

Introduction: Self-Portrait as a Queered Armenian Studies

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IN A RECENT VISUAL ART PROJECT ENTITLED *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* (2012-2016), Aikaterini Gegisian collected, curated, and reassembled late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular postcards with portraits “of women in traditional costumes and national dresses.”¹ The portraits themselves were made in commercial photographic studios throughout the late and immediately post-Ottoman landscape: in Cairo, Istanbul, Algiers, Tunis, Athens, and Sofia. Some of the photographers were locals, some were from the European colonizing communities, many were Armenian. That the same women sometimes show up in different guises reveals not only how fabricated the semblance of nativity was, but also that there was a community of women models participating in this popular art form. Gegisian found these postcards in flea markets and junkshops throughout Turkey and the Middle East, as well as on commercial websites.

The portraits on the postcards show women posed in settings meant to amplify their folkloric appearance. Holding a jug, lounging in a pastoral landscape, standing behind a gate, veiled or bearing breasts or shoulders or stomachs, the postcards traffic in a range of gendered and orientalist expectations, but with a particularly Ottoman spin: they iterate and reiterate the designated particularities that the empire prided itself on allowing to flourish, even as the empire of course set often violent limits and conditions on that flourishing. And they embody that work of reiteration in the figure of woman as site and source for the reproduction of ethno-national kinship. Typically the postcards include captions that amplify this reiteration, labeling the women with ethno-national taxonomies: “Armenian,” “woman from a harem,” “Greek.”

The postcards in turn fold the staged particularities of the portraits into the putative universality of the empire. Indeed, the logic of the post perfectly elaborates this Ottomanism. Postcards are at once particular and universal, unique and ubiquitous, private and public. They promise a special connection between a singular sender and addressee; yet mass-produced postcards are sent and received by a mass audience, and their often mundane missives are out in the open, for all to read. In part, then, Gegisian has assembled an archive of ideology: cultivated, mass-produced meaning whose conditions of production are obscured, such that the meaning—the authenticity of ethno-national natives who make up the reproductively potent potential of a putatively diverse empire—comes to seem commonsensical, eternal, and natural.



Figure 1: From Gegisian's *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman*"

However, when re-presented in Gegisian's *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* the postcards are critically repurposed, effectively exposing and

interrupting their ideological function. Specifically, she gathers them together in a set of 93 images organized into three panels, grouping them not according to the ethnic taxonomies the postcards themselves offer but rather formally, by the women's postures and poses (see Figure 1). *Re-presented* in this way, the images' self-evidence dissipates, or sublimates. Consequently, the postcards emerge not as documents of the ethno-national authenticity of an empire but rather as a mass-mediated and deliberately composed genre, in Jacques Derrida's sense. Writes Derrida in "The Law of Genre:"

As soon as the word "genre" is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind: "Do," "Do no" says "genre," the word "genre," the figure, the voice, or the law of genre. And this can be said of genre in all genres, be it a question of a generic or a general determination of what one calls "nature" or *physis* (for example, a biological *genre* in the sense of *gender*, or the human *genre*, a genre of all that is in general), or be it a question of a typology designated as non-natural and depending on laws or orders which were once held to be opposed to *physis* according to those values associated with *technè*, *thesis*, *nomos* (for example, an artistic, poetic, or literary genre).²

Gegisian's *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* allows us to discern the limits and norms that organize these postcards, limits and norms that impute to them a certain "native" and profoundly gendered value, in which women are designated as bearers of particular, folkloric identities gathered into, and properly cultivated as, national-imperial culture. We come to see how their putative authenticity is at once their staged cultural form, elaborately posed so as to self-efface posing itself. Gegisian's representation, in turn, restores the pose. That is, the self-evidently posed women become women who self-consciously pose. The objects of the images become the agents of the genre.

The title of the work encapsulates this critical shift: the seemingly infinite plurality of the postcards is offered as a singular self-portrait of "an Ottoman woman," of the gendered woman as the genre Ottoman. The "self" that *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* portrays, then, is one of mass-reproducible particularity, one whose massification is a condition

of possibility for the acknowledgement of its singularity. If the law of genre declares, as Derrida suggests, that “genres are not to be mixed,” for “as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity,” then Gegisian’s generic self-portrait makes evident how that law requires discourses and practices of enforcement and normalization.

Re-presented by Gegisian, then, the “self” of *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* is shown to be a fictive, performative, politico-commercial self. Which is to say, the agency these selves assume is not of the voluntaristic, individualistic, or autonomous sort common to Western liberalism. Freed from their ideological purpose, the figures of these women are not free to be all they can be, to realize their inner purpose, to become self-sufficient actors. Rather, they appear to a viewer of *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* as questions. Who were they? How might they have understood the authenticities they were meant to perform? What did they get out of their performances? They appear, that is, as active yet largely unknown participants in a modern culture industry, like forgotten movie stars, rather than as ethno-nationally particular signs of universal Ottoman authenticity. No longer generic proof of the norms empires and nations demand and enforce, they become opaquely individuated instances of a genre whose “norms and interdictions” are exposed and unsettled. Gegisian has mixed up the law of this genre, challenged the norms and interdictions of empire. And so she asks us to ask: what kind of fictive kinships do empires and nations demand of us, how do they enforce those demands, how might those demands be unsettled, and what alternative kinships might we forge in the face of those demands? While *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* does not answer these questions, it offers us a syntax for asking them.

The contributions to this urgent special issue of *Armenian Review*—written by Tamar Shirinian, Carina Karapetian Giorgi, Nelli Sargsyan, and Sevan Beukian—could be said not only to take up the questions posed by *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman*, but in fact to offer a rigorous range of potent answers to them. The essays bring some of the most important recent work of Western queer theory—including work by Judith Butler, Lisa Duggan, Gayatri Gopinath, José Muñoz, Sarah Ahmed, Jack Halberstam, Lauren Berlant, among others—to bear on political

and cultural practices in Armenia, of Armenians in diaspora, and of the interactions between Armenia and the diaspora. As a result, this dossier of queer Armenian studies research—published as it is within one of the most canonical of Armenian studies journals—boldly attempts what some of us have at times felt was impossible: the queering of a stubbornly traditional field. The field would do well to take notice, for after reading the work of Shirinian, Giorgi, Sargsyan, and Beukian, one finds oneself oriented toward what ought to be the future of Armenian Studies.

Felicitously, each essay eschews not only nationalist conformity—be it state or diaspora sponsored—but also the manichean model of resistance, which after all has firm roots in nationalist tradition itself, particularly in the more nativist strands of anti-colonial nationalism. Instead, the radicalisms of Shirinian, Giorgi, Sargsyan, and Beukian—both the radicalisms of their essays and the radicalisms of which their essays write—challenge normativity as a guerilla movement might, or as feminist collectives like the Guerrilla Girls have: by appropriating traditional spaces, practices, discourses, or cultural formations and repurposing them. In Giorgi’s self-critical anthropology of coffee-ground reading, Beukian’s account of queered counter-public spaces and discourses in Armenia and the diaspora, Sargsyan’s reflections on civic and environmental activist projects in Armenia during a period of virulently nationalist militarism, and Shirinian’s ethnography of the potencies women in Armenia find in expectations of propriety and domesticity, we find diverse, quotidian instances of Armenian queerness. Or, as Beukian points out, we find what the Queering Yerevan collective calls *tarorinakelov*, “something out of the ordinary or unusual,” in and amongst deceptively ordinary or usual sites. We thus learn from these essays that queering Armenian studies, and Armenian queerness itself (and of course we cannot speak singularly of such a formation, as these essays make clear), consist most radically in concerted practices of bricolage: the creative re-use of “the remains and debris of events,” of readily available “odds and ends,” of “the means at hand.”³

This is also the logic of the postcards with which Gegisian works, as well as the work Gegisian produces from those postcards. Indeed, those postcards were produced during the very period between what Giorgi describes as the rise of popular coffee culture in the mid-nineteenth-

century Ottoman Empire and the post-1940s vogue of coffee-ground reading among both Armenians facing Stalinist repression of the practice in Armenia and Armenians forced into diaspora after the Genocide. All of which should dissuade us from falling into a too presentist conception of *tarorinakelov*, and rather recognize such active, quotidian non-normativity as a kind of open set of anti-traditions extending well into the past, haunting and provoking the very nationalist traditions that so confidently naturalize themselves in time immemorial. That such anti-traditions animate the queer Armenian presents these essays offer us—among professional women in Yerevan reading coffee-grounds with a mix of embarrassment and enjoyment (Giorgi); among activists working with Hye-Phen Magazine and the Queering Yerevan Collective (Beukian); among citizens involved in the 2012 Mashtots Park initiative (Sargsyan); and among women bricoleurs reworking quotidian boundaries between public and private, propriety and impropriety in Armenia (Shirinian)—ought to give us hope not simply for the future of Armenian studies, but more importantly for radical futures of and among Armenians.

If there is a deconstructive politics in these essays, it is because they are animated by a passage from *Of Grammatology* to which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has long directed our attention: “The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them *in a certain way*, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms...”⁴ Giorgi, Beukian, Sargsyan, and Shirinian insist on inhabiting Armenianness from within its structures, even when those structures might seem, from the outside, too relentlessly normative. As a result, they find in those structures a potent ensemble of possibilities and limits that might otherwise have been suppressed, from a normative perspective, or overlooked, from any number of outsides: the West, the diaspora, the queer, the feminist, the cosmopolitan.

Thus Shirinian finds leakages between putatively public and private spaces in the traditionally “patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal society”

of Armenia. Attending with great care to the post-Soviet features of Armenia—in which private spaces like homes have been subjected to a certain involution and made public thanks to collectivization and the legacy of actually existing socialism, while public spaces have been increasingly and vigorously privatized during the so-called neo-liberal turn—she depicts for us shape-shifting spaces where diasporans and other Westerners might only see stasis. Her subtle interpretation of Virginia Woolf's figure of "a room of one's own" in that context thus rewrites Woolf's figure, revealing how women "mak[e] use of patriarchal space toward different ends" since "everyday political behavior in socialism did not work *against* authoritative discourse, but made use of it within it." In particular, Shirinian's ethnography teaches us the myriad ways domestic spaces are being remade as sites of queer feminine intimacy: "liberatory queer feminine desire might also be found precisely at the site and space of propriety rather than outside or as a failure of it."

Relatedly, from what contemporary Armenian women say about and do with the seemingly traditional structure of tasseography, or coffee-ground reading, Giorgi culls a defiance of "normative definitions of how time and space should be occupied, marking the practice as a form of queer temporality-making." It is superstitious, it wastes time, it is a way of getting lost in the day, and it even embarrasses some of its urban practitioners. "I hate it when people come up to me and say, 'read my fortune, read my fortune,'" says Adrine at one moment to Giorgi, "I'm an educated, business professional, not some gypsy fortune-teller;" while at the next moment she boasts "Oh yes, I'm very gifted" at seeing the future through coffee-grounds, "it's something that just comes very naturally to me, but I don't like to do it." Not a separate space of women absolutely defying nationalist patriarchy, but rather a site of "disorientation," tasseography allows for a pleasurable and volatile "cross-examining" of lives.

Taking up this challenge of occupying and deconstructing traditional structures, Sargsyan goes so far as to suggest that "if you squint at the right angle," Mount Ararat itself, the ultimate nationalist signifier, can be seen "as a potentiality that is [quoting José Muñoz] 'linger[ing] and serv[ing] as a conduit for knowing and feeling other people.'" She tells us how she learned to "squint" from networks of antimilitarist feminists involved in the Mashtots Park initiative in 2012. But also that such knowledge can

only come from being too close to Armenia, where, “depending on the smogginess,” one experiences “reveries” that are at times “not exactly there, at other times so tangibly there.”

Beukian similarly attends to equivocal efforts to occupy familiar structures from within, revealing some of the subtle ways Armenians queer the culturally powerful figure of *amot*, or shame. She also pays profound attention to the ways Armenians could and do ally with other struggles, such as anti-racist politics against police brutality in the U.S., on the basis of a critique of the orientalist gaze that has been directed at Armenians. Witness the Hye Pen Collective’s “Hye for Black Lives” efforts in 2016, for instance. At the same time, she is unfailingly attentive to the limits Western social and intellectual movements can impose, pointing again to how the Queering Yerevan collective “refuses queerness as centered and located in this ‘West’ and insists that a queering is possible from the site of the Armenian East.”

With Beukian’s salutary caution about the normative power of Western theory and practice, we can return to the passage from *Of Grammatology* I quoted above, and broke off from mid-sentence, because that passage ends in a surprising way. Requoting the last sentence, this time in full: “Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, *the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work*” (italics mine).⁵ This profoundly auto-critical gesture of and as deconstruction, in which the structures that have been occupied impose limits or conditions of impossibility that are never far from the conditions of possibility the structures nonetheless also offer, can felicitously complicate and extend any efforts to queer Armenianness. For Armenianness is infinitely marked in and through a globality animated unevenly by catastrophe, Orientalism, diaspora, immigration, Ottomanism and neo-Ottomanism, Soviet and post-Soviet conditions, and capitalist and neo-liberal conditions. Which is to say, as we learn so profoundly from these four essays taken together as one prescient dossier, there is no one structure of or for “Armenianness.” So while any given structure may offer the kind of potentials Giorgi, Beukian, Sargsyan, and Shirinian track for us, the occupation of those potentials—with all the verve of the most creative

of bricoleurs—carries irreducible risks that we also would do well to track, lest we fall prey to them without noticing.

Indeed, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak activated this very deconstructive caution some years ago when she extended some encouraging admonitions to young Armenian scholars wondering whether and how there might be an Armenian postcolonialism.⁶ She answered, in part: “Armenia’ cannot lean toward existing theories. It cannot be comfortably located in the generally recognized lineaments of contemporary imperialism and received postcolonialism. It has been too much in the



Figure 2: From Gegisian's Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman

interstices to fit such a location. Indeed, that is its importance. Its history is diversified, with many loyalties crosshatching so small a place, if indeed it is more a place than a state of mind over the centuries. Is it increasingly representative of the contemporary predicament, where mere postcoloniality may be caught in a time-warp and nationalism must enter into an economy of regionalism and globality?”⁷ This interstitial complexity of Armenia and Armenianness is perhaps precisely why the project of queering Armenian studies is so urgent and so difficult.

On one of the postcards Gegisian uses in her *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman* (Figure 2), we find a notation in Spanish from the sender, who signs their name “A. Etchenique.” Written above a colorized portrait of a serious young woman with long, flowing black hair, dressed in a matching maroon hat and blouse bejeweled and trimmed with gold medallions, the notation reads: “*Los pueblos obtienen su felicidad según la cultura de sus hijos*,” or “Nations get their well-being from the culture of their children.” “Pueblo” can mean people, nation, or town; in Spanish the word does double duty as a figure for local, culturally

specific, often ideally rural identity as well as shared, cultivated, national belonging. The notation thus perfectly encapsulates the ideological work of the postcards themselves: the regulated reproduction and cultivation of native particularity is a condition of possibility for the welfare of the nation. What is more, this postcard is affixed with a stamp from Uruguay and the notation is dated August 21, 1904. This is the same year Uruguay's conservative, rural Blancos party led a revolt against president José Batlle y Ordoñez and his liberal Colorado party, which like other liberal movements in Latin America had pursued vigorous, centralized efforts at social, political, and cultural unification across Uruguay—efforts against which many rural people revolted. A. Etchenique's notation seems, then, to be in line with the Colorado party's ideals. The 1904 notation thus succinctly encapsulates the very ideology shared by many of the nationalist movements organizing themselves in the wake of the Ottoman Empire's collapse, notably the Committee for Union and Progress, which was founded just two years later in 1906 and, when led by the so-called Young Turks, was intimately responsible for what would come to be known as the Armenian Genocide, one of the principle means for establishing Turkey as an independent nation-state. But elements of this ideology also animated Armenian nationalism in its short-lived realization right after the Genocide, more vigorously in its post-Soviet incarnation, as well as in its various diasporic iterations. That ideology enforced a panoply of masculinist and hetero-normative discursive practices, all in the name of reproducing children as objects and agents of national-cultural well-being.

A. Etchenique does not seem to have imagined that the serious young woman with long, flowing black hair and a maroon hat and blouse bejeweled and trimmed with gold medallions was in fact performing a role for a popular culture industry. When we forget that performance, we forget the innumerable ways normative nationalisms have been haunted by non-normative potentials, as well as the risks any effort to activate those potentials run. Aikaterini Gegisian recalls that performance, those potentials, and those risks to us with her repurposed *Self-Portrait as an Ottoman Woman*. So too do Giorgi, Beukian, Sargsyan, and Shirinian in this inspiring special issue of *Armenian Review*.

NOTES

- 1 See <https://ottomancosmopolitanism.wordpress.com/exhibition/aikaterini-gegisian/>. See also <http://www.gegisian.com>, "photo works."
- 2 Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," *Critical Inquiry* 7.1 (Autumn 1980), 56.
- 3 Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Science of the Concrete," in *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966): 1-33.
- 4 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 24.
- 5 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 24.
- 6 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "1994: Will Postcolonialism Travel?," in *Other Asias* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008): 97-131.
- 7 Spivak, "1994: Will Postcolonialism Travel?," 117.