Shushan Avagyan

A Book, Untitled

Translated from the Armenian
by Deanna Cachoian-Schanz

Translator's Afterword

DEVIATIONS

Memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was—that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way.

—Toni Morrison,
The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations

When the only purpose of life becomes to rediscover not the story that didn't exist but the one that was deliberately made to disappear.

—Shushan Avagyan, *A Book, Untitled*

"*I beg you, please don't distort the essence and meaning of the work! / Don't make it 'comprehensible'!*" What is a translator to do with such a text that beseeches against its own distortion, while at the same time declares that among its many goals,

its "one [primary] purpose . . . is to *deviate* from the original purpose"? When the translator aims to do justice and relay the source text to a reader while also preserving the inevitable strangeness of a text in translation, at least one thing becomes clear: *Dear reader, you are not reading* Girq-anvernagir*. You are reading* A Book, Untitled. *If you want to read* Girq*, learn Armenian!*

One day in autumn.

I first encountered *Girq-anvernagir* [*A Book, Untitled*] in a season of my own deviations. I was considering throwing in the towel on the graduate degree I'd started at Ca' Foscari University in Venice, Italy. Months prior, I had been schooled by my mentor, a gentleman of the collar, that there were no Armenian women writers of real literary merit.

What did exist, perhaps with the exception of a mediocre few whom he didn't even bother to mention by name, were of little import and certainly not worthy pursuits of serious intellectual critique. He was visibly agitated that feminism was to blame for destroying the image of the Armenian matriarch. But anyway, he said, there was little sense in bothering to read these unnamed women writers when there was no greater literature in the Armenian canon than the neo-Romantic poet Misak Medzarents, or the lover of neologisms, Daniel Varoujan. It was either my callous unfeeling or naïve misappreciation that couldn't sympathize with the sad fate of the young and dreamy Bedros Tourian—poor one, who'd died of tuberculosis before his time, and with a love unrequited!

I supposed that *no Armenian writer inspired me*. With my aesthetic critique clearly off or my nostalgic longings just not up to snuff (did it matter which?), I left Venice, unsure of any return.

Till one day in autumn, *when each time I wander back to Yerevan*, I anxiously sat on a concrete porch that opened onto the unkempt backyard of the ground-floor apartment two of my friends were renting, and where I was couched, on yet another in very a long line of hospitable couches that nomadic year. My friends had set up a home office in the living room to help edit a book they'd worked on with an art collective. Later that evening, the rest of the *équipe* was going to join. That book, *Queered: What's to Be Done with Xcentric Art?*, was to become material for the next one, *Zarubyani kanayq* [The Women of Zarubyan Street].

The arrival of these women—one an artist/photographer, one an artist/graphic designer, and the other, a literary scholar/writer/translator—made me more anxious than excited. What was I to say for myself? That I'd dropped out of my program, that I needed to abandon my career in literary criticism and find a new path? I remember sitting out on the porch, the trellised grapevines overhead starting to chill in the autumn air, the bugs circling the lightbulb, the cast-iron chairs that held our cheap Areni wine (the days before the fine wine boom in Armenia) and velvety cognac, and as they left for the evening, her saying to me, *So Deanna* jan—*dear Deanna—go back and finish what it is you need to write.* She was about to leave Yerevan—a self-imposed exile—and return to Normal,

Illinois, to get back to her translation of Viktor Shklovsky's *Bowstring: On the Dissimilarity of the Similar*. I wasn't sure then if misery wanted company, or if she'd noticed my spark rekindle over our discussion of (with the exception of a notable few) the limits of literary criticism in the Armenian world and how we imagined it differently, but before she left, and after the kind of hug that implied a potential, future kinship—inviting, but with trepidation as to not over-inscribe—she wrote a modest note in a book with a red-and-white cover. She handed it to me silently as she walked down the steps. "To dear Deanna—with warmest wishes, Shushan." And so began a journey, renewed.[1]

Girq-anvernagir was published as samizdat in 2006 in Yerevan, the capital of the Republic of Armenia. Yet the book itself—initially written as a translator's diary while Avagyan was translating the poems of Armenian writer Shushanik Kurghinian into English—is the product of a series of exiles, longings, and returns over the course of a century. Forging a home for herself in the United States by writing in her native tongue of (Eastern) Armenian while on an indefinite sojourn, Avagyan's first novel brings together the stories of four women from the "eastern" and "western" contexts of the twentieth-century Armenian reality; women separated by a hundred years as well as by the shifting borders of the empires and nation-states that necessitated their constant migrations. In Avagyan's rendering, *one day in spring*, they all meet in Yerevan.

The first encounter in the novel is between Shushanik Kurghinian—the socialist poet who fled the Tsar's regime

to return to a Soviet Armenian state—and the Western Armenian, Constantinople-born writer Zabel Yesayan—who had fled her own annihilation as the Ottoman Empire fell and the borders of the modern Turkish republic were drawn. Kurghinian's works were censored by the Tsar's regime and disingenuously represented and derided by Armenian nationalists; in post-Soviet Armenia, her work was forgotten. Yesayan, whose influential works were largely overshadowed by her male contemporaries in the Armenian literary imagination till the early 2000s (and not in small part due to the great interest sparked by the archival labors recounted in this book), fled ethnoreligious cleansing in Ottoman Turkey, and was killed later in Soviet Armenia by Stalin's regime. Yet in 1926, the year in which Avagyan sets their meeting, the lives of both women overlap in Yerevan: Yesayan has just arrived in the Soviet Armenian capital, and Kurghinian dies there one year later, in 1927.

However, Avagyan's staging of this fictional encounter between Kurghinian and Yesayan is precipitated by an equally important one in the novel's present. Again, *one day in spring*, three-quarters of a century later in Yerevan—the capital of the now-independent Armenian republic—the narrator (ostensibly Avagyan), referred to in the novel as the "typist/writer/translator," meets Lara. Avagyan—who is translating Kurghinian's poems—had already left the post-Soviet Armenian republic in the early 2000s for the United States. On a visit back to her home city of Yerevan she begins to work with Lara Aharonian, a contemporary whose family was deported by the Ottoman Empire and who thus grew

up in the Armenian diaspora—first in Lebanon and then in Canada. In the time the novel is set, Lara is a recent migrant to Armenia who comes to research Yesayan, and when she and Avagyan meet, they decide to join forces and search through the state archives together to look for traces of these nearly forgotten authors. Later, Avagyan would publish her translations of Kurghinian's poetry in the United States as *I Want to Live: Poems of Shushanik Kurghinian* (2005) and Lara Aharonian, along with Talin Suciyan, would direct and produce the documentary *Finding Zabel Yesayan* (2008) in Armenia and Turkey, marking the first significant wave of reinterest in Yesayan's works.[2]

In many ways, then, the lives of these four women are parallel. Just like Kurghinian and Yesayan, Avagyan and Aharonian were separated by political borders and cultural contexts and thus, speak two different variants of Armenian—Eastern and Western. And just like Kurghinian and Yesayan, the two contemporary women's political subjectivities and migrations are conscribed by the modern inheritors of the empires and colonial states that continue to wield power and write the dominant narratives that define their respective geopolitical contexts (namely Turkey, Russia, and as the dominant global power, the United States). Though Avagyan's and Aharonian's migrations may be read in one light as a choice of circumstance, rather than a flight for their immediate and physical wellbeing, it is questionable whether we might interpret their movements as privileged choices rather than as matters of symbolic, social, and cultural survival in their own right. In the first instance, one must consider, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the lack

of opportunities and resources available in the Armenian republic, especially in regards to education. In the second, the matter at hand is the perennial, existential tenuousness of never fully belonging in a host culture or nation as a member of the diaspora—an afterlife of the violent dispossession of Armenians at the fall of the Ottoman Empire. It is for these reasons that the movements of all four women, albeit in different directions, represent gestures against the colonial, national, and patriarchal drives to be rendered obscure, to be assimilated, or, with strong voices that speak/spoke in the name of justice, to be rendered silent.

The cyclicality and crisscrossing of these movements and encounters, then, is key: Avagyan and Aharonian meet because of the silence surrounding the works and lives of Kurghinian and Yesayan in the Armenian public and literary imaginations. As a result, Kurghinian and Yesayan would not be having a conversation in this untitled book if the Armenian canon had deemed them worthy of being properly archived, as their celebrated male counterparts have been. With a title that reflects an aporia that had gone unnamed for nearly a century, *Girq-anvernagir*, or *A Book, Untitled*, attempts to bring attention to the grammar of what was made to be nearly unspeakable, or, as Avagyan puts it, what was *deliberately made to disappear*. Indeed, it would take the imagination and drive of two women, whose own political subjectivities and voices were being structurally muffled, to ask the critical questions about the effects of censorship. Whether that censorship be patriarchal or governmental, they assert that it results in structural silence, often at the expense of women's

and other socially minoritized people's voices, without critical accountability.

"Busts of all the beloved figures are arranged in the lobby of the state university. 'But where is she,' asks Lara. 'Why isn't her bust there?' / I answer," writes the unnamed narrator . . . "If we could have recovered all of the pages that had been torn out, burned, and destroyed by the critics, the libraries would simply overflow." How might the modern Armenian woman or feminist recognize herself through the history presented to her by a patriarchal society, which, according to Vahan Ishkhanyan in *Girq*'s Introduction, is a history of deception in which women's ideas of their emancipation in Armenia *were potentially* destroyed? Avagyan once recounted this story to me:

> I recall, during the final Soviet years in the 1980s, that in the textbook we had [there was] this ugly woman [Kurghinian]. I must have been in sixth or seventh grade . . . It was a very bad print, and yet she had my name, Shushanik, and she was born in 1876, a hundred years before me, and those were the only two things I remembered. We skipped over her and never read her literature. Many years later when I was trying to think, after reading so many other non-Armenian feminist writers . . . I asked myself, *Don't we have any feminists?*, and that's how Kurghinian's name came back to me. I started digging into her and I was very afraid I'd be disillusioned when I found out who she really was. But as I went into the museum

> and dug through her notebooks, I realized she was a revolutionary writer for her time. I was researching Kurghinian, and I also knew about Zabel Yesayan, and I was curious about her, but I didn't have the time, nor was I quite comfortable researching in Western Armenian. I'd contacted Lara about this book. At the time she was in Canada, and I said that I wanted to publish a translation of Kurghinian, asking her if she knew of a good publisher or fund. She told me that she was coming to Armenia to research Zabel Yesayan, and that's how I found out about her interest . . . She moved to Armenia in about 2000, and my way of understanding Lara was through Yesayan. We would talk about Yesayan, I'd tell her about Kurghinian, and we'd compare and discuss and write . . . [and] our conversations paralleled with Yesayan and Kurghinian. (Avagyan and Cachoian, Interview, Yerevan/Istanbul, 2014.)

If the legacies of Kurghinian and Yesayan had been disseminated instead of obscured, how might the narrative of the Armenian literary tradition in the twentieth century have been different? What form might the development of political and feminist thought, or literary aesthetics in an Armenian context, have taken had there been unobscured access to or the complete archival preservation of some of Armenian literature's most consequential writers?

Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe's thoughts on the limits of the archive help us to, at the very least, better grasp

what structures the roots of such fundamental frustrations. What we come to understand as "archives," explains Mbembe in "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," are not constituted so much by the material documents or lack of them stored in an institution as much as by "the process which converts a certain number of documents into items *judged to be worthy of preserving*" (20, emphasis mine).

Archives, then, are not *just* about the documents or objects present, preserved, or altogether absent in an institution or holding cell of ostensible knowledge production. Instead, to speak about archives is to speak about "the exercise of a specific power and authority" that judges, discriminates, and selects, "granting a privileged status to certain written documents, and the refusal of that same status to others, thereby judged 'unarchivable'," (20) explains Mbembe in the same essay. If "the archive is not a piece of data, but a status," as Mbembe concludes, then Kurghinian and Yesayan—perhaps as socialist-leaning activists, or perhaps as talented wordsmiths and critically thinking women whose works stood out amongst their surrounding mediocrity—were deemed too dangerous to be worthy of holding it. Indeed, to have bestowed either writer their due status would have also meant to condone their vision of a world in which women's voices were equal to men's, or in which living in a diverse and multiethnic society where the acceptance of a person's humanity, regardless of their ethnoreligious background, was possible. But instead, Avagyan's novel opens with the first line of a letter addressed to Marina Tsvetaeva, the lines of which read, "When you love, you live without Hope."

Zabel Yesayan was already aware of the possibility of not being granted this privileged status—a warning passed down to her from none other than another feminist Armenian writer, Madame Srpouhi Dussap, when, as a young woman, Yesayan and her friends go to visit her in her parlor in Pera, Constantinople. "She told me," writes Yesayan in her memoir, "that in our day and age, a woman who wanted to carve out a place for herself in society was still not tolerated . . . To overcome all of these obstacles, I needed to exceed mediocrity." Yet Madame Dussap was wrong about one thing: It wasn't only imperative that Yesayan and other women writers exceed mediocrity in life, which Yesayan did impressively. She would also have to overcome the prejudices of those who came after her, who would inherit her writing, archive it, analyze it, handle it lovingly (or *ousoumna-SIREL*), and above all, maintain its status long after her death. The question of status and its censorship, then, is at the heart of Avagyan's literary experiment, and readers accompany her with it, sifting through fragments that have long been buried in the ruins of a destroyed plot.

"Literature is a weapon to struggle against injustice," wrote Zabel Yesayan. In Avagyan's response to the Armenian literary canon's diminishing and erasure of Shushanik Kurghinian and Zabel Yesayan, *Girq* takes Yesayan's task to arms by formally mimicking the very erasure and distortion of the canon that it criticizes. *Girq* announces its auto-censorship through the use of asterisks (or *****), plagiarizes poetry and prose (from Yesayan, Kurghinian, and others), and uncovers lost h(er) stories. In doing so, *Girq* enacts censorship and provokes the

question of "who can author?" to echo the male-dominated, heteropatriarchal historiography to which it responds. This historiography has written the two revolutionary authors/protagonists as domestic fixtures who've remained behind the closed doors of "tradition" and domestication, having been instrumentalized as Soviet propaganda and/or Armenian nationalism while largely ignoring their contribution to political, aesthetic, and feminist thought in the transnational Armenian milieu.

As such, with poetry by a series of authors who go unnamed, quoted sections of telegrams by Kurghinian and Yesayan that the typist/writer/translator and Lara discover in the dusty boxes of the state archives, Avagyan's scathing critique of the methods of erasure shared by literary critics, editors, and governmental regimes alike as she translates Kurghinian's poetry, and a series of unsent or unarrived love postcards to an unknown recipient, *Girq-anvernagir* is a translator's stream-of-consciousness novel. Indeed, through this elongated translator's note, the reader comes to learn not only the back stories of the writers that informed the urgency of Avagyan's translations, but also, about the typist/writer/translator herself and how those same heteropatriarchal methods of erasure are still enacted, against her and all of us, in the present.

"Intricately complicated, deliciously slippery: where to draw the line between the *life* and the *work*, between *theory* and *practice*?" writes literary theorist Alex Brostoff and art practitioner Lauren Fournier about the bourgeoning genre of autotheory in their introduction to "Autotheory ASAP! Academia, Decoloniality,

and 'I'" in *ASAP/Journal* (2022, 489–502). Indeed, autotheory is an apt genre to describe a work that at once is a story of its protagonists as much as it is about the author herself and her relationship to those protagonists; a novel that, while telling its story, theorizes itself in its own telling; a novel in which the author, the narrator and characters, slip, one into another. And like this—deconstructing hegemonic ways of knowing and understanding both History and the subject(s) who come to write it—Avagyan's novel is an encounter with how the personal structures our re-knowing of the social, "sutur[ing] self to social to structural, underscoring their emergence as mutually constitutive and interdependent," as Brostoff and Fournier continue.[3] As Avagyan once explained,

> This book is a poem unlike any other poem, it is a novel unlike any other novel, it is a translator's note unlike any other translator's note, and it is a critical essay unlike any other critical essay. It is something in the process of becoming, it has not yet developed into any kind of genre, or it is a synthesis of genres—a text that bleeds into various categories and feeds on various realms like fact and fiction, and hence it refuses categorization. It can be anything—(Avagyan and Cachoian, Interview, Yerevan/Istanbul, 2014)

Yet, through this weaving in and out of *Girq*'s fragmented prose and its polyphony of voices, it is difficult at times to keep track of *who* is speaking, or whose words are being cited or appropriated. Several of *Girq*'s chapters, for example, bear the names of Kurghinian's poems, yet they remain unmarked,

and the reader is left to wonder who has authored these lines. Taking a rather socialist-feminist stance, the typist/writer/translator suggests that the absence of quotation marks deprivatizes words, giving them over to a plurality of interpretations, narratives, and possibilities:

> Sometimes, reader, the typist/writer forgets to put quotation marks around cited words or sentences. / Does that mean she steals others' words? / Which is worse: To let the living words of the poet die in damp boxes in dark, treacherous rooms or to sow them like seeds, mixed with another's words, to revive them and let them bloom in untitled fields? / Besides, quotation marks privatize words and make them someone else's property. / The words belong neither to the typist/writer nor to you, reader. / They simply unite our past, present, and future.

Indeed, such methods of decolonial citational practice have also been employed by other writers of autotheory whereby, from the perspective of the writer's embodied subjectivity in time and space—that is, the material and social conditions that make them them—their bodily experience helps us to think about and through high theory differently, not the other way around. In *Testo Junkie* (2013), for example, Paul B. Preciado directly takes the theories of various cultural philosophers to task *through* and *because of* the bodily transformations they undergo while on testosterone. In Preciado's case, the experience of the transitioning body pushes *theory* to think differently about itself, as well as to think differently about

the body. Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015) uses yet another kind of citational practice. While Nelson does not directly reference the theorists she quotes in the main body of the text—theorists and theories that lovingly accompany her into her new relationship with bodies while she is pregnant and her partner is transitioning—Nelson's citational kin are enacted as co-writers of her autobiographical novel, named in italics in the book's margins. They are not a part of the text, but are adjacent to it; and they are, nonetheless, named.

Avagyan's autotheoretical approach in the deliberate unnaming of her citational kin, then, is even more radical. In this citational iteration, unnaming or not citing at all (re) enacts a violence at the same time as it is didactic, gesturing towards a more socialist norm; it is also a way to pay tribute to the writers who have most influenced her; and in its final instance, perhaps it also displays Avagyan's own embodied frustration with the Armenian canon and its readers. It asks, *Why do you, reader, so relentlessly want to know what belongs to whom; from where does that desire to* possess *such knowledge come; and finally, if you do happen to know its source, just how much more richly does this text arrive to you?*

But still, aren't we at least curious to know which chapter titles are echoes of Kurghinian's poetry? Which poetic verses "belong" to Avagyan? Couldn't it be Avagyan's duty to fill us in? To tell us which words are Kurghinian's, which Yesayan's, which her own? And are there still others? Avagyan refuses to labor the answers to these questions for her readers. Instead, she challenges us to be archeologists along with her and ask,

Under which circumstances does one acquire the right to claim authorial voice? How does authorship invoke ownership, and how does ownership—based upon the concept of possession—*reproduce (colonial and capitalist) hegemony?* "Any kind of writing is always a response to something else," says Avagyan.

Yet can we divest that power of ownership by just refusing to play by its rules and not cite authors? How might History and the archive also be privatized, effected and affected by that hegemonic patriarchal reproduction? As such, to what extent has History been edited and distorted, and thus what might a subversion of distortion *through* distortion look like?

In my own reading—as certainly one person's interpretation is never exhaustive or whole—four major narrative layers unfold to address these questions: the first, the presentation of the silenced archival traces of Kurghinian and Yesayan; the second, the reconnaissance work of the typist/writer/translator and Lara as they uncover the archive's violence in censoring material, and then their *imagining* of what could have been a conversation between Kurghinian and Yesayan (animating the gaps and silences of the archive beyond what its patriarchal contours might allow); the third, *Girq's* diary-entry type prose, reflecting on the censorship or editorial violence its author experiences as a translator, and which she parallels to the historical censorship of Kurghinian and Yesayan; and the fourth, the series of love postcards written in italics and addressed to an unknown recipient that reflect irreconcilable gaps and distance created by time, by language, and by space. *Indeed, while these postcards are here in the*

book, "saved from exile," some things, dear reader, just remain untranslatable. Each of these layers contributes to Avagyan's commentary on erasure.

Enacting auto-censorship on her own text to reflect this violence, Avagyan performatively and provocatively parallels the historical censorship of her authors, beseeching her reader to question it:

> Anyway, reader, know that this book arrives to you incomplete. / In the lines you see the (*) mark, know that in these parts the most potent words from the original text have been removed. / Every book, especially a collection of translated poems, goes through a "cleansing" process. / For you, reader, because apparently the editors know (and know well) what you need, in what quantity and in what form.

Throughout *Girq*, the reader encounters strings of asterisks, marked omissions, and struck-through sentences. The historical "cleansing" processes to which the typist/writer/translator alludes above are the censored letters Yesayan wrote to her daughter, Sophie, while in prison. Though written ambiguously to guard against being seized and destroyed by the prison authorities, her letters were nonetheless inspected, "edited," and reappropriated by her Soviet "investigators" before they were sent. Still, readers might ask, is the typist/writer/translator presenting us with "real" historical documents, or are these figments of her own imagination? In this juxtaposition of history with the present, Avagyan offers a

biting commentary on the editing/publishing institution itself as being contaminated by market values in its conception of readers as consumers rather than questioners, ultimately leading to a text's contamination. "A lot of things are missing," she writes. "For example, two sentences from this chapter are missing. / The most important part is missing, but you, my good reader, don't notice it. / You don't ask questions." Thus, Avagyan provokes us to be active readers who dig through and challenge the layered silencings of and deviations from the past. And according to the typist/writer/translator, "you can't find the truth . . . unless you deviate . . ."

And thus, Avagyan presents us with a new kind of story, one that, in theory and in practice, connects the legacies of the past with stakes in the present. Still, that story does not dictate or define for us what those connections might be. "History," as Saidiya Hartman writes in her 2008 essay "Venus in Two Acts," "pledges to be faithful to the limits of fact, evidence, and archive," (9) yet we must remember, as explained by Mbembe earlier, that the archive is itself a result of an *edited* hegemonic narrative—one that has cherry-picked who gets represented in History, and how. Perhaps creative writing about archival material intensifies the fiction of History, decoupling us from the idea of history as fixed, or its archive as definitive.

Girq's creative project predates Hartman's similar concept of "critical fabulation" by two years, mixing archival research, theory, and creative writing to imagine how the disappeared will be re-membered back into history through interpretation. And while Hartman employs "critical fabulation" to imagine

and *write in*, through fiction, what has been left out of or that remains irrecoverable from the colonial archives on the Middle Passage, Avagyan brings us East, to the regulatory forms of racialization and erasure in the Ottoman Empire, the Soviet Union, and still today in the nation-states that have inherited their legacies. As Avagyan suggests, then, this method of writing about archival aporias prompts readers each time to "re-find" more of what is concealed: "Someone will remember the disappeared, and while remembering, will write verses dedicated to them, and while reading those verses, yet another will re-remember them. / The loss of one thing will help re-find another." And the typist/writer/translator frames this writing-remembering process as inherently deviant: "A book that, throughout its creation, changes and distances itself from its original aim . . . Whatever's impossible to solve in reality, I'm trying at least to understand by writing."

As I confronted what translating *Girq* from one language to the next might mean for the book's project, I also participated in Avagyan's experiment of multi-authorship. If we can compare Avagyan's multi-voiced, multi-genre text to what Mikhail Bakhtin in "Discourse in the Novel" calls the heteroglossic imagination—when "another's speech in another's language . . . express(es) authorial intentions [through] refract[ion]," (324) then *translation* may also be a deviation that allows the translator to be an equal player in the creation of a new text—giving, as Benjamin famously wrote in "The Task of the Translator," the text an afterlife, or perhaps a new life altogether.

Avagyan's formal and thematic deviations encouraged me to follow in kind. Thus, deviation became the politics of my own translation of *Girq*. "To comprehend something new, one must learn another language, customs, culture; in a word, they must live another way of life," writes Avagyan. Yet, how to translate concepts into English that Avagyan has coined in Armenian (who said that Varoujan was the only master of neologisms in Armenian)? There are several, for example, in Chapter 15, "To the Square!" The first is *batsa-hayt(naber) el*: literally "open-seen/known(bring it forth)." Translation options included "ex-tract(plain)," "dis-cover/un-cover/un-fold," and "dis(un)cover." What new and diverse meanings in English might each of these translation choices unfold? Avagyan herself once explained the term to me—a merging of the two words that share the same root: *batsahaytel* and *haytnaberel*—to discover and uncover, or extract and explain. The merger, however, aims to intensify the process of discovery, a type of "discovery through exposition . . ." In this moment of being lost *between* the translations, the loss of one thing might help to re-find another. The reader will find "dis(un)cover" as the final choice in this translation.

The second example from Chapter 15 is the separation of the compound word *ousoumnasirel* as *ousoumna-SIREL*. *Ousoumnasirel*, which means "to learn, study, read, examine," is a verb formed from the noun *ousoum*, meaning "study" or "education," and the verb *sirel*, meaning "to love." However, in Avagyan's text, the verb reads as *ousoumna-SIREL*, emphasizing the *love of* the process or to proceed *lovingly*. In the sentence, *ousoumna-SIREL* is used in the

context of loving or being infatuated with the "learning" or "studying" of the roots of commonplace words in order to dis(un)cover new meanings within them. Indeed, at times I wondered if Avagyan's meta-critique laid in its challenge to (or almost *trolling* of) her future translator: Find a proper translation for the very word that instructs you to go deep within it and find all the possibilities of its meaning. At least, this is what becomes clear in the process of translating such commonplace Armenian words, bringing them into a new language where they cannot be played with as comfortably as they can be in their native tongue. I hope to have accomplished, then, what Benjamin elegantly wrote of translation in "The Task of the Translator." "Instead of resembling the meaning of the original, [a translation] must *lovingly* and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language" (69–82, emphasis mine, and to disclose some of Avagyan's own surreptitious citations).

After coming up with a plethora of possibilities, I settled on "exa-*mine*" as the translation of *ousoumna-SIREL*. In my opinion, the choice preserves the sense of studying or examining the roots of something, starting from the outside, or *exo-*, while italicizing *mine*, as in mining the roots of knowledge from the outside, in. Indeed, in my reading, it is the *love* of study that allows one to *mine* for knowledge . . . though it is important to remember that this interpretation is just that: merely mine.

Ultimately, reading *Girq* in English translation becomes an event through which a new language again calls upon Avagyan's reader to re-create words to re-create a story. Through the inherent deviation of translation itself, we are thus reminded of the aim of un-archiving in *Girq*: "Re-assume. Re-analyze. Re-remember," (31) in order to ex-tract(plain) or "dis(un)cover."

Yet, what distinguishes deviation from invention and hypercorrection? The title of Chapter 20 is "*Anraqeloutyoun, kam Yeraznerov mi´ tar snound*" ("***An****raqeloutyoun,* or Don't Feed Me Dreams," boldface mine). The latter part of the sentence is taken from the title of a Kurghinian poem. But "*Anraqeloutyoun*" does not mean anything in Armenian. How to translate something also obscure in Armenian? Trying to make sense of the word, I first gravitated towards what *was* intelligible: the word began with "*an*," a prefix equivalent to "un-" or "in-" for negation in English. But what was the meaningless, abstract noun "*raqeloutyoun*" to which it was attached?

There was yet another option. Influenced by Avagyan's deviations and tendency for word play by inserting letters into words to break them apart and make a word that contained two or more words in one (like *batsa-hayt(naber)el* [dis(un)cover] discussed above), I became hyperaware of these instances. I imagined that the "*n*" could actually be the "foreign" addition to the entire word. *A****n****raqeloutyoun* does not mean anything, but *Araqeloutyoun* does: it means "mission," or "apostolicism," from which the adjective *araqelakan* or "apostolic," as in the

Armenian Apostolic Church, derives. Perhaps here is where the two ideas collapsed into one: a negating *an* + *ara-qeloutyoun* = *a**n**raqeloutyoun*. The noun becomes abstract with its "*outyoun*" ending (the -ism, -ness, or -tion in English). Very clever, I thought. I rendered the following options: Inapostolicism; A-^{a}postolicism (taking a hint from the math equations in Chapter 6); A-(a)postolicism. I consulted Shushan, only to have her correct/edit/(censor?) my own interpretation. Instead, she imposed her "original meaning" . . . or, better stated, her "intention." *Anraqeloutyoun* was simply the state of being "without Raquel"; thus, "Raquel-lessness."

Beyond what I could both imagine and conjure up in my attempt to stay true to the deviating spirit of her text, Avagyan was simply (or not), referring to someone named "Raquel." And so, deviations apparently risk a translator's hypercorrections, bringing the text in a direction even its author could not have imagined. We would do well to remember that all translation, indeed, is interpretation. Even in their effort to keep true to a text's spirit and the words on the page, even the most well-intentioned and attentive translator deviates from the original path. Such, then, is an example of when the editing process between *author* and *translator* can be, if possible and perhaps in the best of worlds, a *very useful* and *generative* collaboration. In any case, "the loss of one thing will help re-find another." Who are you, Raquel? How were you lost? Are you reading this text now? Could you read it before? Or are you only to be known by your inventor/rememberer? *Perhaps some things are not meant to be found . . .*

Due to the constraints and codes of the English language, in the manuscript's unedited version, I also gestured towards a certain opacity in my translation, which would have exposed my own political persuasions as a reader of *Girq*. Indeed, such is what I imagine as an autotheoretical praxis of translation—the moment in which, through the act of translation, the embodied subjectivity of the translator, which affects *how* the translator translates, becomes exposed. In this case, the translation of the ever-looming, gender-neutral third-person-singular pronoun, *na* (Eastern Armenian variant), also required deviation from the Armenian text. Mostly because of the text's fragmented character, which maintains its purposeful narratological ambiguity, *na*'s referent, oftentimes, is lost. Giving gender to *na* in any gender-ambiguous passage (and there are several) would have risked, in my opinion, writing an assumed gender-relationality (and sometimes either a hetero-, homo-, or queer-erotic timbre) into a scene. I was wholly uncommitted to making a choice between male or female gender pronouns in English. Indeed, each seemed inappropriate to me: either an overreading or underreading. And what's more, *assigning* a gender to *na* in these more ambiguous circumstances would mean writing out its ambiguity in the Armenian. In these moments, I wondered what kinds of possibilities a queer perspective on the translation of the ambiguous *na* offer?

While certain theories of translation seek to domesticate a text so that it does not, to use the Turkish saying, "smell like translation" (*çeviri kokuyor*), I wanted my translation to lean instead towards what I've called a praxis of "double" de-domestication. A translation practice of domestication seeks to

make the translation appear as if it were not a translation but instead a product of the target language itself; indeed, as if it were written in it. This translation praxis was largely popular for centuries, yet contemporary critics beginning with Lawrence Venuti have critiqued such a practice as a colonization of the source text, disingenuously and inappropriately assimilating it. As such, Venuti famously proposes a translation theory against the domestication of a foreign text, so that the translation does not *pass* as a text "domestic" to its target language. Instead, Venuti proposes to preserve the "foreign" elements of the text in its translation. However, if the constraints of the target language foreclose these possibilities such that a text can be neither foreignized nor domesticated, this is not possible. Instead, a translation praxis of double de-domestication visibly estranges the text in English translation beyond the comfortable ambiguity of the Armenian, so that the translation becomes a renewed reading of the primary text, over, against, and beyond it. Indeed, as its Latin prefix suggests, *trans-* is not a state, but a process; not a return, but a movement *beyond*; a non-return that looks back on an "orginary" object or place, changed. Sitting visibly in its ambiguity by refusing to pass or play by the rules of either-or, as a process of *throughness*, and whether about bodies of flesh or of text, *trans-* transforms. Thus, hoisting the translator into a position of hyper-visibility, double de-domestication is a second layer of textual foreignization caused by the constraints of the target language.

Instead of assigning gender to the *na*s in gender-ambiguous passages, I had originally chosen to *further* highlight the gender-ambiguity of the text beyond its original subtly by

translating *na*, unless otherwise indicated, as "they." The use of they in the third-person singular (or in reference to a singular antecedent) is not new. Instead, it has a long history in the English language, dating back to at least the fourteenth century in written form, as described in "A brief history of singular 'they'" (2022) on the webpage of the Oxford English Dictionary. Today, the singular they has been re-adopted or put back into use as a pronoun used, the entry goes on to explain, "in cases where the gender of the antecedent . . . is unknown, irrelevant, or nonbinary, or where gender needs to be concealed." It is through this (presently queer) look to the past, then, that I chose to adopt the old form of the singular they; and this choice might be queer *only* in light of the queer or gender nonbinary community's recent adoption of it in order to be imagined otherwise and/or beyond the gender binary. But what's more, if I had instead chosen to inscribe the gender binary of "he" or "she" in my translation, I would have actually been distorting or censoring the queerly, strangely comfortable ambiguity of the Armenian in its use of the gender-neutral or gender-ambiguous singular, third-person pronoun *na*. The gender neutrality or ambiguity of Armenian plays a key function in Avagyan's text. For example, the book conveniently auto-censors or does not outwardly reveal its play with gender ambiguity in the love postcards. In my reading, this is purposeful: The postcards are quite aware that they do not reveal the gender of the recipient (or writer) to you, dear reader.

To be sure, the choice of the singular they would have revealed my own sociopolitical positionality, a Shklovskian

"estranging" of the eighteenth-century conformity of English grammar, interjecting what in today's lexical field would be read as a queer framework of gender-ambiguous or non-binary possibility. As the English translator of Shklovsky from Russian, Avagyan's writing has been influenced by his work, which has also come to inform her own translation praxis and her politics of creating neologisms in Armenian. And so, while her translator's choice of singular they would have brought the text away from its own subtle ambiguities, in my opinion, it would have *also* opened it up to new readings beyond what the primary text might immediately offer. Perhaps too, this praxis would have remained in the spirit of Avagyan's project: "You can't find the truth, Lara, unless you deviate." *However, reader, remember these lines quoted above, and when you arrive to Avagyan's penultimate chapter,* "know that this book arrives to you incomplete . . . Every book, especially a collection of translated poems, goes through a 'cleansing' process. For you, reader, because apparently the editors know (and know well) what you need, in what quantity and in what form."

In the end, the singular they was nixed in most instances, and we (Shushan and I) have amicably and collectively chosen here to render in English what the author intended while writing, most specifically in the cases when there was a particular referent in the passage to whom it was necessary to refer by gender in order to maintain the continuity in the text and/or the reader's comprehension of the characters; these are the types of moments when both practical and ethical decisions are made between author and translator. Indeed,

even though Barthes inaugurates the poststructuralist turn with his claim that "the author is dead," in most cases when translating contemporary literature, the elephant in the room is that the author is still speaking.

This time—not for the reader or the translator but for the writer herself—the English translation has opened up a new possibility of expression. *But just remember, dear English reader, that for the reader in Armenian, gender is still slippery; its ambiguity still exists. In perhaps an ironic twist of its translator's initial intentions to make it queer and visibly strange in the English while Avagyan preferred to assign the pronouns in English that she'd initially imaged for her characters, even the author herself cannot escape it: In the Armenian, gender is still pleasantly up for grabs.*

Through the questions it poses on authorship, censorship, and plagiarism, *Girq*'s deviations demonstrate how literature written in Armenian can also question the Western-born neoliberal market's effects on aesthetic practice. The novel queries into the potential merits that a different political system—a socialist-feminist one, perhaps, based more on collectivity and polyphony than individualist or liberal "democracies"—might have. As Barthes claims with "The Death of the Author," the text writes him. There is no ownership *over* the text; to the contrary, it is the text—master of one—that reigns over its readers.

And yet where might we draw the line between a translator's interpretation versus their distortion? Is it not limiting to

understand the act of translation as either a text's "legitimate" interpretation versus its distortion? And so, what if, in lieu of distortion, deviation provided renewed possibilities for translation? My English translation of *Girq-anvernagir* does not seek to domesticate the text. I chose to translate more literally, or rather, more closely to the Armenian rather than privilege language that might "flow better" in English so as to preserve the particularities of an Armenian-language mentality. Instead of Avagyan's repeated declarations throughout the novel that it has four authors, now in its English translation, it has five. Indeed, that "[t]he book has four—or five?—authors who are as different as the seasons of the year," (Chapter 22) is my own addition/deviation from the original content of the text as written in the Armenian. *It is also my way, reader, to remind you of the many interpretations through which this text arrives to you, not least of all your own.*

Inevitably, the choice to not wear the mask of the original may distance my audience. Is it also injustice? I have left some idioms more literally rendered to give the sense of the text's foreignness, attempting to preserve, as much as one can in a foreign tongue, the book's cultural milieu. As per Lawrence Venuti's estimation in *The Translator's Invisibility*, this choice is "rather to develop a theory and practice of translation that resists dominant target-language cultural values so as to signify the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text." Like Avagyan resists hegemonic gender hierarchy and national canon and history making, as her translator, and as someone aware of the inherent problematics or contradictions of translation into the colonial lingua franca of the globalized

world, my intention is not to colonize or domesticate this story into one that can be easily translated to an English-speaking context. Instead, I hope this translation inevitably highlights the richness of Avagyan's prose, as well as the strangeness and deepened, unanticipated intimacies across global contexts that the Armenian language might bring to English, and vice versa.

One of these inherent strangenesses or unanticipated intimacies may be, for some English-language readers, the use of "black" in the text. Of *Book*'s narrator—possibly the author—it is written in defiant reclamation, "you're too irregular and black," or as Kurghinian writes of herself ambivalently in the poem "We As Two Separate Planets": "I, a black and somber exile." Echoing Kurghinian, Avagyan nods to the regimes of racialization to which Armenians were, and still are, subjugated, not just in Armenia and in Armenians' greater ancestral geographies, but also in Russia proper, where Kurghinian became a political refugee, forcing herself into exile in Rostov-on-Don. Extending well beyond the Western colonial world, the material-discursive regimes in course that subjugated Armenians in the (Russian) imperial, Soviet, and postcolonial contexts also function(ed) through the language of blackness and the ideological black(ening) of bodies.[4] In this context, blackness describes not just the somatic differences between "white," "blonde," and "luminous" Russians and the "dark-skinned," "dark-haired," "black" or "black-smeared" (*chernomazy*, among other more derogatory terms in Russian) Armenians of the South Caucasus, but it also describes Armenians' becoming Other by law and by lan-

guage in their own lands. Such optical regimes served the advancement of the colonial discourse regarding "illuminated" Russians versus the peoples of the Caucasus who were (in) "dark(ness)" and thus in need of enlightenment. Kurghinian, as a result of her socialist activities, effectively became a "black exile" (or as she disaffectedly terms in Armenian, *sev njdeh*) in response to that colonization. In her writings both published and unpublished, Kurghinian vehemently claims "black" as the term of her otherness. A century later, Avagyan follows suit, but reclaims the term: "my little black darling[s]," or the other Othered-Armenian readers today who might be considered Kurghinian's kin and who can dare to imagine their empowerment as "black exiles"—or conceptual refugees—otherwise. With references to this particular regime of blackness that subtly pepper the text yet still arrive as powerfully acerbic, *Book*, perhaps unexpectedly, invites the English-language reader to examine how diverse regimes of racialization that employ blackness as their means of subjugation traffic on a wider global stage.

A Book, Untitled, with its formal, historical, and thematic deviations, and its many (women) authors—including its translator (the fifth!)—views writing and history as belonging to readers and their interpretations instead of as the sole product of the author, historian, editor, translator, or publishing house. It also illustrates what the process of truly collaborative work can open up for the reader. For readers of Armenian literary works, both old and new, I hope this translation arrives to you as an exciting gateway through which to engage with intertextual and radical prose from the Armenian republic. I hope it also

acts as a lens through which to better understand some of the terms that animate this region of the South Caucasus, ex-Soviet republics, and diasporas of the Ottoman Empire and Middle East: as a transnation, Armenia straddles—and disrupts—all these categories.

A Book, Untitled and others like it still untranslated from the Armenian, both Eastern and Western, have much to share about how contemporary artists and authors understand and critique society, the particular and localized hegemonic paradigms of the history that has inscribed them, and the particular forms of gender hierarchy, nation-state aspirations, and ethnoracial nationalisms in the post-Ottoman, post-Soviet, and diasporic contexts to and through which they respond. If there is a past to be honored, it can only be rendered more significant through the continued attention we give to contemporary works lest they, like Kurghinian and Yesayan, also be rendered insignificant.

Avagyan's project is careful not to re-prescribe the legacies of Kurghinian and Yesayan, but to remind us of our possibility to un-fix them from their archival stagnation: to see just how much *one small* archival opening can disrupt the resolute foundation of patriarchal history-making. In this way, reading *Girq-anvernagir* through the lens of queer or postcolonial theory might guide us in reading its challenges not as a dismantling of History so much as a provocation of the possibilities of the archive and history if they are stretched and expanded beyond their fixed, past-oriented foci.

I asked Shushan once why she hadn't written her book in English instead of Armenian, being that she'd lived in the United States for such a long time, had translated Shushanik Kurghinian's poetry and Viktor Shklovsky's prose, and so most certainly could have accessed a global readership for *Girq*. Her reply: The recovery of the interrupted connection could have only taken place in the mother tongue of these women—the typist/writer/translator—Lara—Kurghinian—Yesayan. Indeed, we might do well, as readers in the colonial language par excellence, to take stock of this pronouncement.

Handing that book, with its red and white cover, to me on that fall evening in Yerevan—a queer act of kinship and care through intimacies begun in disparate geographies and junctures—along with that small note in English, was my nudge to get back to Venice and *learn them* something anew. As for the book, leaving us with open provocations instead of hermetic answers, *Girq* pushes us not only to ask, What else remains? but also, How might each new excavation, in a new language, herald another plethora of discoveries, alternate readings, and other possibilities for new aesthetic, social, and political paradigms? I can't wait to discover what possibilities await.

Istanbul, Autumn 2022

* A version of this afterword appeared as an essay by the same name in the *Queering Armenian Studies* special issue of the *Armenian Review*, 56:1–2, 2018.

1. The first iteration of this translation was made upon my return to l'Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, under the tutelage of Sona Haroutyunian, my second mentor there who, unconvinced of said mediocrity, both encouraged and made this translation possible.

2. At the time of its publication in 2006, *Girq-anvernagir* was one of the few published books that explicitly focused on the literary legacies of Shushanik Kurghinian and Zabel Yesayan (especially in a work of creative writing). After Marc Nichanian's 2002 *Writers of Disaster*, Victoria Rowe's 2003 *A History of Armenian Women's Writing, 1880–1922*, Avagyan's 2005 publication of *I Want to Live: Poems of Shushanik Kurghinian* by AIWA Press, Melissa Bilal and Lerna Ekmekçioğlu's 2006 compilation *Bir Adalet Feryadı: Osmanlı'dan Türkiye'ye Beş Ermeni Feminist Yazar (1862–1933)*] (Istanbul: Aras Publishing), Lara Aharonian and Talin Suciyan's 2008 documentary film *Finding Zabel Yesayan*, and Jennifer Manoukian's 2014 translation of Yesayan's *The Gardens of Silihdar*, the floodgates have been opened to a renewed interest in the publication of Armenian women's writing by translators and scholars.

3. In the special issue of *ASAP/Journal* dedicated to autotheory, Alex Brostoff and Lauren Fournier describe what they understand as the bourgeoning genre of autotheory. I quote here at length as I find it integral to a reading of Avagyan's work: "Fusing self-representation with philosophy and critical theory, autotheory moves between 'theory' and 'practice,' between 'living,' 'thinking,' and 'making.' It is critical and it is creative; it is experiential and experimental; it is scholarly, and it is popular. It brings theory to life and life to theory. It plays with personal polemic, positing a speaking self in the act of writing 'I,' and then, self-reflectively and self-reflexively, it deconstructs itself. Autotheory's genealogies spring from the institutions it seeks to critique. It privileges thinking *with* over thinking *against*; its politics of citation unveil its relations" (490).

4. The racialization of Armenians in the Ottoman and post-Ottoman imperial contexts—subsequently exported into Western diasporic contexts—

functioned through a different set of racial vocabularies and structures. In the Ottoman context, Armenians attempted to incorporate themselves into Western colonial models of "whiteness" (as opposed to their corollary of "blackness" and being Muslim) in order to mark themselves as potentially worthy of being saved by Western Christian nations (with "whiteness" and Christianity as intimately linked) from the ethnic-cleansing campaigns against Armenians and other ethnoreligious/racial minorities by the late Ottoman regime. For Armenians, their racialization in their ancestral lands west of the Arax River ultimately culminated in genocide in 1915.

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Author Biographies

Shushan Avagyan (b. 1976) is the author of the experimental novel *Zarubyani kanayq* (2014) and this title, originally published in Armenian as *Girq-anvernagir* (2006). She has translated into English a volume of Shushanik Kurghinian's poetry and critical works by Boris Arvatov and Viktor Shklovsky. She currently lives in Yerevan and teaches at the American University of Armenia.

Deanna Cachoian-Schanz (b. 1987) is a translator and literary theorist who writes on translation, gender and nationalism, and technologies of racialization in the geographies of Armenia, Turkey, and their diasporas. Having called these places, and likewise Italy and her native New York home, she is currently based in Istanbul as she completes her dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania.