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Arlene Voski Avakian Papers

1963-2010
13 boxes (19 linear ft.)
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Arlene Avakian arrived at UMass in 1972 as a graduate student working on the social history of American women, but quickly became a key figure in the creation of the university's new program in Women's Studies. As she completed her MA in History (1975) and EdD (1985), she helped in the early organization of the program, later joining the faculty as professor and program director. Through her research and teaching, she contributed to an engaging departmental culture in which the intersection of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality were placed at the center, building the program over the course of 35 years into the nationally-recognized Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Avakian has written and taught on topics ranging from the lives and experiences of Armenian American and African American women to culinary history and the construction of whiteness. She retired in May 2011.

Documenting the growth and development of Women's Studies at UMass Amherst, the collection includes valuable material on the creation of the department (and Women's Studies more generally), second- and third-wave feminism, and Avakian's teaching and research. The collection includes a range of correspondence, memoranda, notes, and drafts of articles, along with several dozen oral historical interviews with Armenian American women. Also noteworthy is the extensive documentation of ABODES, the Amherst Based Organization to Develop Equitable Shelter, which established the Pomeroy Lane Cooperative Housing Community in South Amherst in 1994.

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Background on Arlene Avakian

An activist, educator, and writer, Arlene Avakian was born on May 4, 1939 into an Armenian family that immigrated to New York, New York. Often feeling a tension between her family's Armenian roots and societal expectations to assimilate to an "American" way of life, her childhood and teenage years were filled with identity issues pertaining to her heritage. Growing up in Washington Heights – a neighborhood that contained many Armenian Americans – Avakian had little to no contact with people who were not Armenian prior to her schooling. Her household and life was family oriented, and her first strong friendships where made only when Avakian entered middle school. She connected with other family oriented girls, and most of her friends growing up were children of other immigrants, with backgrounds such as Jewish, Greek, and Romanian. Unfortunately, most of the other children and adults Avakian encountered throughout her childhood were not familiar with Armenia or Armenian culture – which only made it more difficult for Avakian to feel comfortable in her own skin.

Avakian's early life was filled with interactions with her extended family. Most had also immigrated to the United States, so their community building involved constant visits to and from various family members. Her life took a turn following the birth of her little brother, Paul, as much of the attention, and devotion, from Avakian's female relatives became focused on him. Avakian, therefore, often found herself spending time in other relative's houses where she was favored. As she grew up, she began to form closer friendships with a few other girls around her age, all also daughters of immigrants. When Avakian reached high school, she fought with her mother desperately to attend the public high school in her city, George Washington. Her parents were uncomfortable with Avakian attending due to discomfort over potential interactions with Black students, however Avakian won out, and was able to attend George Washington under the condition that she return home for lunch every day. Her time spent at George Washington High School was overall pleasant, where Avakian had many friends, felt properly challenged in classes, and was an honors student. Unfortunately, in 1954, Avakian's parents informed her that they were moving to Glen Rock, New Jersey to avoid raising her younger brother in the city. Two years from her high school graduation date, Avakian was ripped from the comfort of her life in the city, made to say goodbye to all of her friends, and was forced into life in the suburbs.

Avakian struggled in the suburbs. Many of the students at her new high school believed stereotypes about people from the city, and soon bored of Avakian once they learned she did not do drugs and was not promiscuous. Avakian struggled to make friends, and felt like an outcast, other than her connection with two other students, Mimi and Pitzie, who also felt themselves to be outcasts. These two friends, along with escapes to the city to visit with old friends, enabled Avakian to bear many lonely days. Moreover, Avakian felt little to no support from the faculty and staff at her new school in New Jersey, Ridgewood High School. She felt as though the school believed she would not achieve, which was a complete contrast to her time as an honor student at George Washington. As a result, Avakian began to believe she was an average student at best.

When it came time for Avakian to think about college, the process was entirely self-motivated. Her parents were more concerned with mapping out the career path of her ten-year-old brother, and her father's only insight was for her to attend an all-women's institution and become a teacher. Avakian also felt that her guidance counselor wasn't much help in navigating the college process. Even with the lack of support, Avakian became interested in Alfred University after a representative visited her high school. The school drew her in because the representative claimed that there was a friendliness to the campus – and all Avakian wanted was to feel accepted by her classmates in college. After applying to the university, Avakian received an acceptance and elected to attend. While the transition to college was difficult, Avakian managed an impressive social life once she began. However, she struggled academically, and found herself taking classes where she knew she could pass, instead of immersing herself in academia.

When her junior year in college rolled around, Avakian began to struggle with her decisions to attend Alfred University, to join a sorority, and to not immerse herself in her classes or major. She began to have difficulties in her social life – making enemies within her sorority – and she became jealous of fellow classmates who had figured out their passions in life. Under the guidance of her favorite professor, Dr. Klitzke, Avakian came to the conclusion that she had outgrown Alfred University, and she elected to transfer to Columbia University.

Along with a new setting, Avakian also found a new academic passion in the field of Art History, and she received her bachelor's degree in Art History from Columbia University in 1961. After spending some time at home, she elected to continue her studies and moved to Massachusetts for graduate school at the University of Massachusetts (UMass) Amherst. While at UMass Amherst, Avakian's studies switched to focus on the construction of identity, primarily regarding the interactions of components such as gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality. She received her MA in History in 1975, and completed her EdD in 1985, with her dissertation, "Culture and Feminist Theory: An Armenian American Women's Perspective." As a student working on the social history of American women, Avakian helped to co-found the new program in Women's Studies at UMass Amherst. Her activity and leadership in the program was instrumental, and her work was considered to be groundbreaking since she stressed looking beyond the typical mold of white feminism. In practice her methods involved simple steps – seeking out and using her privilege to bring to light the opinions of people of color. Avakian would go on to engage with the program as both faculty and director as well. Beginning as an Associate Professor in Women's Studies from 1993- 2001, Avakian worked her way to becoming one of the most highly respected faculty members within the department, and in 2001 she became both a Professor and the Chair of the department. She held this position until 2011, leaving behind a prominent legacy at the nationally-recognized Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and via those impacted by her leadership, teaching, and scholarship. Avakian has written and taught on topics ranging from the lives and experiences of Armenian American and African American women to culinary history and the construction of whiteness.

In addition to her work as a professor and researcher, Avakian was one of the founders and president of the Amherst Based Organization to Develop Equitable Shelter (ABODES), which began the Pomeroy Lane Cooperative in South Amherst in the early 1990s. Countless hours of meetings, phone calls, petitioning, and letter writing went into building ABODES from the ground up, and Avakian was the main point of contact and visible leader of the initiative. The organization aimed to create a limited equity housing cooperative that utilized cohousing principles.

In addition to her passion for Armenian-American culture, Avakian worked closely with the Ararat magazine, a journal dedicated to English-writing about Armenia. The company, which has been around since the 1960s, published articles based on Armenia and Armenian-American experiences. Written for and by Armenians, the magazine published various accounts, theses, literature, history, popular culture, artwork and photography surrounding Armenian and Armenian-American culture. Avakian worked on the board for this magazine, assisting with the editing and processing of various articles.

Avakian is proud that her legacy is tied to her impact on the Women's Studies department at UMass Amherst and women's, gender, and sexuality studies more broadly, and to the advancements she made as an activist and organizer in the Amherst community. She is similarly pleased with her work in retirement, focusing on herself, community, and her freelance writing.

Scope of collection

The Arlene Voski Avakian Papers are organized into three series: Personal & Writings, UMass & Research, and Amherst Based Organization to Develop Equitable Shelter (ABODES). The collection includes a range of correspondence, memoranda, notes, and drafts of articles, along with several dozen oral historical interviews with Armenian American women from Avakian's research, and extensive documentation of ABODES. The collection reveals Avakian's lifelong engagement with issues related to racism, sexism, feminism, and housing inequality, and her dedication to the department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Series descriptions

[Series 1. Personal & Writings](#)

1979-2001
.5 box (.75 linear feet)

The Personal & Writings series consists of Avakian's writings and personal correspondence, including content from her books, articles, personal research, and non-academic conferences. The smallest portion of the collection, this series portrays Avakian's life, interests, and work outside of materials related to UMass Amherst.

[Series 2. UMass & Research](#)

1971-2006
8 boxes (11.75 linear feet)

The UMass & Research series documents Avakian's work as a student and then later as a faculty member at University of Massachusetts Amherst, including student work, class syllabi, campus news and articles, project descriptions, and conference materials. This series includes valuable material on the creation of the Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (and Women's Studies more generally), second- and third-wave feminism, and Avakian's teaching and research. De-

identified student response papers, course assessments, and teaching materials are particularly rich in showcasing Avakian's engagement with topics such as whiteness, race, and gender studies in her work as an academic, professor, and mentor. Research materials cover her own research, including her dissertation, oral histories, as well as publications and organizations Avakian followed for her professional work.

[Series 3. ABODES](#)

1959-2010

4.5 boxes (6.5 linear feet)

The last series documents the Amherst Based Organization to Develop Equitable Shelter (ABODES), and the development of the Pomeroy Lane Cooperative. It includes meeting minutes and agendas, financial and official organization documents, recruitment materials, correspondence, newspaper articles, and promotional materials. The majority of the series is correspondence between organizations, official documents between the state and ABODES, and documentation of financial responsibilities.

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Rites and Reason was the "research theatre" of the Brown University Afro-American Studies Program, who undertook a study on Afro-American and Armenain-Women, the "Women and Ethnicity Project."

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National Association of Housing Cooperatives, Cooperative Housing Bulletin
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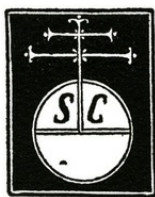
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