TEN

Transnational Solidarities

Speech at Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, Turkey (January 9, 2015)

Hrant Dink remains a potent symbol of the struggle against colonialism, genocide, and racism. Those who assume that it was possible to eradicate his dream of justice, peace, and equality must now know that by striking him down countless Hrant Dinks were created, as people all over the world exclaim, "I am Hrant Dink." We know that his struggle for justice and equality lives on. Ongoing efforts to create a popular intellectual environment within which to explore the contemporary impact of the Armenian genocide are central, I think, to global resistance to racism, genocide, and settler colonialism. The spirit of Hrant Dink lives on and grows stronger and stronger.

I am very pleased that I'm been accorded the opportunity to join a very long list of distinguished speakers who have paid tribute to Hrant Dink. I can say I'm a little intimidated by that prospect as well. I know that those of you who have made it a regular practice to attend these lectures have had the opportunity to hear Arundhati

Roy and Naomi Klein, Noam Chomsky, and Loïc Wacquant. So I hope I live up to your expectations.

Let me also say that I am very pleased that the commemoration of the life and work of Hrant Dink has provided me with an occasion for my very first visit to Turkey. It's hard to believe that it has taken so many decades for me to actually visit this country, since I have dreamed of Istanbul since I was very young, and especially since I learned about the formative influence of Turkish geographies, politics, and intellectual life, and this very university, on a formative influence and close friend, James Baldwin. I can also share with you that as a very young activist—and as I grow older it seems I grow younger as well in my memories and thoughts—I remember reading and feeling inspired by the words of Nâzim Hikmet, as in those days every good communist did. And I can say that when I myself was imprisoned, I was encouraged and emboldened by messages of solidarity and by various descriptions of events organized on my behalf here in Turkey. As I said, I can't believe this is my first trip to Turkey. When I was in graduate school in Frankfurt, my sister made an amazing trip to Turkey, so I'll have to tell her that I finally caught up with her fifty years later.

And since this is my first trip to Turkey, I would like to thank all of those who personally joined the campaign for my freedom in those days, or whose parents were involved, or perhaps whose grandparents were involved in the international movement for my defense. I think far more important than the fact that I was on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list—which draws applause these days; it tells you what happens if you live long enough, the transformative power of history—is that vast international campaign that achieved what was imagined to be unachievable. That is to say, against all

odds we won in our confrontation with the most powerful figures in the US at that time. Let's not forget that Ronald Reagan was the governor of California, Richard Nixon was the president of the US, and J. Edgar Hoover was the head of the FBI.

Often people ask me how I would like to be remembered. My response is that I really am not that concerned about ways in which people might remember me personally. What I do want people to remember is the fact that the movement around the demand for my freedom was victorious. It was a victory against insurmountable odds, even though I was innocent; the assumption was that the power of those forces in the US was so strong that I would either end up in the gas chamber or that I would spend the rest of my life behind bars. Thanks to the movement, I am here with you today.

My relationship with Turkey has been shaped by other movements of solidarity. More recently, I attempted to contribute to the solidarity efforts supporting those who challenged the F-type prisons here in Turkey, including prisoners who joined death fasts. And I've also been active in efforts to generate solidarity around Abdullah Ocalan and other political prisoners, such as Pinar Selek.

Given that my historical relationships with this country have been shaped by circumstances of international solidarity, I have entitled my talk "Transnational Solidarities: Resisting Racism, Genocide, and Settler Colonialism," for the purpose of evoking possible futures, potential circuits connecting movements in various parts of the world, and specifically, in the US, Turkey, and occupied Palestine.

The term "genocide" has usually been reserved for particular conditions defined in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which was adopted on December 9, 1948, in the aftermath of the

fascist scourge during World War II. Some of you are probably familiar with the wording of that convention, but let me share it with you: "Any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group as such, killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part, imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."

This convention was passed in 1948, but it was not ratified by the US until 1987, almost forty years later. However, just three years after the passage of the convention, a petition was submitted to the United Nations by the Civil Rights Congress of the US, charging genocide with respect to Black people in the US. This petition was signed by luminaries such as W. E. B. Du Bois, who at that time was under attack by the government. It was submitted to the UN in New York by Paul Robeson and it was submitted in Paris by the civil rights attorney William L. Patterson. Patterson was at that time the head of the Civil Rights Congress. He was a Black member of the Communist Party, a prominent attorney who had defended the Scottsboro Nine. His passport was taken away when he returned. This was during the era in which communists and those who were accused of being communists were seriously under attack.

In the introduction to this petition, one can read the following words: "Out of the inhuman Black ghettos of American cities, out of the cotton plantations of the South, comes this record of mass slayings on the basis of race, of lives deliberately warped and distorted

by the willful creation of conditions making for premature death, poverty, and disease. It is a record that calls aloud for condemnation, for an end to these terrible injustices that constitute a daily and ever-increasing violation of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide." The introduction continues, "We maintain, therefore, that the oppressed Negro citizens of the United States, segregated, discriminated against, and long the target of violence, suffer from genocide as the result of the consistent, conscious, unified policies of every branch of government."

Then they go on to point out that they will submit evidence proving, in accordance with the convention, the killing of members of the group. They point to police killings—this is 1951—killings by gangs, by the Ku Klux Klan, and other racist groups. They point out that the evidence concerns thousands of people who have been "beaten to death on chain gangs and in the back rooms of sheriffs' offices and in the cells of county jails and precinct police stations and on city streets, who have been framed and murdered by sham legal forms and by a legal bureaucracy. They also point out that a significant number of Black people were killed allegedly for failure to say "sir" to a white person, or to tip their hats, or to move aside.

I mention this historic petition against genocide first because such a charge could have also been launched at the time based on the mass slaughters of Armenians, the death marches, the theft of children and the attempt to assimilate them into dominant culture. I had the opportunity to read the very moving memoir *My Grandmother*, an Armenian Turkish memoir by Fethiye Çetin. I'm certain everyone in this room has read the book. I also learned that as many as two million Turks might have at least one grandparent of Armenian heritage,

and that because of prevailing racism, so many people have been prevented from exploring their own family histories.

Reading *My Grandmother*, I thought about the work of a French Marxist anthropologist whose name is Claude Meillassoux. This imposed silence with respect to ancestry reminded me that his definition of slavery has the concept of social death at its core. He defined the slave as subject to a kind of social death—the slave as a person who was not born, *non née*. Of course, there's grave collective psychic damage that is a consequence of not being acknowledged within the context of one's ancestry. Those of us of African descent in the US of my age are familiar with that sense of not being able to trace our ancestry beyond, as in my case, one grandmother. Deprivation of ancestry affects the present and the future. Of course, *My Grandmother* details the process of ethnic cleansing, the death march, the killings by the gendarmes, the fact that when they were crossing a bridge, the grandmother's own grandmother threw two of her grandchildren in the water and made sure they had drowned before she threw herself into the water. And for me the scene so resonated with historical descriptions of slave mothers in the US who killed their children in order to spare them the violence of slavery. Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, for which she received the Nobel Prize, is based on one such narrative, the narrative of Margaret Garner.

I also evoke the genocide petition of 1951 because so many of the conditions outlined in that petition continue to exist in the US today. This analysis helps us to understand the extent to which contemporary racist state violence in the US is deeply rooted in genocidal histories, including, of course, the genocidal colonization of indigenous inhabitants of the Americas. A recent book by historian Craig Wilder addresses the extent to which the Ivy League universities,

the universities everyone knows all over the world—you mention the name Harvard and that is recognizable virtually everywhere in the world—Harvard, Yale, Princeton, et cetera, were founded on and are deeply implicated in the institution of slavery. But—and in my mind this may be the most important aspect of his research—he discovers that he cannot tell the story of slavery and US higher education without also simultaneously telling the story of the genocidal colonization of Native Americans.

I think it's important to pay attention to the larger methodological implications of such an approach. Our histories never unfold in isolation. We cannot truly tell what we consider to be our own histories without knowing the other stories. And often we discover that those other stories are actually our own stories. This is the admonition "Learn your sisters' stories" by Black feminist sociologist Jacqui Alexander. This is a dialectical process that requires us to constantly retell our stories, to revise them and retell them and relaunch them. We can thus not pretend that we do not know about the conjunctures of race and class and ethnicity and nationality and sexuality and ability.

I cannot prescribe how Turkish people—I've learned in the days since I've been here (actually, this is only my second and a half day here) that it might be better to refer to "people who live in Turkey." I cannot prescribe how you come to grips with the imperial past of this country. But I do know, because I have learned this from Hrant Dink, from Fethiye Çetin, and others, that it has to be possible to speak freely, it has to be possible to engage in free speech. The ethnic-cleansing processes, including the so-called population exchanges at the end of the Ottoman Empire that inflicted incalculable forms of violence on so many populations—Greeks and

Syrians, and, of course, Armenians—have to be acknowledged in the historical record. But popular conversations about these events and about the histories of the Kurdish people in this space have to occur before any real social transformation can be imagined, much less rendered possible.

I tell you that in the United States we are at such a disadvantage because we do not know how to talk about the genocide inflicted on indigenous people. We do not know how to talk about slavery. Otherwise it would not have been assumed that simply because of the election of one Black man to the presidency we would leap forward into a postracial era. We do not acknowledge that we all live on colonized land. And in the meantime, Native Americans live in impoverished conditions on reservations. They have an extremely high incarceration rate—as a matter of fact, per capita the highest incarceration rate—and they suffer disproportionately from such diseases as alcoholism and diabetes. In the meantime, sports teams still mock indigenous people with racially derogatory names, like the Washington Redskins. We do not know how to talk about slavery, except, perhaps, within a framework of victim and victimizer, one that continues to polarize and implicate.

But I can say that, increasingly, young activists are learning how to acknowledge the intersections of these stories, the ways in which these stories are crosshatched and overlaid. Therefore, when we attempt to develop an analysis of the persistence of racist violence, largely directed at young Black men, of which we have been hearing a great deal over this last period, we cannot forget to contextualize this racist violence.

Here in Turkey you are all aware that this past fall and last summer in Ferguson, Missouri, all over the country—in New York, in

Washington, in Chicago, on the West Coast—and, indeed, in other parts of the world, people took to the streets collectively announcing that they absolutely refuse to assent to racist state violence. People took to the streets saying, "No justice, no peace, no racist police." And people have been saying that, contrary to routine police actions and regardless of the collusion of district attorneys with the police, that Black lives do matter. Black lives matter. And we will take to the streets and raise our voices until we can be certain that a change is on the agenda. Social media have been flooded with messages of solidarity from people all over the world in the fall, not only with respect to the failure to indict the police officer who killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, but also as a response to the decision of the grand jury in the case of Eric Garner [in New York City]. These demonstrations literally all over the world made it very clear that there is vast potential with respect to the forging of transnational solidarities.

What this means in one sense is that we may be given the opportunity to emerge from the individualism within which we are ensconced in this neoliberal era. Neoliberal ideology drives us to focus on individuals, ourselves, individual victims, individual perpetrators. But how is it possible to solve the massive problem of racist state violence by calling upon individual police officers to bear the burden of that history and to assume that by prosecuting them, by exacting our revenge on them, we would have somehow made progress in eradicating racism? If one imagines these vast expressions of solidarity all over the world as being focused only on the fact that individual police officers were not prosecuted, it makes very little sense. I'm not suggesting that individuals should not be held accountable. Every individual who engages in such a violent

act of racism, of terror, should be held accountable. But what I am saying is that we have to embrace projects that address the sociohistorical conditions that enable these acts.

For some time now I have been involved in efforts to abolish the death penalty and imprisonment as the main modes of punishment. I should say that it is not simply out of empathy with the victims of capital punishment and the victims of prison punishment, who are overwhelmingly people of color. It is because these modes of punishment don't work. These forms of punishment do not work when you consider that the majority of people who are in prison are there because society has failed them, because they've had no access to education or jobs or housing or health care. But let me say that criminalization and imprisonment could not solve other problems.

They do not solve the problem of sexual violence either. "Carceral feminism," which is a term that has begun to circulate recently—carceral feminisms, that is to say, feminisms that call for the criminalization and incarceration of those who engage in gender violence—do the work of the state. Carceral feminisms do the work of the state as surely as they focus on state violence and repression as the solution to heteropatriarchy and as the solution, more specifically, to sexual assault. But it does not work for those who are directly involved in the repressive work of the state either. As influenced as many police officers may be by the racism that criminalizes communities of color—and this influence is not limited to white police officers; Black police officers and police officers of color are subject to the same way in which racism structurally defines police work—but even as they may be influenced by this racism, it was not their individual idea to do this. So simply by focusing on the individual as if the individual were an aberration, we inadvertently engage

in the process of reproducing the very violence that we assume we are contesting.

How do we move beyond this framework of primarily focusing on individual perpetrators? In the case of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, we quickly learned about the militarization of the police because of the visual images of their military garb, military vehicles, and military weapons. The militarization of the police in the US, of police forces all over the country has been accomplished in part with the aid of the Israeli government, which has been sharing its training with police forces all over the country since the period in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. As a matter of fact, the St. Louis County Police chief, whose name is Timothy Fitch—and St. Louis, of course, is the setting in which the Ferguson violence took place; Ferguson is a small town in St. Louis County—this chief received "counterterrorism" training in Israel. County sheriffs and police chiefs from all over the country, agents of the FBI, and bomb technicians have been traveling to Israel to get lessons in how to combat terrorism.

The point that I'm making is that while racist police violence, particularly against Black people, has a very long history, going back to the era of slavery, the current context is absolutely decisive. And when one examines the ways in which racism has been further reproduced and complicated by the theories and practices of terrorism and counterterrorism, one begins to perhaps envision the possibility of political alliances that will move us in the direction of transnational solidarities. What was interesting during the protests in Ferguson last summer was that Palestinian activists noticed from the images they saw on social media and on television that tear-gas canisters that were being used in Ferguson were exactly the same

tear-gas canisters that were used against them in occupied Palestine. As a matter of fact, a US company, which is called Combined Systems, Incorporated, stamps "CTS" (Combined Tactical Systems) on their tear-gas canisters. When Palestinian activists noticed these canisters in Ferguson, what they did was to tweet advice to Ferguson protesters on how to deal with the tear gas. They suggested, among other things: "Don't keep much distance from the police. If you're close to them, they can't tear gas," because they would be tear-gassing themselves. There was a whole series of really interesting comments for the young activists in Ferguson, who were probably confronting tear gas for the first time in their lives. They didn't necessarily have the experience that some of us older activists have with tear gas.

I'm trying to suggest that there are connections between the militarization of the police in the US, which provides a different context for us to analyze the continuing, ongoing proliferation of racist police violence, and the continuous assault on people in occupied Palestine, the West Bank, and especially in Gaza, given the military violence inflicted on people in Gaza this past summer.

I also want to bring into the conversation one of the most well-known political prisoners in the history of the US. Her name is Assata Shakur. Assata now lives in Cuba, and has lived in Cuba since the 1980s. Not very long ago she was designated as one of the ten most dangerous terrorists in the world. And since it was mentioned that I was on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list, I would like you to think about what would motivate the decision to place this woman, Assata Shakur, on that list. You can read her history. Her autobiography is absolutely fascinating. She was falsely, fraudulently charged with a whole range of crimes. I won't even mention them. You can

read about it in her biography. She was found not guilty on every single charge except the very last one. I wrote a preface to the second edition of her autobiography. Assata, who is actually younger than I am by a few years, is in her late sixties now. She has been leading a productive life in Cuba, studying and teaching and engaging in art. So why would Homeland Security suddenly decide that she is one of the Ten Most Wanted terrorists in the world?

This retroactive criminalization of the late-twentieth-century Black liberation movements through targeting one of the women leaders at that time, who was so systematically pursued, is, I think, an attempt to deter people from engaging in radical political struggle today. This is why I am always so cautious about the use of the term "terrorist." I am cautious, knowing that we have endured a history of unacknowledged terror. As someone who grew up in the most segregated city of the South, my very first memories were of bombs exploding across the street from my family's house simply because a Black person had purchased a house. We actually knew the identities of the Ku Klux Klan people were who were bombing houses and bombing churches. You may be familiar with the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church that happened in 1963, when the four young girls, who were all very close to my family, died. But you should know that that was not an unusual occasion. Those bombings happened all the time. Why has that not been acknowledged as an era of terror? So I'm really cautious about the use of that term, because there is almost always a political motivation.

Let me say, as I move toward my conclusion, that I want to be little bit more specific about the importance of feminist theory and analysis. I'm not simply speaking to the women in the audience, because I think feminism provides methodological guidance for all of

us who are engaged in serious research and organized activist work. Feminist approaches urge us to develop understandings of social relations, whose connections are often initially only intuited. Everyone is familiar with the slogan "The personal is political"—not only that what we experience on a personal level has profound political implications, but that our interior lives, our emotional lives are very much informed by ideology. We ourselves often do the work of the state in and through our interior lives. What we often assume belongs most intimately to ourselves and to our emotional life has been produced elsewhere and has been recruited to do the work of racism and repression.

Some of us have always insisted on making connections, in terms of prison work, between assaults on women in prison and the larger project of abolishing imprisonment. And this larger project requires us to understand where we figure into transnational solidarity efforts. This means that we have to examine various dimensions of our lives—from social relations, political contexts—but also our interior lives. It's interesting that in this era of global capitalism the corporations have learned how to do that: the corporations have learned how to access aspects of our lives that cause us to often express our innermost dreams in terms of capitalist commodities. So we have internalized exchange value in ways that would have been entirely unimaginable to the authors of *Capital*. But this is the topic of another lecture.

What I want to point out is that the megacorporations have clearly grasped the ways in which what we often consider to be disparate issues are connected. One such corporation, G4S, which is the largest security corporation in the world—and, I evoke G4S because I am certain that they will attempt to take advantage in

France of the current situation in a way that evokes Naomi Klein's analysis of disaster capitalism—G4S, as some of you probably know, has played such an important role in the Israeli occupation of Palestine: running prisons, being involved in checkpoint technology. It's also been involved in the deaths of undocumented immigrants. The case of Jimmy Mubenga is important. He was killed by G4S guards in Britain in the process of being deported to Angola. G4S operates private prisons in South Africa. G4S is the largest corporate employer on the entire continent of Africa. G4S, this megacorporation that is involved in the ownership and operation of prisons, that provides armies with weapons, that provides security for rock stars, also operates centers for abused women and for "young girls at risk." I mention this because it seems that they have grasped the connection in ways that we should have long ago.

Speaking of megacorporations, I heard that students have successfully protested Starbucks. Is today the last day Starbucks will be available on this campus? Hallelujah. Especially since Turkish coffee far exceeds what Starbucks could ever hope for.

My last example is also an example from the US, but it reflects a global pandemic from which no country is exempt. I'm referring to sexual violence, sexual harassment, sexual assault. Intimate violence is not unconnected to state violence. Where do perpetrators of intimate violence learn how to engage in the practices of violence? Who teaches them that violence is okay? But this is, of course, another question. I do want to evoke the case of a young woman by the name of Marissa Alexander. You know the names of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. Add the name of Marissa Alexander to that list, a young Black woman who felt compelled to go to extremes to prevent her abusive husband from attacking

her. She fired a weapon in the air. No one was hit. But in the very same judicial district where Trayvon Martin—you remember his name—was killed, and where George Zimmerman, his killer, was acquitted, Marissa Alexander was sentenced to twenty years for trying to defend herself against sexual assault. Recently she faced a possible resentencing to sixty years, and therefore she engaged in a plea bargain, which means that she will be wearing an electronic bracelet for the next period.

Racist and sexual violence are practices that are not only tolerated but explicitly—or if not explicitly, then implicitly—encouraged. When these modes of violence are recognized—and they are often hidden and rendered invisible—they are most often the most dramatic examples of structural exclusion and discrimination. I think it would be important to go further developing that analysis, but I am going to conclude by saying that the greatest challenge facing us as we attempt to forge international solidarities and connections across national borders is an understanding of what feminists often call "intersectionality." Not so much intersectionality of identities, but intersectionality of struggles.

Let us not forget the impact of Tahrir Square and the Occupy movement all over the world. And since we are gathered here in Istanbul, let us not forget the Taksim Gezi Park protesters. Oftentimes people argue that in these more recent movements there were no leaders, there was no manifesto, no agenda, no demands, so therefore the movements failed. But I'd like to point out that Stuart Hall, who died just a little over a year ago, urged us to distinguish between outcome and impact. There is a difference between outcome and impact. Many people assume that because the encampments are gone and nothing tangible was produced, that there was no outcome. But when we think about the impact of these imaginative and innovative actions and these moments where people learned how to be together without the scaffolding of the state, when they learned to solve problems without succumbing to the impulse of calling the police, that should serve as a true inspiration for the work that we will do in the future to build these transnational solidarities. Don't we want to be able to imagine the expansion of freedom and justice in the world, as Hrant Dink urged us to do—in Turkey, in Palestine, in South Africa, in Germany, in Colombia, in Brazil, in the Philippines, in the US?

If this is the case, we will have to do something quite extraordinary: We will have to go to great lengths. We cannot go on as usual. We cannot pivot the center. We cannot be moderate. We will have to be willing to stand up and say no with our combined spirits, our collective intellects, and our many bodies.