(DIS)ORIENTING EXILE: HOME AND BELONGING IN QUEER ARMENIAN-AMERICAN WOMEN'S MEMOIR

by

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ABSTRACT

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Addressing the lacuna of critical work on queer literature in the Armenian transnation, this thesis serves to trace its genealogy. Based primarily on close textual analysis of Arlene Avakian's *Lion Woman's Legacy* and Nancy Agabian's *Me As Her Again*, this literary inquiry explores the articulations of exile experienced by queer Armenian-American women's memoir. Conceptualizing 'Diaspora' as a space of movement and (dis)articulation, I problematize its acute nationaist rhetoric that writes nation/home and bodies as a sites of stability. How does transnational heteropatriachal discourse assign women's bodies to heteronormative reproductive roles that regulate normative gendered/sexual identities? How might this echo the contours of land claim discourse? Who do these hegemons exclude, how do they operate, and within what limits? How does the queer Armenian woman present a particular challenge to this hegemon and its inheritance? How might queerness already align with notions of Diaspora and exile, inscribing flux instead of stability as characteristic of the Armenian diasporic home? Further, is it possible that a queer analysis of Armenian diasporic literature that addresses diasporic mourning and instability, may assist in ushering a new era of production, potentiality and futurity for pluralities in Armenian history and identity production? Through textual exegesis, aesthetic considerations and psychosexual identity (de)construction via language, storytelling and inheritance, I address these questions, arguing that both memoirs are integral in beginning to resist the reproduction of the above monoliths, opening up possibilities for the modes in which Armenian literature and other genres in the transnation are read.

ÖZET

SÜRGÜNÜ YÖNLENDİR(ME)MEK: KUİR ERMENİ-AMERİKALI KADINLARIN ANILARINDA EV VE AİDİYET

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Anahtar Sözcükler: anı, diyaspora, kuir, Ermeni ulusötesi, yas

Ermeni ulusötesinde kuir edebiyata dair eleştirel çalışmalar boşluğunu doldurmak adına bu tez, bu konunun jeneolojisinin ilk adımını oluşturur. En temelde Arlene Avakian'ın *Lion Woman's Legacy: An Armenian-American Memoir* ve Nancy Agabian'ın *Me As Her Again: True Stories of an Armenian Daughter* kitapları üzerinden bu edebi çalışma, sürgün kavramının Kuir Ermeni-Amerikalılar tarafından ve Kuir Ermeni-Amerikalı kadınların anılarında farklı ifade edilişlerini incelemektedir. "Diyaspora" kavramını, devinim alanı ve ifade etme/edememe olarak kavramsallaştırarak, ev/millet kavramlarını ısrarla durağanlık mekanı olarak kodlayan milliyetçilik retoriğini sorunsallaştırıyorum. Ulusaşırı heteropatriyarkal söylem kadınların bedenlerini cinsiyetli/cinsel kimlikleri düzenleyen heteronormative üreme rollerine nasıl dahil eder? Bu durum toprak talebi söyleminde ne şekilde yankılanır? Egemenler kimleri dışlar, hangi sınırlar dahilinde, ne şekilde işlerler? Buna ek olarak, Kuir Ermeni kadın heteropatriyarkal Ermeni kimliğine ve mirasına ne şekilde bir meydan okuma sunmaktadır? Kuirlik, değişkenlik gösteren Diyaspora ve sürgün kavramlarıyla, özellikle travma sebebiyle Ermeni diyasporik ev ile ne şekilde ortaklaşır? Diyaspora ve sürgün kavramlarıyla aynı hizada olan kuirlik, Ermeni diyasporik evin özelliği olan stabiliteden ziyade akışkanlığı nasıl yazabilir? Ayrıca, diyasporik yas ve instabiliteye değinen Ermeni diyasporik edebiyatın kuir bir analizi, yeni bir üretim tarihi açmada ve Ermeni tarihinde ve kimlik üretiminde çoğulluğun geleceğine ve ihtimaline yardımcı olabilir mi? Dil, hikaye anlatımı ve miras aracılığıyla metinsel yorum, estetik mülahazalar ve psikoseksüel kimlik (de)konstrüksiyonu üzerinden her iki hatıratın da yukarıdaki yekparelerin üretimine karşı direnmede, Ermeni edebiyatının ve ulusötesindeki diğer türlerin okumasında farklı modlar açma ihtimaline muktedir olduğunu iddia ettiğim bu soruları yöneltiyorum.

PREAMBLE

From the Aesthetic, Political to the Personal

While a potential for queer futurity might either reject or liberate itself from the notion of the past as a determinative originary moment, in the work of contemporary, LGBTQ Armenian feminist authors, the past ever-looms over the formation of queer futurity and non-heteronormative potentiality. In the work of writing alternative narratives that disrupt the hegemon of Armenian patriarchy, nationalist identity construction and its reproduction in order to both disengage and rewrite potentiality, the reader notices not a rejection of the past and originary moment, but instead, a strong link and deference for the past in order to assemble space for that potential queer future. As such, the object of this study is to locate the beginnings of a literary landscape by queer Armenian women, what it attempts to disrupt, how, and what it is in the process of becoming. In addition, in mapping these texts that (dis)inhabit several prescriptive categories such as nationalism, heteropatriarchy and heterosexism, this thesis serves to usher these marginalized narratives out of heteropatriarchal, homopatriarchal, and nationalist obscurity that too often shape Armenian discourse, shadowing its resistance.

Originally, this project began as a proposal to track a genealogy of queer Armenian women's autobiographical writing. It intended to depart from the first two queer Armenian memoirs, both published in the Armenian-American Diaspora: first, Arlene Avakian's 1992 memoir *Lion Woman's Legacy: An Armenian-American Memoir*, and moving on to Nancy Agabian's *Me as her again*: *True Stories of an Armenian Daughter* (2008). My aim was to discuss how diasporic homespace for the queer Armenian writer challenged the stability of home itself, and by *returning home* to past stories that created the diasporic state of Armenians after the 1915 genocide, ultimately wrote queer space within it. My aesthetic engagement strove to highlight the more 'traditional' modes of autobiographical writing in both works, while illustrating that each writer's stylistic endeavor is also parallel to a theoretical shift in LGBTQ discourse, beginning with Arlene

in a more binary understanding of straight versus lesbian identity, and moving onto Nancy's depiction of her bisexuality—marking a shift in creating an in-between third-space of possibility beyond hetero/homo binaries. In addition, it also intended to question the genre of memoir as a mode for transmitting this story, tracking aesthetic shifts in form and genre. While this thesis has accomplished the former, the latter aesthetic questions remain as a future topic of inquiry that will serve as a critical foundation.

Next, bridging the transnational terrain of Armenian literary production with *In the (Un)space* (2007), a three-way dialogue of essays written in French, English and Armenian by Lara Aharonian, Nancy Agabian and Shushan Avagyan, I wanted to show how feminist dialogue and LGBTQ literary production and activism began to evolve between the Diaspora and Armenia. I aimed to discuss how Armenian women from different sociopolitical realities engaged together with issues of ethnicity, feminism, activism and queerness; how each was involved in the project of deconstructing nationalist discourse in her own right, and the fissures and ironies between diasporic belonging and national unbelonging… or vice versa. The form here would also parallel the vignette-style content of the works and reflect the political project of transnational dialogue.

Finally, I intended to end with Shushan Avagyan's more experimental (auto)biographical piece *Book-Untitled* (2006), written in Eastern Armenian, and thereby considering literary production from the Armenian 'nation' itself. Blending the stories of four feminist women of two different generations, unsilencing, blurring, fabricating and challenging the limits of history, ownership and writing autobiography, the text seeks to uncover and question the censorship of two Armenian feminists of the early 20th century both in its content, and its highly fragmented form. In addition to auto-censoring and providing auto-critique on censorship and nationalist identity projects today, the work aesthetically opens up consideration for queer analysis and pluralities outside of the framework of national longing and belonging, by changing the Armenian language itself. The book is not confined by national longing for the homeland, yet somehow, is nonetheless quite particular and consequential to the transnational Armenian context.

My original project titillated around the theme of creating a space for lesbian and queer alterity, characteristic, according to Brodzki and Schenck (1989: 8), of women's autobiography, in order to resuscitate these works from obscurity. I sought to consider how they endeavored to create a transnational queer space through form, challenging their readers to reconsider hegemonic Armenian identities, feminist (her)stories of resistance, and the role of lesbian and then queer writing in this process. Yet, endeavoring to deconstruct and open up spaces for queer belonging in a transnational Armenian framework beyond the 'home' as I sit—a queer-identifying Armenian-American woman living in Turkey (the 'original home' of my ancestors)—I find myself having to, ironically yet perhaps unsurprisingly, start at that very beginning: *home*, and more particularly, *my home*, with the literary productions from within the Armenian-American diaspora itself.

Many inquiries asked yet left unanswered or unexplored, this current project marks only the beginning of what I hope to be a larger opus that will move beyond the Armenian-American diaspora to include the aforementioned project, expanding to include performance and visual art by queer Armenians (not just women, and perhaps later also queer Turkish people) which circumambulates around similar, larger themes of belonging, becoming and how this disrupts and resituates claims to ethnic identity and geographical landscapes. In addition, it will also set the stage for further research of new queer publications like *Zarubyani Ganayk* (*The Women of Zarubyan*), published in 2014, by Shushan Avagyan and lucine talalyan, which pivots around the theme of queer women's voices and activism in Armenia. The work, a dialogue between text (by Avagyan) and photographs (by talalyan) distorts the Armenian language, creating new words and shorting others in an insurgency against the structure of the Armenian language itself. What *does this text* have to say politically, and how can we situate it within this tradition of queer Armenian feminist literature that this thesis will begin to explore? In addition, how might we approach other works, like the fiction of Michelle Aharonian Marcom or other contemporary Armenian works, with this queer, anti-nationalist lens? In the meantime, the current project, along with my earlier translation of Avagyan's *Girk-Anvernagir* (*Book-Untitled*), remains only as a beginning.

My aim through the focus on literature written by LGBTQ Armenian women in many ways echoes the task of Shushan Avagyan in her seminal work, *Girk-Angervagir*, which seeks to uncover the censored voices of Zabel Yessayan and Shushanik Kurghinian, two strong yet forgotten Armenian feminist voices of the early 20th century. This work and thesis do not only seek to add to the bourgeoning archive of Armenian women's writing; it also aims to show how this work is actively engaging in concepts that destabilize patriarchal and nationalist Armenian discourse by inscribing queer identity onto the Armenian experience. The whispers of this 'other voice' began to be discerned with the publication of Diana Der Hovhanissian's *The Other Voice: Armenian Women's Poetry Through the Ages* (2005), Shushan Avagyan's translated collection of Shushanik Kurghinian poems *I Want To Live* (2005), Victoria Rowe's 2009 publication of *A History of Armenian Women's Writing 1880-1922*, and Jennifer Manoukian's first, full-length translation of Zabel Yessayan's *The Gardens of Silihdar* (2014). My work attempts not only to highlight the contemporary women's voices that are becoming a part of that archive, but also those who actively criticize the Armenian literary canon itself, and who challenge their own sense of belonging (or not) to an 'Armenian' identity, also notably authors like Micheline Aharonian Marcom. It seems particularly curious that as the writings of rebellious Armenian women of the past have begun to be uncovered over the past ten or so years, the works of Arlene Avakian, Nancy Agabian and Shushan Avagyan (as writer and activist, not translator) that interject deviant sexual, political and identity themes (explicitly and subtly) remain for the most part unknown (to the Diasporic and Armenian reader), let alone to an international readership at large, and even among canons of women's literature. Why are these texts not written about, at the very least in Armenian circles? Are they too new? How can we account for their exclusion? Could it be because they are immensely unlike, in both content and form, the recently popular works of other Armenian bestselling authors Chris Bohjalian, Nancy Kricorian or Antonia Arslan, romance or historical fictions based on the genocide that receive wide praise and press from various Armenian organizations? And when they do gleam some attention from literary critics, like Arlene's memoir in the otherwise important work by Lorne Shirinian on Armenian diasporic writing, why is it permissible that lesbian identity

is censored, referring to Arlene's lover and partner Martha as merely "a friend," giving the reader a more 'palatable' yet nonetheless obscured rendition of their nurturing and romantic relationship?

With this work, I seek to contextualize and put these books in dialogue to demonstrate the iconoclastic themes being discussed. Each work disrupts, in different ways, concepts of the nation, home and monolithic historical production. They also disrupt the new-found "feminist" voice in recent articles and commentaries that further nationalize (vis-à-vis an attempt to show her liberation) the Armenian woman by highlighting her strength and freedom—a supposed new discovery of Armenian "feminism"—exemplifying her emancipated state, so advanced that she can even militarize and fight as a *fedayi*[1] for the sake of the nation[2] (as if this were a choice); or by evidencing the existence of Armenian schools for girls at the end of the Ottoman Empire as a sure sign of a lack of women's oppression in the Ottoman Armenian community.

Tracking a "lesbian" or queer movement opens up a dialogue of various displacements of the grand narrative also of Armenian women's supposed liberated state, demonstrating that it is still very much in its beginning as they continue to struggle to break the bounds of nationalist, heterosexist and (his)torical frames.[3] Even though this topic is not directly discussed within the framework of this thesis, this work calls for the opening up of an Armenian feminism that discusses tensions beyond 'women's role in society', and that speaks to greater issues like nationhood, the parallels in claims of ownership over land and bodies, heterosexism in the Armenian community, monolithic and painfully exclusionary conceptions of Armenianness (based on linguistic ability, blood lineage, 'percentage' Armenian), genocide as gendered, mandatory reproductivity, religion, and other 'delicate' and difficult-to-discuss topics.

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[1] *Fedayi* is Turkish for "freedom fighter."

[2] See "♥ARMENIAN PRIDE ARMENIAN WOMEN FEDAYIS♥" at https://plus.google.com/103778840668511157534/posts/XAoFcPNV76S. The photo caption reads: "Armenian Female Fedayis… To fight in defense of what is right, is not a calamity but a blessing. Even today, an Armenian woman will not hesitate to sacrifice her own life to protect HOMELAND ARMENIA". Accessed June 14, 2016.

[3] Shushan Avagyan's work here is incredibly important because she seeks to do this doubly, by breaking frames in form and content, as well as in the contemporary historical moment by showing how censorship is employed to cover up the lives and work of two women authors. By writing about the past and giving them back their own voices by publishing their postcards and poetry, Avagyan attempts to write them out of exile and silence.

As voices from the past find themselves anew in the crucial recent work on Ottoman Armenian feminism (vis-à-vis the work by Lerna Ekmekcioglu in *Bir Adalet Feryadı, Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e Beş Ermeni Feminist Yazar (1862-1933) [(A Cry for Justice: Five Armenian Feminist Writers from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic (1862-1933)]*, and her forthcoming work on a sourcebook of (Western) Armenian feminism, scholarship must also focus on the *present* in order not to lose sight of the *continued* struggle of contemporary Armenian women writers, artists and activists. Continuity must be studied and maintained. These works show us that the feminist struggle of Zabel Yessayan, Shushanik Kurghinian, Hayganush Mark and others one hundred years ago is as alive as it was then, and that Armenians—of all (dis)orientations and (trans)gen(der)erations—remain framed in a patriarchal and heterosexist narrative of the nation and Armenian ethnic identity that is confining and exclusionary. In presenting the following two works, this thesis will suggest why and how queer futurity may be a guiding light in further opening up and liberating this discourse. Shushan Avagyan longs to *shrjel*—to invert and to roam. In further study, can this roaming also lead us to roaming across body and land borders? How might we parallel these questions to questions of migration through and across genres? Inverting the discourse and wandering in to discover the queer themes in these works acknowledges that these women also make up a part of a vibrant activist, aesthetic, and *highly marginalized*, community of women who, with their queer subjectivities, challenge feminism that remains within a nationalist framework and the discourse of body or land borders and politics that a queer analysis of these works has the potential to address, even in its very beginning stages through the present works.

It seems a strange irony that, coming from New York City, I discovered Arlene Avakian's work in Turkey, even though she grew up attending the same church in Washington Heights as my family; that I discovered another Armenian-American woman writer, Nancy Agabian, who now lives in New York, vis-à-vis my own affiliations with the Women's Resource Centre and the Queering Yerevan collective in post-Soviet Armenia; that I was able to give a presentation on queer Armenian literature in the forum

provided to me by Sabancı University and the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor in Istanbul during the WATS (Workshop on Armenian-Turkish Scholarship) workshop this past fall; and that I was given a space this past year at the 14th Istanbul LGBTI+ Onur Haftası (Pride Week) to discuss queerness in the Armenian Diaspora, especially as the only woman on the panel. While writing my first MA thesis, I was met with resistance to write on 'unserious' feminist themes; and warned to steer clear from feminism which was blamed for the destruction of the sacred mother and role of the woman that at least is/was at least still preserved, alive and strong, amongst Armenians. Even among women and dear friends who have now become interested in the genocide as gendered, women scholars are still caught up in sanctifying and discursively constructing the untouchable martyrs of the genocide, reproducing the national narrative of victimization, women's sacrifice, and the binary struggle against the nation's sworn enemy, the Turk. It has been with academicians and feminists in Turkey that Arlene Avakian has "found her people." And it has been among those same Armenian and Turkish feminists, queer activists and scholars in Istanbul and Yerevan that I have had a more ample space to explore and write about this topic. This personal experience I do not think should go unnoticed. It renders the necessity for a study like this one, in the context of a Turkish university as a diasporan Armenian, especially in the current political context of impending tyranny in Turkey against all dissidents of the state, I hope, a vital and valuable endeavor.

To my queer kin in İstanbul… your creativity, perseverance and spirit have inspired me to celebrate and disrupt identity to the fullest. Keep safe. Keep strong.

And to Martha Ayres, a woman of strength, persistence, love, an infectious smile and a grand sense of humor.

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And finally, my heartfelt thanks to *Alex Brostoff*, my intellectual partner in crime, most trusted confidant and editor (of papers and *life*) over these past ten years. We have traveled and grown together over the distances of time, oceans and mountain peaks. Sharing and growing our passions reminds me always that there is a purpose outside of the highfalutin, self-serving institution; a place we can make for resistance, subversion, teaching, learning, activism, art and postcards. I would not have made it without your encouragement and support. True story. *To the system*, my dear, *I say fuck you* – Maggie Nelson.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. (Dis)Articulations of Diaspora

It is only difference… that allows movement.

–Brent Edwards, "The Uses of *Diaspora,*" 66

In his book *Writing Memory: The Search for Home in Armenian Diaspora Literature as Cultural Practice* (2000), Lorne Shirinian considers the literary production of the Armenian Diaspora as constituting a crucial tradition of Armenian literature in its own right. As a Disaporic literature, it also pivotally engages with negotiations of memory, the past as ever-present, national imagination, quests of (un)belonging and narratives of displacement and hybridity. While diasporic discourse articulates the "homeland" as a space of origin and immanent belonging, it also inevitably inaugurates, according to Shirinian, a complex space activated through memory and imagination; one that concomitantly destabilizes notions of homogeneous national identity. Citing Khachig Tölölyan's formation of diaspora in "The Nation-State and Its Others" as "the exemplary communities of the transnational movement" (Tölölyan: 1991, 5) Shirinian articulates the Armenian diaspora as a hybrid transnation that, while experiencing the effects of cultural displacement, also constructs its diasporic cultural identity particular to the consequences of that displacement. The result becomes a constant negotiation between identities never fully homogenous but always in-between, "privileg[ing] intercultural connections, not necessarily roots" (Shirinian 5). As a result, then, it renders difference not as "a product of a set of traditions," passed down vertically that distinguish the diasporic community in binary opposition *to* its host or non-diasporic community, but rather, as a "part of an ongoing negotiation" (5).

Homi Bhahba conceptualized this site of negotiation as the "third space," in which one rests in the in-betweens of identity, borders and belonging which ultimately and inevitably constitute cultural hybridity. As such, a diasporic community, while it may seek to ossify tradition, origin, cultural particularity, identity and "homeland," is

constantly in flux, betwixt and between national identities, borders and temporalities. Thus, while the diaspora may fashion an identity discourse and imaginaire around constancy, coherence, stability (of the "homeland," nation and community) and homogeneity[1], its very ontological status as a third-space renders it unstable, disruptive, liminal and ambivalent. The third-space is always a site of movement and translation.

Brent Edwards in his essay "The Uses of *Diaspora*" offers another nuanced layer of reading diaspora which springs from a long critical discourse on diaspora by scholars writing on the Armenian, Jewish and Afro-diasporas. Departing from the work of Tölölyan (1996) and Gilory (1993), Edwards suggests that it is not the 'abstraction' of Diaspora that offers comfort, "but that it forces us to consider discourses of cultural and political linkage only through and across difference" (61). Diaspora, then, as a site of *internal difference*, allows us to "go beyond limiting frames of geography or time," or a "reliance on obsession with origins," (61) signaling and accounting instead *for difference itself*.

> If a discourse of diaspora articulates difference, then one must consider the status of that difference—not just linguistic difference but, more broadly, the trace or the residue, perhaps, of what resists translation or what sometimes cannot help refusing translation across the boundaries of language, class, gender, sexuality, religion, the nation-state. (Edwards 64)

The various *articulations*[2] of any particular diaspora may be, in Shirinian's summary, how a community conceives of and (re)produces its cultural heritage, engages with memory, imagination, tradition, and homeland, nation and identity. Yet, as Edwards argues, with articulation comes the indelible effect of *disarticulation*—something that is "left out"—in the diasporic imaginaire. Edwards describes that trace or residue which either self-imposes a refusal to be articulated, gets lost in translation, and/or is strategically excluded, as the *internal disarticulations* of diaspora which constitute a

[1] These naturalized 'articulations' assist in preserving an originary notion of identity.

[2] Edwards uses the term "articulations" as conceptualized by Althusser as he describes the structure and superstructure. My use of both the term articulation and (dis)articulation is informed by this argument. We might also conceptualize this understanding of articulation as performance as does Butler (1990; 1993), Fortier (1990; 2001), Gopinath (2003; 2005) others. I intend to explore this connection further in a following study.

décalage,[3] "an unevenness or differentiation…in the very weave of the culture, one that can neither be dismissed nor pulled out" (64-5). *Décalage*, a "difference within unity," ineffable yet always "gingered and pressed," (21) opens a space to consider the disarticulations of gaps and silences; what can and *cannot* be said; who and who cannot participate or be represented.

As literary critic Myrna Douzjian (2009) and anthropologist Nelli Sargysyan-Pittman (2013) have recently argued in their respective works, the Armenian nation-state[4] as the symbolic 'homeland' itself is also a fraught term as it "lack[s] geographical and historical fixity" (Douzjian 2009). Consequently, its symbolic status as 'homeland,' even for citizens of the country, must also be considered as an inseparable part of the Armenian (diasporic) transnation. As Douzjian argues for the lifting of the border between what one distinguishes as diasporic and post-Soviet Armenia's literary productions, she points to the transnational themes of "dual or hybrid identities, language, cultural transference, cultural survival, and the Genocide…[and] the constant necessity of negotiating the politics and identities of various others" as all and ever-present characteristics of each. Paraphrasing Gayatri Spivak, the identity (or 'ipseity', as Spivak writes) of the Armenian experience and subsequently its literary production "lies somewhere between the global and the local"; it is defined by the 'uneasy' combination of the two. Resultantly, "rather than representing an anomaly," Douzjian argues that the transnational quality of the Armenian experience "is fast becoming the norm…" (Douzjian 2009).[5]

What is at stake in representing and *living* transnational diasporic Armenian identity? What is at stake if instead of homogenization discourse, hybridity and heterogeneity become the counter-narrative? What if, as Shirinian states, "the ability to represent… new cultural forms of displacement and relocation," (5) concepts that come

[3] Edwards borrows this term from French theorist Léopold Senghor in his essay "Problématique de la Négritude" (1971), in Liberté III: Négritude et civilisation de l'universel (Paris: Seuil, 1977), 274.

[4] As Douzjian (2009) importantly notes, the Armenian 'homeland' is now defined within the contemporary understanding of "nation-state," reminding us of the historical categories that may have loosely defined the changing borders of the Armenian 'nation' or 'homeland' over the centuries.

[5] Spivak's original quotation reads: "Any theory of postcolonial hybridity pales into insignificance when we consider the millennial ipseity of the Armenian, existing in uneasy double bind with the hybridity imposed by the locale" (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Other Asias. Blackwell Publishing: Malden, 2008).

into being *because* of cultural translation, hybridization and spatial and temporal movement, are, contrary to the hegemon of national purity discourse, actually the norm? Ergo, Edwards' conceptualization of *décalage*, along with Shirinian's discussion of diaspora, and Douzjian and Sargysyan-Pittman's considerations of the Armenian transnation, prompts us to imagine a space in which *new* forms of cultural representation of the Armenian experience may be produced. We are thus inclined to ask: *What constitutes the Armenian home and belonging to it? Who and what becomes disarticulated in the Armenian Transnational Diasporic narrative? What might, according to how the Armenian transnation writes itself, resist translation into the hegemonic notion of what constitutes Armenian identity? Who then, as a result, becomes silenced?*

1.2. The Theoretical Frame: (Dis)Articulations of Queer Diasporic Exile

Literature is not an ornament, a pleasant pastime, a pretty flower. Literature is a weapon to struggle against injustice.

—Zabel Yesayan[6]

Through a reading of Arlene Avakian's *Lion Woman's Legacy: An Armenian-American Memoir* and Nancy Agabian's *Me as her again: True Stories of an Armenian Daughter*, this thesis interrogates how 'home' and 'belonging' are shaped in two queer diasporic Armenian memoirs. Both Avakian's and Agabian's memoirs are the only two memoirs[7] published by queer women in the transnational Armenian Diaspora,[8] and as such, are indicative of what I consider as one of the *disarticulations* of Diasporic subjectivity in the

[6] See http://www.zabelyesayan.com/2013/06/letter-to-sophie.html. Source, unknown.

[7] To my knowledge, no other memoirs or autobiographies have been published by queer Armenian women. This does not include any poetry, experimental literary work that includes autobiographical reflection/vignettes, etc. It also does not include queer Armenian men's autobiography, though also to my knowledge nothing exists either in Armenian or the Diaspora. Works in other literary genres *directly related* to LGBTQ issues in the Armenian transnation are the productions by members of the Queering Yerevan collective, HyePhen Magazine, and most recently, *Մայրհիմք. Դրոշ* (*Mommyland: Flag*), printed by Yavruhrat Publishing in Armenia in 2015. Written by Armen Hayastantsi (pen-name), the 139-page novel focuses on the topic of statehood in Armenia, and is based on the life of a transgender Armenian man in Yerevan. Thanks to Sargis Khandanyan for bringing it to my attention.

[8] The Diasporic Armenian space includes the various transnational spaces that are home to Diasporic communities. I do not consider the territory of modern-day Turkey as the Diaspora, or Armenia (though both are considered as a part of the Armenian transnation).

Armenian transnation. As 'queers' who self-identify on the spectrum of LGBT identity, I will argue that both women constitute a *décalage* in the Armenian national narrative which defines the terms of belonging and home through heteropatriarchy, the exclusion of feminists/feminism, queers and others of marginalized gender and sexual (dis)orientations. Exploring the intersections and conflicting spaces of queer identity with a home-centered national identity, this close-reading will interrogate how the exiled unbelonging from the home is actually a condition of the (diasporic) home itself, ultimately allowing our authors to locate queer identity *within* and *as a result* of their homes. As a result, this study challenges the originary home as stable, aligning 'queer' with movement, difference, and as explained above, the notion of *décalage*. In addition, it will argue that, particular to the Armenian Diasporic experience, genocidal mourning is also an integral part of the process of 'returning home' and belonging for both authors.[9]

Pointing to the various aspects, geographies and cultural pluralities of the Armenian transnation, Lorne Shirinian's interrogation cited above incites us to challenge a monolithic conception of Armenian identity, history, nation and homeland. The singular focus on disaporic narratives of origin and return to the unstable referent of 'Armenia' itself not only devalues transnational hybridization and overwrites the diasporic disarticulations of *décalage* but also, as Shirinian points out, ironically brings into question the location of home and the *feelings of belonging* to that home itself. What may constitute the point of origin for one member of the diaspora may in fact be a different (or now inexistent) place for another.[10] As I will challenge further in this current study, how can we or why should we even imagine that the original homespace or homeland and its borders are stable concepts, notwithstanding their plurality of referents? That is, paralleling communal/ethnic homeland to family homespace, how can we imagine that the most fundamental *home* of the family (perhaps the most localized site of identity production) is a priori a place of stability and belonging from which we then migrate?

[9] Queer mourning is not a topic that this thesis will address, however further research should be dedicated to the parallels and disunities between queer and diasporic mourning.

[10] Shirinian conceives of 'Armenia' as an unstable referent of 'homeland' because home may be considered a different place in the diaspora, or in fact the displaced homeland of Western Armenia, the actual 'origin' site of many diaspora Armenians, which is now Turkey and so no longer 'Armenia'. The 'homeland' itself then is fraught as it semiotically and geopolitically does not exist any longer. In fact, 'Western Armenian' exists now *only* in memory, as an imagined space, a past geography that both defines and haunts the present.

And, if cultural production in the diaspora attempts to promote a sense of belonging in the home and homeland, how do those who are *disarticulated,* like queer subjects, *negotiate* or experience any sense of belonging in the home at all?

If home and belonging in the Armenian diasporic imaginaire is situated in a belonging to the Armenian nation, then the "impossibility" of the queer diasporic subject, as Gayatri Gopinath formulates it, results in the double-exiled status of the queer diasporic subject—doubly (dis)orienting her *outside* of the nation/home. In the Armenian case, this exile-status holds yet another exclusionary layer, as what constitutes Armenian *diasporic* subjectivity is based on the catastrophic trauma of a denied genocide. Thus, the queer Armenian subject is an exile of a (traumatically lost) homeland (she has been violently cast out); and she is an exile within the diasporic context because of her queer subjectivity. As a result, she is thus doubly foreclosed in accessing the mourning of her family's trauma. She is cast out of the contours of land, body and belonging, just as much as she challenges those contours.

Employing the formulations of hegemonic nationalist discourse which excludes feminist and queer subjectivity, I will explore, through close exegesis, some of the major (dis)articulations of home and belonging versus exile which constitutes one of the primary thematic arches of both Arlene Avakian and Nancy Agabian's Armenian-American memoirs. Putting these works into dialogue, I seek to exemplify the function of queer diasporic cultural forms which Gopinath, using Roach's formulation, theorizes as 'clandestine countermemories' that "work against the violent effacements that produce the fictions of purity that lie at the heart of dominant nationalist and diasporic ideologies" (4). In finding the inspiration to embody their queer subjectivities *from* the diasporic home, they simultaneously upset the notion of homogeneity, vertical familial inheritance and the importance of reproductivity for the nation.

Writing respectively as a lesbian-feminist and a bisexual Armenian-American woman, writers Arlene Avakian and Nancy Agabian, though in different ways, explore their subject formations through quest or bildungsroman-style memoirs in which they direct the discussion of their (un)belonging to the constructed homespace of Diasporic Armenian cultural heritage and identity. The iterations of (un)belonging will be

formulated as orientations and disorientations of, away, and towards home, articulated more broadly as 'exile' or '(un)belonging' in this thesis.

Several integral layers backdrop this project: 1) the discourses of heterosexist, masculinist nationalism that accentuate themselves into a Diasporic reality the authors reject; 2) Diasporic subjectivity that challenges essentialist nationalist tropes of ethnic 'purity'; 3) the confronting of Diasporic loss—the ever turning-backward to the lost homeland of the past—and the function of *mourning* in confronting that loss specific to the Armenian case; 4) the parallel between claims over land (in the diasporic context) and body (in the heteropatriarchal context) 5) the overlapping natures of queer and diasporic subjectivity as third spaces, which is exemplified more broadly as the arching theme throughout this thesis.

Exploring how nationalism employs and works in tandem with heteropatriarchal discourse underscores how subjects of both marginalized gender and sexual identities negotiate their own subject formations and belonging within and without that hegemonic frame. As such, in demonstrating their articulations of exile and exclusion, I will argue that Arlene Avakian's *Lion Woman's Legacy: An Armenian-American Memoir* and Nancy Agabian's *Me as her again: True Stories of an Armenian Daughter*, are resistant and subversive additions to the transnational production of Armenian literature because they ultimately (re)present feminist, queer identity and Armenian-American, Diasporic experience as inextricably bound.[11] Thus, it is through these queer diasporic narratives that the legacy of Armenian nationalism finds a ground to be, as Gopinath argues, "imaginatively contested and transformed" (2005: 4).

What is revolutionary about these texts—aside from their dissident content—is the "queer" form their memoirs take in this process.[12] Both works integrate the authors'

[11] This thesis will not argue that both narratives are fully free from nationalist or heteropatriarchal norms, and more may be addressed in further study about their limitations to this end.

[12] Though originally an intention of this thesis, the current analysis does not delve into the relationship between the subversive content of the memoirs as related to the more traditional form of their genre, memoir itself. It is limited to the more specific content-based form of injecting the stories of both authors' grandmothers into their own memoirs; a common characteristic of dialogism women's writing, especially after Cherríe L. Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981). It would be a strong point of inquiry, beyond the final notes in the coda which address this issue, to more directly and with more detail engage in the question of the limits of the genre of memoir itself, what is allows and disallows, and how it may limit or make us ponder the particular potency of these works.

own stories with the Oral History transcripts of their grandmothers' genocide survival narratives, which they utilize in order to reconcile their feminist and sexual identity formations. As a result, the memoirs operate as metadiscursive: *a dialogue between grandmother and granddaughter*, where the books themselves represent the third-space of two, first-person narratives; a space created through language and the act of writing. As Nancy Agabian describes, this space is one blended between "fiction and non-fiction," memory and interpretation; "a true story," (3) where both authors find place in exile.

I will then suggest that the writing/recording process for both authors becomes the metaphysical dual-space of home and exile, their actual place, as they integrate their grandmothers' stories into their own memoirs and subjectivities. Exile, as such, becomes both foreign land and home, both place and story. And writing that story becomes the space of transgression where according to Lacan subjectivity, formed alongside language in the Symbolic Order, is made coherent. This writing/recording space is *also*, I contend, a space of mourning. As a result, I will conclude with a discussion of these texts as queer diasporic texts that open up Armenian identity from rigidly inscribed constructions of heteropatriarchal and heteronormative identity through the act of mourning, as theorized by Veena Das (2000), Dina Georgis (2006) and David Kazanjian (2012).

In both memoirs, I locate the aesthetic turn of multilayered narrative as "queer" in reading the decision to incorporate the voices and genocide stories of the authors' grandmothers as a moment of *turning back* towards the home and of creative transgression.[13] I also consider them queer because the gendered aspects of their grandmothers' genocide narratives and its affects on their deviant queer subjectivities are integral in both works. As a result, these stories inspire both authors to live, in Foucault's terms, a queer "way of life" (2005: 2) that goes against the grain of the all-important social institutions of the Armenian transnational family: motherhood, heterosexuality and reproduction. J Halberstam expands on the postmodern temporality experienced by queer subjects as "queer time" and "queer space," oppositional times/spaces against the institutions of family, heterosexuality and reproduction, providing alternative methods of alliance and subcultural practices. Finally, as the relationship between grandmothers and

[13] also but not contingent on the fact that they *are* queer themselves.

their queer granddaughters complicate the role of motherhood, "family, risk/safety and inheritance" (Halberstam 2005: 6) in both texts, this study attempts to displace the notion of motherhood and reproductivity from the center of feminist inquiry and Armenian nationalist discourse, recentering it instead on different orienting principles for the Diaspora.

My overarching definition queer adopted in this work aligns with Eve Kofsky Sedgwick's seemingly contradictory yet refined definitions of "queer" which both "pluralize and specify" the possibility to queer and be queer to all subjects, while simultaneously *not* divesting it from its 'original' context as LGBT-oriented: "For anyone to disavow those meanings," she warns, "or to displace them from the terms' definitional center, would be to dematerialize any possibility of queerness itself" (1993: 8-9). In this way, queer, analogous in many ways to the concepts of Diaspora and *décalage*, is "the open mesh of **possibilities**, **gaps**, overlaps, **dissonances** and resonances, **lapses** and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality, aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically [boldface mine]" (Sedgwick 8). Thus, using Sedgwick's leverage of 'queer' as "*other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourse… do[es] a new kind of justice to the fractal intricacies of language, skin, migration, state" which both deepens and shifts "the gravity of the term 'queer' itself" (9). My own usage of queer rises from this formulation, along with the understanding that 'queer' constitutes normative-defying identities *based primarily* on non-normative (both heteronormative and homonormative) gender or sexual identifications.[14]

1.3. A Brief Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is separated into an Introduction, three chapters and a Coda. Drawing from the preliminary discussion on Diaspora, disarticulations and *décalage* above, this Introduction lays the theoretical framework which maps the ways in which nationalist

[14] In forthcoming work, I will be extending this analysis to inquiries regarding gender and genre, and also, how a queer perspective regarding this issue, which in itself is redefining and challenging identity borders both discursively and physically (form), may be employed to the discourse of land claims and the geopolitics of contemporary day Armenia and Turkey.

and diasporic discourse privileges heterosexual reproductivity and employs women's bodies in order to define the 'nation,' and in the Armenian case, its transnational community. In addition to articulating how queer identities are excluded from the reproduction of and belonging to national identity and homespace, it will also present the framework for how queer identities and a queer analysis might challenge that hegemonic framework. As such, this Introduction should be used as the guide for the close readings of the memoirs that follow.

Chapters 1 and 2 present close readings of Arlene Avakian's and Nancy Agabian's texts, respectively. Throughout, I employ themed sub-sections, which serve to highlight the specific ways in which each author articulates the contradictions of how Armenian identity is constructed in their homes, and how this construction inevitably exiles them. Though I have tried to keep a working parallel, not all sub-sections in the chapters mirror each other due to the specificities of each work. Both sections end at the chronological point in the narratives in which the authors 'return home.'

Departing from their 'return home,' Chapter 3 reads both works together by putting into dialogue the nature of the authors' 'return,' and how it may be read through a queer reading that opens up possibilities for contemporary Armenian identities. It will also consider the specificity of this return to an Armenian diasporic context, as the 'return' also involves confronting their grandmothers' trauma from the Armenian Genocide of 1915.

Finally, this study will end with a Coda, which briefly explores the texts' differences, and how this project sets the stage for reading other queer narratives in the Armenian context, including further questions for study.

1.4. Nationalism, Heteropatriarchy, Heteronormativity and Its Diasporic Echoes: An Overview

A significant body of scholarship over the past two decades has encouraged delving deeper into the intersections between gender, sexuality, genocide, nationalist discourse and constructions of ethnic identity (Spivak: 1996; Butler: 1990, 1993, 2002; Sedgwick:

1993, 2008; Anderson: 1982; Tölölyan: 1996, 1991; Parker et al.: 1992; Gopinath: 2005; and others). How does each normative construct function in the exclusion of its semiotic opposition, posing, in the words of Roland Barthes, the naturalized Other as "a scandal which threatens" (1972) the majority's existence as deviant from the normal; a threat to the security of the home?

As Kassabian and Kazanjian delineate in their article "You Have to Want to Be Armenian Here" in *Armenian Forum*, the compilation *Nationalisms and Sexualities* demonstrates how discourses on the nation-state, gender and sexuality "circulate in the interest of a unified, coherent, and normative national identity" (1998: 21). Similarly, Diasporas, they argue in a later piece entitled "From Somewhere Else," "produce their own normative forms of identity, particularly in terms of gender and sexuality," (2005: 125). Expounding further, Khachig Tölölyan argues in "The Nation-State and Its Others," that

> In [the nation-state], differences are assimilated, destroyed, or assigned to ghettoes, to enclaves demarcated by boundaries so sharp that they enable to nation to acknowledge the apparently singular and clearly fenced-off differences *within* itself, while simultaneously reaffirming the privileged homogeneity of the rest, as well as the difference *between* itself and what lies over its frontiers. (1996: 6)

Seeking to explore the sharp demarcations, exclusionary and essentialist, homogenizing politics of the "nation", *Nationalisms and Sexualities* departs from Tölölyan's conception of nation while interrogating an interesting assertion by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*: "in the modern world everyone can, should, will 'have' a nation, as he or she *'has' a gender*" (Parker et. al: 1992, 5; citing Anderson: 1983, 6, italics mine). Taking up Anderson's parallel between the (universalizing) categories of nation and gender, the compilation seeks to deconstruct the myth of monolithic national belonging vis-à-vis the deconstruction of homogenous experiences of 'gender,'[15] showing how both function discursively. Working together, these categories also draw a body-politic of exclusion highly based on gender. Contingent then to the project of deconstructing

[15] For more on multiple experiences of nation and nationalisms, see: Homi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990) or the work of Butler and Spivak in *Who Sings the Nation-State: Language, Politics and Belonging* (Oxford: Seagull Books, 2007).

nationalism is also that of deconstructing the gendered lens through which it is conceived and applied.

It is Eve Kofsky Sedgwick's essay "Nationalism and Sexualities in the Age of Wilde"[16] in this compilation that perhaps best encapsulates this challenge and the complicit functions of Benedict Anderson's discussion of the "nation-state" and what Gayle Rubin coined as the sex-gender system that defines kinship patterns within a community. Problematizing the notion of a monolithic 'national' identity, Sedgwick contends that 'having' a gender is equivalent to inhabiting a "national" identity as a *plurality of experience* with iterations different for all. "It may be," she argues, "that there exists for nations, as for genders, simply no normal way to partake of the categorical definitiveness of the national, no single kind of 'other" of what a nation is to which all can by the same structuration be definitionally opposed" (in Parker et al.: 1992, 6). Yet, how might gender plurality challenge homogenous forms of national identity?

Consequently, the work of scholars like Gayle Rubin and Cynthia Enloe, the many contributors to works like *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, or Ayşe Parla, Ayşe Gül Altınay, Hülya Adak, Nükhet Sirman, Deniz Kandiyoti and Dicle Koğacıoğlu in Turkey, and Arlene Avakian, Lerna Ekmekcioglu, Anahid Kassabian and David Kazanjian in the Armenian context, has lead us to consider how masculinity and patriarchy work in tandem with nationalist discourses. Tropes of "the nation-as-woman," (Parker et al.: 1992, 6) writing women into the roles of tradition bearers,[17] authenticators and protectors of nationalist culture and the home,[18] which naturally depend, "for its representational efficacy, on a particular image of woman as chaste, dutiful, daughterly or maternal" (Parker et al. 1992: 6), run rampant.[19] Yet the nation, while metaphorically

[16] Later re-published with slight differences as "Nationalisms and Sexualities: As Opposed to What?" in *Tendencies* (1993, Duke University Press) p.145

[17] See Koğacıoğlu, Dicle (2004) The Tradition Effect: Framing Honor Crimes in Turkey. In: *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*. Brown University. 15:2.

[18] See Sirman, Nükhet (2000). Gender Construction and Nationalist Discourse: Dethroning the Father in the Early Turkish Novel. In: *Gender and Identity Construction: Women of Central Asia, the Caucasus and Turkey*. Acar F and Güneş-Ayata A (eds). Leiden: Brill, pp. 164.

[19] For a thorough sketch of a normative Armenian Diasporic response to a child's coming-out story, see comedian Lousiné Shamamian's sketch of maternal responsibility in the making and preservation of the nation also as a consequence of the Armenian Genocide. "Lousine: Lesbian Matchmaker to the Straights S2 EP 1," posted by

conceptualized as female, has been analyzed as (ironically) a highly homosocial public sphere that reinforces male kinship, and in which women are participatory through their affiliations with male citizens: citizenship through marriage, mediated participation in the political sphere, the taking on of the male's family name, mothers that reproduce "breadwinning nationalist sons," (Mann: 1997; cited in Sargysyan-Pittman: 2013, 182) etc.[20] Through this binary gendered lens, nationalism becomes also highly contingent upon an "idealization of motherhood by the virile fraternity," that, as Parker et. al explain, "entail the exclusion of all nonreproductively-oriented sexualities from the discourse of the nation" (6). As a result, the image of the (simultaneously) chaste but reproductive National Mother excludes sexualities that deviate from the preservational codes of patriarchy, normativity and reproductivity necessary for the maintenance of that nation. Even further, diasporic nationalism takes on these notions in more acute forms (Kassabian and Kazanjian: 1998, 125)

Yet, as the work of Dina Georgis aptly brings to light, while illustrating how the nation "is symbolically invested in the sexual," this body of literature does not help us to consider how acceptable sexuality "comes to be invested in [the] home to regulate the sexual" (2006: 3). If the National Mother—imbued with sexuality by its inherent foreclosure—is relegated to the private sphere, then one must ask, what kinds of home-spaces do these women write? How do they orient themselves in terms of that nation, or 'home,' and what do their stories have to tell us? And, as is the partial inquiry of this thesis, how are those stories transported into a Diasporic context, when the home has been violently lost or displaced, expressed nostalgically through national longing and desire?

Further, if the nation is based on a system of homosocial and homopatriarchal kinship, wherein even homosexual males (while deviant) still may participate in the patriarchal structure inscribed into the nationalist structure, what space does this leave

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MatchmakerLousine. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dR9Ox3W9Gd4&feature=youtu.be). Just before coming out as a lesbian to her mother's lines read: "So, what is this? What are you doing now? Matchmaking? If you're matchmaking…find yourself a man and give me a grandchild." While Lousine fumbles to explain to her mother that homosexuality was normal among the Ancient Egyptians and Greeks, her mother replies: "What's it to me if the Greeks were homosexual? We're not Greeks, we're Armenian!" Finally frankly telling her mother, "I'm gay," her mother responds: "What are you saying? Find a nice boy, get married, I want grandchildren! Armenians don't have anything like that. Armenians are clean."

[20] See Gayle Rubin's seminal essay "Traffic in Women".

lesbians and queer women in the conception and particular functioning of the nation? As noted by Harveen Mann, a "corollary effect of such a singular, masculanist, heterosexist narrative of the nation is the effacement of lesbianism… from the national-cultural script," (1997: 97), thus purporting Teresa de Lauretis' claim of the "socio-sexual (in)difference" of nationalism's inclusion of lesbian sexuality—or rather, its inherent foreclosure of it as a male institution. Where then, do all those female queers go when they fade into the background? Do they remain shadowed in obscurity? And what do they have to say about the national institution once they find a voice?

1.4.1. Lesbians, Female Queers and Queering Home

Probing the very male-centered heteronormative and homosocial construction of dominant national and diasporic discourse, Gayatri Gopinath's book *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (2005) draws particular attention to *queer female subjectivity in the diaspora* as it constitutes a particular absence even among queer Diasporas.[21] Shedding light on the continued marginalization of women's voices even in already marginalized queer contexts, Gopinath makes clear the necessity of the political project to avoid the elision between queerness and feminism. "[M]aking female subjectivity central to a queer diasporic project," she explains, "begins instead to conceptualize diaspora in ways that do not invariably replicate heteronormative and patriarchal structures of kinship and community" (6). Instead, these queer feminist diasporic narratives partake in the "delineation of identity by alterity," what women's autobiography scholars Brodzki and Schenck (1989) describe as one of the "most pervasive characteristics of female autobiography" (8). Yet, this alterity not only provides for content-based variegation in cultural production. As was ushered with the publication *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), compilations of various women's voices also began to change the structure of collective writing, influencing form and intertextuality in different ways. Here, the connection between gender and genre is not solely discursive

[21] Gopinath's contention echoes that of many lesbian literary theorists like Biddy Martin, Bonnie Zimmerman and others as they write about lesbian marginalization, how to read, and what might constitute a 'lesbian' text.

parody, illustrating also the changing power of non-canonical or marginalized voices when heralding themselves into the literary-scape. Here, a feminist queer analysis heralds a similar challenge to canonical readings, even in LGBTQ spaces.

Anthropologist Nelli Sargysan-Pittman's recent ethnographic work with queer Armenians in New York and the Republic of Armenia further corroborates the elision of lesbian narratives in Armenian discourse. In her dissertation "Negotiating Ethnosexual Difference in the Armenian Transnation" (2013), Sargysyan-Pittman describes what she locates as the "incommensurability" (Povinelli) of gay subjectivity and Armenian identity. Sargysyan-Pittman interviewed queer Armenian subjects to demonstrate how queer Armenian identity challenges homogenized identifications of the Armenian transnation as heteronormative. However, in doing so, she also notes that Armenian lesbians still remain as excluded or exiled subjects in queer Armenian communities because of the male-dominated homonormativity among gay Armenian males, who still function within patriarchal primacy! Often, Sargysyan-Pittman's queer female interviewees explained that they do not actively participate in many Armenian LGBT projects because they are primarily male-centered, opting instead to meet in their own alternative collectives (Sargysyan-Pittman 184). They reject the reproduction of masculinity in homonormative contexts, in which even gay males act, as one queer female interviewee describes, "like the 'favorite sons' of their families."[22] Thus, as Sargysyan-Pittman shows, though self-identified queer Armenian subjects (men and women) "contribute to the reconceptualization of the (Armenian) diaspora through alternative Armenian collectives beyond the heterosexist and masculinitst conceptualization of the diasporic," it is the lesbian or queer female subject whose subjectivity further challenges patriarchal dominance, whether constructed through hetero- or homo-frames. I would even argue that in Sargsyan-Pittman's study, it is lesbians and female queers that understand community and identity more radically. Interestingly, Lucine, one of Sargysyan-Pittman's self-identified lesbian Armenian interviewees, notes that she is more hesitant to create bonds simply based on an ethnic "Armenian" heritage. Lucine marks a noted political consciousness in not simply

[22] Sargysyan-Pittman (2013) quoting an interview with Noem, a bisexual Armenian woman in her 40s from Massachusetts, currently residing in New York, who was formerly a co-president of the LGBT Armenian organization AGLA-NY, p. 184.

accepting the normative function of kinship among Armenians solely based on one's identification as such. For Lucine, kinship must be created in a deeper way… other than identifications to an ethnic tribe or sexual orientation. As we will later see, the work of Nancy Agabian also to some extent challenges familial kinship systems, even among queer siblings.

Sargysyan-Pittman's fieldwork also highlights how queer Armenian subjects internalize and rationalize homophobic nationalist discourse in post-Genocide ethnic reproduction: "While the homophobes were saying, *There's no such thing as a gay Armenian*—in the two generations after the Genocide, so much pressure was placed on survival through traditional marriage and family, that to be gay seemed a threat to the culture," as her interviewee Noem describes. Thus, as Sargysyan-Pittman notes, an Armenian "queer diasporic view of the past" (2013: 197) and of present queer subjectivities may comprise, as Gopinath formulates, "contradictions and the violence of multiple uprootings, displacements, and exiles" (2005: 4) that are inextricable from the story of the Armenian Genocide and a node responsibilities towards the nation as a result.

The marginalized status of Armenian lesbian subjectivity is thus a site of exclusion that functions within the "exclusionary matrix" of (hetero/homo)patriarchal identification and power, as Butler (1993) formulates. This matrix, according to Butler, "requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet 'subjects,' but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject" (1993: 3). In this reading, the subjectivity of the Armenian lesbian is forever precluded if, or as she remains, in the abjected space of patriarchy. "Bound[ing] the 'human' as its constitutive outside," the systemic exclusion of the Armenian lesbian or female queer "haunt[s] those [patriarchal] boundaries as the persistent possibility of their disruption and rearticulation," rendering the existence of two queer Armenian autobiographies as integral to that very disruptive process of rearticulation. Notice also how diasporic *articulation* and *disarticulation* lend themselves to merge with the discourse on queer abjection and inclusion as *rearticulation*.[23] In challenging the notion of "constructedness

[23] Brent Edwards in "The Uses of *Diaspora*" also talks about the *décalage* as a type of haunting. *Décalage* in racial/ethnic terms shows how "diaspora can be used discursively [to prop up] (*calé*) into an artificially 'even' or balanced' state of 'racial' belonging. But such props… are always articulations of unity or globalism, ones that can be 'mobilized for a variety of purposes but can never be definitive: they are always prosthetic. In this sense, *décalage* is proper to the structure of diasporic 'racial' formation, and its return in the form of *disarticulation*—the points of

and materiality as necessarily oppositional norms" (28),[24] Butler urges us to deconstruct identification categories as one can deconstruct non-prediscursive materiality[25] which, as she argues, is "*founded through a set of violations* [that] are unwittingly repeated in the contemporary invocation" (29). There is a liberatory quality in articulating these very matrixes of power, either in the discursive categorization of 'women' (for Butler), or for our purposes, the lesbian Armenian subject. Through deconstruction, as Butler argues, these categories do not become useless but "become one[s] whose uses are no longer reified as 'referents,' and which stand a chance of being opened up… coming to signify in ways that none of us can predict in advance" (29).

1.5. The Dissonant Home and Its Orientations

The self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities
—Gilles Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*

It may not only be queer diasporic view of the past that can be associated with multiple uprootings, displacements and instability. In fact, as Irene Gedalof explains in "Taking (a) Place: Female Embodiment and the Re-grounding of Community," (2003) the production of 'home' itself may also be seen as a site or space of dissonance. Gedalof formulates her argument vis-à-vis Sara Ahmed's challenge of the association of 'home' with notions of fixity in *Strange Encounters* (2000), relating the non-fixity of the homespace to the non-fixity of the 'diaspora space':

> …[T]here is an ongoing process of rehearsal and reconstitution of a sense of home/community that is worked through encounters with 'the stranger within', and, drawing on Avtar Brah's (1996) notion of 'diaspora space', through a never-ending series

misunderstanding, bad faith, unhappy translation—must be considered a necessary haunting." (Edwards, "The Uses of *Diaspora,*" 66).

[24] Formulation borrowed from "Bellatricksy," in "Butler: Bodies that Matter," Posted Monday, June 25, 2012. http://bellatricksy.blogspot.com.tr/2012/06/judith-butler-bodies-that-matter-1993.html. Retrieved June 4, 2016.

[25] Butler here argues that matter itself is prior to discourse, as "matter itself is fully sedimented with discourse on sex and sexuality that prefigure and constrain the uses to which that term can be put" (1993: 29). Materiality itself is "constructed through a problematic gendered matrix [and thus] the discursive practice by which matter is rendered irreducible simultaneously ontologizes and fixes that gendered matrix in its place. And if the constitutive effect of that matrix is taken to be the indisputable ground of bodily life, then it seems that a genealogy of that matrix is foreclosed from critical inquiry" (29).

> of encounters between staying put, arriving and leaving. 'Home' is produced through a constant process of adjustment, transformation, negotiation, redefinition—a never-ending, ongoing work to reproduce the appearance of stability and fixity that is part of the imagined community, whether that community is being thought about in terms of nation, ethnicity, religion, etc. (2003: 101)

Gedalof relates the labor of reproduction to the role of women not just sexually, but also to the mundane chores of the quotidian and the "emotional kinwork" fulfilled by women that give the home the semblance of stability and sameness through the ever-changing circumstances of life. Certainly, as Gedalof points out, this task is even more challenging in the diasporic context of forced displacement when the physical site of the home itself is always shifting and unstable (101).[26] Next, Gedalof suggests that if home, via women's bodies, maintains the semblance of stability, then

> refusing what we are can be to challenge the ways in which reproductive work is associated with 'the stasis of being' (Ahmed 200:89) and is set up in opposition to the productive work of becoming. Instead we might argue that the 'home' that is produced through discursive constructs of 'Woman' and by the embodied practices of women is one in which being and becoming are always entangled...[As women] have to manage that never-ending series of encounters between staying put, arriving and leaving, [w]e can see this work of producing 'home', therefore as a site or space of dissonance... (101)

In challenging the idea of belonging as stasis, queer female subjects may then see their ever-becoming in the eyes of the nation, diaspora, and home, as an internal work, a "turning inward," or a work of 'home' itself.

What then is necessitated when the female-identifying queer Armenian *turns back* or *turns inward* to confront the 'home'? Gayaptri Gopinath also asks this question, formulating home as a site of inward turning and contestation in *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (2005). Merging queer narratives within the dissonant homespace, Gopinath's aim, counter to the narrative of some queer conceptions of home which situate queers as "moving out to come out," (Fortier: 2001: 4) is to also remake the space of home *from within*. For Gopinath, a

[26] Gedalof remembers here the feminist work of Mladjenovic and Matijasevic (1999) in the former Yugoslavia who has pointed out the heavy burden on women displaced by violent conflict who are being asked to reproduce home in unfamiliar conditions or in the overcrowded households of extended family and friends in new spaces.

> resignification of 'home' within queer diasporic imaginary makes three crucial interventions: first, it forcefully repudiates the elision of queer subjects from national and diasporic memory; second, it denies their function as threat to family/community/nation; and third, it refuses to position queer subjects as alien, inauthentic, and perennially outside the confines of these entities. (2005: 15)

Beyond these political assertions, however, is a nuanced understanding of what it means to queer 'home.' Here, the work of Anne-Marie Fortier provides some insight. In analyzing queer diasporic migrations in her essay "Queer Migrations and Multiple Evocations of Home" (2001) Fortier also challenges associations of 'home' with fixity by looking at *how* home is deployed in queer narrative, pointing out that the terms queer and diaspora share a commonality in their estrangement from 'home' (607). While some argue that the connection between queer, diaspora and exile is "secured through the shared experience of forged movement *away* from an original 'home' that does not occupy the same definitional status" (608) Fortier argues, along with Gedalof's and Ahmed's formulations of *becoming*, that the deployment of 'homing desires' in queer migrant narratives actually situates the queer subject in a movement between *leaving* and *becoming*, in which queer migrant subjects "reclaim a space to be called 'home'" (610). That is, the narratives of queer subjects are also ones of *becoming*, suggesting a *movement towards* a home in which they realize their queer subjectivities as they queer home itself.

As our two Armenian-American queer memoirs will also demonstrate, *queerness is relocated in the home* as the queer subject *reorients towards the home* from their exilic statuses. As such, home, and the diasporic home, engenders, a priori, queerness itself. To echo Deleuze and Guattari, "becoming-animal, becoming-woman… a becoming in which one never becomes, a becoming whose rule is neither evolution nor asymptote but a certain turning, a certain turning inward."[27]

[27] Cited in Nelson, Maggie. *The Argonauts*. Minnesota: Greywolf Press, 2015. p. 53.

1.5.1. The Turn Back Home: Diaspora, home, loss, mourning and queering

What added layer might *turning back* and *reorienting* oneself towards home engender for the queer Armenian diasporic subject if a movement towards the home *also* heralds a recognition of the affects of gendered violence and genocide?

Merging discourses on the space of Diaspora, home, loss, and queering in an essay entitled "Cultures of Expulsion: Memory, Longing and the Queer Space of Diaspora" (2006), Dina Georgis articulates a foundational basis of my inquiry:

> The space of diaspora is not the space of home but the space of loss of home. It is the space of loss from which loss of home is recalled melancholically and from which our "illness of love" and the terror of belonging and not belonging are re-imagined. When repudiated desire, which is to say queer affect, enters the space of the nation, we return to the space of diaspora: to our ambivalence, to our fraught longing, to our aggression and negation of home… Literature, and the aesthetic phenomenon, embody this fragmentation… [where] the emotional reality of the event of loss, the event's discarded and troubling content, is re-invoked in aesthetic representation. (6)

Georgis conceptualizes diasporic space as a space of the lost nation and home, where belonging and exile play a dangerous balancing act, marking literature and aesthetic production as a space where subject fragmentation, reckoning and mourning take place through queering. Resultantly, how does scholarship on queering diaspora, as Georgis asks, "redirect us to consider how sexuality has a fundamental relationship to home"? (3) What's more, how does an exploration of **LgBtQ** subjectivity in that diasporic home-space both disrupt the national, masculine hegemonic narrative of women's prescribed gender roles as "chaste," "motherly" subjects but *also* that of their divergent sexualities and layered-stories *as a result* of being a gendered subject within that nation?

In analyzing the Armenian genocide as gendered, Arlene Avakian, in her academic work in the years following the publication of her memoir, has further urged us to explore the psychological effects of the *gendered* Armenian Genocide on subsequent generations and their institutions, and how the trauma has participated in continued constructions and practices of masculinity, femininity, sexuality, and (a severe lack of) mourning in post-genocide generations,[28] a subject which her memoir heavily

[28] See Avakian, Arlene (2010). "A Different Future? Armenian Identity through the Prism of Trauma." In: *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no 42. pp. 207. This lack of mourning has, to my estimation, as in Avakian's and David

interrogates. As David Eng and David Kazanjian argue, this process of mourning is situated as letting go of the lost object of symbolic desire (that very object, which, according to Lacan, marks the beginning of our Subject formation) (Eng and Kazanjian: 2003). What then would be the correlation between letting go of genocidal mourning and heterosexual longing? Could we not make a thematic parallel, then, between the letting go of genocidal mourning and heterosexual longing/desires as a part of the same process of transgressing symbolic desire? How would a process like this look like or occur, and what might be its outcome?

In exploring the literary production of the psychosexual bildungsroman memoirs of Arlene Avakian and Nancy Agabian, our present query in this section focuses on the following fundamental questions: 1) Can we successfully read the authors' exclusion/"exile" as conditioned and inscribed by gendered Diasporic nationalism?; If so, 2) How can an exploration of non-heteronormative women's narratives in the Armenian Diasporic context serve as an opening to closed conceptions of nationalist belonging, decentering the monolithic heteropatriarchal Armenian narrative, and thus opening up Armenian identity to greater plurality?[29]; 3) What does a "return" home for our queer authors look like?; 4) How does finding queer *in the home* by our queer Armenian subjects also catalyze the *mourning* of their traumatic diasporic subjectivity as they confront the moment they must *mourn* for the brutal genocide survival stories of their grandmothers, which have so clearly formed both theirs and their granddaughters' own (disturbed) psychosexual subjectivities?

Reading mourning's significance, Georgis outlines that "mourning is a creative process generated from loss; and [subsequently, that] loss… is an emotional resource for cultural production" (2006: 6) As we will also see in David Kazanjian's articulation of mourning's function specific to the Armenian Diasporic context, mourning might be invoked in a way that does not work within the same limiting nationalist politics of

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Kazanjian's, also contributed to an ongoing obsession with genocide denialism and recognition that has trapped and/or clouded much cultural production it the Armenian context.

[29] And to what extent can something "veer" until it could not be considered "Armenian" any longer? Should we not *still*, notwithstanding this deconstructive inquiry, also be asking this question to understand the limits of what distinguishes the 'Armenian' experience from others?

genocide; that is, not mourning a displaced and irrecuperable home, but instead embracing the openings that Diaspora provides for new pluralities of identity and relationality. In this way, Georgis and Kazanjian's conception of mourning as opening, as we will see, may work in tandem with queer as opening or possibility as defined by Sedgwick (1990; 1993), Butler (1993) and Muñoz (2009). And, but opening up the possibility to imagine both coming to terms with their divergent sexual identities, their Armenian-American Diasporic identities, and *also*, in confronting their grandmother's genocide narratives, the very genocidal conditions which have predetermined that subjectivity, both Avakian's and Agabian's bildungsromans may well be cultural works of queer mourning themselves.

1.6. The Construction of the Armenian Transnation's Others by way of national imagery

How can I be without border? That elsewhere that I imagine beyond the present, or that I hallucinate so that I might, in a present time, speak to you, conceive of you-it is now here, jetted, abjected, into "my" world.

–Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, "On Abjection"

Two images I've recently happened upon aptly illustrate the grave necessity of the importance of queering home and mourning in the Armenian Diasporic context, as poignantly rendered in both Arlene Avakian and Nancy Agabian's memoirs. In each image is expressed the quintessential 'Others' of the Armenian transnation: in Figure 1, by way of negative association, nonreproductive homosexuality, and then more literally, the Turkish nation, in Figure 2.[30]

[30] Lorne Shirinian (2000) also talks about the location of diasporic memory sites, which have "meaningful and significant, real or imagined units that have become symbolic elements of the Armenian community and form the basis of its symbolic repertoire." Among these symbols Shirinian includes "flags, monuments, institutions, individuals literary texts, commemorative events, or geographical features like Mt. Ararat." He then describes their singular function in evoking "a set of values that unite diaspora Armenians in all of their diversity into a social Armenian collectivity… [by which] the repertoire of representations of the collectivity is confirmed as being the repository and resource of present Armenian diaspora consciousness" (2000: 12). In addition, it should also be noted that the figure of the Armenian homosexual is often discursively aligned in vitriolic discourse as a 'Turk.'

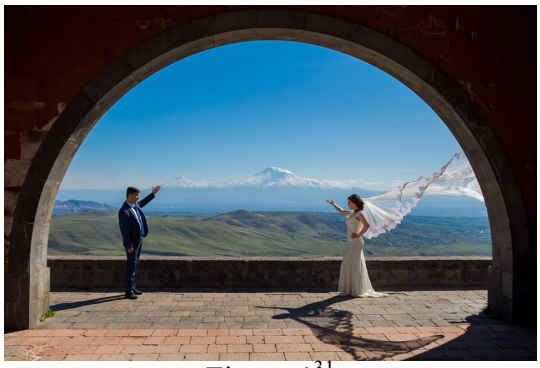

Figure 1[31]

Image 1 depicts the every-day championing of heteronormative reproductivity in Armenian nationalist discourse, while demonstrating how the discourse is simultaneously sheathed in territorial land-claims collocated with Armenian identity. A heterosexual couple from Armenia, in traditional wedding dress, stand against the backdrop of Mount Ararat, the feminized (and lopsided, breast-shaped) mountain that functions as one of the many (but territorial) symbols of Armenian national (be)longing. The mountain, however, rests just over the Armenian border, which became Turkish territory shortly following the genocide. In this photo, the suggestion is that Ararat stands as the pillar of the heterosexual couple, fortifying their union in the background as well as their union as Armenians to lands lost. The hope is, as the couple unites together, and *through their union*, that their Armenian subjectivities will also unite the Armenian nation with its lost territory. This union—of man, woman, and land—is also sanctified with the arch they stand underneath in the foreground—the halo of religious sanctification in this national-project (of marriage and reparations). While the photo may also be read as a celebration of continuity, I also see the layering of such images as the reiteration and reinforcement of heterosexual Armenian identity that is also deeply tied to nationalist longings of land claims.

The second is an image re-posted with further commentary by "Araz B", a member of the closed Facebook group "Birthright Armenia Alumni,"[32] on April 29, 2016.

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[31] This photo was posted by Ruzanna Sakanyan, a Facebook friend of this writer, on May 3, 2016. https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1119301958089993&set=a.335861113100752.78450.100000305995754&type=3&theater. Photo by Misak Kalajyan Photography. Accessed 15 May 2016.

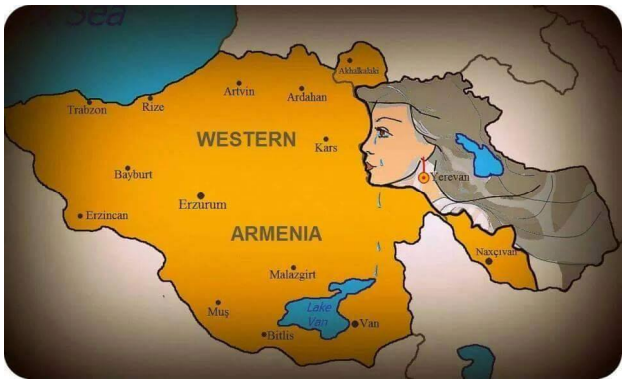

Figure 2

The commentary posted above the photo reads:

> Beautiful Map. Lets not forget what belongs to us. WE WILL have this land back, as long as we claim it, it is ours, and one day it will be a part of Armenia. Let continue teaching these precious lessons to the new generations. It's a struggle, it's a fight, but it is ours, it is our Birthright.[33]

The figure of the feminized Mother (or Sister) Armenia is a redrawing of a popular national imaginaire; the silhouette of modern-day Armenia, a woman facing west.[34] Not only is the figure of the Armenian nation here feminized as our Mother/Sister Armenia, but her image drips in nationalist longing as a result of the lost lands after genocide. As she looks towards "Western Armenia," otherwise known as Eastern Turkey, Eastern Anatolia, and most recently with the new national/ethnic struggle for self-determination, Kurdistan, her teardrops actually constitute the physical lake-space of the region—Lake Van—the historical site of the Armenian pantheon. The image of contemporary Mother Armenia in tears along with the following angry comments that claim to re-possess the land (I wonder how? Perhaps by waging virtual militancy against the Kurdistan Workers' Party—Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê—PKK?), suggests an unhealed wound denied closure, which as the comments would suggest, are due to the deferred promise of

[32] In the interest of full-disclosure, this writer is a member of the group, having participated in the program between 2009-2010.

[33] Posted by Facebook user "Araz B" April 29, 2016. https://www.facebook.com/groups/151873631523126/. Accessed 15 May 2016.

[34] In fact, this author's mother would often repeat to historicize and geographically locate the country while I was growing up, that the map of historic Armenia resembled the silhouette of a lamb, while the modern-day map was of a young woman's face. No doubt of course that that conception is Westward facing, as Armenia's Christianity aligns it not only with the Christian West but also with European Enlightenment/Renaissance values.

longing's fulfillment.[35] To reclaim land is couched in a strong thread of nationalist discourse and power that transcends generations throughout the transnation as their "inherent birthright."[36]

1.6.1. 'Crosspollination' or, When Others Collide: The Violence of Nationalist Backlash Against Gender Non-Conformity in the Armenian Transnation

In the past five years, the heteronormative discourse that in large part frames Armenian national identity, drawing the geographical contours of land and body, has taken to violence against the LGBT community in Armenia and in the Diaspora. On May 7, 2012, the LGBT-friendly bar DIY, owned by the queer feminist punk rocker Tsomak Oga, was firebombed in Armenia's capital, leading to Oganesova and her sister's fleeing the country to seek political asylum in Sweden. The young perpetrators of the attack, grandsons of Iranian-Armenian members of the nationalist Daskhnaktsutiun (ARF) party, were bailed out soon after the incident by two of the nationalist party's parliamentarians in Armenia, Artsvik Minasyan and Hrayr Karapetyan. As Gayane Abrahamyan of ArmeniaNow.com reported, in remarks to reporters, Minasyan asserted that the young men

> acted in accordance with our society's values and national ideology, and in an appropriate manner… I have repeatedly said that Tsomak and her ilk are destructive for our society… At the very least, all of us should keep our children and those around us away from her. This is really an issue of safety for our society. (Abrahamyan: 2012)

Shortly following, Republican Party MP Eduard Sharmazanov supported the ARF MPs, calling the attack "completely right and justified," and that LGBT-supporters in Armenia

[35] A promise continued to be passed down throughout the Diaspora.

[36] This commentary received 27 likes from other group members, of approximately 1,000 members as of June, 2016. It is important to note though, that while this Facebook group serves as a venue for alumni and member networking and support in the transnation, it was not until after this author wrote a solidarity post about the mistreatment of an LGBT diasporan Armenian in Armenia two weeks after the event and this current Figure 2 posting, that the group gave any attention to LGBTI issues currently facing Birthright Armenia members volunteering in Armenia currently. Similarly, issues about domestic violence in Armenia remain normalized in the group, as nationalist sentiments are employed in the interests of protecting 'Armenian identity' against Azeris, Turks, and other 'evils' that may give Armenians a bad reputation.

"are perverting our society [and] are defaming the Armenian national identity" (Abrahamyan: 2012).

As social media flamed public commentary surrounding the DIY incident in Armenia, Facebook users turned the three arsonists into heroes, calling their actions "the only true way of fighting against homosexuals," some posting photos of Oganesova along with their comments. In addition, following a 2011 survey by PINK Armenia, the Public Information and Need for Knowledge organization that has been fighting for LGBT rights in Armenia, the organization reported that 72 percent of their 1,189 respondents agreed that the state "should take measures to 'fight against homosexuals'" (Abrahamyan: 2012).

However, the attack was not solely motivated by homophobia: Oganesova's participation in Istanbul's Gay Pride Parade in neighboring Turkey was also cited, by Oganesova herself and others, as one of the strong motivations for the 'nationalist' response. Incidentally, the homosexual who enters into the nation's enemy territory becomes the highest-risk for threatening Armenian national ideology.[37]

With the anti-homophobic and anti-Turkish motivations at its core, the DIY firebombing is just one example in the past five years of homophobic discourse in Armenia and the Diaspora that has begun to make sliding associations between the Armenian nation's chief Others: the homosexual, and the Turk. In the Diversity March held by the Women's Resource Center on May 21 shortly following the DIY attack, demonstrators were met with protestors holding posters that read "Send Gays to Baku."[38] Similarly, after a media leak in Armenia of photographs of the Armenian Gay and Lesbian Association of New York's (AGLA-NY) participation in the 2013 New York City Gay Pride Parade, several comments read: "There are no gay Armenians. They

[37] For more information on the DIY fire-bombing, see: http://asbarez.com/103029/arf-shant-student-association-issues-statement-on-yerevan-hate-crime/; http://asbarez.com/103025/of-hate-crimes-and-intolerance-lessons-must-be-learned/; http://civilnet.am/2012/05/17/diy-ի-պայթյունից-սեբեբը-փորձում-են-օգո/; "Human Rights Situation of LGBT people in Armenia 2012" http://www.pinkarmenia.org/en/2013/06/lgbt-report2012/ ; "Spokesman of Armenia Republican party Eduard Sharmazanov & co should be denied visa to civilized world as supporters of terrorism in their country" http://unzipped.blogspot.com.tr/2012/05/spokesman-of-armenia-republican-party.html; Letter: You Cannot Threaten, Condone, or Enact Violence Against LGBT Armenians by Nancy Agabian, http://armenianweekly.com/2012/05/21/letter-you-cannot-threaten-condone-or-enact-violence-against-lgbt-armenians/ May 21, 2012

[38] Baku is the capital of Azerbaijan. This poster is in reference to sending Armenian gays to Azerbaijan, the Turkic nation neighboring Armenia to the east that has been in both active war and ceasefire with Armenia since the 1990s (fall of the USSR) over the autonomous region of Nagorno Karabakh, currently controlled by Armenians.

might as well be Turks!... they are disgusting; how dare they call themselves Armenians and hold the Armenian flag…" (Agabian, personal correspondence, March 2016). Years earlier, Nancy Agabian recounts in her memoir that when a feature article appeared in the New York City based *AIM: Armenian international Magazine* about AGLA, the hate mail that appeared on AGLA's website, posted by Diasporan Armenians, read similar lines: "'Gay Armenians don't exist, 'You're nothing but a bunch of Turks,' and 'Death to all Armenian fags, bisexuals and lezzies'" (Agabian: 2008, 196). Thus, in the national discourse that seeks to maintain its legitimacy, the Armenian homosexual and the Turk have started to become synonymous Others that complicate those borders.

Finally, and perhaps most symbolically disappointing, is that one year shy of 100 years after the Armenian Genocide, Armenians find themselves yet again in a moment of exclusionary, nationalist discourse based on identity politics. The all-too familiar Blacklist of April 24, 1915, marking the roundup and deportation of Armenian intellectuals in Istanbul (the symbolic date that marks the beginning of the Armenian Genocide), now finds its eerie parallel in Armenia. In May 2014, an article was published in Armenia by the newspaper *Iravunk* ("Right") entitled "They serve the interests of the international homosexual lobbying: Blacklist of the Country's and Nation's Enemies," calling for the public shunning of those who support the LGBTQ cause in Armenia. The article also provided names and links to the Facebook pages of the 60 individuals listed, calling for them to be banned from their professional and social circles. Again, the language of Othering in this article, like so many other inflammatory comments of heteronormative nationalist discourse which are threatened by nonreproductive sexuality *in the home*, either deny a space in Armenia for them, or, exile them just beyond their borders to the other national enemies—the Turks or the Azeris—of whom similar threatening statements of home and national purity are made.[39] Similarly, over these past months alone during the writing of this thesis, members of the LGBTQ community were beaten on the streets in Armenia because of their suspected homosexuality, and a gay Diasporan Armenian participating (ironically) in the Birthright Armenia volunteer program, was kicked out of the dance group "Karin" in Yerevan, known for its politically

[39] An interesting topic for an article would be the strikingly similar ways in which Turkish gays are derogatorily called "Armenians" in Turkey. Interestingly, they are not called Kurds, who have been for the past decades the current "national enemy" of the Turkish Republic.

nationalist stance, after the director found out that he was gay.[40] Both incidents on social media were followed by homophobic comments from both Armenia and the Diaspora. Consequently, these examples further illustrate how the politics of the Armenian nation and the Diaspora often times overlap and integrally rely one another, making a dichotomous separation between nation and Diaspora impossible. This makes the transnational paradigm for the Armenian case, as Spivak, Douzjian and Sargysyan-Pittman have argued, the most relevant lens of analysis.

For the aforementioned reasons, to suggest that these current memoirs by Avakian and Agabian are creating Queer Space via reorienting home, belonging and queer identity in the Armenian transnation is not just an aesthetic endeavor—it is also highly political. The existence of these queer memoirs, which through their revolutionary language fight to destabilize the myth that queer and Armenian identities are irreconcilable, stand as proof in writing that, as the first LGBTQ organization in Turkey KAOS GL proclaimed in their 2015 speech for their acceptance of the Hrant Dink Award, echoing the mantra of the Queer Nation, "We are here, we're not going anywhere, better get used to us!"[41] Literature empowers us to identify with and embrace diversity. As such, this study seeks to draw a continuity with the past to understand where the generational diversity of these marginalized LGBTQ voices begins. Tracking a genealogy of non-normative exilic writing in the Armenian context show us now only how these voices and discourses shape and evolve. Avakian and Agabian's memoirs demonstrate that we do not have to deny the past, or one's identity, but in fact, must return to it again and again, reframing the stakes of reproducing hegemonic history and identity. In this way, a queer analysis might strongly offer an opening for the future of Diaspora studies, Armenian literary studies, and related fields.

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[40] For news on the event, see: "Diaspora Activist Endures Discrimination in Armenia" in *Asbarez*, May 19, 2016. http://asbarez.com/150571/diaspora-activist-endures-discrimination-in-armenia/. Accessed 21 July 2016. And «Կաթիճ Պաթպֆինի Համույթ» at Pink Armenia's official website, http://www.pinkarmenia.org/tag/%D5%AF%D5%A1%D6%80%D5%AB%D5%B6-%D5%BA%D5%A1%D6%80%D5%A1%D5%B5%D5%AB%D5%B6-%D5%B0%D5%A1%D5%B4%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%B5%D5%A9/. Accessed 21 July 2016.

[41] Kaos GL (2015) Kaos GL's speech at Hrant Dink Award Ceremony. Available at: http://www.kaosgl.com/page.php?id=20192 (accessed 19 September 2015)

1.7. Mapping The First Armenian-American Queer Memoirs in the Diaspora: (Dis)orientation and (Dis)articulation

If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossibility constitutes its very being, that it is none other than abject.

–Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, "On Abjection", 5

The abject designates here precisely those "unlivable" and "uninhabitable" zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the "unlivable" is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject's domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, "inside" the subject as its own founding repudiation.

—Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter,* Introduction, 3

In this study, I explore the dichotomous orientations of home versus exile as a major theme throughout *Lion Woman's Legacy: An Armenian-American Memoir* and *Me As Her Again: True Stories of an Armenian Daughter*, which reverberates with Anne-Marie Fortier's project to disrupt the notion of home as a static or familiar space in her ethnographic study "Queer Migrations and Multiple Evocations of Home." Fortier explores the discourse on queer migrations in(to) a Diasporic space via what she calls its characteristic relationship between "moving out and coming out within the narrative of migration-as-emancipation" (1999: 4). Employing this framework, she reads the connections between exile, displacement and migration as homecoming, where home is rather the origin of queer and diasporic narratives, not its destination (1).

It is Fortier's project to argue for a queer/diasporic narrative that situates queer/diasporic subjects as oriented *towards* home (instead of *leaving* home) in order to re-imagine and challenging the idea of originary home as a familiar spacio-temporal landscape. Achieving this argument, Fortier eloquently problematizes "how memories of home can relocate queerness within the home without reinstating home as originary moment" (Fortier 1999, Abstract), hence illustrating the commonalities between "queer and diaspora on the basis of their shared experience of estrangement from 'home'" (407).

While her discussion carries a rational and liberatory tone for her analysis of queer Italian émigré culture, I contend that for the Armenian-American diasporic experience iterated in both Arlene Avakian's and Nancy Agabian's memoirs, it is precisely the memories of an unfamiliar and confused Armenian *home* of (dis)articulation in America *as originary moment* that ultimately relocates their queerness *in the home* and as a part of the greater Armenian-American, queer feminist experience in the Diaspora. That is, it is by returning to their 'origins' that finally achieves continuity with the previously unexplored and silenced[42] stories of their families, both authors (though differently) are able to (re)situate their subjectivities and (un)belonging(s) within their Armenian-American ethnosexual landscapes, which become (dis)integrated with 'home'. In this way, their identity narratives "reconfigure spaces of belonging shaped *both* through movement and attachment" (Fortier: 1999, Abstract) though it is the orientation of *moving back home* and *listening to their grandmothers' stories of genocide and migration* that necessitates the understanding of a home that champions their renewed feminist and queer politics.

This thesis then fittingly aligns with Gayatri Gopinath's assertion that "it is through the queer diasporic body that these [racist and colonialist] histories [of the diaspora and homeland] are brought into the present; it is also through the queer diasporic body that their legacies are imaginatively contested and transformed" (2005: 4). As a result, Gopinath urges us that one cannot think of "home" without queerness. As queer activist and anthropologist Naisargi Dave explains, "it is the inability to belong within the rules of domestic and national normativity that render one 'queer' at all" (2008: 184). "This felt queerness," she continues, "becomes the impetus for taking leave, but the experience of not-belonging (queerness itself) still demands constant debate, and, thus, the sought return to the home space where queerness can paradoxically only but never exist" (173).

However, it is the Armenian Genocide and the psychosexual affects of that trauma in its queer diasporic subjects which makes this endeavor in analyzing lesbifem[43], queer

[42] silenced mostly due to inscribed heteronormative gender politics and genocidal trauma that renders silence.

[43] "lesbifem" is a shorthand referring to a coalitional movement in Istanbul of lesbian, bisexual feminists (which is this author's reference point). The group also includes cis-women, transmen and transwomen.

Armenian texts particularly resonant and divergent in this line of inquiry. Gopinath's work "dissect[s] the ways in which discourses of sexuality are inextricable from prior and continuing histories of colonialism, nationalism, racism, and migration" (2005: 4). Drawing upon this frame of analysis, I aim to demonstrate, both with and against Fortier, that home can be both originarily familiar and still allow, and in fact champion, queer subjectivity in the Armenian context, in large part *because of the genocidal trauma* expressed and (re)membered in these memoirs. Both Arlene Avakian and Nancy Agabian are strengthened by their grandmothers' stories of survival. And what makes the Armenian diaspora[44] particular and different from Fortier's Italian émigrés is that their subjectivities have come into being through a migration caused by resistance to a (largely gendered) trauma. As a result, this makes all the difference for our authors.

Departing her theoretical work from a reading of Butler's performativity, Anne-Marie Fortier discusses the hegemonic production of Italian émigré culture in London in "Re-Membering Places and the Performance of Belonging(s)" (1999) as a series of performative acts that are regulated through institutional discourses and practices that (re)produce tradition both in various terrains both inside and outside the immediate home. These acts and the regulatory practices that produce both social categories and norms of membership, she argues, "are sites where hegemonic definitions of the collective body relate to multiple injunctions of individual bodies" (1999: 43), and thus "reterritorializ[e] identity" (44).

Yet, while Fortier's aim here is to demonstrate how "different displays of presence operate through the repetition of regulatory norms that produce an effect of materialization and naturalization of cultural belonging through the ethnicizing and gendering of individual bodies" (1999: 4) my aim here is to demonstrate what Gopinath describes as the function and forward-looking positionality of the queer diaspora through Roach's term of 'clandestine countermemories.' That is, the bringing to present of erased memories that do not fit into "conventional nationalist or diasporic scripts" (Gopinath: 2005, 4). Avakian and Agabian show how the non-normative constitutes their own (un)belonging, and later queer belonging, in memoirs which nevertheless inscribes itself into the very tradition that it chooses to (dis)inhabit by their ends. As a result, this queer

[44] Perhaps much like the Jewish and Afro-diasporas?

diasporic cultural form, according to Gopinath, "work[s] against the violent effacements that produce the fictions of purity that lie at the heart of dominant nationalist and diasporic ideologies" (4).

Interrogating the function of performativity, discursive/linguistic predetermination and the formation/rebellion of the subject in *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler understands a 'queer' performative reterritorialization of identity from the hegemonic definitions of the collective body as enacted via the use of that very hegemonic structure. As Butler explains,

> [p]erformativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a 'pure' opposition, a 'transcendence' of contemporary relations of power; but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure. (1993: 241)

Bearing in mind this formulation, if one is "in power even as one opposes it, formed by it as one reworks it, and it is this simultaneity that is at once the condition of our partiality…and the condition of action itself" (Butler 1993: 241), then a queer reterritorialzation of Armenian Diasporic identity must be performed, for both our authors, by instrumentalizing (in order to rearticulate) the very identity politics of Armenian Diasporic subjectivity itself. As a result, via Butler's formulation, we arrive at the tautology that the queer diasporic subject could perhaps only reterritorialze their subjectivity by invoking their home-defined diasporic subjectivity itself. And as we see, the result of the "resignification of norms" via challenging the limits of Diasporic Armenian identity, demonstrates the very "*inefficacy*" of those norms. According to Butler, then, "the question of subversion, of *working the weakness in the norm*, becomes a matter of inhabiting the practices of is rearticulation" (241). In addition, it exemplifies how the disavowed Armenian queer, or in Butler's term (borrowing from Kristeva) the abject subject, is the "rearticulation [of] the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility" (Butler: 1993, 3). Thus, both in the Diasporic and queer contexts, "rearticulation" seeks place.

1.7.1. Exile: (Dis)orientations of Home in Avakian and Agabian's Texts

Exile is never the state of being satisfied, placid, or secure… Exile is life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentred, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew.

–Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile", 149

Avakian and Agabian articulate exile in several narrative permutations: a "polarity of existence," as Agabian explains, as typical to the "cross-cultural American experience… a feeling of never fully being yourself, in both the predominantly white world and in the traditional ethnic community of your family" (2008: 34). They are also exiles from both communities due to their feminist politics and queer identities/subjectivities. Each of the narratives' iterations of exile is complex and deserves a paper in itself. As such, I will streamline this critique vis-à-vis the interweaving and complex articulations of home/belonging and exile/unbelonging as the authors link their feminist/queer bildungsromans with their Armenian-American (familial) experience.

In these texts, the space of one's exile writes itself in the form of "Otherness"—that "scandal which threatens" the majority's existence as deviant from normalcy, threatening the security of the home. "Exile," or rather, orientations or articulations of home and exile, function as the locus of gendered subject formation in Avakian's memoir. For Agabian, home is a space wrought with cleanliness, protection, silence around topics about sex anti-Turkish sentiment, and a space of "Armenianness," the absence of which renders her unintelligible.

The home versus exile/unbelonging binary is constructed in direct parallel to an Armenian versus American binary[45] in both narratives, where the "home" is written as "Armenian," and is a site of dissonance due to the fragmented nature of diaspora. Outside-the-home is conceived of as "Other," a desired American space—a space which both authors desire but ultimately can never fully achieve, at least on the narrative level of the memoirs, because their diasporic subjectivities ultimately precludes them; it is a homing desire in fact that both shapes them and *turns* them *back* home.

[45] actually a hybrid and thus conflicted/(dis)oriented Armenian-American, as we will later see.

This Introduction has sought to situate an intellectual genealogy of the literature pertaining to nationalism's framing of otherness, and how it finds its echoes in the Diaspora. Particularly, how does the Armenian transnation relate particularly to sexual and gendered-others, with particular employment of female bodies? In addition, how might Diaspora and queerness, both iterating disarticulations of 'normativity,' disturb concepts such as the unwavering or definitive borders of nation/home/land, and how might they further be employed to provide openings? In the following two chapters, I will analyze the different articulations of exile in Avakian's (Chapter 2) and Agabian's (Chapter 3) texts. While based on the theoretical and historical groundwork laid in this Introduction, each section will delve deeper into the particularities of exile based on language, gender and familial hierarchy that all paint the familial landscape from which both authors yearn to escape in the beginnings of their memoirs. In Chapter 4, the memoirs will be juxtaposed in their 'returns home' and their grandmothers' genocide stories, situating and measuring the limits of queerness, their challenge of heteronormative reproductivity, and the role of mourning specific to the Armenian Diasporic story.

CHAPTER 2

LION WOMAN'S LEGACY:
Dissonances of the Diasporic Home

She understands that identity is dangerous when stabilized.

—Bella Brodzki & Celeste Schenck,
Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography, 4

Arlene Avakian's memoir *Lion Woman's Legacy: An Armenian-American Memoir* is an exploration of the limits and intersections of "Armenianness" in the United States and "anti-racist feminist" subjectivity beginning in the 1950s and stretching across the civil rights and women's liberation movements. To my knowledge, Avakian's memoir, published in 1992 by The Feminist Press in New York City, is the first (diasporic) Armenian text to breach the autobiographical topic of lesbianism and queer identity in the Armenian context. Also to my knowledge, the book has received little attention within the Armenian-American community.

More traditional in its chronological form as autobiography, Avakian is occupied with the development of her consciousness and subject formation. Her prose is straightforward, and her mission from the outset is clear: "to tell the truth with this narrative…understand[ing] that my truth is only one of many" (Acknowledgements). As we will see, from the outset, our memoirists' formulations of truth are quite different: Avakian acknowledges the multiplicity/simultaneity of truths based on perspective, thus adhering to a more epistemological understanding of truth. However, the 'truth' of Agabian's memoir is a liminal one found between fact and fiction, not based on perspective but an ontological questioning of the ever-intangibility of 'truth' that perhaps a combination of fiction, fact and memory can bring us closer to, if only ephemerally, in writing.

As a more traditionally chronological memory piece, Avakian's narrative is linear. She writes as she remembers, using the past tense as she takes her reader with her to experience her life as she did, adding retrospective interpretation and analysis along the way. We journey first from childhood, when Arlene comes of age in the Armenian speaking community of Washington Heights, NY, where her family life and "outside"

life are completely separate from each other both socially and linguistically. This depiction is quite indicative of its historical juncture, as Arlene is a child of the first-generation wave of post-Genocide Armenian immigrants which still heavily maintained its language and cultural traditions in an insular Western Armenian diasporic enclave of northern Manhattan, where little outside contact with the English-speaking world was necessary. Armenian identity was preserved, and assimilation to American culture was shunned for fear of further cultural annihilation and loss, two generations after the Armenian genocide. In fact, Arlene admits, speaking of her entrance into public school, that she "remembers little of those early school years because I wasn't fluent in English and because of the separations between school and the rest of my life" (19).

Arlene's project of assimilation to American culture as a young child is a mechanism both to "fit in" and escape from the ineffable exile-status of her family, which rendered them, in the eyes of her peers, as 'Other':

> **I was hard put to answer what an Armenian was**. It was who I was and what I had known all my life, but how could it be defined? I knew that my mother came from Turkey and my father from Persia, but they were definitely not Turks or Persians. Where was Armenian on the map? I asked my mother and she told me that it was in the northeast corner of Turkey, part of what was called Russia… Though I knew that my father had lived in Russia and that Uncle Alex had fought in the Russian army, I knew that we were not Russians. **Nothing about being Armenian was clear**… Was I Catholic? Protestant? I could only answer that, as my mother had told me, our church was like the High Church of England…(21)

Arlene's project of assimilation then is marked by an outward movement of escape from the disorienting space of home, which creates her highly fragmented subjectivity as a child. Strangeness, Otherness, disarticulation and unintelligibility are in fact all dissonant characteristics of 'home' for a young Arlene, and characteristic, as we have seen in the Introduction, of the diasporic experience. Here, she expresses a geographic dissonance, as well as 'Armenian' being inexplicably defined through negative association. When she describes later that her desire to be Catholic was to avoid membership in the inexplicable Armenian Apostolic Church, Arlene writes that she understood that being Catholic, like Armenian, "was something you and your family were, not something you became." Thus along with being Armenian as a site of confusion, it is also a site of predestined stagnation…a status of un-becoming.

Arlene's imaginaire of Armennianess is based very much in aesthetic projections. In the opening lines of the memoir, she describes the Armenian church and priest that Easter Sunday of 1954 as not looking like anything "I had seen in magazines or books" (12). Nothing was familiar, and everything according to American standards—about the church, what she wore, how they celebrated and where, were wrong. "I realized that these people would never look or act like people in *Life* magazine, the *Saturday Evening Post*, or on the silver screen" (6). To counteract the embarrassment of the Armenian refusal to assimilate, which is a great source of shame for a young Arlene, her rebellion from the Armenian community from the very early stages of her childhood is marked by a gendered performance of femininity and physical difference that she identities with being American. She takes pride when a young man comments that she did not look Armenian because she "was too tall, too narrow in the hips, too light, and [that she] didn't have a big enough nose or enough hair to look like a real Armenian" (6-7). Further, the first chapter opens with Arlene proudly reporting what she wore that Easter Sunday. Because she won the battle against her mother to choose her Sunday best, she reports:

> It was Easter Sunday, 1954, and my family and I were coming out of church. I had on the new clothes I had made for the occasion and high heels. I wore lipstick but no other makeup. My legs were shaved, but my eyebrows remained untweezed. (1)

A small victory, yet enough to display the "premium" she put "on looking American" (7).

Gendered orientations negotiated in and away from her Armenianness are one of the major themes of exile in Avakian's memoir that fracture her identity inside and outside the home. It is also a site of great contention in how the structure of her Armenian family is comprised. However, before departing on a more streamlined gender analysis, I will explore the more subtle forms of Arlene's fractured subjectivity as a result of her home and self in a diasporic space.

2.1. And first there was her name: Naming and (Un)Belonging

Arlene's childhood is marked by her feelings of exile from her own home—an Armenian-oriented space—and her efforts to assimilate to the surrounding American

community. Yet, while Arlene sees the American world as "the rest of the world," for Arlene's mother, this outside space is the dangerous world of "people who were not blood kin" (19) or "*odars*," the Armenian word for foreigner/stranger. The inside/outside dynamic of the homespace, where the homespace is the one that resists assimilation, is rendered in Arlene's name, Arlene Voski Avakian: "Arlene was the name they [her family] had given me to face the world, but Voski was who I was to my family and in the neighborhood" (9). Arlene reveals, vis-à-vis a fractured subjectivity, that her name constitutes the schism between what defines her supposed selfhood in the home/community and truth-oriented space versus her supposed façade or shield bestowed upon her by her blood kin oriented *towards* (but not a part of) the world to resist/protect her from it (resist both assimilation, and as we shall later see, trauma).

In fact, Arlene's name itself stands as the first disorienting contradiction of the maintenance of tradition in her homespace versus American assimilation, which her family in all other respects rejects. As Avakian beings to describe her childhood desire as a *movement* oriented *towards* Americanness and thus *away* from the confines of the Armenian community,[46] she links the bestowing of her hybrid name to the construction of the genealogical continuity of her family *based on migration(s)* indicative of the historical Armenian experience:

> I consciously began my campaign to become an American toward the end of my elementary school years, but the process of assimilation had actually been started by my parents when I was born and named Arlene Voski. According to American tradition, the first female child should be named after the father's mother.[47] My parents decided that, since I was born in America and would probably live in this country all my life, they would give me an American first name and use my grandmother's for my middle name. My parents were following the lead of older family members who had emigrated to the United States. My father's Uncle Mesrop and his wife, aunty Manoush, renamed their children when they emigrated from Persia. There was precedent too for American names in my mother's family. Uncle George's name had been Americanized when he came here

[46] The citation reads, "I began my process of moving away from the orbit of family and the Armenian community when I entered public school... I remember little of those early school years because I wasn't fluent in English and because of the separation between school and the rest of my life" (19).

[47] It is important to note that Voski is the name of her paternal grandmother, whom she never meets. While she does not bear the name of her maternal grandmother, it nonetheless emphasizes the importance of grandmother's in Arlene's subject formation. Later in the memoir she notes that she considered changing her last name to Voski, as "it had been my grandmother's first name and I liked the idea of following the female line" (204), thus further establishing female kinship as a continued integral part in Arlene's subject formation throughout the memoir.

> as a young child, and he and my aunt, my mother's sister, had named their three sons George, Howard, and Edmond. (9)

This naming process fascinatingly situates Avakian as a migrant subject/body herself, constituted by a complex tradition of assimilation. Though born in the United States, she becomes, to draw on Marianna Hirsch's concept of post-memory, a "post-migrant-subject"—a child of migrants, yet an honorary migrant in her own right, as she experiences the "other world" outside of the Armenian community of Washington Heights as something strange and unknown when she visits her non-Armenian friends' houses and enters "another world" (20). Interestingly then, the memoir suggests that Arlene inherits migratory status from blood kin. Yet, though she inherits an "Armenianness" in America which constitutes her as a first-generation hybrid subject, she has not been transmitted a post-memory through which she can make sense of that hybrid subjectivity. She is never explained, until she is older, why her family lives in the United States and not Armenia or Turkey; she is never explained why her family hated Turks yet ate Turkish food; or why the people who were not blood kin (i.e., the new American friends Arlene tries to make as a child; a type of queer kinship along non-blood ties) were clearly dangerous (19). As Arlene describes, every one of her attempts to assimilate and "be ordinary had been foiled" (25) mostly by her mother, which becomes a great source of contention in their relationship. Thus, blood kin is what is constructed, counter-intuitively, as the source of stable inheritance and yet also of a migratory history reflected in Arlene's name.

Yet, along what lines are the invisible/imagined geographies that map Arlene's supposed (dis)inhabitation of Armenian identity drawn? If it is the home-space and her genealogy that bestows her (dis)continuities both with a static definition of Armenianness coupled with its historical migratory/fluid status, it is Armenianness itself which, defining the home, becomes the primary source of confusion and unintelligibility for Arlene. For as much as Avakian places importance and detailed descriptions in her first four chapters to paint a rich picture of the hub of the transnational/diasporic Armenian community of the 1940s-1950s in Washington Heights, these descriptions are always coupled with Arlene's childhood inability to orient the essence of Armenianness itself. Armenianness is

ineffable. Thus, both "home" and "Armenian" function synonymously as sources of (dis)orientations at the interstices of the geographic, historical, political, religious, linguistic and finally, gendered levels.

2.2. Language and Gender Politics

If Arlene's name is the first and most indicative of her multiple subjectivities, the linguistic codes of Armenian and English also function as important barriers that either bar or invite access to her participation with her relatives or "them", a.k.a. "*odar*s,"[48] a.k.a. Americans. *Linguistic (dis)orientations*, beginning with Arlene's name, are the first of several points of oriented-confusion in Arlene's early life that mark her hybrid subjectivity and status. She is in-between cultural points of reference as well as a subject never *fluent* in, and always moving either towards or away from, a given linguistic code.

Though her first language and mother tongue is Armenian, the classical Armenian of the Armenian Church remains distanced and unintelligible for her as a child. This becomes a major source of estrangement from any solidified definition of Armenianness, and shameful in its further temporal/historical distancing that works against Arlene's desire to become American: "The ancient Armenian language[49] used for church services sounded as if it might be understood, but it was unintelligible to me…[O]ur priest used an even stranger form of the language [which was] peculiar enough as it was…" (2). Yet, her *movement* away from the confusions of Armenian-language stigmas into the English-language landscape is a further (dis)orientation, as she attributes remembering little about her early school years in her process of "moving away from the orbit of family and the Armenian community" because she "wasn't fluent in English" (19).

[48] Arlene employs the word *odar* in Armenian, which means stranger or foreigner, marking any non-Armenian. In this passage, Arlene makes her identification of *odar* as being directly associated with being American (11).

[49] The ancient Armenian language, or Classical Armenian known as Գրաբար [*Krapar/Grabar*]is the older form of Armenian, equivalent to the Latin : Italian correlation. Orthography, verb conjugations and possessive noun forms vary, sometimes significantly, from Modern Armenian, or Աշխարհաբար [A*shkarhapar*].

This movement from Armenian towards English forecloses Arlene's possibilities to interact with her family members. The figure of Aunty Lucy presents an interesting case-in-point to what Nelli Sargysyan-Pittman discusses in her work as the very strong identifications and claims to ethnic identity based on the capability to speak the ancestral language (2013: 51). Aunty Lucy is the wife of one of Arlene's father's brothers. They moved to New York City from Persia to take part in the family's Oriental rug import business, the Avakian Brothers. However, Auntie Lucy did not want to move and refuses to acclimate (let alone assimilate) to her new geographic surroundings. This strong-willed woman, "though she lived in America for more than fifty years…refused to speak one word of English, even when it meant being unable to communicate with some of her grandchildren" (13). Thus, here, the Armenian-language maintenance for Aunty Lucy becomes *more important*/holds *more value* than keeping her ties to her kin/grandchildren. Resistance to English enabled Aunty Lucy to protect her ethnic identity within the four walls of her house, which ultimately, as Arlene states (by aligning the home space with the nation space) became "her country" (14). Yet, though Arlene maintains fond memories of the solace she felt in the comfort of Aunty Lucy's lap, their relationship begins to dwindle because of their respective struggles for national (un)belonging through a mutual maintenance/resistance to language: "My relationship with her diminished as I lost fluency in Armenian. My desire to be American was as strong as Aunty Lucy's refusal, and by the time I was in my late teens we barely understood each other" (14). It would seem then, that maintenance of the Armenian language to preserve Armenianness, also may work in the very destruction of kinship ties in a diasporic context.[50]

Arlene discursively situates home v. outside/other in a gendered context with her iterations and associations of the binaries "we/us" v. "they/them", "*odar*" and "wrong" to describe who belongs inside and outside of the homespace/Armenian identity. Ethnic/national belonging is measured by language fluency, a standard to which *only* the various women in her family are held. In fact, she does not discuss the language-capabilities of any of the men in her family that might or might not foreclose their

[50] A queer analysis of this topic is in order for future study.

identification with "Armenianness."[51] While for men it would seem that their Armenianness as Avakians is assumed as a biological given, the level of Armenianness of the *women* in her family is directly linked to their engagement and fluency in the Armenian language, which is measured both qualitatively and quantitatively. Thus, only women can be measured with varying levels and hybrid measures of Armeniannes. This is clearly exemplified by Arlene's two aunts-by-marriage, Aunt Vera (English) and Aunt Sonia (Russian). Though to Arlene's amazement both *odar*s are considered very much a part of the family unit, the extent to which they are marked as foreigners/strangers is contingent upon their fluency in Armenian. While "Aunt Vera's English accent and non-Armenian ways (using Windex to clean windows instead of vinegar and water, for example) clearly identified her as an *odar*," Aunt Sonia "did not seem like an *odar* at all... [She] spoke English with a very heavy Russian accent… [and was] also fluent in Armenian" (11).

Yet, a woman's language capability is not the only linguistically-oriented characteristic of Armenian ethnic belonging, according to Arlene. Here, ethnic gender roles and language-use are tightly intertwined in the full-identification/location of one's 'natural' belonging to the community. Aunt Sonia is a disruption to the normative whole. She is a source of great curiosity for Arlene not just because she seems to successfully bridge the gap between belonging/unbelonging within the Armenian family as an ethnic Russian *because* of her Armenian language fluency (thus disrupting narratives of ethnic purity). "Aunt Sonia," she writes, though she belonged, "was strange" for two reasons. Firstly, unlike the other women in her family, and especially to her mother's disapproval, Aunt Sonia took part in "'men's talk'—probably politics—and women did not discuss such things" (11).[52] Aunt Sonia's voice is heard and is relevant in these discussions.

[51] For the men, their Armenianness is taken a priori as the leaders of the families. Hybrid Armenian men are not discussed, however women's Armenian identity can be qualified and quantified.

[52] Full quote: "There were two things about Aunt Sonia that distinguished her from the other women in the family, though they did not make her American. One was that she had long and often heated debates with my father and uncles, using worlds I had never heard before. None of the other women spoke up during these discussions, and perhaps that is why I was curious about them. When I asked my mother what Aunt Sonia and the men were talking about, she told me with a wave of her hand that it was just talk. While this talk was clearly not something 'they' did and therefore not automatically wrong, I sensed that something about it was not right. My mother disapproved not so much of the conversation but of Aunt Sonia's part in it. It was 'men's talk'—probably politics—and women did not discuss such things. The other thing about Aunt Sonia that made her different from the other women in the family was that she called herself an artist. She painted, not just to fill the time after her children were grown, but because she was an artist.

Consequently, silence is identified (by inverse association) as a defining quality of Armenian women. Thus, paradoxically, the 'Armenian' woman must both *speak* Armenian with fluency, yet also *remain silent.* Secondly, Aunt Sonia was curious because she was an artist and had interests beyond her children.

However, the sole express sign of Aunt Sonia's *odar* identity for Arlene is her *geographic orientation* outward in "the way she used the city" (11). Aunt Sonia went to museums, could navigate the subway with ease, and went downtown "alone and often" (11) as opposed to the rest of Arlene's family who would only go downtown for shopping or seeing a show at Radio City Music Hall. Aunt Sonia's ability to independently leave the confines of the home lives up to Arlene's American-imaginaire, thus relegating the full-fledged Armenian woman inside and silent, just like the figure of Aunty Lucy, ever-oriented towards the past as she maintains her Persian Armenian-speaking "house [that] was her country" (14) while she remains silenced in the English language that would otherwise orient her/give her access to the outside, American world.

2.3. The Heteropatriarchal Home

Though the women of Avakian's childhood home are the predominant actors in orienting Armenianness, the symbolic home itself, and the Avakian family, is a highly heteropatriarchal space, to which the women are expected at all times to defer. In fact, Arlene's mother talks very little about her own family, constantly placing importance on the social status of being "an Avakian" (22).[53] "All the Avakians," as her mother later explains—"she meant the men but did not say that—were highly respected" (56). However, the only claim in childhood that being an Avakian holds for the author are the

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Aunt Sonia had ideas of her own and was willing to argue about them with men, and she had an interest that was totally unrelated to her children. These were unusually qualities in a women, to be sure, but they were certainly not attributes that other women of the 1940s and 1950s—American women—possessed either. They did not make Aunt Sonia any more like an *odar* than her Russian accent. Aunt Sonia was strange" (11).

[53] Apparently, the Avakians, as Arlene learns in her university years, were a highly respected, aristocratic family in Persia before their migration, complete with a family seal (Avakian 55). This continuation of "aristocratic status" rejects Arlene the possibility in childhood to do anything mainstream or with her friends because of the social capital her mother places on the family name. She is not allowed to take tap dance lessons, her mother choosing ballet and classical piano lessons instead as status symbols. For her, being an Avakian "meant I would do nothing that was common but have only 'the best'" (22).

few associations we receive, which reveal the gendered dynamics of both her mother's (Donigian) and father's (Avakian) families. The Avakians have (and their legacy is) a very strict heteropatriarchal system of authority within the family unit:

> My father's family was organized around a strict hierarchy that was obvious even to a young child. The father in each family held major decision-making power over business as well as private matters, since all males in the family were on the board of directions of the family business…While Aunty Lucy and Uncle Hagop, and after his death Uncle Mesrop, were at the top of the hierarchy, and everyone in the family was deferential to them, older brothers also held positions of authority. As a younger brother, my father was just below Uncle Alex… My father… complied with his brothers' decision[s] (14).

Interestingly, the author shares this Avakian-hierarchy with her reader to familiarize us with the heteropatriarchal structure of Armenian families. It also foils the interrupted heteropatriarchal system of deference in her mother's family as a result of, as is revealed later, the Armenian Genocide, though Avakian avoids mention of the genocide by name at this point in the memoir. She only reveals here that because many of the men in the Donigian family either disappeared or were dead, the women took the decision-making roles traditionally assigned to the patriarchs or other male figureheads. Thus, the gendered-hierarchy is destabillizied in the Donigian family due to trauma and the loss of male authority. Of the difference of her mother's family, Avakian describes that her mother "freely disagreed with her brother, sister, and even her mother." However, the traditional championing of male-superiority is still upheld embodied/engendered by the women/females in her family as "my uncle, her [mother's] brother, was pampered by all the women…" (15).

In another example Avakian references while detailing the lack of hierarchy and more matriarchal-centered structure of her mother's family, the women of the Donigian family still reproduce the same traditions that refuse other female bodies' agency in taking ownership over their own life decisions, especially regarding marriage. While still living in Turkey, Arlene's grandmother, Elmas, conflicted in the decision to betroth her daughter to a man in Turkey with whom she fell in love, "despite the fact that she had been responsible for the survival of the family for the eleven years since her husband's departure" (15) could not see herself as having the authority to decide about her own daughter's wedding: "Since her father, all of his brothers, and her brother-in-law were

dead, she wrote to her older sister Turvanda for permission for [her daughter] Arsenik's marriage" (15). Indeed, the matriarch, Turvanda, denies Elmas's request and betroths Arsenik to her own son (Arsenik's first cousin) upon the family's arrival to the United States. However, with age, Turvanda's symbolic matriarchal position does not transmit intergenerationally. Rather than maintaining the alternative possibility of a matriarchal family structure, the gender-hierarchy itself would rather disintegrate: "as Turvanda grew older, no other woman emerged to become head of the family. There were some men of my mother's generation in the family, and the women deferred to them, but there was not the strict hierarchy of my father's family" (15). Thus, women are also unable to maintain intergeneration continuity, and also, as this passage would suggest, inheritance. Yet, this is a theory both Arlene and Nancy prove terribly incorrect as they connect to the stories and legacies of their grandmothers.

2.4. Go West (for the) Young Man!: Racial Hierarchies and (Re)orientations of Home and Exile

In the continuation of male hierarchy in the Avakian family, it is the entrance of Arlene's brother, the later more Americanized sibling of the two, that ironically inherits the Avakian patrilineal legacy, who unwittingly catalyzes Arlene's final move outside the confines and comforts of her Armenian home to the 'dangerous' outside space of Americanness. While Armenian women, unlike Aunt Sonia, are marked also because they do not leave the confines of community and geographic space, Arlene also stands as an anomaly as a woman in her family because of her outward movement outside the home. Interestingly, however, while men seem to be vertically be the cause of silence and stagnancy amongst the Armenian women of their families, twice because of her brother Arlene is made exile from that coveted family space: once from the closeness she shares with the women in her family, and second by the family's move out of the Armenian neighborhood of Washington Heights in order to "rescue" him.

Arlene describes that her life changes when her brother was born when she was six-and-a-half. Her memory is unmistakable: her grandmother excitedly rushes to the call

with the news that the baby is a boy. In this way, the first pangs of Arlene's nascent feminist consciousness and physical exile are directly catalyzed by her mother and grandmother's privileged, gendered treatment of Arlene's brother, their little *paşa*.[54] Hesitated though she had planned with her mother to hold the new baby on the car ride home, Arlene's "grandmother's arms shot out and she took him," (16) snatching away and interrupting Arlene's first possibility for interaction and older-sisterly care of her brother passed to her by her mother. As such, it is her *grandmother* who initializes Arlene's first actual physical exclusion (beyond Arlene's agency to assimilate into American culture) from her family circle. On the way home, Arlene recalls, "sitting next to [my mother, grandmother and brother] I felt for the first time a circle of intimacy from which I was excluded" (16). She later paints an even more powerfully visual depiction of this exclusion:

> A few months later I saw my mother and grandmother in the dining room bending over my brother, totally absorbed. The closed circle I had sensed on the day we brought him home now included my mother. I stood apart watching them and saw the circle as double-edged. I couldn't get in, but it was also clear to me that he couldn't get out. I felt compassion for my brother who was, after all, only a baby. But the circle, closing me out and him in, was too powerful for me. The compassion faded, and I felt mostly hatred and jealousy. (16)

Thus, the homespace itself becomes reoriented towards a masculine presence, finally solidifying the gendered oppression of women in the patriarchal familial structure enforced/reproduced *by* women. This dynamic maintains itself throughout the memoir, while her brother Paul Khosroff "stayed within the circle," never obliged to participate in the same family-visits and mandatory rituals of Armenian identity that Arlene had. Instead, he remains safely in the bosom of his home with his mother and grandmother, "where he was their king, or *pasha* as my grandmother called him" (17).

Yet, what this outside-orientation means for Arlene, if home for her family until this point has been synonymous with security and the outside with "those" dangerous people? Due to her status as female, Arlene is inherently bestowed the status of second-class citizen, and throughout the rest of the memoir, she is neither expected to achieve good grades, a good job, or to support herself independently.

[54] pasha, in English. Used in Turkish historically as the title of high ranking officials in the Ottoman government. The root stems from Pahlavi, meaning 'lord' or 'shah.'

The narrative of Arlene's confused (dis)location and her family's tension between assimilation and preservation in the Armenian v. American binary is further complicated and intertwined with systems of gender and ethnicity/race-relations upon her parents' decision to move out of the Armenian community of Washington Heights because the "neighborhood was not so nice anymore since so many Puerto Ricans were moving into it" (37). While her parents maintain a clear divide between their Armenian identities and non-Armenian/American ones, they still quickly accept, participate in and enjoy the white privilege bestowed upon them by American legal standards.[55] "Although my family had not assimilated entirely into American culture, they had understood very well America's racial code and had transmitted it to me" (25), Avakian recounts.

She becomes further disoriented by her parents' willingness to lie about what type of Christians they were while searching for a house in New Jersey. Instead of proudly bespeaking their Armenian Apostolic identities, they quickly align themselves as Protestants in order to mask their ethnic difference, securing the right brand of Christianity in order to reap the benefits of white privilege. This public denial of their Armenianness—something they had her whole lives seemingly never rejected—was incredibly disrupting: "I was very confused by this lie" (37) recalls Arlene. Interestingly though, this echoes the pattern of Elmas, Arlene's grandmother, who had to Turkify and Islamify after the genocide in order to keep herself and her children (including Arlene's mother) safe in Turkey by denouncing their Armenian identity, until they left.

Not only do Arlene's parents deny their Armenian identity in order to participate in white privilege, but it becomes clear that they also participate in the denial of their Armenianness *because of a gendered preference* for her brother!: "They…told me that they didn't want my brother to grow up in New York City [though] [i]t had been fine for me, I argued… But they were determined to save my brother from the neighborhood" (37). Higher value is thus placed on the danger of the racial degradation and the *de-whitening* of the Washington Heights neighborhood and its possible affects on her brother Paul, inciting Arlene's parents to choose rather than cocooning him in the same

[55] US Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in 1910 that Armenians are "Caucasians" and therefore "white" upon the testimony of antropologist Franz Boas (Bakalian: 1992, Sargysyan-Pittman: 2013).

ethnicized Armenian community that formed Arlene's subjectivity and homespace, to "save" him from the *threat of non-white infiltration.*

Whitewashing serves to 'rescue' Paul, which was, until that moment when Arlene was younger, was a completely foreclosed option. In fact, being Armenian meant resisting that very whitewashing! This gender/ethnic dynamic is deeply situated in conflict: whereas Arlene as a girl is aligned and "relegated" (to her despair!) to the role of tradition bearer (Sirman: 2000; Kogacioğlu: 2004)—participating in and performing her Armenianness in a forced process of diasporic/ethnic reproduction which she actively resisted (her longed-for assimilation denied to her even discursively as a "danger" in fraternizing with "those" people)—her brother Paul is *rescued* from that self-same ethnic cocoon and transported, perceived to be saved via whitewashing, from the very American community that is constructed for Arlene as a symbol of bastardizing ethnicity and corrupting ethnic purity! Further, while Armenianness serves to contain and protect Arlene as a girl, Americanness or whiteness promises Paul a successful future as a male.[56] It is not even clear if Paul is held to the same standards of reproductivity that ironically, Arlene is. As Arlene later recounts of their first year in New Jersey, a nosey Armenian woman working at a test center reported Paul's IQ scores to the family[57]: "My mother was ecstatic and said that, if only one of her children was very smart, she was glad it was Paul because he was a boy" (43). Thus, the gendered dynamics of the Avakian family and Arlene's subject formation resonate highly in the dissonant homespace of gendered diasporic Armenianness that Arlene eventually vows to escape.

[56] Here, whereas patriarchal traditions would usually be concerned with the maintenance of Paul's ethnic identity at all costs in order to pass it down patrilineally, whiteness is privileged and Paul does not even grow up speaking Armenian!

[57] Arlene's mother learns this information via an Armenian woman working at the test center who, going against the rules of testers' anonymity, informed Arlene's family as she felt personally proud of Pauls's success because of the '–ian-s they shared at the end of their last names.

2.5. Gender, Genocide and Survival *through* Exile: Storytelling and Inclinations of Assimilation

Arlene's reaction to her family's exclusion and her move outside the home is also expressed in gendered terms. However, hearing her grandmother's story of genocide and survival for the first time as a fourteen-year-old serves as a turning point for Arlene in her final (dis)orientation away from the home which leads to her self-imposed exile from her Armenian family and her own Armenian identity for many years.

"My urge to be like everyone else intensified by something that happened when I was fourteen years old" (30), she writes. While Arlene's grandmother recounts the disappearance of her husband, her and her children's deportation and exile from Kastemoni, and her Turkification through Islamization of the family in order to save them, Arlene's mother remains silent in the other room, never talking to Arlene about the story she also experienced as a child. And, when Arlene's grandmother finishes, she leaves her with the precious task of telling her story to the world. However, Arlene regrets to have heard it. The sociopolitical/historical context that leads to the genocide is never contextualized for Arlene, a silence which leads to her further confusion: "Why had those horrible things happened to them?" she remembers asking herself as a child. Further, "the whole thing was incomprehensible to me," she explains, also because of the strong connection her mother's family kept to Turkey:

> Their hatred of Turks was especially confusing. We seemed to be so connected to Turkey ourselves… Some of our favorite foods were Turkish… We danced Turkish and Armenian dances to Turkish music… Older family members were fluent in Turkish… And the coffee that provided the focus for our afternoon rituals was Turkish coffee. How could it be that my family could hate what was so intimately woven into the fabric of their lives? (32)

As a result, the story of Arlene's grandmother appears as a grand contradiction to her family's cultural practices. Further layering the complicated dissonances of her household, family and the Armenian identity she already works to reject as a child, Arlene loses all remaining affection for her fraught Armenian identity:

> Why would I want to know about people who were unknown to most of the world, who were hated so much when they were recognized that they were forced to leave their

> homes and to give up their religion, who were even killed. I was sorry that my grandmother had told me her story. I was sorry that I had asked her to tell it to me. I didn't want to know it. It was bad enough to be unknown, strange, and different from everyone else, but it was unbearable to be despised. I would forget it. (32)

It would seem then that the story of genocide, told in the diasporic home by her grandmother, functions for Arlene as a metaphorical double exiling in its re-telling. For a young Arlene who carries the knowledge of the trauma along with her family's silence about it, precludes her the contextual tools or psychological support to cope with it. As a result, the function of genocide itself is revived in her renewed exiling:

> I did not think very much about what my grandmother had told me, but unconsciously the knowledge that I belonged to a people who were despised contributed to my drive to get as far away from being Armenian as possible. The family, with its adherence to old world traditions, *was* Armenia (34).

Thus, for Arlene, the genocide story renders her family Armenia itself, making her "even more determined to deny [her] difference from everyone else" (33) and further orienting her towards American assimilation. Oriented outwards, Arlene begins to more definitively reject Armenian food, language and culture as she exiles herself from her community and family by further adopting despised and feared, dangerous American habits.[58] She even, to her disappointment, distances herself from some of her beloved aunts and cousins. The fights Arlene recalls having with her mother during this time color their distanced/cold relationship for the rest of the memoir (34).

However, perhaps the most explicit act of exiling through the denial of her grandmother's story is in Arlene's vow to escape her Armenianness *by adopting the normative gender codes of American women* that her conservative Armenian family forbids:

> My anger began to erupt—at my mother for her strict controls over me…at the Turks for having done what they did to my family, and at my grandmother for having lived through such horror and for telling it to me. I vowed to be like my friends. *I would tweeze my eyebrows. I would wear lipstick. I would go out with boys*. And, most of all, I would get away from my family as soon as I could. (34)

[58] Commodity fetishism is directly linked to Arlene's conception of the 'American way,' and the mode by which assimilation should take place. She wants to buy "brand name" foods, for example.

Arlene's attempt to escape one rigid identity opens the pathway for her adopting gendered conventions in an American context—one that first regulates her life and then creates serious conflict as she struggles to liberate herself from the patriarchal and heteronormative constructs of both Armenian and American communities throughout the rest of the memoir.

Following her move from home, Avakian's memoir becomes concerned with Arlene's evolution as a college student and adult alongside the Civil Rights Movement, Gay Liberation Movement and Women's Liberation and Feminism, in which the gender and familial conventions of both the Armenian and American worlds are deconstructed. Arlene crosses over racial boundaries as she dates an African American man one summer in college, to heavy community/white disapproval. She later transgresses the codes of monogamy, working on her "sexual problems" (209) as her husband notes, as she and her husband Tom sleep with other people (at Arlene's suggestion) before she decides to leave him—a choice still frowned upon in the 1970s, the 'single mother' being viewed, by definition, as a bad parent (238). Confronted with lesbian friends, her prejudices on the "sickness" of being gay, or the conception of "lesbians to be sick man-haters" (237) are also challenged (to Arlene's surprise) (202-3). And, Arlene's further immersion in the feminist movement, along with her getting into a PhD program in Women's Studies, further sets her apart from the conventional white, heteropatriarchal scaffolding of American society as she fights for student's rights, women's rights and intersectionality within the women's movement in the university context.

But Arlene's "turning queer" (205), or putting her activist politics to the test in her personal life, takes on another dimension when she finds herself falling in love towards the end of the memoir with a woman named Martha. Actively defining her feelings as "lesbianism" and not just queer curiosity as earlier in the memoir, Arlene is clear that her feelings are not motivated by political choice: "I did not become a lesbian because I hated men… I fell in love with her because of who she was, not because I didn't want to sleep with 'the enemy'… which was [an idea] common among many lesbians I knew" (236). As their relationship grows, Arlene describes it through the metaphor of building a scattered, patchwork garden, one that broke all the traditional

rules for gardens" (261). It is through this building of a garden (perhaps a queer Eden), that Arlene feels free from family and social conventions for the first time.

It is also because of Martha's encouragement that Arlene returns to her family's Armenian story after a long hiatus after several vehement fights in which Arlene's sense of racial injustice and the victimization of women seems almost hyperbolic. During one of these fights, which focus predominantly around race and hegemony, Arlene finds herself urged to make the connection between her own experience of power in gendered and racial terms to the genocide story of her family. Again in a fight about the relative power of black men, Arlene begins to articulate the relationship between power, race, class and gender that have colored her own life:

> I continued, now through my tears, to say that I understood the oppression of a people and that oppression had an impact on patriarchy. I was well aware that Armenian men were *male chauvinist pigs*, and it was impossible for me to live near my family because of the way women were treated, but there was something about our common pain that would always connect me in some profound way to Armenians, women and men. (261)

Thus, it is this relationship with a woman, one that sets Arlene outside the image of "a good Armenian woman" (284), that ultimately catalyzes Arlene's reorientation towards home, to the story of her grandmother that had so unexpectedly "come back into [her] life" (261). Alrene's movement or self-imposed exile away from home, which carries layers of gender re-orientations, eventually catalyzes her movement back *to* the home, via her lesbian relationship with Martha and intersectional politics. This movement will be explored in juxtaposition to Nancy Agabian's memoir Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 3

ME AS HER AGAIN: Dissonances of the Diasporic Home in Second Generation Diasporic Queer Memoir

Me as her again: True Stories of an Armenian Daughter, was published sixteen years after Avakian's memoir by Aunt Lute Books, a small multicultural women's press based in San Francisco. While Agabian's memoir was nominated in 2009 for the LAMBDA Literary Awards, the Armenian Diaspora did not give significant attention to its publication. Nancy Agabian, an Armenian-American "daughter" as the title of her memoir playfully reads, approaches her psychosexual bildungsroman from the perspective of not 'one of many truths,' but as truth from a more liminal positionality in the craft of memoir: "a blend of fiction and nonfiction," surely marking also a structural shift in the craft of autobiographic writing and memoir from Avakian's moment. Written while she was a creative writing student of nonfiction, Agabian sees both memory and memoir as highly creative processes, and as such, takes more creative liberty than Avakian's more streamlined autobiography to interweave narratives and piece them together. She disrupts the chronology of her narrative, compresses the roles of several people into a couple of minor characters "in order to streamline the story," (Agabian, Nonfiction Advisory) and incorporates her own creative work—journal entries, letters, poetry, and the text of her own performance pieces. This weaving of time, perspective and genre achieves a more dramatized stylized picture of Nancy's selves from different moments of her development as she reflects back, in various parts of the memoir, from many timeframes.

Piecing vignettes from different moments and reflections of her life create, through form, a more stylized paralleling of the legacy of Nancy's family, homespace and her upbringing as she juxtaposes them to moments in her adult life closer to the time of writing. As a result, Agabian crafts her memoir so that the reader is given the creative space and agency to make the connections between her actions in adulthood that are juxtaposed to scenes from her childhood or family that give explanatory anecdotes to her adult anxieties.

Agabian also makes her reader aware of this structural project from the first chapter. Recalling her first childhood memory of a story about the characters "1" and "0", she remembers the little red character "1" "who repeatedly found he didn't belong" and was always searching, melancholically, for "0" (his female counterpart). "*My* story was of feeling alone," (7) Agabian writes, yet recognizing that "the yarns spun expressly by my mother and grandmother, in which they are heroines protecting something so special and fragile, are interwoven with mine." As she announces, Nancy's memoir is about loneliness, exile, gender binaries in a heteronormative structural space (1 & 0), and the search for belonging/becoming. And, while that search may be characterized as the story of belonging/becoming of " the bisexual, the queer, the transgendered, the outsider, the oppressed, the depressed, the victim, the survivor, the denied, the denier, the forgotten, and the remembered" (4), Agabian's story is "fundamentally… a mother-daughter-granddaughter story" (7). As she writes quite poetically and movingly in the opening pages:

> Now I tell my life in order to sort out the yarns of the others, those mothers, to look closely at our threads and loss and longing and leaving, braided together, an emotional timeline of similar but different histories passing one another, over and under and around—bound. This is a story of what was left behind, what passed down, and how all that history pressed itself into bodies and minds as a life unwound. (7)

Thus, unwinding together her own psychological past and present, as well as the pasts and presents of her mother and grandmother, Nancy finds her becoming and belonging in the story she creates between the bound and unwound. A becoming, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, "in which one never becomes; a becoming whose rule is neither evolution nor asymptote but a certain turning, a certain turning inward" (Nelson: 2015 citing Deleuze and Guattari, 53). In Nancy's case, that inward turning is to the written word. This illusory movement inwards, discovering the affects of her grandmother's and mother's subjectivities and legacies of genocide on her own psychosexual formation, enables her to negotiate between the incompatible structures of Armenian and queer identities, something forever changing and unstable, as she later comes to realize.

Nancy's meanderings take her readers back and forth temporally and spatially from childhood, family and university life in Massachusetts, to her life as a performance

artist in Los Angeles where she avoids the Armenian community, and finally to New York City in a Creative Writing MFA program at Columbia University (where she ultimately writes this memoir). Throughout, Nancy explores her fears and rejection of her own queer sexuality—a partial confirmation of her longstanding suspicion that she was gay—and recounts her difficult coming to terms with her body.

Fears of both hetero and homosexuality everywhere permeate Nancy's narrative. Searching for and becoming "tired of pushing for words that might never be spoken" (142) Agabian's memoir focuses more explicitly on the relationship between her sexual consciousness and its conflicts with her Armenian, female identity (her ethnic, gender and sexual identities independently and simultaneously). First and foremost a wordsmith, Nancy reiterates throughout her memoir her need for words and language, which bring into actuality or bridge incommensurability. Thus, language becomes one of the major thematic sites of exile for Nancy, disappointed for not being "able to speak the same language" (132) with her parents, her sister Valerie, and her American and Armenian communities. "But I wanted words" (132) she insists.[59]

Through language play in its very title, *Me as Her Again*, Agabian provokes a clever syllabic and phonetic play on *Mi-a-ser-agan*, the word for "gay" in Armenian. *Me as her again*, the new 'me' to which one returns through family story, now incorporates a queer identity back into the homespace: I am her, *again*. In addition, as we will see later, moving through stories, words and affects reconfigures the language and textual exile Nancy's depicts that is similar to spatial movement in Fortier's work on movement and queer migration.

Fittingly, as Agabian plays with language, she identifies language as the site of the first conflicts between sex and being Armenian in her family in what she calls her "Armenian-challenged household." Though her immediate family does not speak Armenian, the language permeates her consciousness as it functions as a language of euphemisms for topics "too embarrassing to say in English: *vardeek* for underpants, *voor* for butt, and *betkaran* for bathroom" (25). Thus, beginning with language, Agabian, links

[59] Interestingly, this want for words could also be paralleled to the metanarrative of Nancy's identification with Armenianness without speaking the Armenian language, as we'll see later.

her relationship to Armenianness with her sexual bildungsroman as centered around the question one of her later audience members asks after one of Nancy's provocative performances (*The Crochet Penis*): "What is it about Armenians that make them so uptight about sex?" (142)

3.1. (Un)reproductive Dissonance in the Armenian Home

The Armenianness that defines Nancy's homespace is markedly different from Arlene's. Nancy is the granddaughter of a genocide survivor, Zanik, and the youngest daughter of Armenian-American parents who do not speak Armenian in the household. Nancy lives with her parents and two older siblings. Instead, Armenian is spoken in the household of her grandmother and three aunts. While Nancy describes her immediate, non-Armenian speaking family as more prudish, never even looking at *themselves* naked in front of the mirror, sexuality and reproductivity become an even more interesting contentious/dissonant space in the Armenian-speaking realm of her grandmother's household. Zanik, the matriarch of the family, lives together with her three unmarried, middle-aged daughters (Nancy's paternal family). For Nancy, who visits grammy and her aunts a few times a year, eating their Armenian food, listening to their stories, and hearing them speak Armenian, 'Armenianness' is once-removed/displaced from her immediate home surroundings. Yet ironically, the Armenianess reproduced in grammy's house already goes against the very grain of what nationalist discourse designates as the *role* of the Armenian woman according to Arlene's text. Here, Armenianness is reproduced in the very household that is (un)reproductive. Whereas nationalist discourse would place the role of the female body as the reproductive organ of the nation, in Zanik's house, Armenianness is reproduced in all cultural ways *except* for physical reproduction *because of Armenianness*.[60]

Like Arlene, Nancy has a similar fascination and closeness to her aunts, emphasizing a strong homosocial female bond within both first and second generation

[60] In Avakian's memoir, the Armenian legacy that Arlene reproduces in on the culinary level as an expert of Armenian cuisine.

diasporian families. The figures of Nancy's aunts similarly depict the dissonance that foils Nancy's understanding of Armenian and American identities, underscoring the function of gender in that identity formation. Interestingly, this depiction is the opposite of Arlene's aunts. The Armenian women in Arlene's family are characterized mostly by their silences. However, Aunty Lucy, the *odar* aunt who speaks Armenian, while still a part of the family unit, is considered strange by Arlene for her outspokenness and independence which most strongly orients her as Other. In contrast, Nancy's three aunts and grandmother, who all speak Armenian and who represent the more traditional side of her family, are all outspoken women, but function in highly codependent, homosocial relationships. Similarly then to Arlene's family, the fully 'Armenian' women are depicted as not independent, while women like Aunt Lucy, and also Nancy's mother who lost her mother at a young age, holds a job and does not speak Armenian, are somehow anomalies for the image of the 'good' Armenian woman.[61]

As Arlene, Nancy's aunts also seem strange to her because they do not abide by what a young Nancy sees as the rules of matrimonial normalcy in the United States. In addition, they certainly do not follow the national reproductive codes of nationalist diasporic discourse. "No one I had ever known had three never-married aunts. Make that two, or even one… Spinsterhood, celibacy—not exactly modern American ideals" (11) writes Nancy in her first chapter, "Clean to Dirty," a title which metaphorically follows the narrative plot of deconstructing the home as a site of purity and stability. Like a young Arlene, being unmarried for Nancy is untenable for a woman: "[W]ere grownups, professional working women, really supposed to live this way?... It was only later, as a teen, when I started to project myself into the future and imagine my life as an adult, that it seemed completely unacceptable" (11).

However, it is Zanik's own conception of acceptability in the Armenian context that forecloses her daughters' participation in what Nancy sees as acceptable matrimonial normalcy in the modern American context. The aunts' reproductive potentialities are completely foreclosed to them by their mother if performed outside of an Armenian space! As Nancy's mother judgmentally informs Nancy when she is older, grammy had

[61] In fact, Nancy's mother has serious complexes about the criticisms of her mother in law and sisters-in-saw, especially about cleanliness.

threatened to disown her daughters if they married someone disabled[62] or non-Armenian, relegating reproduction as an acceptable possibility *only* in the Armenian space. Thus, as Nancy's parents show no physical interaction between themselves, and Zanik and the Aunts do not display sexuality, for Nancy, the space of sexualization becomes American (but not reproductive).[63] According to J Halberstam's concept of queer space, Zanik's foreclosure of her daughters' non-Armenian relationships relegates them to a space of nonreproduction, which, as I will analyze in Chapter 4, is conceptualized as a queer time and space by Halberstam. Interestingy, this space is *stipulated by the codes of Armenian diasporic subjectivity itself* that champions ethnic homogeneity over reproduction of non-Armenian identity!

The interesting irony, however, is that the Armenian space of Nancy's grandmother and aunts is also the space of homosocial kinship among women that *introduces* Nancy to nudity and her own body. During one of Nancy's visits, Auntie Mel hops in the shower with Nancy to help her: "I had never seen a naked woman before. Mumma never got nude, and Valerie [her sister] was still just a girl. Mel had big white breasts and brown jiggly-eye nipples. Even scarier was the black curly bush between her legs" (23). Nancy often references the closed-off nature of her mother, which was a source of Nancy's great resentment towards her. In a way, the 'prudeness' of Nancy's mother, and the fact that everyone in Nancy's family "covered their bodies from bathroom to bedroom" signals a sexual dissonance/discomfort in her family, a discomfort that Nancy spends the majority of her memoir fleshing out in terms of her own psychosexual formation. This moment of exposure also heralds Nancy's own realization of her anxieties with nudity and her body with which she grapples throughout the memoir.

[62] Here, Nancy's connection between the association between being non-Armenian and having a disability is far from collocation or metaphoric meaning.

[63] Arlene in fact marries a non-Armenian. This is a difficult reality for her family, but it is later accepted, perhaps because of the fact that she is a woman, assuming that she would defer to and adopt the cultural traditions of her husband instead of her family. This would also not oblige Arlene to reproductively produce Armenian cultural traditions, language and heritage to her children, which in fact she doesn't, aside from making Armenian food in the home. Interestingly, her memoir does not recount the pressures of her family to raise her children Armenian.

3.2. *But I couldn't speak*: Linguistic and Bodily (Dis)Orientations of Exile In and Out of the Armenian Community

Though the Armenian-language is used euphemistically in her home, Nancy's parents still place an importance on its reproduction by sending her and her siblings to Armenian school every Saturday. Thus, incapable of reproducing (the language) in the home, they shirk this responsibility onto diasporic institutions.

Nancy's performance in school becomes one of the primary sites where Armenianness and Americanness become, respectively, sites of failure and success for a young Nancy, which thus orient her towards a preference for participating in the 'American' world. While Nancy's institutional attempt at achieving Armenianness (also quantified by one's level of Armenian-language proficiency) is an utter failure and source of shame because she cannot learn the Armenian language, she excels in her Massachusetts public school. Unlike Arlene who sabotages her academic performance in school to rebel against her mother and resist 'standing out', as a child Nancy takes great pride in her academic successes at the expense of being labeled a nerd. Though she is applauded as "a very smart girl" in an era where women's liberation is in full force and her family praises her achievements regardless of her gender, American school becomes a site of opportunity and less oppression for Nancy. While smartness labels Nancy a nerd amongst her peers, this exile status is preferable to the humiliation she experiences in Armenian school.

Nancy and her siblings find it almost impossible to learn the Armenian language, rendering them as complete exiles and failures in the Armenian space. For Nancy, this inaccessibility to language and words is near-devastating, as through words, she *becomes*. This becoming is foiled by her introverted personality and her inability to speak in many situations, which is attributed in large part to her double-bound exilic status of being an Armenian-American. As a result of attending Armenian class yet not able to speak the language, she writes:

> I was completely inept in Armenian: I knew the 38 letters of the alphabet…[and] I could read anything put in front of me; I could memorize vocabulary words…But I didn't know how to put together a sentence. **I couldn't speak**" (32). [Emphasis mine]

These lines echo Nancy's loss of speech in the American community as well when she comi-tragically attempts to explain what an Armenian is to her friends: "What is that?" one friend blurts out.

> "That's what I am. The same way you're Irish. I'm Armenian."
> "Arabian?"
> "No, ARMENIAN."
> "So, where is—"
> "Armenia. It's near Russia."
> "How come I never heard of it?"
> "Because it's a part of the Soviet Union."
> "So you're a Commie?"
> "No."
> "Are you Catholic?"
> "No."
> "What religion are you?"
> "Armenian Apostolic."
> "Is that Jewish?" This seemed to be the most crucial question to answer correctly, for it was asked with an air of suspicion.
> "No, I'm a Christian," I retorted.
> "But you're not Catholic?"
> "No."
> "Are you sure?"
> "Yes," I sighed.
> And hence the polarity of existence began, as I became accustomed to being misunderstood, explanations barely helping my case. A typical cross-cultural American experience…. The feeling o never fully being yourself in both the predominantly white world and in the traditional ethnic community of your family.… I just wanted to be something simple that everyone had heard of, like Irish, Italian or Polish. I didn't want to be different, to have to explain myself.
> **So I couldn't speak**. (27-28)

The scene is indicative of the frustrations geographic (dis)orientation produces in the diasporic space. Thus, ineffability becomes a symptom of Nancy's status as an Armenian-American diasporic subject. This scene is also similar to an exchange Arlene has with her school friends—an inability to place Armenia intelligibly because of a long and complicated history of empire, war, migration and genocide, the story of which is foreclosed to them as children. Instead, it remains as an invisible backdrop, while the remnants of that displaced status, without explanation, becomes a source of great angst for both authors as children.

Language also becomes one of the sites of active insurgence for Nancy and her brother who were shamed and outcast from their Armenian classes for not speaking Armenian (a responsibility that lies on them and *not* with their parents or grandparent's who didn't teach them). The siblings rebel by bastardizing the word *Digin,* a term of respect similar to Madame. Nancy's Armenian teacher corrects Nancy's pronunciation with a biting tone as Arlene addresses her instead as *Diggin*. But, Nancy explains that instead,

> Leo and I had corrupted the pronunciation of Dee-*geen* [purposefully] to the gruffer sounding Diggin in order to more effectively make fun of the Armenian school teachers. Diggin was also reminiscent of TV beatnik speech we heard on *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeanie*: "Dig that crazy sound," and "Can you dig it?" (29)

Hence, as the Armenian language is instrumentalized as a tool of forceful reproduction among Armenian-American children, it becomes susceptible itself to bastardization and ridicule/rejection by the same subjects it severely burdens and shames. Thus, when Nancy and Leo distort *digin* to diggin', they rebel by reproducing a queer, sardonic version of the language in their daily lives.

If this pressure/shame of silence were not enough, the Diggins surely drive the point home as the Armenian language again becomes the site of reproductive responsibility and natural legacy of diasporic children who, in the event that they do not fulfill their duties to the language, also do not fulfill their duties to their families or nation. When Nancy and her peers perform abominably on their language exam, Diggin Arlene chastises:

> Our culture has survived for over two thousand years. Our people have suffered countless hardships and still we've preserved. Your parents send you to this school so that the flame of Mother Armenia can be kept alive. **There is little hope if you kids don't learn the language. Your ancestors are crying right now, I can tell you that. They're crying**. (30-31) [Emphasis mine]

Notwithstanding her childhood aversion to the language, Nancy attempts to reinsert herself into the Armenian community later in the memoir. However, she is

interrogated yet again by several old Armenian women[64] at the Holy Cross Armenian Church in Washington Heights (Arlene's old church) for not speaking Armenian:

> Edie introduced me to a few people. An old lady lacking eyebrows and wearing a tan felt hat said, "She looks Armenian."
>
> "Yes, she's Armenian but she doesn't' speak the language," Edie explained. "She's learning."
>
> "Are you half Armenian," the old lady asked.
>
> "No, both my parents are Armenian."
>
> "Why don't you speak the language?" she asked, her waxen face twisting into a question mark.
>
> "My parents didn't speak it in the house. They were born here too."
>
> "Why didn't they teach you? I'm half Portuguese and I taught my children and grandchildren how to speak Armenian." (206)

Nancy is completely inculpated in this exchange. Even being of tainted "half-Armenian" parentage would not be an excuse for Nancy not to speak Armenian, like the half Portuguese woman, making Nancy's position, with two Armenian parents, of no excuse. What's more, it is *her* that is blamed for such a lack, and not her parents; as if one could choose and will to intuit and learn a language as a bilingual speaker without inherentence as a child. When the third woman who learns of Nancy's lack of language skills asks her, "'So you don't speak any Armenian?'…shaking her head and tsk-tsking my answers," Nancy explains, "This really pissed me off, but I was oddly satisfied, her judgment serving as actual proof of why I had exiled myself from Armenians for so long" (207).

Deciding as a young girl to orient herself towards the American community where her teachers and parents applaud her success in school, Nancy is still marked by difference in the American space because of her physique:

> Clearly, I was a complete failure at being Armenian. Though I could reject my identity by making fun of it and by refusing to learn the language, and I could embrace the white world by following all rules and excelling at American school, I would still look different to everyone in Walpole, I would still have the label of my last name, and I would still come to learn that my grandmother's stories were never acknowledged. (31)

[64] Note how it continually becomes the role of the women to both reproduce the language and also police its reproduction. Note also that each of these women come from different Armenian spaces—one from Istanbul, one from Brazil, and another from the United States. The importance of the reproduction of language in the Armenian context transcends geographic distance in the homeland and the diaspora, making a transnational conceptualization of Armenianness an important intervention rather than the binary separation of homeland v. diaspora. The Armenian nation in large part is constituted *by its diaspora*. To separate them would be a misstep.

Here, Nancy sites the vectors of her difference in white space, much like Arlene. Yet, unlike Arlene who can "pass" as a 'non-Armenian'/American with her pale skin and tall and lean figure, Nancy describes herself as an olive-skinned mustachioed young girl with an obscure last name that was often punned by her young peers as they teased her: "Hey Arabian, your camel's double-parked" (56). This sense of otherness in the American community is also expressed in gendered terms. Nancy describes herself not fitting in, even as a pre-teen, to the stereotypical beauty standards of white America. Describing two female playmates in her neighborhood, Nancy recalls,

> They were best friends, and I was their subordinate friend… [T]hey were girls, and I was a girl, and I was supposed to be like them, but I had failed: I was not dirty blond nor suntanned; moreover, I possessed a moustache. (42)

This outcasting is echoed throughout Nancy's life with her interactions with the Armenian community, especially with undertones of matchmaking by her mother.

> I had felt estranged from the Armenian community since high school, when Mumma had dragged me to a few dances, which seemed like thinly veiled excuses to indoctrinate teenagers to marry Armenian. Not knowing how to dance, I sat at a table while Mumma told me not to wear such a 'sad sack face,' so I went to the bathroom and sobbed in a stall. (94)

And while Nancy physically feels closer to her young Armenian peers as a child, their physicality is still expressed in a negative light because of their 'ethnic' look. Even Leo, in crossing over gender roles as he dons the veil that's a part of Nancy's Armenian dance costume for school, can achieve femininity better than the Armenian girls.[65]

> He had placed my veil on his head and wrapped the sheer fabric across his nose and waved giddily at unsuspecting New England drivers. I thought of Leo's big black eyes shining from behind the veil and how he'd been transformed. My brother was prettier in that costume than you will ever be, I thought as I looked at my classmates. Seta had frizzy brown hair and wore grey braces on her buck teeth. Shushan was stocky and her wide face reminded me of the monster in *Where the Wild Things Are*. Puny Maral, with her bowl cut and big nose, resembled Ringo Starr. I became more depressed the more I critiqued the girls' appearance. With my dark skin, bare trace of a moustache, and greasy

[65] Interesting in fact that it's a male for Nancy (who later turns out to be gay) that is a male for her that can only achieve the ideal of the beautiful Armenian girl.

> black hair, I looked more like them, I realized, than my pretty brother, than the fair-haired Ms. Duffy in Walpole. (38)[66]

Later, Nancy feels outcasted when she does not look feminine enough, even in front of her Armenian peers in Los Angeles. Thus, what we begin to see constructed is an exile not just from the general standards of 'white' or 'ethnic' beauty, but also the highly feminized female beautify standard itself, something it seems her brother Leo does a better job of achieving than Nancy ever could.

3.2.1. Language, Desire and The Incommensurability of Trans, Lesbian and Bisexual (Queer) Subjectivities

While language functions as an exclusionary tool for Nancy, we have also seen how she and her brother, for rebellious acts, also use it. The euphemisms for 'private words' used in Armenian also enable sexuality to enter the landscape of her family. Yet, interestingly, throughout her childhood, Nancy and Leo constantly employ language—their greatest weapon—as a weapon against the queer body. They obsessively use "gay" and "fag" to make fun of anyone acting outside of their socially expected gender roles. Nancy even imagines her teachers Diggin Arlene and Diggin Carol in a racy lesbian romance (55) in an act of insurgence against her torture as she's assigned to re-learn declensions in Armenian school. Thus, lesbianism becomes a site of inacceptability and unimaginability, satirized further because of its Armenian context.

Although a game as a child, as Nancy approaches adolescents, she becomes terrified not just by what might be the signs of her queer sexuality, but by her attraction to her only friend in middle school, a Turkish girl named Emine; an attraction which threatens to doubly transgress her "Armenian" identity. Learning about her Turkish friend, her uncle lectures to her and asks, "You know what the Turks did to us, right?" This reminds Nancy of the "Romeo and Juliet situation [they] were in" (72). In the next scene, Nancy recalls her doubly-queer desire: "Emine lay on her side, facing me, and I

[66] This footnote corresponds to the PDF manuscript copy of *Me as her again*.

noticed the curve of her hip… I thought about how messed up and gay I would be if I wanted to kiss her. Then I tried really hard… to wipe it out of my mind" (72).

Nancy writes about her mother's rejection of her sister Valerie's lesbianism before her own coming out. For both Nancy and her mother, Valerie's lesbianism is a possibility, but a threatening one *because* of its dissonance with heteronormative sexuality. Just before Nancy is shocked to learn Valerie is gay, her perception of her sister's queerness is couched in Valerie's transitional state, which, as Nancy explains, was tiring to follow: "But it was overwhelming… to figure out who she was *this* time" (72). Thus, for Nancy, queerness is located in dissonance and transition; a transition she fears; and queerness is unintelligible.

The unfixity of Valerie's sexual identity is the source of much discomfort also for Nancy's mother, who first imaged Valerie's lesbianism to be a phase. It is also quite unintelligible for her, as the sexual act itself remains unimaginable. Lesbianism is also perceived as something that one can be convinced of assuming. Recalling a phone conversation when her mother is complaining about Valerie, Nancy's mother says,

> "It's fine for them to be friends," she'd tell me over the phone. "But why do these women have to have *sex* with each other? Your sister is just so gullible, she just goes along, letting them talk her into it. Don't let anyone talk you into it, too, Nancy." (89)

Yet, ironically, it may seem that the perceived transitive phase of lesbianism's 'unfixity'—the overwhelming, unintelligible dissonance of queer sexuality—is preferable to its permanence:

> Mumma's tolerance of my sister dating women waned once Val had been with a girlfriend for over a year. Miriam was a writer and she was incredibly sweet and kind. But Mumma couldn't stand her, since it was now clear that Valerie's lesbianism was not just a phase. (89)

Paradoxically, it is exactly the *fixity* or *non-transitiveness* of Valerie's lesbianism that Nancy's mother most fears (in contrast to Nancy who fears *transitiveness*). Thus, we are encountered with an inherent contradiction: while lesbian identity's unfixity is perceived as overwhelming, its liminality is tolerable; however, once that dissonant queer identity is perceived as *becoming fixed*, then it stands as the real threat to home, identity and

propriety for Nancy's mother. When Valerie's queerness is finally confirmed for Nancy upon reading Val's journal, Nancy

> didn't breathe. Here was the source of her changes lately. Valerie was gay. That was bad. Gay people were bad; everyone made fun of them. *I* made fun of them. They were so, so… queer. I didn't want anyone to know Valerie was queer. (74)

Immediately, this discovery compels Nancy to fight with her own, long-standing self-doubt about her own queer sexuality since she was a young girl. Repeating "*But I'm not gay…I'm not gay, I'm not gay, I'm not gay*," (75) after reading Val's diary and racing through the pages of "In Amerika They Call us Dykes" in *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, it is as if the performance of the speech act would bring her statement into being. To her chagrin, this performative act, notwithstanding her mother's hope, is one of futility, and Nancy throughout the memoir does not display any significant close kinship ties to her sister that would make it easier for her coming out either because Valerie is her sister, or because later, she discovers her own bisexuality. Instead, Nancy comes closer to recognizing the possibility of her queerness while attending Wellesley, an all-girl's college with a high density of lesbians. Yet, while her general tolerance of LGBTQ identity rises with Valerie's own coming out, Nancy's own acceptance of her queer identity is precluded by the strong codes of social propriety: "I really didn't think it was right to be a lesbian, otherwise I would be one" (82).

For Nancy, deviant sexual identity interestingly hovers above the theme of (dis)orientations between the hegemonic boundaries of and between ethnicity, gender and as we will see later, binary (either hetero or homo) sexuality. Perhaps Nancy's encounter with the trans character Carly best illustrates this intersection. Nancy meets Carly when she is fifteen years old. She is one of Valerie's friends who was once Carl, who, according to Valerie, is now in a deep depression because she is not sure she made the right decision about her gender-reassignment surgery. But for Nancy, it "wasn't Carly's blurry gender that drew me in the most; rather, it was her whole deeply sad aura. Even my grandmother who had lost so much in the massacres didn't seem this bereft" (78). Here, Nancy suggests that Carly's depression may be a consequence of several factors:

that her queer body, in attempting to find intelligibility within a gender binary system, has conformed to one of its polarities and become female—a tragedy for the queer body itself that feels it must conform to a gender binary; that she is depressed because her body still does not feel familiar to her, making liminal the possibility of not recognizing one's own body; or because her body, in attempting to achieve a 'female' status through operations and hormones, will never be 'originarily' female (as a result of her queer alteration, it will remain forever in a state of *transition* or *becoming*). This renders the queer body, or a trans body, arriving at a becoming that is forever delayed. Or, as Anne-Marie Fortier suggests, "for the queer, there is no return, only arrival. And it is an arrival that is always deferred" (2001: 409).

The transitioning body is not just unintelligible and unacceptable, but somehow, the binary 'choice' provided through operation (and by association, identity politics) is, at least for Carly, also untenable.

> Mumma closed the door. "Is there something wrong with Carly," she whispered.
>
> "Nothing's wrong with Carly," Valerie said.
>
> "She seems like a guy," I offered. My sister laughed
>
> "Yes, she seems like a *guy*," Mumma said, emphasizing he world as if it were a curse.
>
> "She used to be a guy. Her name was Carl. Now she's Carly," Valerie replied.
>
> My mother was speechless. Then incredulous. "You mean to tell me that she's a man?"
>
> "No. I mean, yeah. I mean, she doesn't know."
>
> "What do you mean she doesn't know?"
>
> "She had an operation but she doesn't like the way the hormones make her feel anymore, so she went off them and now she's depressed; she thinks she made a mistake." (76)

Valerie couches the "unknowing" of Carly's gender identity and depression as a result of her dissatisfaction in the binary choice that hegemonic masculinity and femininity provide her. It is this sadness of the in-between, ever-dissonance, that draws Nancy in the most. Later in the memoir, Nancy more directly identifies with Carly's in-betweenness when she comes out as a bisexual woman. The tension of being neither heterosexual nor homosexual is a source of angst, highlighting how beyond heteronormativity, binary categories of sexual and gender identities within the homosexual community are also a site of dissonance: "I was scared the lesbians would disapprove of my bisexuality" (195)

Nancy writes on attending her first meeting with the Armenian Gay and Lesbian Association of New York.

The sadness and fear of unfixity powerfully merge themselves for Nancy with the story of her grandmother, couching the (dis)orientations of Carly's and Nancy's sexual identities as perhaps even worse than being the subject of ethnic others in genocide; in this case, at least as a survivor of that trauma, one has retained an intelligible ethnic identity. "Even my grandmother," Nancy writes reacting to Carly's in-between, transitive state, "who had lost so much in the massacres didn't seem this bereft" (77). While the genocide has incurred transgenerational psychosexual affects that Nancy also experiences, the genocide itself, due to the nature of nationalist discourse, was conducted under the specific conditions of steadfast holding to an identity of fixity and ethnic purity. While massacre might be a tragic result that later incurs sadness, according to Nancy's diagnosis as a young teen, it is a sadness far less than the one that the ever-becoming, ever in-between and liminal trans body suffers. For Nancy, this deep sadness, an inner dying *from one's identity*, is both familiar and evermore tragic than the body's dying *for one's identity*. Ironically enough, though, Nancy finds herself shriveling up because of being caught between both normative gender and sexual identity that circumscribes her body and sexual preferences, as well as supposedly informed and definitely complicated by her ethnic identity.

Thus, Nancy's response to Carly situates the memoir's juxtaposition of the disorientation of gender identity and ethnic conformity. Lesbian, queer and trans identity is unfixed and a source of discomfort. However, that moment of unintelligibility is somehow preferable, because to allow it as a fixed identity in the home would be to completely destabalize the homespace; it takes away speech, and then belief itself: "My mother was speechless. Then incredulous." The moment queerness becomes a paradoxically fixed identity (like Valerie's lesbianism—permanently unintelligible), it becomes the dissident threat to the heteronormativity of the home. And for Nancy, the sadness of that dissident threat is even graver than the suffering her grandmother experienced during the genocide: at least her grandmother's identity as an Armenian was intelligible, though it is her identity as an Armenian that led to her near-destruction.

In addition, that Nancy's juxtaposes the state of Carly's sadness to Zanik's, and later drawing implications to her *own* bisexual body, is of no coincidence: each character is representative of a subject (queer and diasporic; gender and ethnic impurities in their given spaces) marked by spatial exile: Carly from her own body because of a dissonance between her biology and gender identity, Nancy because of her dislocation between heter- and homosexual identities, and Zanik from her own country due to her inconvenient ethnic identity in a nationalizing Turkish space. Thus, both the queer and diasporic subjects, unlike Gilroy's claim, which separates their functions, *simultaneously* make the "spatialization of identity problematic and interrupt the ontologization of place" in geographic space and in the terrain of the body (Fortier: 2001, 409, citing Gilroy: 2000, 122). As the memoir would suggest then, the queer and Armenian bodies share much in common.

Echoing Carly's gender trouble in [her feeling of exile from] the female body, Nancy also later confesses that her "insides just never felt feminine; they felt neutral, without gender. My body lived in the real world, and I lived in my head," (154) a distortion which conflicts with her image of "a nice Armenian girl" (73). This image of gender ambiguity and bodily (dis)orientation parallels Carly's experience of alienation from her body, displayed as well in a scene after Nancy has sex with a male lover, Glenn. Looking into the mirror, Nancy is troubled by her feminine appearance, which, as she says, she had been avoiding since her Turkish (girl)friend had, almost as if a traitor, embraced her own: "I looked really feminine and it was disturbing. Ever since I had parted ways with Emine, my Turkish girlfriend, for embracing her femininity—and her sexuality—at the age of fourteen, I had been shunning mine" (124). Thus, Nancy's aversion to her own body is not only wrapped up in the prudeness of her immediate family or her shock of nudity in her grandmother's house. This aversion is attributed to the dissonant tension of her queer body in a highly-gendered space of feminine codes. Further, the discomfort with her body becomes associated with another danger. This feminine body is *not just* revealed by girls like Emine—a traitor to the 'un-sexualized' body of a pre-teen[67]—but, as a result of its feminization, is also made vulnerable to the male monsters who wait to attack it:

[67] and of course Nancy plays with the Armenian collocation of 'Turkish traitor'.

> my feminine appearance dwelled outside the realm of my mind's control, and it could lead to something dangerous, like a scary man wandering around, just waiting to strike. This guy had been with me almost as long as I could remember, lurking at the edge of my consciousness. He shook Grammy and haunted her from the walls…He was not just a regular guy to whom you gave over your tender insides, but a monster to protect yourself from with dear life. (155)

The image of the anonymous man-monster haunts both Nancy and her grandmother. Thus, as one Christmas Nancy refuses to fix her hair for her aunts and grandmother because she doesn't want to look 'pretty,' she simultaneously refuses *becoming* feminine, which for both her and her grandmother, leads to an imprisoned fixity of vulnerability. It also leads to a fear of men.

The intersection of Nancy's fear of the vulnerability of the feminine body and of men is expressed in one of her poems published after the memoir, entitled "Reality." The opening lines read: "Are you a lesbian? he asked/ No, I said, I'm bisexual but I'm afraid of men/ What exactly do you fear? He asked./ Their penises, I said" (2007: 16). Later, as Nancy hears the oral history tapes of her grandmother, the reader links Nancy's sexual paranoia to her grandmother's story of survival. As we'll later see, for Nancy this interweaving of these stories also helps her to come to terms with her own fear of being bisexual. However, when grammy recounts in her genocide story that all the girls "smear[ed] themselves with mud to appear as repulsive as possible so that no one[68] [would] want to touch or take them. 'After all they're virgins,' Zanik says," (173) she locates feminine beauty and purity as a fraught site of vulnerability, danger and victimization at the hands of men that can potentially lead to rape, sexual abuse and murder.[69] And as an interesting parallel, for both Nancy and her grandmother, the adherence to or desire of femininity, which threatens their existences, is enacted by Turkish people: for Nancy, it is Emine who in her adoption of femininity and sexuality, abandons Nancy in her queer subjectivity and insights her to shun her femininity. In the this example, interestingly enough, Emine would here function as the catalyst of Nancy's gender queerness, would she not?; for Zanik, it is the Turkish gendarmes which insight

[68] "no one" refers to the Turkish soldiers and genderarms who were kidnapping the most 'beautiful' girls and marrying them.

[69] As we have seen in Avakian's memoir, men (her brother Paul) can also lead to the *deportation* of non-conforming females from the Armenian family circle.

the girls to make themselves look repulsive on the death marches; rejecting their beauty (including Zanik) in order to survive both physically or as an Armenian[70] in her own body. Later, as we will see, this is how Agabian explains Zanik's fear of men and the reasons for which she might have taken precautions not to be sexually violated, even in her old age. Finally, while the threat to Carly's queer body is not as a result of 'Turkish aggression,' the codes of heteronormativity, Emine's feminine and sexualized body and the violence of the nationalist conformity of Turkification during the Armenian Genocide all act as counterpoints to the (un)fixity of trans/queer sexuality and Zanik's victimization because she was 'impure' in the context of genocide as an ethnic Armenian. As a result, the memoir highly correlates the narratives of sexual and ethnic dissonance.

For Nancy listening to her grandmother's oral history tapes of the genocide enables her to interweave her own story with her grandmother's, which ultimately assists her in coming to terms with her own fear of bisexuality. However, prior to listening, she reasons that the fear she carries with her is also one of the sources of her chronic panic attacks. Before learning that her appendix needed to be removed, she admits that she had always assumed her panic attacks "been the result of stress, a psychosomatic symptom, an intensity of being Armenian" (179). In many ways, connecting the narratives threads of her memoir, one could assume that her Armenianness and its understanding of femininity as both desirable but dangerous is much wrapped up in her disoriented psychosexual subjectivity. Yet, on her way to a pilgrimage trip to Turkey, she begins to piece together the "crazy and controlling" behavior of Armenians, and the categories of exclusion as a survival mechanism which echo analyses of nationalism and its role in the policing of gender and sexuality construction:

> If we didn't cling together as a group, we would get clobbered individually until extinction. It would explain why I still needed by mother's approval to embark on anything risky… it would also explain the tendency I sensed in the Armenian community towards conformity; since it seemed there were so few of us, any divergence from the traditions of family and church (such as marrying a non-Armenian or being gay) was seen as disunity threatening the survival of the entire culture. (185)

[70] if the girls weren't raped or killed, they were married into Muslim families and Islamized, which traditionally meant that they lost their identity as Armenians as became Turkish or Kurdish.

Yet, to what resources do our marginalized authors turn when it is they themselves who threaten that disunity? As Julia Kristeva and feminists of the *l'ecriture feminine* movement would argue, it is through writing—a semiotic (and in this case literal!) return to the womb—that the authors interweave their bildungsroman with their grandmothers' stories, combating against the "regularit[y] of conventional language" (Jones: 1981, 249). that they are able to reach both semiotic and emotional liberation from hegemonic phal(logo)centric historical narrative and ethnic identity construction. In the next chapter, this question, along with a discussion on queer cultural production and mourning in the Diaspora, will also be contextualized in relation to the memoirs.

CHAPTER 4

WHEN GENDERED SILENCE FINDS A VOICE: Semiotic Liberation

Then perhaps the subject returns, not as illusion, but as fiction.

—Roland Barthes

Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a 'pure' opposition, a 'transcendence' of contemporary relations of power; but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure.

–Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 241

How will we know the difference between the power we promote and the power we oppose? Is it, one might rejoin, a matter of 'knowing'? For one is, as it were, in power even as one opposes it, formed by it as one reworks it, and it is this simultaneity that is at once the condition of our partiality, the measure of our political unknowingness, and also the condition of action itself. The incalculable effects of action are as much a part of their subversive promise as those that we plan in advance.

–Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 241

Language and its disorienting quality is a common theme in both Avakian's and Agabian's works, problematizing the relationship of signifier to signified via the relationship of our subjects to (the Armenian) language (Smith & Watson: 1998, 19). What are the theoretical underpinnings we can draw from feminist theory on language and semiotics (Kristeva, Witting, Cixous, Butler) that illuminates Arlene and Nancy's texts as semiotic recalibrations of queer feminist subjectivity in an Armenian context? As exemplified in both analytical sections of text, both authors' subjectivities can be read in the Lacanian formulation of the subject, which is split and "always in the process of constituting itself through its others," (Smith & Watson: 1998, 19) a moment which also coincides with the emergence of Language. The etiology of sexual divergence is explored precisely through this lens in both narratives, as both authors' associations with Armenianness heavily (dis)orient their dissident sexual identities. This intersection between ethnic and sexual identification is expressed most resonantly through the (dis)orientations of *language* in both narratives, and is *precisely* for Lacan the site and birth of the subject. However, not only is the Mirror Stage the site of the Other and language, but as Butler importantly points out, it is also a site of repudiation, which is

inherent to identity formation via differentiation (1993). For Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990), this site may be one of subversion that may lead to a more "sustained political practice" (110). Or, as she more loosely reformulates in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), "It will be a matter of tracing the ways in which identification is implicated in what it excludes, and to follow the lines of that implication for the map of future community that it might yield" (119). In this section, I will interrogate how in both Arlene and Nancy's narratives, the subjects that are 'born,' through the mirror of difference are our fragmented queer feminist Armenian memoirists. Through the prism of heteropatriarchal and heteronormative exile, our disarticulated subjects find rearticulation.

As we have seen, language in these texts is always-already a site of exile, and both Avakian and Agabian employ this theme.[71] For Agabian, she uses language itself, to refract dissonant (re)presentations of queer subjectivity and the queerness of the Armenian home. For Arlene, this theme is located most explicitly in the figure of her Aunt Sonia who, though non-Armenian, is accepted into the home because she speaks Armenian perfectly. Ultimately, however, she is an utter outsider because she is 'outside oriented' as she goes into New York City by herself (unlike a 'true' Armenian woman who remains in the home). Instead, Nancy plays with language itself, injecting queerness into the home through her psychosexual poetry, and in the punned title of her book: *Me as her again*/*Mi-a-ser-agan*. Exploring possibilities of alternative languages and selves by representing the "gaps," "silences" and contradictions in their experiences of being Armenian and also their grandmothers' paradoxical stories of victimization and triumph, as readers, we "read away from [the] coherence" (Smith & Watson: 1998, 20) of diasporic (heteropatriarchal) Armenian identity, injecting, a priori, queerness and (dis)unity into Armenian diasporic home and subjectivity.

While each triggers a very different reading of Lacan's semiotics and language, the loosely framed group of 'French feminist critics'[72] encourages resistance to phallocentric discourse and identity politics. We can also read Avakian and Agabian's

[71] For Derrida, this always-already Other state of language is also one of internal exile.

[72] See Butler's analysis of the differences and criticisms of the American category of "French feminist theory" in the 1999 Preface to *Gender Trouble*.

memoirs as resisting silence and 'stealing back' language, as Hélène Cixous calls for in the "Laugh of the Medusa." In this way, and also as being unique examples of queer memoir in the Armenian-American contexts, both authors write *towards* their difference (Smith & Watson: 1998, 19). In reading Irigaray, who champions nonphallogocentric language via the language of fluidity, we may also interpret the (un)fixity of our queer bodies in their diasporic and heteronormative spaces as transgressive because they employ feminist politics and queer sexuality to destabalize boundaries of diasporic Armenianness, stereotypes of fixed femininity, unity and sameness (Smith & Watson: 1998, 19).

However, Kristeva's understanding of *jouissance*[73] is perhaps most applicable to both texts. Nancy herself locates the "truth" of her narrative between 'fact and fiction,' while Arlene interprets her story as "one of many truths." Excluding their philosophical differences, both authors question the very notion of representation in memoir itself. Just as Kristeva acknowledges the self as a fiction sustained through practices of representation[74] (Smith & Watson: 1998, 20) fictiveness and truth can be "glimpsed in the shadows of the semiotic, in the gaps, in nonsense, in puns [and] in pleasurable rhythms, all of which erupt from the unconscious… to disrupt meaning" (Smith & Watson: 1998, 20).

Yet for Kristeva, *jouissance* is the "nonverbal effluence of subjectivity" (Smith & Watson: 1998, 19, citing Kristeva) that lies outside of traditional practices of representation, signaling instead "the eruption of the irrational," originally suppressed in order to *imagine* coherence and unity. Aside from disrupting meaning with language play and language-exile, both Arlene and Nancy literally attest to the unweaving of their "fictional" or fragmented selves *via* their outbursts, which they self-categorize as "irrational." Nancy interprets these emotional outbursts as running in the female line of her family on both sides: Aunty Ruth admits to pushing grammy when she is angry, Nancy "lob[s] three pillows at her mother's head" (114) at twenty-two years old because

[73] A term originally conceptualized by Lacan.

[74] Here, one could argue that the memoirs actually represent a metaphysical representation of the authors fractured and unified selves. as their unity via their fragmentation is represented between the physical bounds of their books.

her mother doesn't want her to leave the house, afraid she'll die on Christmas.[75] Her aunts and mother also display several moments of uncontrolled hysteria. However, these "hysteric" moments are *not* depicted as the inexplicable, feeble female "hysterics" Gilbert and Gubar analyze, but instead, as the effects of a deeply rooted psychological trauma along the female bloodline of her family. Hence, they are not, as Kristeva would suggest, located in the semiotic's unintelligibility and so subordinate to the Symbolic realm. While these eruptions of the irrational allow the fictionality of coherent subjectivity to be represented[76] in the memoir[77] as Kristeva would suggest, they also simultaneously dislodge, in a literal way, the silenced psychological trauma of loss[78], and the in-home rejection of their queer subjectivities.

Arlene's family is depicted quite similarly. Her father is characterized as the collected, wise male who "takes everything in stride," where only "shaking his head in frustration or raising his voice ever so slightly" (110) were the signs of anger or further emotion he expressed with anyone else. "There was a lack of emotion among all my father's relatives" (110) which enabled distanced 'politeness' to enforce behavioral codes and deference within their male hierarchy. In stark contrast, Arlene's mother's family is characterized as fueled by severe and active emotional repression which both mocks and negates Arlene's anger as a child, attributing it instead to female hysterics that is met with silence and denial by both genders. Just as Gilbert and Gubar's famous essay "Woman in the Attic" attests, Arlene here maps a genealogical continuity regarding her own subject-formation as closely related to her family's ignoring of her mother's "hysterics" when Arlene was a child. Compare:

> I had been the "screamer" in the family in my early teens. I had railed against my mother's restrictions, the demands of the extended family and my mother's and grandmother's obvious preferences for my brother. When I got into a rage generally

[75] Nancy's maternal grandmother died on Christmas day. Nancy thus makes the direct connection between her mother's trauma of loss and her own psychological anxieties of that loss that she projects onto Nancy.

[76] Kristeva's formulation.

[77] thus the semiotic does act as a tool that uncovers the myth of the stable home/self

[78] here the insinuation is the loss of Nancy's mother, but more broadly also to the Armenian Genocide and the loss of Nancy's mother's family history (the loss of Nancy's maternal grandmother brining another layer of silence on the female-line of Nancy's family).

> everyone left the room, and my grandmother always said, in Armenian of course, "The temper has a hold of her." Her statement made me angrier. She denied everything that had made me angry and attributed my feelings to a mystical force that had overtaken me. (109)

With:

> While my mother often yelled at me in anger and sometimes hit me as well, she usually restrained her emotions with other people. When I was in my teens, however, she did acquire a reputation within the family as being nervous and high strung because of her occasional outbursts of anger at my father, her sister, and her brother. Yet people tried to calm her down rather than deal with what was bothering her. They left her alone emotionally just as they had left the room when I got into a fit of temper as a child. (110)

Notice in the first quotation the orientation of Arlene's active resentment and resistance to the *women* in her family (not the men) precisely because of their restrictions on her as opposed to the fawning that her brother receives as the male child. Secondly, notice the self-reflexive analysis Arlene gives in the last sentence of each quotation, aware as writer of the intergenerational impact of both subjects' formations as women: for her mother as a survivor of an denied and unaddressed trauma, and again as Arlene, the daughter and inadvertent receiver of the familial mechanisms to deal with the rage of post-traumatic stress victims *and* women [i.e., her family, and her mother have learned to deal with Arlene the *same way* they deal with her mother's outbursts—they have internalized it]. Instead, the origins of these "hysterics" are met with further silences and denials, and womanhood is discursively linked to hysteria, silence, denial and repression characteristic also of genocide.

However, therapy enables Arlene to realize and give voice for the first time to her silenced emotions, so strongly that she characterizes herself as a different person because of it: "The therapy, which had seemed so terrifying, had been responsible for a change in me. It was so vital that I saw my life in 1966 as divided into two sections—before and after therapy" (109). Arlene's moment of perceived irrational outburst finally comes as she begins to bring articulation to her dis)articulated experience growing up as the child of migrant Armenian parents while in therapy. It comes also as no surprise that this revelatory experience arrives to her *through the act of speaking/unsilencing her emotions* to her therapist.

Nancy has a similar moment in therapy, in which she realizes, perhaps retrospectively to her naiveté, that she needed to hear the words "I love you" from her parents. Confronting her mother one Christmas at home, she finally screams, "You never once told me you loved me!" to which her mother replies, "I thought you knew I loved you. You mean, I had to tell you?!...You know, we just don't say things like that in our family," (108). Nancy's mother resents the fact that Nancy is probably going to therapy, subsequently blaming 'the mother' for everything, a fact that Nancy also realizes later as quite a limited scope to analyze her own psychological issues. Nonetheless, this motherly silence also resonates for Nancy along with what she hyperbolically terms "the conformist mania of Armenian families—'be like us or risk death'" (196). To echo Irigaray, Avakian's and Agabian's gush of unsilencing coincides with an anti-phallogecentrism associated with the 'logic of solids,' literally partaking in the 'logic of fluids' and (un)fixity to express transgression. Participating in a moment of *jouissance* through "irrational" outbursts concurs with what Benjamin calls "the liquidation of the traditional value of cultural heritage" (Benjamin: 1968, 221).

Vis-à-vis the emancipatory nature of learning "how to be more open to [her] feelings… and express them," (110) Avakian attributes her exile from her family as a result of their own emotional repression and abandonment which she unavoidably characterizes as non-American, and thus, characteristic of a still-illusive Armenian behavior: "I wondered if speaking of love was strictly an American thing to do. While I hadn't seen for myself what happened in American families, affection seemed to be a part of the culture" (110).

In the above examples of *jouissance*, our semiotic displacement of the fiction of our subjects' unity is coupled with the intergenerational legacy of silence and emotional eruption by the women of both Avakian's and Agabian's families. We can draw distinct parallels then to what Bella Brodzki argues in her essay "Mothers, Displacement, and Language in the Autobiographies of Nathalie Sarraute and Christa Wolf" as the "figure of the lost mother" as the lost *mother tongue*, the "compelling figure haunting the text of [the] women autobiographers." Paralleling Brodzki's contention to our own narratives, "the repression felt by the daughters (already displacement) of past loss" (Smith & Watson 1998: 21) which in our narratives is represented by genocidal loss and its

psychological effects, "involves her in a complex struggle with this loss" which is represented as language's exilic functions both in gendered and ethnic terms. As a result, this linguistic struggle, as Brodzki describes, "initiates the metonymic chain of substitute objects of desire, some more productive than others." (Brodzki in Smith & Watson: 1998, 158). For both Avakian and Agabian, the results of that metonymic chain of substitute objects of desire is American-oriented, which ultimately becomes unproductive in realizing the queer origins of their queer *becoming* as Armenian-American subjects.

Walter Benjamin similarly interrogates the fictiveness that the practices of representation sustain in his famous "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." For Benjamin, film—the mechanical reproductive agent—was the unforeseen monster,[79] "the 'most powerful agent' in the 'shattering of tradition'."[80] Just as Benjamin argues that the "the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition," (221) we might similarly look to Kristeva's *jouissance* through the prism of Avakian and Agabian's works to see that their memoirs themselves, as *reproductions* of memory, fictions in themselves, are engaged in the business of "shattering tradition itself" (221). However, as Judith Butler has successfully demonstrated in *Gender Trouble*, Kristeva's argument, which ultimately hierarchizes the semiotic as subordinate to the Symbolic, patriarchal realm[81], does not render culturally intelligible the very sources of dissonance that may catalyze *jouissance* for our authors. Instead, the authors themselves write more along the lines of Butler's contention against Kristeva.

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[79] Perhaps similar to the man-monster also lurking around the corners for Nancy and her grandmother.

[80] I thank Alex Brostoff for this important formulation and her reminder of Benjamin's important role in discussions on reproduction, which is relevant also to these texts and the "fictitious" reproduction of a unified self. Perhaps Kristeva's *jouissance* can be coupled with Benjamin's conceptualization of the role of film as the shattering of heteropatriarchal/heteronormative tradition.

[81] As Butler points out in *Gender Trouble*, following Lacan, "Kristeva accepts the assumption that culture is equivalent to the Symbolic, that the Symbolic is fully subsumed under the "Law of the Father," and that the only modes of nonpsychotic activity are those which participate in the Symbolic to some extent" (115). This would thus render female homosexuality and desire as completely unintelligible and thus not a possibility (an unattainable possibility) in cultural practice. Butler goes on to argue that "By projecting the lesbian as 'Other' to culture, and characterizing lesbian speech as the psychotic 'whirl-of-words,' Kristeva constructs lesbian sexuality as intrinsically unintelligible. This tactical dismissal and reduction of lesbian experience performed in the name of the law positions Kristeva within the orbit of paternal-heterosexual privilege. The paternal law which protects her fro this radical incoherence is precisely the mechanism that produces the construct of lesbianism as a site or irrationality." (118)

As Butler deconstructs, Kristeva's conception of semiotic *jouissance* ultimately maintains a hierarchy between the semiotic and Symbolic realm of "paternally sanctioned" heterosexual culture, ultimately relegating a "full-scale refusal of the Symbolic impossible" (1990: 116). While Kristeva argues that *jouissance* (either through poetic language or giving birth) is a rejection of the Symbolic realm that maintains an ontology of heteropatriarchal culture, it is not, in Butler's analysis, a subversion of it because *jouissance* partakes in the very rules that the Symbolic inscribes/writes. In her argument, Butler outlines how even for Kristeva, "the alleged psychosis of homosexuality… consists in its thorough break with the paternal law… [hence rendering] female homosexuality [as] the emergence of psychosis into culture" (1990: 117). As such, the "lesbian experience," continues Butler, is identified "as the psychotic alternative to the acceptance of paternally sanctioned laws" (118). However, while society around them may render our authors' hysteria (psychosexual and otherwise) as problematic effects of heterogeneous drives and paternal law (how Kristeva characterizes psychosis), Arlene and Nancy *both* reject this diagnosis (117). Both Nancy and Arlene, in *locating* and resisting the sources of their emotional strife (in their mothers, the genocide, and their heteropatriarchal Armenian home as becoming queers), refuse the Symbolic realm on three levels: first, by refusing to finally interpret their "hysteria"/outbursts/"*jouissance*" as without motivation, or as a product of their feminine fragility,[82] locating them instead as due to the silencing of sexuality and genocidal trauma; secondly, by acknowledging the genocidal trauma's effects on their gendered subjectivities in the Armenian context, they employ this narrative to incorporate their queer desire *not as psychosis* that must be expressed in displacements and poetic language, as Butler argues of Kristeva (117), but as something [queer] that must be incorporated into their fractured diasporic subjectivities in order to attain coherence by the end of their memoirs; finally, both authors reject the political notion of lesbian/queer sexuality as a rejection of direct patriarchy, instead insisting that their sexuality is a result of loving women without consciously politically rejecting sexual relationships with men. Arguing along with Butler, overt homo/queer sexuality for Arlene and Nancy becomes

[82] Though, as these outbursts are treated as feminine reactions, it further adds to their sense of displacement in and resentment of the family/homespace.

not only a "culturally sustainable activity" (1990: 115) but also inserted into "cultural *legitimacy*" (119) because they locate their own queerness (or the strength to be feminists and queer) within the diasporic experience itself.

If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself. The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its "natural" past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities.

–Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 127

4.1. Linking Stories: The Power of Writing Queer

Queer is continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, troublant… *Keenly, it is relational, and strange*

–Eve Kofksy Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*

In her essay "Writing," Barbara Johnson reminds us of Roland Barthes' challenge to look beyond the content of *what* is written to read the message embedded in *how* it is written—it's [semiotic] representation—to decode it. We thus must examine the intersection between content and form in Avakian's and Agabian's texts in order to arrive at the liminal "true story," and how the theme of language, the actual act of writing, and the *need to tell a story*, strongly drives these narratives. What are the formal literary consequences as the authors merge their own gender/sexual identity with their grandmothers' stories, and how might this amalgamation favor a queer reading? Due to the fact that both memoirists interweave actual Oral History transcripts into their works, they inevitably render a meta-memoir with three major characters: their Grandmother's Oral History as character, the Granddaughter as Narrator, and the Author who creates a meta-discursive mixing of the two. Both memoirs publish selections from their grandmothers' transcribed Oral History tapes, ultimately engendering queer space via the very act of writing it. They also parallel a queering of the home—as it is *to* the home (their grandmothers) in a transgenerational exchange of sexual and gendered oppression that the authors are able to create a genealogy of their psychosexual conflicts in a

paradoxical narrative of strength, docility, resistance and survival along the female lines of their families.

Jack Halberstam defines queer space as postmodern geography, one in which "the notion of a body-centered identity gives way to a model that locates sexual subjectivities within and between embodiment, place, and practice" (2005: 5). Both Avakian and Agabian's memoirs do so because 1) they breach the taboo topic of divergent sexual identities by superimposing them onto a heteronormative patriarchal Armenian-American context, thus acting as politically subversive texts; and 2) Writing as LGBTQ Armenians, they offer us an alternative textual space that reminds us that Armenian identity is hybrid, constantly in-flux, and continually adapting—lending itself naturally to the analytical framework of "queer" itself.

This further problematizes how the story of the Armenian people, both pre- and post-1915, may or may not engender queer space[83]—ever changing, as Jane Garrity expounds in *English Language Notes'* (1997) special issue, in "nonnormative locales that are physical, social, and constituted by and through social relations" (1), a definition, as we have seen, not far from the experience of diaspora and the in-between space of Armenia/ns geographically, politically and socially.

Like diasporic migrants, our queer authors are also "between leaving and becoming" (Fortier: 2001, 413) which reorient them *towards* home, as Gopinath argues (2005). Queer is thus employed here by our authors as the "conceptual tool that disrupts binary oppositions," as per Fortier's amalgamation of migratory diasporic and queer bodies. Reading with Fortier, finding queerness and Armenianness "within the very space of 'betweeness' typically attributed to the 'diasporic space' located between 'here' and 'there' (Brah, 1996; Clifford, 1994)," our authors "expand the 'betweeness' of diaspora to produce a wedge between fixed gender roles and [ethnic] identifications" (Fortier: 2001, 413). Always becoming and rewriting itself, disrupting the homespace also means that our authors must return to it in order to situate one's story, mourn, and feel a connection to identity.

[83] The new digital Queer Armenian online magazine and collective *The Hye-Phen Mag* also problematizes this issue in their "What?" page. See: http://the-hye-phen-mag.org/what/

As both narratives progress, it becomes clear that Avakian's sensitivity to the racial and gender injustice that surround her, and Agabian's sensitivity to her sexuality and distanced feelings of Armenianness, is highly informed by the stories of their grandmothers that they were told as children. In order to orient themselves "within and between" these stories, the authors "map identity onto the very spaces they (dis)inhabit" (Brostoff: 2015, unpublished paper, UC Berkeley). It is also in this moment that, as Agabian suggests, we might find the "true story" between memory and interpretation. By interweaving their stories and writing the queer space of the third meta-memoir, the authors give their grandmothers' stories agency in the creation of their own dissident subjectivities. This agency, importantly, was previously denied them as gendered subjects of genocidal practice and heteropatriarchal Armenian family structure. As a result, this revolutionary space, where language is reclaimed through writing, allows both authors to transgress phal(logo)centric nationalist discourse which denies the construct of "gay" as oppositional to that of "Armenian." In addition, by challenging other vitriolic assertions like one Agabian recounts in her memoir: "Gay Armenians don't exist!... You're nothing but a bunch of Turks!" (245),[84] the memoirs doubly challenge synonymous constructs that 'threaten' the Armenian home.

The memoirs also resonate with the queer space, which Dina Georgis conceptualizes as the site of creative production catalyzed by mourning, which will be addressed in more depth in the next sections. Finally, as this transgressive moment is a moment of voice or *jouissance*, it may also be analyzed as the point at which we may locate a more coherent subject-formation as the authors reconcile their fragmented queer-diasporic subjectivities: between the practices of creative memoir writing and historical recording, memory and fact, truth and illusion; the best fiction, the 'truest' representation of reality.

While reading these subversive texts, the challenge to read textuality and the "disruptive force of signification and erasure that transgresses all closure" (Johnson citing Barthes: 1990, 229) becomes apparent. Not to mention that it may be a queer thing to think about one's sexual politics at the same time as they imagine their grandmothers, the

[84] This comment was a hate-male response on AGLA's (Armenian Gay and Lesbian Association) website soon after a feature article about them was published by *AIM: Armenian International Magazine.*

process of writing and interweaving queer identity with their grandmothers' stories is, as Barbara Johnson suggests, the act of subversion against the master, the "open[ing] up [of] a stance of domination, a space of exile… the pathway to freedom" (1990: 229). Or, perhaps as Deleuze and Parnet provocatively formulate: "What other reason is there for writing than to be a traitor to one's own reign, traitor to one's own sex, to one's class, to one's majority? And to be a traitor to writing" (Nelson citing Deleuze and Parnet: 2015, 97-98).

Transforming the reality of oppositional sexual and ethnic identities to possibilities, these texts participate in the type of meta-language Barthes describes in *Mythologies* as "Revolutionary language"—the *only* type of language production free from Myth. I thus align Barthes' Revolutionary Language with the writing of "Queer Space," which, as contemporary artist Jean-Ulrick Désert contends, "is in large part the function of wishful thinking or desires that become solidified" (Garrity citing Désert: 1997).

But queer writing and storytelling don't just act metadiscursively in re-territorializing identity: Arlene's grandmother comes to life when she is telling her story of survival to her granddaughter: "Here eyes [became] bright" (269) as she intervened to narrate her story. In addition, Arlene's Armenian language skills are revived in this moment. As her grandmother's eyes light up as she lucidly tells her story, the floodgates of erasure are opened as Arlene's repressed Armenian language skills suddenly come gushing back. Nancy returns to Graduate School for an MFA in writing, "In a sense…to make her [grandmother] live again" (199), demonstrating that *writing* is not only iconoclastic and politically subversive, but also an empowering act. It gives life, language, and therefore, voice, even if it is found for grammy posthumously. This giving of voice also counteracts Nancy's own previous inability to speak that the Armenian language had previously foreclosed her.

It is through the transcription/writing process of her grandmother's oral history that Arlene, for the first time, "felt connected to her [grandmother's] pain, to the pain of [her] mother, aunt, and uncle, and, by extension, the Armenian people" (281). Not only does this process, catalyzed by her lesbian relationship, emotively reintegrate her with a feeling of solidarity with the Armenian people and her own history, but through her

grandmother's resistance, Arlene realizes that "even within a strict patriarchy, women were not rendered helpless" (282). This story helps Arlene to realize her own openness to the women's movement and her dissatisfactions with it, along with the irony that: "The same woman who taught me to defer to men, whom I had grown to dislike after the birth of my brother because she so obviously favored him, was also the woman who taught me, through her story, that women were strong" (284). In effect, creative writing becomes then an act of catharsis for our writers.

4.2. *Turning Back Home:* Queer Mourning as Cultural Production

Insofar as grief remains unspeakable, the rage over the loss can redouble by virtue of remaining unavowed.

-Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter,* 236

Subjectivity is keenly relational, and it is strange. We are <u>for</u> another, or <u>by virtue of</u> another

—Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*

Avakian's and Agabian's memoirs are particular to an Armenian Diasporic context because their return home necessitates a return to the underlying conditions of their diasporic exile: genocide. In returning to the genocide stories of their grandmothers, the authors cathartically *turn back* themselves towards home to understand the psychosexual affects of the genocide on their grandmothers and by extension, themselves. If we read this moment as a queer reorientation or homecoming as Anne-Marie Fortier does, it would "suggestively unhinge [the] idea of an originary home(land)" (2001: 420) while also showing, by "movement *towards* an endlessly deferred space" (420), that homing desire also "emerges *within* the very spaces of inhabitance called home" (420).

But, for our post-genocide Armenian subjects, that space of "inhabitance" in the story is also one fraught by its ultimately deferred, or impossible (un)inhabitance of a violently lost homeland. *Movement towards home* from the very spaces within the home also means confronting gendered violence and psychosexual trauma. But, because these survival narratives are also sources of strength by which our writers embody their own

feminist and queer identities proudly, via the process of transcription and writing, I read this moment of *reorientation towards home* also as a transgressive moment of queer mourning along with Veena Das; and as an act of (queer) cultural production through mourning vis-à-vis Dina Georgis. It is also a moment, thus, where the authors are able to somehow form a more "complete" subjectivity.[85]

Exploring fragmented subject formation in "The Act of Witnessing: Violence, Poisonous Knowledge, and Subjectivity" (2000) Veena Das interrogates, through Butler (1997), the becoming of a subject via the witnessing of the experience of subjugation through gendered acts of violence. Das's ethnographic work asks how these gender-subjugated subjects reoccupy this violation through domestication, ritualization, and re-narration. (203). "How does one bear witness," she asks, "to the criminality of the societal rule… not through an act of dramatic transgression but through a descent into everyday life?" Invoking the myth of Antigone in her argument, Das "explores the conditions under which conscience may find a voice in the feminine" (206). Applying her ethnographic work of one Indian woman through a reading of Antigone and Lacan, for Das, loss is not articulated through a dramatic gesture of defying the world (like in Antigone's case), but instead, through a "gesture of mourning" which allows the subject to re-inhabit the world by learning to inhabit the world *again*.[86] For Antigone, the subject "between two deaths"[87] is able to show "the criminality of the social order" via the "emergence of voice in the moment of transgression" (Das: 2000, 207). In our case, this criminality would be exclusionary politics based on gender and sexuality. And certainly, our authors are located between two deaths: the death of their family/Armenian space because of their queerness, and the historical death of the diasporic Armenian people as a result of the genocide. Yet, what is important for Das in her work is that this moment of

[85] Literature professor Sibel Irzık has suggested that there may be more behind the transference of genocide stories from grandmother to granddaughter than just giving 'strength' for resistance. I believe she is correct, but must take more time to ponder and elaborate on these possibilities, which I intend to address in further study.

[86] A fitting echo to *Me as her* again.

[87] In this case, the two deaths would symbolize the denial of genocide, the unspoken/ignored violation of women's bodies b/c of the genocide and the denial of the queer subject to inhabit the space of Armenian history b/c of her exclusion from that heteronormative/patriarchal construction.

transgression—the moment of the emerging voice—is not a moment that *transcends* the everyday, but one that *plunges* back into it; it reinhabits its complex origins, the home, unmasking its unbearable truths, which allows the subject to turn back to *reinhabit* the same space "now marked as a space of destruction in which you must live again" (208). For Das, this is the *recovered* space of the every day via "*descent* into the everyday" (208) [emphasis mine]. This process happens through mourning, re-narration, and a re-positioning of one's (gendered) subjectivity rather than "an ascent into transcendence" (as one cannot escape the reality of one's present/past).

Important for Avakian's and Agabian's memoirs is that one cannot transcend or escape their grandmothers' and families' traumatic pasts. Thus, it is through *re-narration* of the event (in its everyday trauma) *and writing* about it (witnessing it and mourning it two and three-generations removed) as a creative process, that they rather find new meaning in the space of that destruction. Maggie Nelson reminds us of Deleuze and Parnet's words, that the "*aim is not to rediscover the eternal or the universal, but to find the conditions under which something new is produced* (creativeness)" (2015: 102, authors emphasis). In the case of both authors, this *reinhabiting* of the everyday and the home, where the unspeakable truths of the criminality of genocide and its gendered affects are exposed in their grandmothers' narratives, is a moment that happens through *Interviewing, Transcription, and Writing*. Inhabiting these stories through their grandmother's *re*-narration, and through the performative act of writing, our authors *re-narrate* to us creatively in a work of non-fiction. This process creates a moment of recognition for the reader, and catharsis for the protagonists as they both unmask *and* transgress the truth by honoring silence, and concurrently give it (and its denial) a voice. As a result, this reckoning process through *Interviewing/Transcription/Writing* allows them to *re-inhabit* home by *re-inhabiting* and *migrating* through and back to stories, and thus giving them renewed strength to also face their every-day conflicting positionalities as lesbian/queers in an Armenian-American diasporic context. If, also, we consider Butler's reading of Freud's sense of melancholia as an effect of ungrieved loss, then, as she sustains, we may also interpret the act of interviewing, transcription and writing as

performative acts that are 'acting out' specifically to that "unacknowledged loss… and its radical uninhabitability" (1993: 235).[88]

In framing the turning point of their bildungsromans as the moment of re-narration, where fractured subjectivities begin to achieve a new articulation within their family/home-space, both authors produce the narrative arches that enable the cultural production of their memoirs in writing their Armenian identities and queer identities as inextricably bound. As a result, they transgress the exclusive binary of the heteronormative nationalist Armenian discourse. Dina Georgis, in "Cultures of Expulsion: Memory, Longing and the Queer Space of Diaspora" (2006) reads this literary space as the aesthetic space of the diaspora, where mourning "is a creative process generated from loss; and [that] loss… is an emotional resource for cultural production" (6).

David Kazanjian in "Re-Flexion: Genocide In Ruins" (2012) adds yet another nuanced layer to this intersecting moment of mourning and loss for creative openings and reinterpretations. In also referring to the myth of Antigone, Kazanjian analyzes the politics and what he terms as "the work of genocide." He equates the other "Other" of hegemonic Armenian nationalism as "the figure of the genocidal Turk" (371)[89] explaining that "the former exists only to the extent that it continually invokes and acts out the latter" (371). He argues that this binary also maintains the binary of the 'civilized man' versus the 'barbarian'[90] in genocide discourse. This construction is similar to the good heterosexual citizen and the dissident homosexual other, ultimately "entombing the inhuman," which is, as Kazanjian explains, "the work of genocide over and against the work of mourning" (371). To this end, departing from a discourse of genocide (denial versus recognition), what Kazanjian's question suggests is that mourning may not only be

[88] The full quote reads: "If melancholia in Freud's sense is the effect of an ungrieved loss (a sustaining of the lost object/Other as a psychic figure with the consequence of heightened identification with that Other; self-beratement, and the acting out of unresolved anger and love), it may be that performance, understood as 'acting out,' is significantly related to the problem of unacknowledged loss… one that reiterates a gendered idealization and its radical uninhabitability." (Butler, 1993: 235). It is also important to note here that Nancy and Arlene's texts are performing/articulating queer Armenian diasporic Armenian experience, and reading of Butlers *Performative Acts* along side both texts would enrich further study.

[89] This is corroborated in Agabian's memoir, as the comments to the magazine article read "There are no gay Armenians! You're nothing but a bunch of Turks!"

[90] In post-genocide Armenian diasporic discourse, formulated as 'Armenian' versus 'Turk.'

an opening but a possibility to break the hegemonic system of nationalism's exclusive others by refusing to participate in the very ostracizing conditions which make genocide a possibility. As Kazanjian provocatively asks, again citing the myth of Antigone,

> Antigone has a liminal existence in exile… She questions the legitimacy of Creon's state law… [and also] holds onto the right to mourn…If the catastrophic violence of the Ottoman state played a central role in creating those diasporas, then how might that violence be mourned without positioning diaspora as a problem to be solved? That is, how might that violence be mourned without reinforcing either the kind of sovereign authority or normative modes of kinship and community…of the kind of homogenized nationalism for which genocide itself is a condition of possibility…? … Can one interrupt the work of 'genocide,' and break open the Armenian Genocide's entombment, without reproducing the terrible logics of denial? What forms would this interruption take, [and] what spaces might it open up? (374)

As such, both Georgis and Kazanjian frame the work of mourning as an opening, a possibility, and a cultural production itself, just as Sedgwick (1990; 1993), Butler (1993), Muñoz (2009) and others have proposed the function of queer as opening or possibility. Perhaps then we might also consider these queer memoirs as partial works of mourning—as they ultimately provide a space[91], in the *very act of writing and book production*—the possibility to imagine both coming to terms with their divergent sexual identities, their Armenian-American diasporic identities, and *also*, in confronting their grandmothers' genocide narratives, the very genocidal conditions which have predetermined that subjectivity. In this way, the first and second generation diasporic memoirs of two lesbian/queer Armenian-Americans may be one of the very spaces of interruption of the heteronormative/heteropatriarchal Armenian hegemonic narrative that, in their existence a priori, also speak against what Kazanjian calls the "uneven but interlinked foreclosures that structure normative Armenian diasporic subjectivities" (2012: 382). Here, we might open up room for new kinds of kinship systems, queer relationality and new identity discourses.

[91] re-iterating space as an important paradigmatic formulation of these works, echoing Foucault's claim that the contemporary world is now an "epoch of space". Re: Foucault's heterotopic spaces in Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" (1967). Trans. Miskowiec, Jay. *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité*. (October, 1984).

4.3. Writing Openings

Understanding "some of the origins of [Arlene's] politics" (283) after her grandmother's story, Arlene admits that "[m]y grandmother would never know what her story had meant for me" (281). Avakian understands that her grandmother's genocide story stands as a lesson for the next generation of women to fight for identity and survival—as anti-racists, as feminists, as queers—in the face of hegemonic power structures that seek to silence these marginal identities, even if those structures originate in or are acted out in the home. While her grandmother's story exemplifies that fight for her granddaughter, Avakian's narrative exemplifies her own fight for us, as readers.

This may be the most powerful aspect of Avakian's memoir: the paradox that the very legacy of resistance and anti-victimization she inherits from her grandmother is the very thing that gives her the possibility to reject the limiting terms of participating in the Armenian community. Even after her newfound solidarity with the community she writes, "I could never live in an Armenian community where my politics, values, and lifestyle would not be accepted… being an Armenian was important to me, but I had no intention of giving up any other part of my life," she writes (278). As a result, the legacy of the lion woman's resistance, and Armenian women more broadly, is what might urge Arlene, as she implies happened later in her life, out from the limiting categories of identity that seek to deny her existence as a feminist Armenian lesbian.

For Nancy Agabian, on the other hand, it is not so much the legacy of resistance but rather, a story of intergenerational psychological legacy of gendered violence that leads her to the acceptance of her difference, and healing. Perhaps the most powerful scene in Agabian's narrative that demonstrates her structure of interweaving is in a scene in which she recollects one of her first sexual experiences with men. When she tries to open up and relax during intercourse, her partner suddenly stops and says, "You squeezed me out" (153). Terrified of what this experience might mean about her sexual identity, she immediately parallels her grandmother's fear of being touched by a man to her own psycho-sexual identity crisis: "Wasn't it pretty obvious I was a big lesbian in denial if I was going around repelling penises from my vagina? It was like I was wearing some kind of an invisible girdle, an iron chastity belt inherited from my grandmother" (153).

Spliced throughout the memoir is the piecing together of her Grandmother Zanik's resistance to men and as a result, of her socially constructed role as a respectable Armenian woman and the decorum she possessed over her own body, even in the most extreme of circumstances (148). To Agabian's surprise earlier in the memoir, she learns from "the aunts" that her grandmother wore a girdle all her life: "She said that because of men, even she, an old lady, had to wear one, all the time." Curious about why her grandmother might have worn a girdle to "look good for men," her sister Valerie clarifies: "No, she wore it to protect herself from them" (148). Later reflecting on her grandmother's death, Agabian then explains that grammy's end became immanent to the aunts the moment that "Grammy took off her pantyhose" (148). Hours later, she took her last breaths. Thus, Agabian paints a metaphorical image of her grandmother's self-liberation, or the death and final disavowal of her gender victimization, though able to occur only in the hours before physical death.[92]

In a chapter aptly entitled "Words and Movement," Nancy describes her performance piece called *The Crochet Penis*, a work that "exorcis(ed) [her] feelings about sex to an audience in order to quell [her] alienation" (127). In the last section of the piece, she equates her tending to her yarn penis as tending to the member[93] of her mother and grandmother, which she refuses to do any longer: "I don't want to be afraid of my body, his body, her body. I want to make this crochet penis a blood line, a family woman bloodline that can be strong too" (127). Semiotically re-appropriating the penis, Agabian (dis)orients/decolonizes it from its male signification. Made of the very metaphorical yarn she has woven throughout the memoir, this new piece is subject, in her hands, to being unwound. Here, Nancy takes back her agency. Holding it, she binds their stories and subjectivities together in an anti-phallocentric moment of triumph. Owning both the crochet penis and vocalizing her story, Nancy then speaks directly to the genealogy of her sexual psychosis:

> My grandmother was different. She saw her mother die, she saw her sister die, she saw her brother and father get dragged away to die and after a long death walk through the

[92] Might death here also be linked to *jouissance*, whereby the removal of grammy's pantyhose renders her ability to breath, which builds up to death as orgasm/sexual actualization? With this reading, it would mean the physiologically shattering of subjectivity. Thank you Alex Brostoff for your probing.

[93] See Butler on the lesbian phallus in *Bodies That Matter* (1993).

> desert in circles she survived disease, death camps, orphanage and rape. After all that and a family she created to replace the real brothers and sisters she was more like a sibling than a mother to them my grandfather said, and she didn't wanna be touched. My father saw this and he wed a woman, my mother and she didn't wanna be touched, and I saw this and I didn't wanna be touched. I am different now. (160)

And, as Nancy is different with the merging of these stories, the hope is that we too, as readers, as listeners, will also be different. By literally deterritorializing the crochet penis from the patriarchal realm, Nancy's performance piece also de-centers a patrilineal understanding of inheritance, culture and tradition also from making of nation, and kin.

4.4. No Returns to the Womb: Queering the National Mother, Queering Kin

Elmas's and Zanik's dynamic stories of anti-victimization provide their granddaughters with a renewed sense of movement, dynamism and (un)fixity to exist among the disarticulations of queer Armenian womanhood in the diaspora. These stories of survival also articulate the tensions between being a strong and resistant woman during the genocide, while remaining docile to male family and community members. However, our narratives that ultimately destabilize the mother have interrupted two significant bridges of reproductive inheritance: 1) patrilineal inheritance and 2) inheritance of legacy from the authors' *mothers*. Why have their grandmothers become the protagonists of these memoirs, while the authors' mothers are painted as cold, hysteric and static figures who line the backdrops of their works? Why have grandmothers superseded the direct lines of reproductive genealogy over their own daughters and daughters-in-law? Has the strong national legacy of the reproductive (yet chaste!) Mother Armenia, supplanted by grandmothers and their trauma, fallen short of maintaining the unity and homogeneity of the Armenian family and Armenian woman? Has the story of survival from genocide actually interrupted, over spatiotemporal distance, the codes of docility and heteronormativity reproduced in the Armenian context?

Queerly, the nurturing mother, the national trope of the steadfast, compulsory heterosexual nation, is all but absent in both Arlene and Nancy's memoirs. Arlene's relationship with her mother is constructed through her rebellion to her mother's social

propriety, latent racism, and othering of Americans; Nancy's mother never ceases to insist on the impropriety of homosexuality, her own fears about loosing her dear ones, and chooses silence to quell her pain over voice and action. For Nancy's mother, heterosexuality is couched in "normality," which also bespeaks the "normal" structure of having both a present and *living* mother and father. As her mother died, leaving Nancy's mother nearly orphaned at the age of nineteen, the trauma of losing one's mother becomes ever-connected to the legacy of un-normative family structures that is a source of loss and trauma that she projects on Nancy's experience of queer sexuality. Yet Nancy resists the writing of this legacy into her own psychological landscape. "Speaking up for myself," Nancy writes, "might be construed as rejection, as it often was with my mother. It was safer to love by staying silent and subordinate to someone, even if I feared that I wasn't existing" (222) writes Nancy. Instead, in "trying to be like [her] grandmother and not [her] mother" (221) Nancy identifies a respect for one's personal space and loving someone "unconditionally," yet also speaking out strongly about one's feelings as qualities she learns from Zanik; lessons that make her aware of her own existence. It is as if Nancy herself, in rejecting to echo her mother's fears, also rejects the law of parental inheritance, becoming *choice* rather than an a priori 'biological' or 'natural' assumption about the culture (not nature) of inheritance and kinship.

Superceding even the literal absence of mothers, both Arlene and Nancy lack fictional mothers. Not speaking the Armenian language and thus foreclosed to any Armenian literature written by Armenian women, both write in a tradition as if in a fog, alone and aware (at least as what is apparent in the memoirs) to the feminist writings of Armenian women who came before them. As such, they work in no tradition (consciously) without access to their 'mother' tongue.[94] Thus, a lacuna not only in the fact that their mothers do not share their trauma stories.[95] As a result, both Arlene and Nancy are motherless writers, fictionally speaking, who queerly write unknowningly in a tradition of vocal Armenian women (i.e., Shushanik Kurghinian, Zabel Yesayan, Hayganush Marc). As a result, we can also read their memoirs as breaking the dynamics

[94] Thank you to literature professor Hülya Adak for bringing the absence of metaphorical mothers to my attention. More must be elaborated on this topic.

[95] Arlene's mother was a genocide survivor, while Nancy's mother is a daughter of genocide survivors. Instead, Nancy's mother does not talk about her mother's tragic death from cancer often.

of inheritance altogether, becoming self-mother, self-producer, self-creator that later may find itself amongst a new queer kinship of intergenerational, transnational feminist women writers of the past century.

As Elizabeth Freeman in "Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory," furthers the work of Gayle Rubin with reference to Pierre Bourdieu's model of "practical kinship" (1977), she proposes that "kinship is a social and not a biological fact, a matter of culture rather than nature," sustaining that "all kinship may, indeed, be a matter of poses, gestures, performance" (299, 307). Butler (2002) further notes that queer kinships compel us to "rethink the problem of exchange altogether… as a set of potentially unpredictable and contested practices of self-definition that are reducible to a primary and culture-founding heterosexuality" (34). As kin relations perform repeated life-sustaining social functions, which both originate in and reinforce dependency and vulnerability,[96] kinship queered by social and cultural practice through mourning and the (de)territorializing of legacy from familial, patrilineal, reproductive and heterosexual determination is quite subversive. In this reading, the very self-definitional practices of both authors, in rejecting their *mother*'s psychological legacies, as well as identifying with yet *reframing* their grandmothers' stories of survival to assuage the dissonance of their queer and diasporic Armenian subjectivities, in addition to unwittingly contributing to a tradition of Armenian feminist writing, illustrates how exchange and inheritance outside of the normative practices of heterosexual relationality and common language can be empowering for opening up possibilities for a futurity that bridges dissonant identities and transgressive politics.

Where as Nancy's relationship with her grandmother is more celebratory, Arlene's relationship with her grandmother is quite fraught after the birth of her brother, yet the silence and coldness that characterizes her mother has a significantly traumatic effect on her. She even wonders if her own alternative parenting, from the post-partum depression she experiences with her son Neal, and anxieties and social pressures about being a single mother, has been influenced by the lack of affection from her mother. "To admit that this pregnancy had sent me into a deep depression would be to admit to decidedly unnatural feelings" (86) she writes, and when she does not conform to socially

[96] Thank you to Alex Brostoff for this important formulation of queer kinship and for enriching the discussion thereof.

acceptable/expected motherly behavior, she reasons, "I guess I'm a different kind of mother" (87). Arlene also fears that her identity would be "subsumed in motherhood" (89). However, it becomes clear that these typically 'unmotherly' feelings become more a question of challenging the societal norms of the doting mother, and expectations around her than a lack of affection for her children.

Though both memoirs depict a strong connection to and rebellious spirit learned from grandmothers, the role of (absent) motherhood, sanctified through heterosexual marriage and national imagery in Armenian nationalist and diasporic discourse, is a site of dissonance, silence, and heterosexual failure. In fact, the heterosexual structure of family and kinship *has* already failed both Arlene and Nancy, not only because they are exiled from it but also because they are unable to look to their own mothers, or even to fictional ones, to reproduce a narrative of strength and continuity in their own lives. As an aesthetic juxtaposition, the silence of the authors' mothers foils the outwardly vocal characters of their grandmothers. Could it be that the second generation of mothers use their silence as a coping mechanism to forget the traumatic legacies of their own mothers (perhaps having experienced the genocide even more acutely being the children of survivors and survivors themselves)? Have they legitimated and thereby not challenged their own suppressed existences as Armenian women in a diasporic, American context because of that inertia? If it is the grandmothers who have passed down their own experiences of trauma, action and resistance, then what legacy does that leave their own daughters or daughter-in-laws, frozen between worlds and times, with stories neither as grueling nor daring nor iconic enough as to pass down to their daughters? Or conversely, could it be that the generation of Arlene's and Nancy's mothers are more static *because* they are first generation diasporic subjects—living in the third space par excellance that renders them, without full access either to the world of their mothers (in Turkey) or their daughters (in the USA), completely frozen in the liminal moment of diasporic transition? Must mothers then also constitute the diasporic *décalage* as children of trauma survivors in a new land? With a present continually defined by the past, how is the generation of Arlene's and Nancy's mothers to provide a future when they are rendered inert by the strong voices of their mothers and the silent responsibility in the Armenian and American

social contexts that compel heterosexual reproduction of nation and family?[97] In this formulation, it is both the grandmothers and granddaughters who, as adults with full access to their given cultural contexts in Turkey and the United States, respectively, are able to become fully *dynamic* subjects in their given worlds. In contrast, their mothers, as first generation immigrants and children of genocide survivors, are actually the ones, more so than their daughters, who remain static between past, trauma, and futurity. As a result, the connection between grandmothers and granddaughters creates a *new* reproductivity (of narration and legacy) where the role of the mother falls short in the interim.

Ironically then, it is Motherhood and the family structure itself (though differently in each text) that becomes the very locus of queer time and space, as conceptualized by Jack Halberstam (2005), and of queer kinship, as conceptualized by Butler (2002) that each memoir engenders. Halberstam, borrowing from Foucault (2005: 2), argues that a queer "way of life" also signifies an alternative form of relationships and temporality. If this is so, then both memoirs, by de-centering the role of motherhood (for Arlene as a mother and for Nancy, via her mother), re-center inheritance and reproductivity via a temporality which renders the 'reproductive' mother negligible. In fact, they specifically *do not want to reproduce* the psychological worlds of their own mothers, queering the reproductive force of motherhood in their own lives. Finally, in the symbolic realm, this destabilization also and inherently affects the symbolic Armenian mother, or Mother Armenia herself, as the strong figure who engenders the potentiality to carry the Armenian nation forward. Arlene's relationship with Martha creates a queer family as they move in together and Martha ostensibly becomes Arlene's children's third parent in a homosexual union in the 1970s; a radical decision at this historical juncture. In this way, family and inheritance (Halberbstam 2005: 6) are reoriented towards a future that is not marked by birth, marriage or reproduction, but instead, through the possibility of difference and acting as a model for the possibility and legitimacy of non-reproductive sexual acts and relationality. Certainly, this point leads one to ponder the relationship

[97] I thank Shari Young for her reading of Arlene and Nancy's mothers as static characters who display signs similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that perhaps their mothers, being adults during the genocide, were better able to cope with and therefore remain able to narrative and make intelligible the trauma, which their daughters (the mothers in the memoirs) remain affectively truncated in their emotional maturity and expression.

between the territorializing of female bodies in the work of heterosexual nationalism, and what kinds of new openings, possibilities, (de/re)territorializations and futurity there would be for the Armenian 'nation' if Mother Armenia her self were a lesbian? Or perhaps more relevantly, how might queer voices who disrupt the discourses of kinship, inheritance and birthright reframe the static rhetoric of Armenian nationalist politics that circulate around the genocide, censorship of feminist voices and militarized geopolitical issues regarding *territorialization,* borders and land claims in the name of reproductive (heteropatriarchal) birthright, as we have seen in section 1.6?

Motherhood in its normative national construction may thus be read in these narratives as a productive 'failure' in the non-reproductive futurity it unleashes as it is reoriented instead towards a queer opening of possibility beyond the bounds of normative relationality and kinship. Mothers, for example, in Nancy's memoir, advocate for homosocial relations among female family members instead of marrying non-Armenians when grammy prohibits her daughters—the aunties—from marrying non-Armenian men. Thus, the nationalist trope of the importance of heterosexual reproductivity for the progeny of the nation, in this diasporic case, fails *because* of the prohibitions that ethnic heterosexual unions must take. Grammy would rather her daughters be barren and live at home in homosocial kinship than marry and reproduce with a non-Armenian men. Thus, the limits of diaspora renders Armenians queerly non-reproductive if and when not participating in the tacit (and sometimes explicit) nationalist rules of reproductivity that exist more firmly in the diaspora in order to combat assimilation.

Interestingly, however, while homosocial kinship bonds are the model for Grammy's daughters, Nancy and her siblings *do not* share such connections. Strangely, even though Nancy has two homosexual siblings, the fact that Nancy feels no kinship to them further stranges their assumed kinship bonds along bloodlines.[98] Here, not even *queerness itself* is enough to create comradery amongst the Agabian siblings, as Judith Butler also purports in "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?" (2002). Drawing from the thesis that "kinship is no longer conceptualized as grounded in a singular fixed

[98] See Lévi-Strauss's position of kinship as the negotiation of a patrilineal line through marriage ties and blood relations in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949). Judith Butler gives an analysis of the contemporary discourses surrounding kinship, including her further intervention on queer kinship in "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?" published in *Differences*, 2002.

idea of 'natural' relation, but [as] self-consciously assembled from a multiplicity of possible bits and pieces," (Butler: 2002, 36, citing Franklin and McKinnon, 14) Butler urges us to understand kinship as "a kind of doing, a practice that enacts that assemblage of significations as it takes place" (36). As a result, queer kinship, as the kind that Agabian's narrative espouses, constitutes a

> "breakdown" of traditional kinship that not only displaces the central place of biological and sexual relations from its definition, but gives sexuality a separate domain from that of kinship, allowing as well for the durable tie to be thought outside of the conjugal frame, and opening kinship to a set of community ties that are irreducible to family. (2002: 38)[99]

Instead, for Nancy, kinship relations are made amongst her friends and the newfound queer Armenian community of the AGLA in New York City. There, her identity becomes culturally intelligible in the Armenian language and in the diasporic space. In addition, Nancy disrupts kinship even in a homonormative framework via her bisexuality. Just as Carly, Valerie's trans friend, Nancy's bisexuality positions her in a state of constant belonging and becoming, assembling and reconfiguring the multiplicity of bits and pieces as she negotiates the heterosexual, homosexual, American and Armenian diasporic worlds. Ever in-transition, ever-between, Nancy perhaps might be the ultimate (un)fixed diasporic subject.

Nancy's rationale about the ironic exclusion of the Armenian community amongst other Armenians also refutes the kinship relations oftentimes taken for granted amongst Armenians because of their ethnicity. Instead, according to Nancy, she wonders

> how it came to be that the intimacy of Armenian families often took the form of attack and condemnation, leading to self-righteous rejection… For the most part I'd been avoiding the Armenian community since I moved to L.A. because I was sure *they would* treat me like my family, that they wouldn't be able to tolerate my identity… I was tired of pushing for words that might never be spoken, wary of rejecting people who loved me, however imperfectly." [italics mine] (141—142).

For Nancy, kinship is practiced along alternate lines of bonding. Nancy travels to Istanos, Turkey—grammy's village—with her Auntie Aghavni to locate the family bible, which contains all of the family history dating back to "when the Seljuks pushed us from

[99] It would be an interesting line of inquiry to analyze Nancy's trip to Turkey and visiting Istanos as a moment of queer kinship, vis-à-vis Butler's formulation.

Van in the eleventh century," (147)[100] as Auntie Aghavni/Agnes explains. The trip takes place after grammy's death, and is integral in leading Nancy to both confront her own "existential uncertainties" and later transcribe the recorded tapes of her grandmother's genocide survival narrative upon her return[101] in the chapter "Hearing Her Story." This trip is also a major turning point for healing the genocidal wounds of her family as Nancy, in making a strong connection to one of the young Turkish girls in Istanos, realizes that she "had come here to stand on the land" that world events had torn apart, "but found that living, breathing people were more important" (159). It is in fact through a silent moment of kinship—ironically for Nancy, exchanging no common language—with a young Turkish girl that bridges the tensions of ethnic strife that have lead to diasporic subjectivity. It is also an apt foil to Emine's role in Nancy's first pangs of lesbian/queer desire. Looking deeply into the young girl's eyes, Nancy internalizes the futility of exclusionary categories that have governed her life as an Armenian taught to hate Turkish people, and as queer subject taught to disapprove of her different body and desires growing up. Acknowledging the kinship bond she images born of a shared ancestral land, Nancy opens up, through temporal and geographical pastiche, the possibilities of enacting and assembling significations that create kinship ties beyond the family and across ethnic hostilities, heralding the opening of a new potential relationality.

Nancy's trip, transcribing her grandmother's story and renewed interest in Armenian history as she takes classes at Columbia leads her to seek the "diversity in which Armenians thrived," as she seeks out the Armenian gay and lesbian community of New York. Though her fears of belonging are also heightened because of her bisexual identity within the group, the AGLA (Armenian Gay and Lesbian Association) community is a space of dissonant convergence of Armenian and queer identities. The association becomes a space where her "two disparate parts existed in one person" (195). The members of AGLA also give Nancy, a person who describes herself as "needing words," the language *in Armenian* to reconcile this identity: the word for gay in Armenian, *miaseragan*. "*Mee-ah-ser-a-gahn… Me as her again*, I repeated in my head to

[100] An interesting moment because Nancy goes in search of her blood ties, giving importance to legacy, reproduction and patrilineal inheritance.

[101] A lengthy effort as she does not understand Armenian and so much have them translated while she lists along, transcribing and listening.

remember" (198) as thus stands the title of her memoir: *Me as her again*, a constant becoming and belonging, turning back to ones 'home', or the lost mother tongue, to find a place for one's self, as Nancy explains in the closing chapter. Language, ironically, provides Nancy a bridge of convergence.

Accepting her bisexuality for Nancy also means letting go of her struggle for her parents to accept it, just as she sees that it may be futile to be angry with Turkish people for the denialist politics of the Turkish government regarding the Armenian Genocide. Here, Nancy's memoir takes a similar turn to Avakian's: both are able to straddle divergent identities by acknowledging their incommensurability. For her parents, if it is in the expression of their anger, to say one's piece, in which one finds their peace, (281) then for Nancy, telling one's personal story, as she has done with the story she's inherited from her mother and grandmother, is where she finds hers. Aptly, Nancy paints the metaphor of the two-headed bird, symbolic, as one priest explains to her, of the church's universality, reaching East and West. However, it is also symbolic of the church's fractions and disunity, "[b]ecause, a body can't have two heads. If there are two heads, the body is sick," (202) describes Father Khntoun. Nancy's convergence of bisexuality and double subjectivity as an Armenian-American bridges that disunity, transgressing polarity and embracing hybridity, the "joy seep[ing] through my veins" (196).[102]

While inheritance and legacy inspire a newborn comradery in Arlene's and Nancy's connection to the Armenian community after hearing their grandmothers' stories, they also use these stories as catalysts for recalibrating their feminist inquiries within that community. They refuse to participate in and reproduce the heteropatriarchal norms and victimized stances many of their diasporic counterparts adopt. For Arlene, this ultimately means that the coexistence of her Armenian and lesbian identities remains unresolved at the end of the memoir, perhaps also as a result of her historic moment, when feminist and lesbian inquiries were burgeoning; before the advent of queer theory. Participating in several Armenian functions after her 'return' to feeling Armenian, she remains vehemently disappointed about her Armenian-American community's refusal to talk about the genocide's psychological effects on the descendants of its survivors—a topic

[102] Perhaps Nancy's two-headed bird is similar to the queer Eden created by Arlene with Martha at the end of the memoir; both recalling Christian imagery.

she realizes is central to her own life story. In the last chapter of the memoir, Arlene reflects on her 'return,' only to learn "that I felt different," and she does not attempt, beyond attending a workshop on genocide and generational trauma, to integrate that difference. She explains:

> I was an Armenian. I was the child of survivors, but what did it mean that I could find so little common ground with others who shared my experience? What did it mean that I could not accept so many of the traditions of Armenians because they were rooted in male dominance? Could I be Armenian and challenge patriarchal traditions? What did it mean that I did not participate in the ancient Christian church of Armenia—the religion my grandmother had refused to renounce, the reason for her exile…
>
> I was in a state of utter confusion about being an Armenian and was relieve to finally get home. It was wonderful to see Martha and be able to talk with her about what I'd experienced. It was also a comfort to be back in an environment where I could be myself. I had told the woman in the workshop the truth: I never could live in an Armenian community where my politics, values, and lifestyle would not be accepted. I had struggled to become an adult woman who was defined not by marital status and number of children but, rather, by my ability to function independently and to believe in myself. I had work that I thought was important and a commitment to try to do what I could to change the world. Martha and I were building a life together that was based on mutual respect…Being an Armenian was important to me, but I had no intention of giving up any other part of my life. (286)

Arlene's feminism and lesbian identity ultimately remain exclusive facets of her Armenian identity. Ultimately unresolved, as it was in the beginning, now even her newfound Armenian identity remains unintelligible. Her memoir does not address what it means for her to be a feminist Armenian lesbian; it leaves her readers only with the knowledge that somehow, she attains peace between these dissonant factions of her life years later, as further exemplified in the scholarship she has produced on the psychological affects of the genocide, recentering her academic endeavors on genocide as an ongoing process of victimization and stagnancy in the Armenian community, subsequent to this work.[103]

[103] See Avakian, Arlene (2010). "A Different Future? Armenian Identity through the Prism of Trauma." In: *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no 42. pp. 207

CODA

ORIENTING OUR OPENINGS:
New Directions for Armenian Studies

In analyzing the ways that queerness for Arlene Avakian and Nancy Agabian is located *in the diasporic home*, this thesis has attempted to analyze the Armenian Diaspora as a recursive geography of dissonant identities in the Armenian transnation across time and space. The central questions and (dis)articulations of nationalism's framing of women and motherhood, reproductive sexuality and gender 'normativity' have, I hope, been reoriented through an understanding of how queer feminist subjects negotiate these questions. Expressing the disarticulations of belonging in a heteronormative Armenian diasporic space, Arlene and Nancy's memoirs gesture at a sense of queer belonging that is un-fixed, ever-between and, even by the end of their memoirs, still postponed.

In making a claim for queer subjectivity as already and inherently a part of the Armenian diasporic home, this thesis has focused mainly on the similarities between Arlene Avakian's and Nancy Agabian's texts. However, both texts arise from very different moments, linking them to a very different center of gravity. Avakian's text is born from the beginnings of the feminist movement as she finds her way in academia, via her coalitional politics and (at that time revolutionary) vision of intersectionality, in order make a place for the women's movement and women's studies programs that do not shadow the history of African American women's experiences. In this way, Avakian's experience is also quite centered in a domestic American framework as she relates her own family's immigrant past and genocide experience to the 'American experience' of many other migrants in the United States, and especially to the transatlantic slave trade. Avakian's text is also quite concerned with identifying her subjectivity in asking the question throughout the memoir, who am "I"? In effect, the focus of the memoir, by telling one's story, is to an extent to center the subject, though by the end of it, we understand that the subject's fractured identities in some ways may not be resolved. In addition, Arlene's 'womanhood,' or the category of 'woman' is not questioned; in the

end, it is her sexual identity and politics that sets her apart from the Armenian community.

Agabian's text speaks more to a narrative of flux and movement. Not only does Nancy display a greater fluidity in how she destabilizes the normative categories of gender and sexuality, but she also considers bisexuality as a queer politics beyond homonormative lesbian identity. However, this does not mean that Nancy's text does not work, as does Avakian's text, in a binary framework. Whereas Avakian understands her lesbian sexuality as a binary exclusion in many senses to her Armenian identity and heteropatriarchal Armenian culture, Nancy's binary comes more in her understanding of writing the story of the Armenian diaspora against the denialist discourse of the Turkish state towards the end of her memoir. Both works do not yet question the transnational status of the Armenian experience, and how their own diasporic hybridities may in fact participate in the decentering of monolithic discourse that excludes the heterogeneity of that experience in various Armenian diasporas, Armenia and in Turkey. Similarly, Arlene's text would perhaps not reflect on itself as a queer text, or as one that challenges body claims and heteropatriarchy as parallel discourses to land claims. In addition, while both authors destabalize home as the place which fixes their subjectivities in 'stability,' they do not prod further into the larger metaphor of family home and Armenian 'homeland.' Both remain particular experiences to the Armenian-American landscape. Nonetheless, Nancy's retelling of her trip to Istanos and the connections she made with the young Turkish girl there *does* serve as the beginning of a bridge that begins to percolate on the connections and perhaps kinship of Turks and Armenians from each side of the genocide story of 1915. While the memoir but hints at this analysis, I believe that this moment does mark the beginning of a significant discourse happening now in the transnational Armenian LGBTQ community that is seeking to deploy the politics of 'queering' nationalist identifications that exclude queer bodies to also bridge, complicate and re-define the now polarizing identities of Armenians and Turks. As insinuated in the previous section, the language of (de)territorialization of the queer body works here in tandem with geopolitical and ethnic (de)territorialization of what may constitute or divide the Armenian versus Turkish body based on reproductive discourses in nationalist

frameworks. I believe also that the Turkish LGBTQ movement is certainly today, in 2016, invested in this change.

While a comparative work may gesture to reify the norms of each text, this thesis, by exemplifying different (dis)articulations of the Armenian diasporic and queer *décalage*, instead serves to illustrate the fluidity of that experience. If, as Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner suggest, the "queer world is a space of entrances, exists, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projecting horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies," (2005: 198, cited in Ahmed: 2006: 106), then what kinds of alternate spaces via non-normative desires might open up? Thematizing marginalization via the lesbian and/or queer, feminist Armenian experience, this work serves to situate queer un-fixity and in-stability as a result of the Armenian diasporic experience itself, which may lead to further inquiries into what *other* normative assumptions of the home or homeland are in fact limiting categories of analysis; and naturally, not limited to the Armenian context, and analysis of which of course not limited the genre of literature.

Home. (Un)Belonging. Being. Between. Ever-becoming. The diasporic subject. The feminist. The queer. (Re)orientations to what object of desire? As scholar Tim Dean explains, homosexual desire "shatter[s] the imaginary identities through which we recognize ourselves and others," (2005: 827). If the experience of the diasporic and queer subject, through fraught belongings and constructed identities, imbue the potentiality for breaking the bounds of nationalist reproductive discourse, how might we orient the queer Armenian diasporic experience as functioning in the work of a Deluezian 'becoming'—a "ceaseless movement of being that is not coordinated by teleology and that never results in anything resembling identity" (Dean 2005: 827)? If a reading of these texts has allowed us to question the 'fixity' of belonging, how might a discussion of becoming, much like our 'unfixed' belonging, be an apt point of departure for further philosophical inquiry? And what is the object to which new orientations, as Sara Ahmed probes in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), are destined? Does queer becoming have an object of desire, and if so, what might it be?

Betwixt and between belonging and becoming, perhaps the power of injecting a queer narrative that disrupts belonging, temporality, geography and reproductivity into the transnational Armenian experience is the discovery that Armenian 'identity' can challenge and reinvent itself. This potentiality, that refuses the reproductive frame, would hail a politics in the Armenian transnation beyond the paralyzing discourse of genocide, strict categories of identification and mandatory reproductivity of the Armenian family and nation that has been the gravitational center of Armenian identity discourse for the past 100 years.

The articulations of exile in *Lion Woman's Legacy* and *Me as her again* only begin to sketch the outline of how queer potentiality resides in these two texts. Given the parameters of this inquiry, further investigation might probe into how the framework of transnational lesbian, queer and feminist Armenian expression in literature extends itself into the aesthetic realm of nonfiction literary production. For example, how does the political positionality of autobiographical texts develop and how does form, along with 'normative' categories of analysis as well as monolithic historiography, mimic this trend? For example, working upon the theoretical foundation of this thesis, how can the 2007 semi-autobiographical work *Girk' Angernagir* (*Book-Untitled*) by Shushan Avagyan be read as the nexus of contemporary queer writing in content and form, which furthers the project of dislocating the stability of heteropatriarchal nationalist discourse? To what extent does a queer politics in transnational Armenian women's writing from the LGBTQ community participate in or deflect a co-opting of counter-hegemonic narrative, retaining potency in its marginality? How might the Gramscian notion of counter-hegemony be applied to the seeming alterity to which 'queer' texts are oriented, a sub-claim of this thesis? What is the role of performativity in these texts? To what extent, formally and conceptually, do they enact the very political stances they espouse? Or does the 'traditional' form that both memoirs adopt challenge the very reproductivity they seek to reject?

Next, further study must probe into the topics of this thesis not limited to literature but expanding to other genres like performance, visual art, cinema and music. How might a literary study like this one propel a cross-genre study of gender/genre, in which one may track the morphing of queer forms across different media? In addition, a

topic at the outside hoped to be analyzed yet here left grossly understudied is the question about the limits of the genre of memoir itself. What does the memoir as a literary form allow its writer to say, and what are its limits? Why has memoir specifically been used as the preferred genre to mediate these stories? May it be because of its confessional quality that parallels the philosophy of the 'coming out' story—telling the truth about one's selfhood? How does memoir as a genre limit its readers' perspective on the situation of the LGBTQ Armenian experience?

Certainly for this author, the genre of memoir has been chosen mainly due to happenstance: the memoir happens to be the genre of the first two openly queer Armenian nonfiction works, thus necessitating, in the creating of a genealogy, an analysis. Analyzing this genre has allowed this author to delve into the more literal subjective experiences of both authors, but has simultaneously limited, to an extent, my own aesthetic criticisms of the works. As they make their own proclamations about their lives, the critic of memoir must take into account the authors' own auto-critical reflections of their own lives. As a result, at times, veering too tangentially into underlying meanings and/or motivations for certain of the authors' perspectives and experiences ventures into psychologically analyzing the authors, which sways from a more strict literary analysis. And, if memoir was important in 70s and 80s, it has different import for today. What are the limits and the possibilities of memoir today, and how would this analysis like this one take this critical perspective to memoir, visual art and performance art? What would happen to these questions when they shift genre?

An aesthetic analysis of these texts is also still in order—one which challenges the potentiality for a text to engender queerness to the extent I claim these texts do, when their form inscribes them in the more traditional genre of non-fiction autobiographical writing. To what extent can we read queer potentiality in texts that engender the form of memoir? How does memoir also perform selfhood, and in this case, diasporic Armenianness? Further, how does performance itself, which Agabian's splices throughout her memoir, contribute to her overall structure of the memoir? How might her text fragment genre in ways that enable Agabian to more performatively challenge questions of body and land claims, for example? And, how might we take this analysis and apply it to the queer Armenian texts that have been produced—not just in the genre

of nonfiction or literally about LGBTQ topics—since the publication of Agabian's memoir? Much work has been published, recorded and performed since 2008 that questions diasporia, home(land), nationalism, transmission, intersectionality and heteropatriarchy, especially within the past five years, that continues the collocation of queer kinship and feminist production explored in these texts.

Finally, in returning to theoretical inquiries, further exploration into the relationship between abjection and queer space in these two texts and the performances and cultural productions that follow them might probe the boundaries of the home and homeland/nation in conjunction with the un-fixed borders of the diaspora, queer body and text. How might texts produced in the 'homeland' in Armenian be able to manipulate language, for example, in a way from which diasporic texts are foreclosed, and how does this re-orientation of language disrupt national fixities? Texts to consider would be the three essays in In the (Un)space, written in three 'mother-tongues' (French, English and Armenian) and the experimental work *Book-Untitled* (2007). For beyond the parameters of these two modernist texts, what is at stake is the navigation of queer space and negotiation of queer identity through that space that opens paths for uncovering the marginalized histories of antipatriarchal, anti-nationalist Armenian women. While Avakian and Agabian more directly challenge Armenian patriarchy and heteronormativity, texts like Shushan Avagyan's much more subtly, through language-play and postmodern form, debunk state narratives of (his)tory. Avagyan longs to shrjel-—to "roam" and to "invert". How does the subtlety of language (and its play) and form seek to destabalize history differently from more thematic approaches? Who are the intended audiences of these works? Are they censored because of their audiences? Or, do these works actually reach a public? How might the potential answers to these questions all inform a greater narrative of erasure, resistance to it, and empowerment while simultaneously highlighting the fissures, gaps, silences and struggles that will continue to characterize the on-going negotiation of identities and their (dis)orientations?

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