In the (Un)Space:
TRANSNATIONAL ARMENIAN FEMINIST DIALOGUES BETWEEN IDENTITIES, BELONGINGS, AND MOTHER TONGUES

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. . . I didn't have to escape into my mind, though, not really. But I still do it, because ultimately, the place that does not exist will exist, in time, in space, someday. And so I imagine a space with three (or more) women, no one imposing her views on the other. I imagine women everywhere supported for their choices, and I imagine sexuality spoken in Armenian culture. I imagine a child who needs my help in particular. I imagine a world of families that have stopped asking their children to serve their parents' wishes. I imagine an Armenia that loves other cultures, that thinks beyond its borders. I imagine you, a woman, or a woman in you, filling in this space too.[1]

–Nancy Agabian

"The laws try to make us disappear, silence and immobilize us, but we continue to draft in black, excavate and experiment," writes Shushan Avagyan in "*Sevamenk*"—the third and final essay of *In the (Un)Space* (2007). The book is an experimental collaboration of non-fiction essays by Nancy Agabian, Lara Aharonian and Shushan Avagyan. Written in French, English and Eastern Armenian—each of its author's "mother tongues"—*(Un)Space* is a trilingual conversation across national borders and "homes" that juxtaposes three disparate feminist perspectives in order to explore what themes might bring them together over and against their common alterity as Armenian feminists. Informed by different geographic, linguistic, and sociopolitical contexts, "The Experiment" (Agabian), "*J'ose Dire*" ("I Dare Say") (Aharonian), and "*Sevamenk*" ("Blackselves") (Avagyan) all set out differently to excavate the heterogenous

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[1] Nancy Agabian, Lara Aharonian and Shushan Avagyan, *In the (Un)Space* (Yerevan: Samizdat, 2007), p.57.

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spaces and experiences of the "Armenian woman" in an attempt to express her with greater plurality and against a nationalistic framework that paints her as modest and submissive.

If Myrna Douzjian and Nelli Sargsyan-Pittman[2] have argued the Armenian transnation (both the post-Soviet republic and the diaspora) is located at the *interstices* of "cultures and identities" across various geographic landscapes and languages, then *(Un)Space* would be this description's most apt literary iteration. The book's three authors conceptualize their literary production as an "(un)space," much like Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space" or "hybridity"[3]—a space created through the interstices of encounters across three languages and sometimes untranslatable perspectives. This hybrid perspective runs counter to nationalist ideology which frames the Armenian "homeland" as an originary referent point, both ideologically and materially: ideologically, insofar as the "nature" of Armenian identity through nationalist discourse is typically narrated as unchanging and pure (ethnically homogenous) over the centuries, and materially as it makes rights claims to its historic geographies.

In the (Un)Space's authors push otherwise: they hail from three different spaces across the Armenian transnation: Nancy Agabian is from the United States, Lara Aharonian is an expatriate to Armenia from Beirut/Montreal, and Shushan Avagyan is from post-Soviet Armenia, and wrote her essay while in the United States. At the interstices of languages, cultures and identities, *In the (Un)Space* illustrates the cultural and political heterogeneity of the Armenian transnation, which troubles—according to its authors—the more static, homogenous cultural, nationalist tenets of belonging to the Armenian identity: language purity and the inheritance of a mother tongue (reflected in Aharonian's essay); traditional patriarchal structures (Aharonian and Agabian's essays); heteroreproductivity (Agabian); compulsory motherhood (Agabian); ethnic homogeneity (Aharonian and Agabian); the inheritances of loss and mourning (Avagyan); and the category of "Armenianness" as belonging strictly to those who reside in Armenia, speak Armenian, or are politically oriented in viewing the Armenian nation-state as the "homeland" to which all those who identify as

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[2] Douzjian, Myrna. "Perennially Transnational: Armenian Literature after the Genocide" *Asbarez*. Nov 6, 2009. (http://asbarez.com/73025/perennially-transnational-armenian- literature-after-the-genocide/, accessed: 17 June 2019); Nelli Sargsyan-Pittman, "Negotiating Ethnosexual Difference in the Armenian Transnation," unpublished doctoral dissertation (University of Albany, 2013).

[3] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004).

Armenian belong.[4] For *(Un)Space*, challenging these nationalist claims is in part an effort to bridge the mutually exclusive terms woman, feminist, queer, and Armenian in nationalist identity discourse.[5] By articulating and translating its authors' experience of Armenianness as feminists or queers, *(Un)Space* summons a certain hybridity, impurity or non-normativity—ideas that serve as counter to the monoliths of national purity and its transgenerational reproduction. As such, as a multilingual text written from feminist lenses as wide as its diasporic geographies, what kinds of discursive spaces and political projects might this dialogic experiment open in order to tackle the oft disarticulated, non-normative sexual/gendered, and feminist identities that exist in the Armenian transnation?[6]

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[4] Here "nationalism" and what the homogenous discourse of the "nation" which uses the rhetoric of the other in order to sustain itself is being brought to question.

[5] Lerna Ekmekçioğlu has also theorized this discursive problem as the inherent paradox in the very lexical collocation of "Armenian feminist," and also as I would extend, the "Armenian queer," as the very terms feminist and queer attempt to dislodge themselves from the home/nation that the very homogenous 'Armenian' can engender. In Ekmekçioğlu's summation, as the radical feminist seeks to break tradition, fighting for gender equality through liberating herself from the home (and thus symbolically from its metaphoric dual, the nation) the Armenian feminist a priori defines herself as a part of that 'national family,' from which she then also seeks liberation. As Ekmekçioğlu problematizes in her research of the Armenian feminist literary magazine Hay Gin, early Armenian feminists writing in Western Armenian sought improvement and civic equality, yet did not reject, and in fact purported tradition, home, family and motherhood in tandem with the nationalist post-genocide project to 'revive' the nation—a term we will hear critiqued later by Aharonian. Subsequently, the nationalist feminist supports reproductivity and the role of motherhood, which by consequence extends to the promotion of the heteroreproductive and usually heteronormative hegemon. Yet, why does motherhood, and Armenian woman as mother, remain unquestioned? She is a mother who protects and bears tradition and language, and thus symbolizes and shapes national identity and belonging to the home/nation.

[6] In beginning to track a contemporary genealogy of queer feminist autobiography in my MA Thesis for Sabancı University in 2016 entitled "(Dis)Orienting Exile: Home and Belonging in Queer Armenian-American Women's Memoir", I discussed the first two queer feminist autobiographical works of the Armenian transnation: the Armenian-American memoirs of Arlene Avakian (1992) and Nancy Agabian (2008). A major theme in both texts was the (dis)articulation of queer/feminist identity in the Armenian diasporic context, and ostensibly, their non-belonging to it as a result; a theme that corroborates the various layers of transnational Armenian political discourse that specifically and vehemently writes queer and sometimes feminist identity out of the Armenian experience because both threaten the heteroreproductive and patriarchal society. Radical-feminist and non-heteronormative sexual identities thus stood as mutually exclusive identities to the Armenian identity for both women. Here, language played a very important role, as its absence to mutually articulate both non-normative sexuality and (radical) feminist politics in the heteropatriarchal Armenian home/nation, for both authors, lead to their self-imposed exiles from their Armenian identity. Exile, home and belonging as a result of the absence of language for the contemporary feminist and sexually dissident subject has thus become a weaving thread of my research.

Language Undone

In her reflective essay on the trials of translation written in the immediate wake of the fall of Yugoslavia, Susan Sontag in "Being Translated" critiques the "potent fantasy . . . about language as a carrier of national identity."[7] In addition to some of the other cores of national identity construction—in which normative gender tropes write "nation-as-woman,"[8] men as its defenders, and women as its tradition bearers[9]—Sontag points to language—its inheritance, naturalization, and use—as serving to both construct and unify identity discourse. And as Parker et al. have convincingly argued in *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (1992), the passing on of the "mother tongue" is usually the woman's burden to bear.[10]

If language is considered the carrier of national identity, then translation—the interruption of its "purity," as Sontag describes—may be considered the "equivalent of an act of treason."[11] Reading between and through *(Un)Space*'s various linguistic registers by which the hybridity of alternative Armenian women's identities are articulated, thus, becomes a provocative, and perhaps treacherous, exercise by three women who dare to break the rules of inheritance. For the reader, reading then is an exercise in navigating through the linguistic and cultural translations of the book's declared (un)belongings.

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7 Susan Sontag, "Being Translated," *Anthropology and Aesthetics* 32 (Autumn 1997), p. 15.

8 Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer and Patricia Yaeger (eds.), *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 6.

9 See Dicle Koğacıoğlu, "The Tradition Effect: Framing Honor Crimes in Turkey," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 15/2 (2004).

10 Parker et al, as above. In my own research of diasporic Armenian women's memoirs, I have discussed the gendered responsibility placed on language inheritance in the patriarchal Armenian-American context. More-often than men who may unquestionably inherit their ethnic identity patrilineally through 'bloodlines,' the extent of women's ethnic identity—the bearers of the mother tongue—is more heavily measured based on the woman's Armenian language ability. In Arlene Avakian's memoir Lion Woman's Legacy (1992), for example, one of the author's aunts holds so tightly onto the Armenian language to resist ethnic assimilation and loss of Armenianness that an eventual language barrier breaks ties to her kin, including Avakian, who loses her ability to speak Armenian (and thus cannot communicate with her aunt) and is considered less 'Armenian' as a result. Armenianness is maintained within the four walls of Avakian's aunt's home through language, and the home is equivocated as "her country." In addition, the female members of the family or community who did not speak Armenian were more readily forgotten as a part of the Armenian-American community of the 1950s in comparison to their male counterparts.

11 Sontag, as above, p. 15.

Across Themes, Language(s), and Between Silences

Linguistic encounter is the primary medium through which *(Un)Space* represents the tensions of untranslatability that varying cultures, life experiences, viewpoints, and geographies may yield. As Avagyan explains in "Blackselves," "I don't read French, Nancy isn't familiar with Soviet mores, and Lara isn't disillusioned yet with life."[12] This tension at times makes the authors' coalitional project seem precarious, and it is also a point of tension for the authorial or narrating "I" of each text. Lara Aharonian ("*J'ose Dire*") situates this untranslatability as the tension of belonging's inability to be fixed by homogenous identity constructs; in the book, this is due to its linguistic heterogeneity. Aharonian's essay illustrates the difficulties of living amongst languages when it comes to trying to situate herself as an Armenian subject. In the end, Aharonian's diasporic heterogeneity, while at times celebrated, seems to undo her, willingly or not:

> My parents say I'm Armenian. I'm trying to erase everything and recreate my own definitions... I speak Armenian, I think in French, sometimes [in] Arabic, I write in French. I speak Armenian, but my emotions are not Armenian. And how to express them? . . . I've been betrayed, and a MONSTER was created.[13]

Overcoming the "monster" between languages, cultures, and geographies by using language as the very weapon in order to "recreate" one's own definitions of subjectivity in this in-between space is one of the tasks taken up in Agabian's and Aharonian's essays.

Each author is to "write in the language in which each of us can express ourselves without any difficulty" in order to show how each essay "fragment appear[s] as a whole,"[14] yet not entirely whole without the other, explains Avagyan. While they may potentially risk creating a monster, the three essays' mutual dependence is also a space of urgency and possibility. Being "in the (un)space" is what the authors refer to as the tension of being in the "in-between" (Avagyan's միջ-տարածայի/*mij-adaradzayi*). And, in all three essays, writing is the medium that mirrors the book's simultaneous unity and fragmentation: "how [do] our

[12] Avagyan, "Blackselves," in *In the (Un)Space*, p. 102.
[13] Aharonian, "*J' ose Dire*," in *In the (Un)Space*, p. 61.
[14] Avagyan, as above, p. 97.

'selves' relate to one another, what are our identifying/unifying elements, and what are the ones that separate/differentiate us?"[15] Thus, the untranslatable and tenuous spaces between the English, French, and Armenian essays emerges as a site for re-imaging the fragmented monster. In addition, it is a site to reformulate the "Armenian woman" beyond language. Thus, while for Aharonian this multi-lingual identity creates a monster, Avagyan—a native of Armenia who perhaps is more skeptical of the outside gaze of her co-writers who seem to imagine Armenian women as sexless—has a different take. Avagyan writes in "Blackselves," "[i]t's important to understand what it is that allows three radically different perspectives to exist side-by-side, and how these differences can form a unified whole."[16]

The Language of Sex and Mother Tongues: Aharonian's "*J'ose Dire*" and Agabian's "The Experiment"

As two diasporan Armenian women who arrive in Armenia from Western contexts (reflected by English and French, the "mother tongues" in which they write), Nancy Agabian and Lara Aharonian relate their experiences in Armenia, in highly confessional tones, as a loss and reclamation of their sexualities/sexual bodies the moment they arrive in the country. Sex, and a language to speak of sex and women's rights in public, are two of the primary themes of both these works. Born in Beirut and a migrant to Canada, Lara Aharonian's "I Dare Say" (*J'ose Dire*) tells the story of her second expatriation from Canada to post-Soviet Armenia, where she is confronted with the country's high rates of domestic violence, which goes unchallenged and is oft met with silence in the diaspora. Aharonian's piece perhaps best encapsulates the theme of gender trouble and sexual disenfranchisement for women, as she defamiliarizes herself even from the collocation "Armenian woman" (a mix of national and gender identities): "I'm a woman and Armenian. Woman. Armenian. Armenian woman," writes Aharonian.[17] This exercise separates and juxtaposes the two words until they become defamiliarized. This language game parallels the author's own self-exile from her Armenian family in Canada to

[15] Ibid., p. 102.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Similar to Ekmekçioğlu's exercise of the term 'Armenian feminist' above (footnote 5).

become a stranger in an unfamiliar, imagined homeland where she only shares the *language*,[18] but not the cultural mores of the host country.[19] Ironically, though she speaks Armenian, Aharonian constantly expresses a *loss of language* in her quotidian life because of her sense of cultural defamiliarization in a strange place: losing touch with her Armenian-language capabilities, she describes not being able to understand one man on the street. She writes: "speaks to me in sign language."[20] Language loss also inaugurates Aharonian's defamiliarization from her own, once self-possessed sexual subjectivity: "I don't have a past or present. My female body is losing itself little by little, and the Armenian emerges to take refuge in a cold and frigid body whose sex doesn't breath anymore."[21] According to Aharonian, the longer she stays in the country, the more her linguistic identities and transcultural *mixité* are threatened by Armenia's homogeneity as well as the oppressive situation it offers native born Armenian women. For Aharonian, this threat means that her literal becoming an "Armenian

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[18] Imagined also because as a Diaspora Armenian born in Beirut, it is more than likely that the Republic of Armenia was never the 'homeland' of her ancestors.

[19] This essay discusses Agabian's and Aharonian's as essays as taking up language as a theme to provide provocative and necessary discursive reflections and criticisms regarding the effects of the general silencing of women's sexuality in an Armenian context, which both authors depict as oppressive and, in their personal experiences, disorienting and disenfranchizing. This analysis is founded upon the literary movement and critique of *l' ecriture feminine* of the 1970s which argued for the importance of using language not only to write the female subject out of phallologocentrism, but also to write the body and female sexuality itself in order to come to an understanding of "self." I do still maintain that Agabian's and Aharonian's autobiographic, confessional narratives which explicitly depict themselves as sexual subjects in Armenia, fill a socio-political lacuna and open a vital space for the articulation of sexuality in the Armenian transnation. However, as I have later argued in another paper ("The (Un)Space of Silence: The Incitement to Sex as Anti-Transgressive Subversion in "*J' ose Dire*" and "The Experiment") following the HDF conference of 2016, I think a more fruitful critique of these pieces is in considering how these essays' very incitements of sex into language might also yield another politics of oppressive category-making which formulates a binary of discourse/sex and silence/non-sexuality. Reading alongside Foucault's rejection of the repressive hypothesis in *The History of Sexuality*, I've considered how their very provocations to bring sexuality and the body to language to expose and ostensibly "create" the female Armenian sexual subject and implicate her in a system of power and knowledge that invests a subject, act or sexuality with meaning and life through discourse. Resultantly, I argue that this ultimately works against the transgression these authors seek to achieve, and instead become the very façade or "appearance of deliberate transgression" (Foucault 1990, 6) about which Foucault warns. [see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (new York, New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 6.]. As such, this essay remains as an exploration of how cultural hybridity vis-à-vis language is employed in the text to highlight the various experiences of womanhood in an Armenian context that resist the hegemonic narrative of the submissive, modest Armenian woman.

[20] Aharonian, as above, p. 62.

[21] Ibid.

woman" is the deactivation of her sexuality. "My vagina is in a coma,"[22] she writes. This sexual deactivation is what Aharonian narrates as the disarticulation of her subjectivity.[23]

In an effort to counteract the reality Aharonian perceives in Armenia, as well as the unnaming and erasing of her vagina in the public sphere, she touches herself, this "prohibited organ, untouchable, that doesn't have a name,"[24] using physicality, in the absence of language, to re-summon into existence that which is lost; and, as she writes, that which she could never imagine Mother Armenia possessing.[25] As Nancy reminds us in her English piece, this acknowledgement of physicality is like Virginia Woolf's[26] message for woman to write herself as body[27]; indeed, an echo of the *l'ecriture feminine* movement.[28]

Aharonian goes as far as to visit a gynecologist during her first months in Armenia because she "doesn't feel anything"[29] in what she describes as a type of vaginal stupor. Substituting for language, the doctor gestures and remedies: "*Madzoun kssé* (put Armenian yoghurt) and it will pass."[30] Though a humorous anecdote, Aharonian quickly brings her reader back to the gravity of the doctor's remedy, identifying his lack of *language* to the lack of conversation in Armenia about the country's contemporary sociopolitical struggles when it comes to gender awareness: "Everything will pass in Armenia: the pain, the poverty, the corruption. A bit of yoghurt and the games up."[31] Noting the doctor's avoidance to name her sex and give her a suitable diagnosis, Aharonian laments, "He fears to put in danger the values

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[22] Ibid., p. 66.

[23] The articulation of her sexuality as a sign of her subjectivity is perhaps a quite Western construct.

[24] Ibid., as above.

[25] An interesting note: the Queering Yerevan Collective recently made a graffiti action and wrote on the Mother Armenia statue, "suck my pussy," which was immediately erased (or "cleaned") the next day.

[26] Virginia Woolf is referenced in all three author's essays.

[27] Agabian, "The Experiment," in *In the (Un)Space*, p. 45.

[28] Agabian references a piece of writing by Woolf in the textbook, *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose*, in which Woolf in a speak about Professions for Women, explains that in order for a woman to become a writer, she must "kill 'the Angel in the house". Here, the angel symbolizes the figure of the self-sacrificing, pure mother. Feeling limited even about writing about women's feelings, (which Nancy mentions anyway in Armenia can be ignored, they're just "feelings," not real problems), Woolf encourages writing the truth about woman as body in order to write honestly. Thus, writing body leads woman to the physicality of her own existence: writing touch, writing physicality; a practice with which both Aharonian and Agabian engage. See Virginia Woolf, *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose* (New York: Broadview, 2002).

[29] Aharonian, as above, p. 66.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid., p. 67.

of an old society that lives by parasitically feeding on the suffering of its dislodged* population."[32] Thus, for Aharonian, the unnaming of women's sexuality or a woman's genitals is a problem for society writ large.

While Aharonian contends with the lack of language for sexuality in Armenian, Agabian, as a non-Armenian speaker, comes to Armenia to discover the opposite. In contrast to Aharonian's essay, Agabian's English-language text, "The Experiment," is written during the author's one-year sojourn in Yerevan as a writing teacher, and focuses in part on the author's language acquisition. When her new Armenian boyfriend Arman teaches her dirty words in Armenian, the meaning of her grandmother's pet name for her as a child—*poopooleeg*—is revealed: "I do not have an inclining as to why my grandmother called me a little penis. / A good sense of humor? / Maybe she was naming me something she couldn't name otherwise."[33] Unlike Lara, for whom sexuality goes comatose upon her arrival to Armenia, Nancy's pet name, which remained an untranslated innuendo in an English-speaking context, is revealed in Armenia as an explicitly sexual reference that hid for a lifetime in the (un)space of an untranslated linguistic space in the USA, known only to her grandmother. However, even upon the discovery of her phallic nickname, Agabian's foreign gaze on Armenian society at times sees eye to eye with Lara's:

> At first I thought it was a language flitch . . . but now I realize . . . you can't take for granted that all human beings are sexual the way you might somewhere else . . . hiding can be the most significant elements of one's sex life . . . Sexuality is denied and negated . . . [34]

For Agabian as well as Aharonian, if sexuality is not publicly articulated, or rather, is met with public silence, it seems to be rendered inexistent. Yet, it seems as if, as a queer Armenian woman, Agabian might have been metaphorically pre-destined to break out of the normative gendered dynamics that otherwise would have written her as the typical, passive Armenian woman she imagines. Perhaps her queer name *poopooleeg*, bestowed by her grandmother, is

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[32] Ibid.

[33] Agabian, as above, p. 41.

[34] Ibid., p. 14.

what encourages her to refuse fulfilling the expectations of her "femininity," reproductivity, or silence. As she rebelliously declares in her poem "The Answer," in response to the social expectation of her modesty: "I will put my time and energy into writing emails, washing dishes, and touching my clit while having anal sex."[35]

Agabian draws stark contrast between her grandmother's queer naming and her mother's behavior. She describes her mother as a "dominating Armenian mother"[36] who, "by her example, showed me how much she thought appearance was important . . . telling me to worry about what people thought about my appearance, but not care what people thought of me."[37] Agabian attributes her mother's effect on her as the reason that, as she describes, she is bisexual but afraid of penises, and why she is equally intimidated by a domineering *Armenian* woman as a sexual partner, because that expression of "woman-ness" reminds her too much of her mother.[38] The Armenian mother—as oppressed (Aharonian), as domineering (Agabian), as lost (Avagyan)—is a repeating theme throughout the essays. She is a heterogeneous, troubled, and troubling figure whose precarious roles under a stringent patriarchy have haunting effects on Armenian society at large. Yet, while Nancy gives acerbic criticism to the Armenian reality of her upbringing and her new country of residence, she reminds her reader about the limits of language, the importance of translation, and what might be lost, especially on her, in its transference: "I don't think all woman are maimed by Armenia. There are lots of interesting women, I just can't speak their language."[39]

As bridges between cultures and languages, Aharonian's and Agabian's essays ask to dismantle the traditional construct of Armenian motherhood and reproduction, arguing instead not for reproduction as *revival*, but to *live on* and in a new way; not as inheritance, but as freedom. "Write to live, live to write," is a repeated mantra echoing feminist writer Shushanik Kurghinian's early 20th century poem, "I Want to Live." However, for this freedom, as per Freud's prescription, Lara writes that, and Shushan later reiterates, "the Armenian woman doesn't have another choice; To remain alive, she must first kill her parents."[40] Nancy

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[35] Ibid., p. 53.
[36] Ibid., p. 16.
[37] Ibid., p. 40.
[38] Ibid., p. 16.
[39] Agabian, as above, p. 17.
[40] Aharonian, as above, p. 64.

"kills" the idea of her own motherhood altogether, rejecting her body's reproductive potentiality: "I do not want to be a mother./ I am kind and caring and/ giving enough as it is I/ feel guilt and I cannot give up my life for a child/ as noble as that may be it's not/ natural for my nipples to be used for food . . . "[41] Certainly, these metaphors extend not just to the deconstruction of traditional motherhood. Opening up the possibility of sexuality and motherhood's concomitance by women realizing themselves and *living for themselves* and *their bodies*—not by serving the reproduction of life and tradition (and the national project)—they must challenge what they see as their own oppression within the family structure, in addition to symbol of the mother tongue and its inheritance on the national level.

Shushan Avagyan's essay "*Sevamenk*," or "Blackselves"—written in Eastern Armenian—is perhaps the strongest challenge to the mother tongue. Writing in the very mother tongue of the nation, Avagyan still demands for translation: "If you can't understand these lines, find a translator!"[42] Avagyan's text discusses loss, mourning, childhoodlessness, censorship, literary criticism, and alienation from language in order to arrive at deeper understandings of her own subjectivity. Her narrative does not focus on a need for sexual expression but on censorship and what is *lost in translation*—perhaps also a meta-commentary on what remains silenced when sex is incited, or what is censored if preoccupied with sexual expression. While Avagyan's essay gestures towards silence as a method of resistance, Aharonian and Agabian's essays are oriented towards exploring the potentiality of the discursive silences the three essays create together in the book's (un)spaces, or in the linguistic-cultural intranslatabilities they depict.[43] Instead, they are invested in depicting their sexuality as untranslatable to their experience in Armenia. Read through a Foucauldian lens, Aharonian's and Agabian's essays might be argued to "produce an even greater quantity of discourse about sex, [yet they] function and tak[e] effect in [the] very economy"[44] of the sex positive-negative binary they create.

While *(Un)Space* champions its readers' diverse interpretations about the experiences of three women in Armenia through its tenuous linguistic structure, for most readers (unless they are

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[41] Agabian, as above, p. 53.

[42] Avagyan, as above.

[43] Though they do reference what might be lost in translation in their essays.

[44] Foucault, as above, p. 23.

trilingual) a complete comprehension of the three essays may not be possible. What about the reader who is foreclosed comprehension by the limits of her linguistic capabilities, and has the tools to only read one or two out of the three essays?[45] Will she have missed a key element that unites the whole, and thus, the book's overall project? Is such holistic comprehension ever achievable? Indeed, the authors do not seem to suggest that their perspectives be integrated: "It's necessary to read the three of us simultaneously, in three different languages, in three different voices and in three different rooms…"[46] writes Avagyan. Yet, what of the reader who finds herself in a linguistic (un)space and needs a translator?[47] While Aharonian suggests that being caught outside or between languages (and identities) may open a path to "recreate definitions," the silent ambiguity of being outside and in-between a language is nonetheless expressed in the meta-text of Aharonian's and Agabian's essay as an incomprehension that threatens to fragment identity and spawns a monster.

I would like, however, to pause in the space that may lie outside of the potential reader's discursive realm, in this silent space of the outside or in-between of language and incomprehension. Despite Aharonian's and Agabian's clinging to language and writing as modes through which they transgress oppressive silences about sexuality, the ability to "live" as women and sexual Armenian beings (Aharonian) and "not forget" the legacies of Armenian women writers (Avagyan), I wonder whether the actual site of transgression in this compilation lies not in the mix of languages, but in the very silences between them that the essays seek to both create and undo. I have explored this topic elsewhere, so suffice to leave this thought here as an open inquiry.

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[45] It should be noted here that I, too, am limited in my understanding of the three essays in their original. As my French comprehension is quite basic, I have accessed Lara Aharonian's French essay through Italian translation. A special note of thanks to Élis Azzolin for their translation of the French "*J' ose Dire*" from French to Italian for the writing of this essay.

[46] Avagyan, as above, p. 102.

[47] Avagyan makes such a demand: "Or this way: with this book we are communicating whatever can fortuitously cause misunderstandings. If you don't understand one of our languages, find a translator!" (See Ibid., p. 97).

(Un)Spaces and Openings: Thoughts on Silence

"This experiment starts with text, with language first," explains Agabian. It is *(Un)Space*'s task to take back language both to live and to resist forgetting. As such, the book follows a long tradition of resistance thematized by women's writing. By experimenting with the themes of movement and translation, *(Un)Space*'s essays speak together to create a dialogic space that *resists* belonging to the Armenian community and 'womanhood' in its traditional, heteropatriarchal sense.

While *In the (Un)Space*'s first two essays might fail to imagine what exists in and between silences when sex is not spoken or women's rights are not publicly addressed in the Armenian republic,[48] Shushan Avagyan's "Blackselves" points us towards it. "Write so that everything becomes unrecognizable, unfollowable, in a word crucify words and sentences,"[49] writes Avagyan (translation mine). How might "Blackselves" open up a new expression of subjectivity beyond speaking one's subjectivity though sexual/gendered identity politics, as do the other two essays in this compilation? To what extent might Avagyan's concept of "black-writing" as an excavation and rejection of language, and an opening up of silent modes of expression via the *loss of language*, utter into existence another, yet unspoken experience of the Armenian woman?

How might we consider silence as the *(Un)Space*'s space of potentiality for imagining, beyond linguistic, sociopolitical, cultural and geographic borders, the many ways in which the Armenian woman might conceive herself beyond regulatory discursive categories across the Armenian transnation? "The laws try to make us disappear, to silence and hinder our blackselves, but we continue to *sevagrel*—to draft in black—excavate and experiment," writes Avagyan. For Avagyan, black writing is the writing of resistance, but also, the message of the interspace: what can be found and filled between what language fails to articulate. To this end, Avagyan wants to շրջել (*shrjel*)—a word that means both "to invert" and "to roam." By this, perhaps she means inverting traditional gendered relationships in *her* Yerevan, as she walks

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[48] I am not arguing here that it is not important for both of these things—free sexual expression and the public defense of women's rights—to not occur. I am suggesting, however, to consider looking beyond the public/private binary to consider how other forms of performative gestures, in lieu of language, might express what in is championed linguistically in Western political and cultural discourse.

[49] Avagyan, as above, p. 101.

Deanna Cachoian-Schanz, "*In the (Un)Space*: Feminist Dialogues Between Identities, Belongings, and Mother Tongues," in *Critical Approaches to Armenian Identity in the 21st Century: Vulnerability, Resilience and Transformation* (Istanbul: Hrant Dink Foundation Publications, 2021), pp. 283–295.

freely, arm-in-arm with a certain Sarah in one scene of her essay. How might this silent gesture of inversion and roaming queer the Yerevan she knows? "Transform. Change your clothes. Get in drag,"[50] Avagyan implores.

Avagyan's call to *shrjel* is a call to the (un)space; a call to what is disarticulated, or "left out" of the hegemonic national narrative. As Walter Benjamin describes, the moment of the in-between, or this interspace, is the mutual coexistence among languages—the ephemeral moment where "pure language," and perhaps the true nuance of the text, can be found.[51] As translation theorist Paolo Bartolini describes, "[t]ranslation is the moment at which pure language [which is ineffable] arrives for just one moment before it plunges back into the text."[52] Thus, in the transitions among texts, the "Blackselves"—the rebellious ones—emerge.

"Blackselves," then, may be the unity of the book's disunity—a unity in the hybridity of experiences, languages and identities; a gap that fills (un)space; not a stagnant belonging, but a transitive, ever-becoming. For Avagyan, this transmission through polylogue is an opportunity for the individual's self-materialization, an exercise that three women across three diasporic spaces and inverted exiles in the transnation—across generations, legacies of "womanhood," sexual orientations and political persuasions, across vulnerabilities, resistances and transformations—share as the new voice of Armenian women's writing in the 21st century.

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[50] Ibid.

[51] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), pp. 69-83.

[52] Paolo Bartolini, "Benjamin, Agamben, and the Paradox of Translation,: *Comparative Literature and Culture* 6/2 (2004).

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