

ACLA Charles Bernheimer Prize 2022

Mrinalini Chakravorty (University of Virginia), Hala Halim (NYU), and Anthony Alessandrini (Kingsborough Community College & City University of New York)

Winner: Helen Makhdounian for the dissertation, “A Map of This Place: Memory and The Afterlives Of Removal” (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)

Helen Makhdounian’s dissertation, “A Map of This Place: Memory and the Afterlives of Removal” is a transformative and methodologically inventive comparative study of removal, dispossession, and memory in the context of three far-flung traditions: Armenian, Palestinian, and Native American. The thesis powerfully situates settler colonialism, memory, and trauma studies to illuminate the role of literature in making the effects of occupation legible and enlivening collective forms of remembrance. Makhdounian advances a brilliant theory of “nested memory” that sheds light on the transgenerational and transcultural effects of forcible displacement and in so doing forges a new way forward for comparative studies.

In four lucid chapters that consider how histories of dispossession are told, Makhdounian lays the ethical framework of comparison that confronts the global imprint of settler colonialism writ large. This involves asking and answering weighty questions: What do disparate cultures that have experienced genocide have in common? How are experiences of occupation and forced removal remembered? What memories survive catastrophe and what memories are generationally withheld? From illustrating the traumatic erasures that happen with the enforcement of ‘settler mnemonics’ to conceptualizing how everyday experiences, practices of withholding, storytelling and translation allow for solidarities adjacent to national identities, the thesis boldly approaches answers to these questions. Keeping the historical circumstances of each instance in careful view (for example, the Hamidian massacres for Armenia, the nakba in Palestine, and the Dawes commission in U.S.) so as not to collapse one into the other, Makhdounian’s work finds new and surprisingly luminous ways of linking cognitive responses to settler colonial violence in literary works from Armenia, Palestine and the Native American First Nations. Theoretically adventurous and analytically supple, this project also brings into view a host of contemporary novelists, memoirists, and storytellers most urgently writing about the aftermath of political occupations.