Survival of a Perverse Nation: Sexuality and Kinship in Post-Soviet Armenia

by

Tamar Shirinian

Department of Cultural Anthropology
Duke University

Date: __________________________

Approved:

__________________________
Diane M. Nelson, Supervisor

__________________________
Anne Allison

__________________________
Anne-Maria Makhulu

__________________________
Tomas Matza

__________________________
Ara Wilson

Dissertation submitted in partial approval of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Cultural Anthropology in the Graduate School of Duke University

2016
Abstract

Survival of a Perverse Nation: Sexuality and Kinship in Post-Soviet Armenia

by

Tamar Shirinian

Department of Cultural Anthropology
Duke University

Date: ________________________

Approved:

________________________________________________________________________

Diane M. Nelson, Supervisor

________________________________________________________________________

Anne Allison

________________________________________________________________________

Anne-Maria Makhulu

________________________________________________________________________

Tomas Matza

________________________________________________________________________

Ara Wilson

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Cultural Anthropology in
the Graduate School of Duke University

2016
Abstract

*Survival of a Perverse Nation* traces the ways in which contemporary Armenian anxieties are congealing into the figure of the “homosexual.” As in other post-Soviet republics, homosexuality has increasingly become defined as the crisis of the times, and is understood by many as a destructive force linked to European encroachment. In Armenia, a growing right-wing nationalist movement since 2012 has been targeting LGBT and feminist activists. I suggest that this movement has arisen out of Armenia’s concerns regarding proper social and biological reproduction in the face of high rates of emigration of especially men in search of work. Many in the country blame this emigration on a post-Soviet oligarchy, with close ties to the government. This oligarchy, having quickly and massively privatized and liquidated industry and land during the war over the region of Nagorno-Karabagh (1990-1994) with Azerbaijan, created widespread un(der)employment. A national narrative attributing the nation’s survival of the 1915 Genocide and dispersion of its populations to strong morality preserved by institutions such as the Church and the family has now, in the post-Soviet era, ruptured into one of moral “perversion.” This dissertation is based on 15 months of ethnographic research, during which I participated in the work of two local non-governmental organizations: Public Information and Need for Knowledge, an LGBT rights organization and Women’s Resource Center, a feminist organization. I also conducted interviews with 150 households across Yerevan, the capital city, and did in-depth interviews with other activists, right-wing nationalists and journalists. Through psychoanalytic frameworks, as well as studies of kinship, I show how sovereignty – the longed for dream for Armenians over the last century – is felt to have failed because of the moral corruption of the
illegitimate figures that fill Armenian seats of authority. I, thus, examine the ways in which a missing father of the household is discursively linked to the lack of strong leadership by a corrupt government, producing a prevalent feeling of moral disintegration that nationalists displace onto the “homosexual.”
Table of Contents

List of Figure

Acknowledgements

Prologue: Armenianness

Introduction: Survival of a Perverse Nation

Chapter 1. Queer Life: Invisible Visibility, Visible Invisibility and the Coding of Everyday Life

*****

Part I. Perversion (*Aylanakutyun*)

Chapter 2. Wandering Yerevan: Nostalgia and Post-Hope in a Presentless and Empty City of Ruins

Chapter 3. The Names of Illegitimate Fathers and the Ends of Symbolic Authority

Part II. Perversion (*Aylaserutyun*)

Chapter 4. The Figure of the Homosexual: Fetish, Freedom, and Separation


Chapter 6. Perversion and *Gender*

*****

Chapter 7. No Father, No Future? The Politics of “No!” as Negation and Affirmation

Conclusion: Concluding and Moving Forward in a Brave New World of Disorder

Appendix

Works Cited

Biography
List of Figure

Figure 1. Rosa’s building. Photograph by Author
Acknowledgements

Writing something this large demands activity that begins not on the first day of graduate school, or even undergraduate training, but way before then. For this, there is no particular order or start that is better than any other to take a moment to acknowledge all of the events and people who made this work possible. Beginning in my “youth,” however, will have to suffice. The kind of intellectual curiosity that has shaped this work surrounded me then. For this, I thank my network of extended family and friends for building the kind of community around which ideas, thoughts and imagination could flow. I thank the adults who gathered to drink whiskey, vodka and wine. While you discussed the stuff that makes life worth enjoying in the backyard of the house on Crenshaw Ave., Los Angeles and the old house in Malibu – you created possibilities of curiosity and imaginative will. Special gratitude is owed to Sarkis Kalashian and Aghavni Jouharian Williams. Growing up with you in these spaces and places gave meaning to my own interior life-world. We not only grew up together, but we raised each other as able to enjoy the chaotic streams of thought that surrounded us like ether.

It was in this environment, unbeknownst to me at the time, that I became interpellated as Armenian. I became interested in Armenianness not as a historical site, but as a set of practices involved in reflective and reflexive thought on cultural productions that were not like any other. I was very aware, in other words, that I was growing up in a different social context. Or, it felt different. And I treasured it. I was surrounded by Armenian artists, musicians, intellectuals and those who generally experienced conversation and other forms of relational exchange as rapture. I would like to thank my father, Moses Shirinian, who was surprised when I first told him in Spring
2010 that I would be going to Armenia to conduct research. “What?!” you asked “What are you doing going there?!” Well, it shouldn’t be such a surprise that I wanted to go there. “There” was a nostalgic place for me, filled with post-memory, to which I wanted to one day (re)turn. But I did not know it at that time. I thank you now, as a grown-up who has the privilege of sharing and learning with you, for giving me that Armenia. And, I thank you for your support – all kinds of support – but, especially the kind that came with constant argument-making.

To my mother, Aida Mouradian Shirinian – the pianist - it was you who taught me how to feel and experience in ways that take you away, break you away, from reality. Feeling, I saw in you, can make you face what you may not want to, but it can also be fugue, allowing experience on other realms, other worlds. Thank you for all of your support – material, affective, labor-intensive love – through the years and for believing that I am who I want to be.

To my sister, Sose, even if younger than me and even if the teasing relation we had in our youth may have led you to believe I know better, I am always learning inquisitiveness and courageous posing of questions (and acting on them!) from you. I know you know what I mean and the many layer-upon-layer jokes over the years have allowed me to tap in to long-standing relation and the ability to come back to moments to treasure them again…and again, and again.

When I arrived to UC Berkeley for undergraduate education, I was ready and unable to wait to add academic language to these long-established longings for intellectual production. Thank you, Paola Bacchetta, for my first Gender and Women’s Studies course, from which there was no return, and teaching me forms of theory-making
that broke with other, more traditional, binds. Thank you Roshanak Kheshti for introducing me to the worlds that theory can make. And, Mel Chen, thank you for making me feel the necessity in thinking about melancholy and the joy of writing that pushed me to go to graduate school.

I would also like to acknowledge my graduate school cohort in Cultural Anthropology with whom and from whom I learned: Yasmin Cho, Layla Brown, and, finally Cagri Yoltar. Cagri, my colleague and friend, without you, graduate school would have been an entirely different, and much less joyous, experience. Thank you for all of the trips to Turkey and Kurdistan, for late night conversations, daytime conversations, as well as the sometimes much needed silence. I would also like to thank Yektan Turkylimaz for the music and for your patience in (re)teaching me to read in Armenian.

Without my teachers at Duke, who pushed my reading and writing in new directions, I would not have been able to produce this massive object called a dissertation. Thanks go to Anne Allison, Tina Campt, Frederic Jameson, Ranjana Khanna, Anna Krylova, Ralph Litzinger, Anne-Maria Makhulu, Tomas Matza, Diane M. Nelson, Jocelyn Olcott, Charles Piot, Kathy Rudy, Irene Silverblatt, Orin Starn, Rebecca Stein, Antonio Viego, Robyn Wiegman, and Ara Wilson. The space of the classroom as a site of sharing and collaboration seemed especially necessary for me when I returned from year-long fieldwork in Armenia in Fall 2013 and the Cultural Anthropology Dissertation Writing Workshop fulfilled that need. For this, I would like to thank my fellow-dissertators for sharing their work-in-progress and for engaging with my own work and providing feedback: Lorien Olive, Jatin Dua, Samuel Shearer, Patrick Galbraith, Jennifer Bowles, Yasmin Cho, Layla Brown and Cagri Yoltar. I am also very
grateful to the faculty who led these workshops – Tomas Matza, Rebecca Strein, Louise Meintjes, Katya Wesolowski, and Charles Piot – who provided valuable comments on early versions of the chapters that appear here.

I had the pleasure and privilege of working closely with a wonderful team of teachers, thinkers and writers that comprised my dissertation committee. Thank you, Anne-Maria Makhulu for your generosity, inquisitiveness, and for pushing me to think more deeply about what it is I want to write. Thank you, Ara Wilson for your wit and reflections on the meanings of queer in the house of anthropology. Thank you, Anne Allison, for your guidance, commentary, questions, and the many engaging conversations along the way. Tomas Matza, even if it was not your exact intention, you arrived at Duke at precisely the moment in which you became an absolute necessity for my work. Thank you for paving the way for engaging with postsocialism and sharing your thoughts and work on a (re)emerging field. And, Diane M. Nelson: I am sure you will find your creative insight all over this thing. While the dissertation is not a complete object, I could not have been nearly as happy as I am with it if it was not for your always-joyous reflections, your openness, and your pushing through the process. As many have said before, and as many will say after me, you were the best advisor and dissertation chair I could have asked for. I am grateful to have chosen you and to have been chosen by you, (counter)transferences and all.

The Duke Women’s Studies Graduate Scholars’ Colloquium has also lend weight to my project over the years, by providing a venue through which work-in-progress is supported and cultivated, as well as allowing me to share my own work and receive much-needed insight. Thanks also go to Anna Krylova, for her brilliant reading of my
work and for beginning a conversation that I hope will continue.

Funding has, also, been a critical necessity for this on-going project. For financial support, I thank Duke University’s Cultural Anthropology Department for supporting fieldwork, the Program in Women’s Studies for aid in conference travel, Foreign Language and Area Studies for the resources in (re)learning Armenian in the summers of 2010 and 2011, the Graduate School and the Dean’s Office of Graduate Education for support in the write-up stages.

It was, initially, for funding that I applied to be the Managing Editor for the Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies. It became much more than this. While the job has had its menial portions – from runs to the post-office, calling caterers, sending out mass emails, and (constant) reminders – it has also provided a profound engagement with the ways in which academic publishing happens – or, more precisely, how it can happen and how new sites of knowledge emerge with good editorialship and creativity. I thank Editors miriam cooke and Banu Gokariksel for their encouragement as well as allowing me to, in some ways, own up to the role of “Editor” in “Managing Editor.” I thank Review Editor Amy Kallander for her kind support over the last two years. While most of our interaction has been on email, your thoughtfulness on my project has been greatly motivating. And finally, Frances S. Hasso, I do not know where to begin acknowledging you and the gratitude I feel for your presence in my work and my path. I am sure that many of the words in this dissertation will be quite familiar to you as you have read them, over and over again, and helped me to sculpt them into existence. Thank you for your mentorship, giving the term and role a whole new profundity, for the encouragement, and the collaboration.
The community of thought that informs this work came outside of Duke as well. Commentary on earlier versions of these chapters were also provided by co-panelists, co-organizers and discussants at various national and international conferences. I am grateful for these contexts and the ways in which they have shaped my thinking and provided new directions. I would thus like to thank panelists and organizers at the Association for Queer Anthropology of the American Anthropological Association; the European Association of Social Anthropologists (and especially the Network for the Anthropology of Gender and Sexuality); the Sexual Sovereignties: Citizenship, Governmentality, and Territory Conference at the American University of Beirut; the Conference on Sexuality, Human Rights and Public Policy at Marquette University; Queer Places, Practices and Lives at the Ohio State University; Association for the Study of Nationalities; and the Digital Queers Conference at The New School.

Outside of these institutions and walls, I developed relationships with colleagues and fellow-creators that strengthened my thinking and writing over the years. I would like to thank Lindsey Andrews for sharing thoughts and the urgency which has sustained much of my thinking; Jessica Jones for the conversations that break open dead ends and assumed directions; Cheryl Spinner for giving me the words; and Sinan Goknur for your readings, discussions and engagements on multiple texts in their very early stages.

As all cultural anthropologists can lay bare, the friends, networks and colleagues in the field are, in the final instance, what makes ethnography possible. In my case, it has not just been made possible by these communities, but made urgent. Firstly, I’d like to extend recognition and credit to Lucine Talalyan. You played various roles in building this project. For your assistance in research, thank you for giving me method, for helping me
develop an approach to how to deal with – live with – the findings. For your collaboration and initiative, thank you for your invitation and showing me the other ways to think the world. For your work, thank you for the brilliant inspiration. For your sustaining friendship and your support, through thick and thin, I do not have the words. I would also like to express gratitude to Lusine Mooradyan, my language instructor for two summers in 2010 and 2011, who gave me insight not just on the proper uses of language – reading, writing, speaking – but also into the importance of language, its specificity, and its social weight.

It is especially the activists in Yerevan who gave urgency to the questions, problems, and arguments that inform the exploration that follows. I thank Public Information and Need for Knowledge (PINK) and the delightful staff members there—especially Mamikon Hovsepyan, Marine Margaryan, Nvard Margaryan, and Kolya Hovhannisyan – for your support and guidance. Learning Armenia in this queer space gave my project a dimension without which I could not have sustained the writing that followed. Over the years, I have come back to your words, your voices, and your work for the inspiration to continue. I also wish to acknowledge Women’s Resource Center and the superb staff there, especially Lara Aharonian, Gohar Shahnazaryan, and Milena Abrahamyan for your inclusion of me in various projects, your invitations and your courage in all of your work. Milena, especially: your passion, will, creativity, and support were invaluable then and continue now. Thank you for your kindness, understanding and patience in what could have been far more difficult times. I would also like to extend my deepest gratitude to other activists, journalists, colleagues and collaborators in Armenia for your strength in continuing the projects that are bringing forth future in Armenia,
especially Lala Aslikyan, Yuri Manvelyan, Arthur Grigoryan, Qnarik Khudoyan, Mikael Danielyan and Karen Hakobyan. Your insight on Armenia gave me much to think about and informed a great deal of the words – sometimes provided the words – for what is in this project.

And to Tsomak Oga: your experience and the grief and anger that accompanied it, in all of the pain that it brought to you, has made so much possible – this project being just one tip of that massive iceberg. To thank you would be meaningless. Rather, I would like to credit you and your righteous indignation for opening the ways for thousands of questions and explorations. I would, however, like to thank you for being a total badass.

In Armenia I had the privilege of making friendships that have reframed my sense of self and contributed to the pleasurable and painful longing that always now comes when I am not “there.” These friendships have been life-affirming and paved the ways for the questions and ponderings that fill these pages. These relationships also gave heartfelt meaning to the notion of “deep hanging out” (Geertz 1998). For these, I thank Ani Petrosyan for her laughter and guiding, Hrach Khachatryan for his care and worry, and Lilya Khachatryan for her spontaneity and always-thoughtful whimsy. And thanks go to Meri Yeranosyan for opening up your home to me and the delightful breakfast conversations. I would also like to thank Melissa Boyajian. While what remains is painfully ambivalent, you were a large part of the many moments that made up the thinking, experiencing, and interrogating that is inscribed - in scratching - within the words.

I want to thank Queering Yerevan for allowing me the space and venue through which to think the otherwise – as theory, method, form and content. However briefly and
however fleeting, I am in gratitude. Thank you especially to Shushan Avagyan whose brilliance in conjuring word is in many ways unparalleled. Thank you for all of your insight into the techniques of pleasurable writing and for reopening for me the ways in which there are many forms and many paths to the practice. And, Arpi Adamyan, I do not quite know how to thank – or acknowledge – someone who will not accept it. But, for all it is worth and for all it may one day (hopefully, perhaps) bring, I appreciated and continue to cherish our discussions and arguments, and admire your fierceness.

Some acknowledgments to the non-human beings and forces that also nurtured me on this journey: Bella (my awkward cat), books, song, dance, cigarettes, whiskey, gin, wine, and Armenian beer.

And, of course – lest we forget – all citation is a form of acknowledgement. So, to all of those who are cited in this project – from academics, novelists, song-writers, poets, project coordinators, journalists: I thank you for building the necessary bases through which I could extend my own thoughts, whether or not we agree on everything (or anything).

And, finally, a sea of gratitude, love, and respect to Ana de Leon whose compassion, caring, and support came into my life at the very beginnings of this project, nurturing it and me all through the way. Without whom none of this would have been possible. Thank you for teaching me, loving me and guiding me and for always being open to the next step, the next thought, the next bit of joy, excitement as well as the pain. And, perhaps not most of all but especially of all, for tolerating all that this has meant.
Prologue: Armenianness

*Survival of a Perverse Nation* explores the ways in which in 2012, homosexuality became hypervisible in Armenia through a homosexual panic brought on by right-wing nationalists. The hypervisibility of what I call the figure of the homosexual was an event that ruptured into discourse the fragmentations within continuity of what Armenians consider an ancient nation. What the homosexual’s appearance, as sexual perversion, did was open up public discourse on Armenianness in crisis that had been ongoing since independence from the Soviet Union, which is now often expressed as moral perversion.

The dissertation plays on these two forms of perversion – sexual perversion, or *aylaserutyun*, and moral perversion, or *aylandakutyun*. These two forms constantly circling around each other lay bare the intimate ways in which Armenian independence and contemporary concerns regarding sovereignty are felt. It was largely right-wing nationalists, who have only very recently emerged within public spheres in Armenia and are in many ways a symptom of Armenia’s political crisis, who constructed the hypervisibility of the figure of the homosexual. These nationalists were drawing on already tense feelings of political, economic and social crises in the nation that they congealed into this figure, making it an appealing avenue through which much of mainstream media can explore these anxieties. As such, many Armenians express these various feelings of crisis – from unemployment and underemployment, election fraud, massive emigration, economic corruption and so on – as forms of moral perversion (*aylandakutyun*) that are felt as national annihilation.

To understand how these moral perversions work within everyday rhetoric, one
has to understand a rupture in what I refer to as Armenianness that came a few years following independence from the Soviet Union. Armenia gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 through a massive independence movement that brought about intense feelings of euphoria and national belonging. This euphoric sense of unity was undone by war, emigration, poverty and corruption by 1996, producing a crisis in sovereignty: the end of a long genealogical line of heroes. Survival of a Perverse Nation is interested in Armenianness to the extent that Armenianness in the contemporary Republic of Armenia is felt, experienced, mourned and redefined. In other words, Armenianness as such should be understood as symbolic order by way of psychoanalytic theory. It is the realm through which Armenians come to understand themselves and their location within culture. It is the very possibility of Armenian culture itself – through language, myth, origin, symbol, ritual, systems of exchange, kinship and religion. Armenianness, as such, cannot be directly defined. It can only be tracked through its, sometimes incommensurable, articulations. Armenianness is not a truth per se, although some feel it to have a truth content to it, but it orients the ways in which truths flow, marking experience as proper or improper, inside or outside, and, finally, continuous or discontinuous. I will not be defining Armenianness in this dissertation. What I will do, however, is provide the ways in which this feeling, this structure, this way of being, is felt as a kind of force pushing those who heed its call – or try to swerve away from it – to act or not to act in particular ways. And so, to begin an exploration of Armenianness and how, in its contemporary moment it is felt to be in crisis, I start with Hayk, the first and the Father of Armenians.
Survivors (Heros)

What is Armenia? Moses Khorenatsi,\(^1\) the 5\(^{th}\) century\(^2\) historian, had a bit to say on the question of what Armenia is and in many ways what he had to say still informs the ways in which Armenians understand themselves and the nation to which they belong.

Khorenatsi wrote one of the most comprehensive histories of Armenia. His History of the Armenians remains one of the very few texts discussing the Armenian people prior to the introduction of Christianity in the 4\(^{th}\) century. Moses’ history, especially the early pre-Christian part entitled “Genealogy of Greater Armenia,” is a combination of myth and citations from Greek archives. His history begins with a criticism of Armenian kings who had the bad habit of not keeping archives of their own history. Because of this, when King Valarshak came to reign over Armenia in the 2\(^{nd}\) century, he did not know the history of the throne: “had he succeeded to the throne of valiant men or of cowards?” Khorenatsi asks (82) as he begins telling the history of history.

Mar Abas Catina, a Syrian and “a diligent man versed in Chaldean and Greek” (82) was sent by King Valarshak to the royal archives of Arshak the Great, the King of Persia. There he found, written in Greek, a book that considers “the authentic account of

---

\(^1\) I use the 1978 translation of the text by Robert W. Thomson.

\(^2\) The belief that Moses was writing in the 5\(^{th}\) century, and the way that the text is still taught in Armenia today, is based on his own claims that he was the direct student of Mesrop Mashtots and Sahak. Mashtots is the “father of the Armenian alphabet” in the end of the 4\(^{th}\) century and is also credited for having invented the Georgian and Caucasian Albanian alphabets as well. Late nineteenth century scholars have argued that some of the texts that Moses was citing were not available until much later and that it is more likely that History of the Armenians was produced in the eighth or ninth centuries, although scholars have still not come to agreement on this debate (Thomson 1978).
the ancients and ancestors” (83) translated into Greek from the Chaldean language. Mar Abas Catina only extracted the “reliable history of [the Armenian] race and brought it to King Valarshak in Nisibis in both Greek and Syriac.” (84). Moses describes Valarshak as “personable and valiant…expert at the bow, eloquent, and intelligent…” (84) and from the recordings of the archives brought to him by Mar Abas Catina, he sees that his ancestors came from similar stock.

According to Khorenatsi, the history of Armenia extends as far back to the most ancient of times. Mar Abas Catina’s discovery begins with the gods:

Fearsome and renowned were the first gods, and the cause of great blessings for the earth - the origin of the earth and of the multiplication of mankind. From them branched off the race of giants, monstrous and enormous in force and size, who in their arrogance conceived and gave birth to the impious plan of building the tower. To that very task they had fallen when a fearful and divine wind, aroused by the anger of the gods, blew down and scattered the construction; they imparted mutually incomprehensible languages to men and brought upon them tumultuous confusion. One of these was Hayk descended from Yapetoste, the renowned and valiant prince, strong and accurate in drawing the bow (84).

Armenia’s history can be dated back to when gods and giants roamed the earth. The giant to whom Armenians can trace their particular genealogy is Hayk, a descendant of Noah. Noah had three sons after the great flood. Khorenatsi argues that scripture has generally dedicated itself to narrating the stories of the descendants of Sem, who begot Abraham, leaving the histories brought forth by the descendants of Ham and Yapheth, the other two sons of Noah, with very few traces. Moses is thus placing the history of Armenia within this early biblical period, where the Earth was renewed by the great floods with the work of God and Noah.
The battle that begot Armenia was fought by the descendent of one of Noah’s other two sons, Bel - the descendent of Ham - and Hayk, the descendent of Yapheth.

Khorenatsi tells a heroic story about a man (albeit a giant man) who refused to let Bel, the warrior who had been “impos[ing] his tyranny on the whole land…”(85), rule over the land on which he lived with his own clan - “his sons and daughters and sons’ sons, martial men about three hundred in number, and other domestic servants and outsiders who had joined his service and all his effects” (85). He creates an army ready to fight.

When Bel and his army arrive, Bel was not pleased by Hayk’s maneuver, but was still determined to expel him from the land. After all, he had already been successful by defeating many other armies and creating a much larger army than Hayk. But Hayk was such a magnificent warrior with his bow that he was able to defeat Bel and his whole army, thus allowing his people to settle on his land with no imposition from the now-defeated Bel. The location of this battle is placed near Lake Van, but is also under the mountain of the northern regions – or Mount Ararat, the site at which Noah’s Arc finally ended up after the floods, according to many myths): “he came and dwelt at the foot of a mountain in a plain where had lingered and dwelt a few of the human race who had previously scattered. These Hayk subjected to himself, and he built there a residence…and gave it in inheritance to Cadmos, the son of Aramaneak” (85).

Aramaneak was the son of Hayk and would be the forefather of Aram and finally Ara, the courageous warriors that were known to have increased the borders of Armenia. Armenia is known as Hayasdan in Armenian and Armenia in other languages. Hayasdan is derived from the Name-of-the-Father, Hayk, as the land of Hayk. And Armenia is derived from
his descendent Armeneak.

Khorenatsi writes, “This Hayk, son of T’orgom, son of T’iras, son of Gomer, son of Yapheth, was the ancestor of the Armenians; and these were his families and offspring and their land of habitation. And afterward they began…to multiply and fill the land” (92). Thus, Armenia is a historical configuration of a brave and ancient people whose survival depends on reproduction in order to continue this sacred genealogy. Armenia is also exceptional. Hayk made a small army that was able to defeat the tyrant Bel, a tyrant that others were not able to defeat. As such, to “multiply” Armenia is not a matter of reproducing bodies. It is about reproducing a particular kind of social made up of a courageous stock of men, who are devoted to their nation and who are willing to fight to keep Armenia safe and free from the tyrannical sorts of those like Bel.

This history was made possible by King Valarshak’s desire to know the roots of his people and his throne and his excitement to know that his bravery comes from his genealogy. Thus, genealogy, which has become an essential component of Armenian nationalism, implies a biological reproduction alongside the importance of a social reproduction of those who will recognizably remain Armenian and protect Armenia from dissolution and tyranny. Armenians are brave, they are warriors, and they will do anything to protect their land and their people – even if it seems impossible. Or, at least this is the proper Armenia in the Name-of-the-Father, Hayk.

Hayk left a legacy of miraculous heroicism. There have been other men of larger-than-life valiance like Hayk in Armenia’s history. One of these was the man who was able to convert the entire kingdom of Armenia in the 4th century to Christianity. As the
story goes, in the early fourth century, King Trdat of Armenia, a sinful King who persecuted Christians, punished his former assistant Gregory for his Christianity by throwing him into a dungeon pit known as Khor Virap. For this sin, God punished the King by turning him into a wild boar. Gregory miraculously survived his incarceration in the pit, which is said to be the home of snakes and other dangerous elements. After years of Gregory’s incarceration the King’s sister had a vision that Gregory was still alive in the pit and could cure the King of his curse. After Gregory was released from the pit, he miraculously cured Trdat, who converted Armenia to Christianity and, along with Gregory, founded the first Church of Armenia and named it after his healer – St. Gregory the Illuminator (Grigor Lusavorich).

This courage to stand up against sin and tyranny continued into the modern era when Armenians survived one of the greatest catastrophes that they, as a people, had ever seen: the 1915 Genocide by the Ottoman Empire, during which the Young Turk regime killed 1.5 million Armenians and pushed almost all remaining populations of the nation out of their historic lands – the land between Lake Van and Mount Ararat that Hayk and his people had settled after the battle. Although Armenians became victims, “a community of sufferers” (Panossian 2002: 137), they persist in existence now over 100 years later. And, even after Genocide, Armenians have managed to survive. “’We are Armenian’ in defiance of 1915.” This is a refusal “to die out as a nation” (Panossian 2002: 138), continuously articulated through the very cores of Armenianness as it is experienced to this day.
Historical Shifts and Crisis in Armenianness

Many of those who were displaced during the Genocide, rather than massacred, settled in the land East of Mount Ararat, near St. Etchmiadzin Cathedral. This cathedral was the Mother Church of the Armenian Apostolic Church, originally built in the 4th century A.D. following the official adoption of Christianity by the Armenian nation. Armenians have been and continue to be a dispersed nation. In the East, they have lived under the Russian Empire and the Persian Empire, where large numbers lived in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Tehran and Tbilisi. In the West, Armenians had lived for centuries under the Ottoman Empire in lands that are now considered occupied by Turkey – cities like Van, Kars, Dikranakert (Diyarbakir) and Kayseri. The land of Hayk – “from sea to sea Armenia,” spanning the territory settled by these great ancestors – has only been under one unified Armenian rule once ever since, under the reign of Tigranes II (Tigran the Great), “who acquired the title of ‘King of Kings’ and gave Armenia one of the most glorious periods of its history” in the first century B.C. (Nalbandian 1963: 7). This kingdom lasted for three decades (established in 95 B.C. and disintegrating in 69-66 B.C.) (Nalbandian 1963: 8) and, as the popular narrative in Armenia goes today, Armenians have been longing for this “freedom” ever since.

For a brief interlude following the Genocide of 1915, Armenians founded the First Republic of Armenia (1918-1921). This Armenia was a small portion of this mythico-historical Armenia, covering the Armenian-populated territories of the Russian Empire, the land surrounding the ancient cathedral of Etchmiadzin (near Yerevan) and out. It bordered the Ottoman Empire on the West, still holding hostage Mount Ararat,
which still remains the symbol par excellence of Armenian loss and longing. To the North was the Democratic Republic of Georgia, to the South Persia. The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic stood on the East. This First Republic of Armenia was governed by one of the three major political parties founded in the late nineteenth century in the Ottoman Empire, the Dashnaksutyun, or the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) as it is known in English. The ARF was a socialist party who saw its mission as working towards Armenian freedom and the establishment of an Armenian sovereign national government. In 1918, freedom, it had seemed, had finally been achieved. This freedom, however, was short-lived, even shorter than the Kingdom of the King of Kings. During its short reign, the Republic fought a two-front war. In the West loomed the threat of Turkish forces, who continued to forge their way east. In the East, the Bolsheviks, who had made gains after the 1917 Russian Revolution, continued to pave their way westward. Eventually, Armenia gave up its freedom once again to become a Soviet Republic.

“Russia made Armenia possible,” I was told countless times during my fieldwork in Armenia. The Soviet regime was incorporated into Armenianness to a certain extent, celebrated as savior and as provider of stability and protection. Many attribute Armenia’s survival to the preservation and reawakening of Armenian culture made possible by the help of a Soviet intelligentsia, which published many Armenian texts, translated many writings into Armenian, allowed for the thriving and renaissance of Armenian music, dance, folklore and historical inquiry. “If it wasn’t for the Bolsheviks do you understand what would have happened to us? The Turks would have eaten us alive!” explained
Marine over drinks one night. Marine was a journalist who wrote on cultural events.

“Western Armenians often talk about how Armenia was submerged into Russianness during the Soviet Union. But, no. The Soviet Union nurtured Armenian culture. It’s now that we are being submerged; now Armenian culture is being lost.”

The Soviet Union allowed Armenians economic stability, political and military survival in the face of the great enemy - the Turk. In some ways, as I will discuss in the chapters of this dissertation, Stalin is placed within Armenia’s genealogy of great Fathers and heroes (alongside Hayk), even if ambivalently. But this incorporation was partial and it paved the way for various crises to Armenian symbolic order. For, while Armenia was stable, industrially flourishing, and had relative safety and protection from enemies – the Turk – it still was not the longed-for dream of territorialized, national sovereignty.

The Year 5004

It was the summer of the year 5004, at least according to the Chamchian calendar, which dates year 1 to 2492 B.C, the year of the battle between Hayk and Bel, and the calendar that the official circulation of the Republican Party of Armenia was using until 1997 (Panossian 2002: 10). That is, before the Party dissipated into something entirely different by some accounts. By the Roman calendar, it would have been 2011. I had just arrived in the city for my second field trip. Alice and Albert, two good friends of mine who I had not seen since the previous year, had come to bring me to the apartment that they had arranged for me in central Yerevan and had then left me to take a nap after 24-
hours of traveling from Durham, North Carolina to Warsaw to Moscow and finally to Yerevan. Now, it was 11 pm and Alice had just gotten off work and was calling to tell me that she was on her way over with wine and a video that I had to see. *Shat karevor a. Kdesnes. Chem aselu incha bayc durt kga aaaaaampayman.* (It’s very important. You’ll see. I’m not going to tell you what it is but you will like it for suuuuuuure). After some catching up in general and pouring some wine, I finally asked her, “So, what is this video you have to show me?” It was a YouTube video: a live recording of one song performed by Arthur Meschian during a concert in 2009. Meschian is a dissident Armenian singer/songwriter, popular amongst a certain intelligentsia in the late-socialist period. Alice and I had bonded over our love of his music when we had first met in the summer of 5003, and now, she was excited to watch me react to this new song.

The song was called “*Aha ev Verch*” (“That’s It”) and retells the story of the battle of Hayk and Bel. In this version, however, Hayk is no longer the valiant hero. Rather, it is he who is defeated by Bel. In the song, Meschian refers to “severed voices” and “last prayers,” possibly allusions to the ongoing protests in Armenia’s last two decades. “Now who do we believe in? Who is the soul of the church? Which mask is speaking now? Which is the puppet of this crowd?” Meschian asks. The myth of Hayk and Bel, it turns out, has an alternative reading in which Bel is not an Other to Armenia, but an enemy within and as it turns out, Hayk did not win this battle. Bel, the tyrant, whom we are told to believe was finally defeated by Armenia’s first and foremost hero, has finally won and Armenia’s history is ending with this final, rather than inaugurating,

---

battle between the illegitimate horde and those who continue to struggle in the Name of Hayk.

We played the video on her smartphone over and over again, discussing the lyrics and its implications. “And the pages turn, this tired myth. A hardened statue, a story forgotten. There is no beginning or end to this eternal struggle. All of you, who have turned, have been defeated by Bel [and as he sings this line, he points out into the audience]. That’s it. Hayk was defeated by the warrior Bel.” After this last line, during one brief beat of silence, a woman from the crowd screamed “No!” (*Voch!*), audible to the whole auditorium. This performative utterance, this refusal, was what Alice and I were stuck on that entire evening. We played the song over and over again, each time waiting for that one second in the recording. This was our *punctum* (Barthes 1981 [1980]). And this moment was not lost on Meschian himself. After he performed the song, he said “That ‘No’ was very good. I don’t know who it was but it was completely of us (*merongakan*),” as he gave a thumbs up. What Alice and I, and later our friend Albert who joined in these conversations, tried to figure out and constantly discussed for weeks when we would get together was what the “No!” and what Meschian’s statement as it being a statement from “us,” meant. If Meschian’s retelling of the narrative of Hayk and Bel had anti-national sentiments, then the “No!” could imply a refusal of the retelling and an insistence on Hayk’s heroisms. But the retelling is not necessarily anti-national. Rather, one could read it as completely nationalist. If Hayk was a hero and the Armenian people are his people, then the last couple of decades of Armenian independence have proven that he has finally been defeated. The severed voices and the last prayers, going
unheard, were what finally did Hayk and his nation-family in. And in this reading, the “No!” is also in line with nationalism – for the good of the nation and the survival of Armenianness – as it acts as a refusal to let Hayk’s legacy die. And as such, the myth of Hayk and Bel is not yet over. Or is it?

As in Freud’s (1989 [1913]) myth of the primal horde, who murder and devour the flesh of the Father, the ruling Republican Party of Armenia, other members of government, and the post-Soviet oligarchy have devoured the flesh of the nation-family and speak in its Name. Many, like Meschian, feel defeated. Many others have left Armenia for good. But, for some who remain, the battle is not yet over. Whether fighting in the name of Hayk – as some grassroots activists (mostly right-wing nationalists) – or abandoning Hayk altogether for a new symbolic order and the possibilities of some other kind of future, Armenia’s survival is at stake. For these people, who continue to survive even if they acknowledge its everyday difficulties, the authorities (ishkhanutyunner) are illegitimate. Their lack of concern for the Armenian people perverts the nation’s genealogy of a proper, heroic and surviving line. This horde might have murdered the Father, they may have ingested his flesh and claim their authority based on his Name, but they are not the proper sons of Hayk, nor all of those other Fathers who are his descendants. It is these feelings – propriety and survival, perversion and illegitimacy, (im)possibilities of hope and future that I experienced through hundreds of conversations with Armenians and over a year of observing the ways crises are felt – that this dissertation explores.
Introduction: Survival of a Perverse Nation

*Yerkiry yerkir chi.* [The country is not a country.]
- Aphorism of Yerevan Cab Drivers

You didn’t just go to Turkey. You participated in a gay rally. You are promoting both Turk and gay. Those, for Armenians, are the two most deadly sins, do you understand?
- Petros Ghazaryan

On the very early morning of May 8th, 2012 two young men firebombed DIY pub, a small basement level bar in central Yerevan. According to the firebombers, the act was done to protect their nation against homosexuals and Turks (perpetrators of the 1915 Armenian genocide), both of whom they considered national enemies. Following the firebombing, for weeks mainstream news – in print, on television and online – as well as social media and popular blogs discussed the event and the implications of it for the Armenian public. What did it mean that there was a “gay bar” in Yerevan? What did it mean that there were homosexuals in Yerevan? Within this context, homosexuality became a hypervisible mark of Armenia’s perversions, the nation’s slippage into moral disintegration, and the sign of crisis. In 2012 homosexuality was born as Armenia’s “new problem” (Shirinian and Margaryan 2013), adding new dimension and possibilities of feeling a nation that had already, since independence, been in crisis.

Crisis is a major thread of discussion in both private and public in the contemporary Republic of Armenia. A series of “fraudulent” (*keghc*) elections, un(der)employment, a “frozen conflict” with neighboring Azerbaijan which in more recent months is turning yet again into actual combat, high petroleum prices, the ongoing privatization of common lands in order to extract natural resources in environmentally

---

1 Cited from an interview with Tsomak Oga on *Urvagic* on *Kentron TV* in May 2012.
destructive ways (such as mining), low pensions for the elderly, and insufficient salaries make up parts of this crisis that is threatening the future of the nation. But the major concern for many Armenians is population loss through large-scale emigration over the past twenty-five years. In the years of the war with Azerbaijan over the region of Nagorno-Karabagh, from 1990-1994, an estimated 22-40%\(^2\) of the population fled Armenia. While emigration has slowed, it has not ceased and thousands continue to leave every year,\(^3\) many temporarily for work, or seasonally, returning once or twice annually. The uneasiness over population is abetted by concerns about unemployment for those who have remained in Armenia. The current (2016) official unemployment rate – defined by those who are actively seeking work in the country as a percentage of the total labor force – provided by the Central Bank of Armenia is 19.6%.\(^4\) However, this does not include employment that does not make ends meet. This rate, in other words, already high, does not include those who are working at extremely low wages in the grey labor market. Furthermore, many claim this joblessness in the country as the cause of the “low” fertility rate of 1.74 per woman since 2009.\(^5\)

\(^2\) The United Nations Development Program (Jijiyan 2009) estimates that in 1992-1993, 980,000-990,000 people left the Republic of Armenia, while some did return later (1993-1994). The total emigration is estimated to have been about 610,000-620,000.

\(^3\) According to a report published in Chorord Ishkhanutyun (Fourth Regime) paper in June 2015, for example, 27,114 persons had left the country already that year. http://www.chi.am/index.cfm?objectid=98ABBE90-F036-11E4-889B0EB7C0D21663 (accessed on December 16, 2015)


In 2012, following the DIY firebombing, right-wing nationalists, given voice by media, pointed to sexual perversion as a cause for the end of the nation, but most of Yerevan’s residents are anxious about something else: the perversions (aylandakutyun) of those at the top, signaling a lack of proper leadership and moral impropriety of those in power, allowing the disintegration of the family, and eventually, the nation. In this dissertation, I take as my main and guiding problem the following question: how was it that in 2012, after almost complete silence around homosexuality within Armenian discourse, the figure of the homosexual became not only a kind of crisis in the Republic of Armenia, but became in many ways the very crux of crisis, and further, how did this newfound sexual perversion of the nation contribute to the ways in which the many other anxieties enfolded into a felt crisis become one of perversion?

2012 was a pivotal year. It was the year in which the homosexual was born into this anxiety, as one form of this anxiety and as a measure of crisis. It was the year that marked the emergence of many new forms of countering the perverse paths that the nation had taken over the prior two decades. After many failed attempts to restore the hope and victorious feelings that had characterized the independence movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Armenians were becoming a fragmented social and political body and new forms of activism were arising to counter a settled-in passivity and hopelessness. The figure of the homosexual, as a national threat that was born through a rhetoric of sexual perversion in 2012, was also able to emerge a rhetoric of other perversions – the moral perversions of those in power. In this dissertation, I am, indeed, arguing that the government and oligarchy – those in authority in today’s Armenia – are
pervasive by way of their relation to Armenianness. Rather than taking their perversion as the focus here, however, I take cue from Armenians who experience this perversion and who contributed to my research, to think the ways in which this perversion is felt and the consequences it has on the very viability of the Armenian nation.

**A Nation Under Threat (the Machinery of Falsification)**

> From the pure spring I take a drink of water, I am satisfied And after a while, upholding the present, I am amazed At how all of a sudden, everything surrounding us changed They say, every dream and hope was made turbid again…

> I am not amazed of all of the monsters awakened again I am amazed of my people’s patience again I am amazed and not afraid of the foreign enemy My country’s sanctuary was destroyed from the inside and already long ago - Arthur Meschian, from the song “I Am Amazed”

Already a small nation that has been felt to be under threat historically – always surrounded by enemies - Armenians feel great anxiety about failures in maintaining a population that continues to be Armenian, immorality and impropriety, as well as the possible complete annihilation of the nation through these failures., Armenian propriety and morality is central to the nation and its survival. The Republic of Armenia is currently an independent nation-state in the post-Soviet South Caucuses, sharing borders with Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Iran. But Armenia is much wider than this. Armenians regard themselves an ancient people, one of the earliest human civilizations, and as the first Christian nation. Armenia has largely been a deterritorialized nation, spanning centuries of survival in other lands under foreign rule. According to popular narratives, the nation has survived this dispersal and the atrocities that come with lack of
sovereignty – like the 1915 Genocide in the Ottoman Empire – because of its commitment to proper Armenianness, or the maintenance of Armenian cultural, literary, religious and family values.

Armenia has only become a configuration of territory – or the dream of and demand for such a territory – since the late nineteenth century. The modern formation of political parties in Armenia – largely in Western Armenia at the end of the Ottoman Era – had transformed a nation based on cultural-religious heritage to the politicization of culture and nation, demanding territorialized sovereignty. As Gerard Libaridian has put it, “By grounding nationalism in a historically well-defined territory, love of fatherland gave the emancipation movement a political legitimacy denied to those whose love was for the abstracted cultural-religious heritage of the Armenians” (2007: 52). This newly emerging demand, however, caused a few ripples along the way. By the beginnings of World War I, members of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), one of the major political parties forming in this time, were holding international meetings – from Istanbul to St. Petersburg to Paris – to discuss revolution and the work that needed to be done to realize the dream of national sovereignty born of these political movements. Some researchers have suggested that it was these actions of ARF members that made Armenians a threat to the centralized Ottoman Empire, especially a 1914 meeting in St. Petersburg during a time when the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire had entered into World War I against each other. These meetings, and plans for national revolution, led to the questioning of Armenian loyalty to the Ottomans, eventually allowing justification for massacres in Armenian townships (Turkylimaz 2012) as well as the assassination of
Armenian writers, intellectuals, and politicians in Istanbul on April 24, 1915, which has come to mark the day of remembrance of the beginning of Genocide, also referred to as the Yeghern (Great Atrocity) and aghed, or catastrophe (Nichanian 2009). While Armenia is popularly conceptualized as a nation that has always been under threat from invading neighbors and foreign rulers, the fight for independence has also never been without its dangers.

In 1988, as a product of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s democratization project for the Union, known as glasnost (openness), Armenians began demanding the secession of the region of Nagorno-Karabagh from the Azerbaijani SSR. The region, claimed as historically Armenian land, had belonged to the Azerbaijani SSR since 1923, but continued to be populated by a large number of Armenians. These demands and mass rallies in Yerevan, Karabagh and Azerbaijan led to ethnic violence in the Republics. In 1988, violence broke out in the streets of Sumgait, Azerbaijan through which tens of Armenians and some Azeris were killed in riots. Again, in 1990, as the conflict between the two Soviet republics reached new heights and the Karabagh movement in Armenia turned into a demand for secession and independence from the Soviet Union itself, violence broke out yet again in Azerbaijan’s capital city of Baku. By 1990, a large population exchange was taking root, evacuating almost all Armenians from Azerbaijan and vice versa. These pogroms were not the first in the region. Armenians had been under attack in 1920, as riots in the town of Shusha, then part of the Azerbaijan independent Republic, burned the Armenian half of the city, killing hundreds of Armenians and expelling many more from the city (de Waal 2013). Inter-ethnic violence and war are not
foreign to the South Caucuses. As Bruce Grant (2009) has shown, sovereignty and territoriality have long been products of constant negotiation and renegotiation. The inclusion of this region into the Soviet Union by 1923 had seemed to quell ethnic tensions through the promotion of internationalism, fraternity and brotherhood across the Republics (Hirsch 2005). As such, the violence of the late 1980s and 1990, which turned into full on war by 1991 between Azerbaijan and Armenia, presented great challenges to the Soviet centralized government. In both Republics, Gorbachev became highly suspect as he took his time in sending in troops to deal with these outbreaks of violence.

While Russia was and in some ways continues to be celebrated as the savior of Armenia during the Soviet era, criticisms of Russia’s failures to intervene in the aftermath of these pogroms led to the re-emergence of a desire for autonomy and sovereignty, rendering the Karabagh movement a national independence movement by 1989. As Harutyun Marutyan (2007) has argued, the 1988 movement brought into play the consequences of a lack of autonomy and independent constitutional rights by highlighting the 1915 Genocide in the Ottoman Empire. Related to the emergence of critical attention to this historical memory was the connection between the 1988 pogroms to the Genocide, often discussed as its “sequel” (96-101). As in many other Soviet republics, Armenians were making claims for independence and the demand for the dissolution of the Soviet Union, comprising national movements that eventually contributed to the end of the USSR in 1991. Importantly for Marutyan, Armenians no longer saw themselves as passive victims, but active warriors in their national destiny.
These movements created a great deal of camaraderie and a euphoric sense of national unity. As Levon Abrahamian describes it, the sentiments of unity enveloped Armenians into “a common soul, a common mind, and (finally) a common feeling of national self-consciousness” (1990: 72). After a century of dreaming for independence, in 1991 Armenians finally had their own sovereign territory, an azad, ankakh Hayasdan (free, independent Armenia), as the national anthem of the new Republic would express it. By 1992, however, this euphoric sense of national unity was being undone by a number of political and economic processes. Armenians popularly refer to the years of the war as the “cold and dark years” (tsurt u mut dariner), marked by unbearable lack of or shortage of electricity, gas, water, and food. The war would be catastrophic in various ways. Along with these horrendous conditions of shortage in Armenia that led to massive emigration from the country, 20,000 Armenian soldiers perished, including 8,000 from the territory of Karabagh. Additionally, the ethnic violence against Armenians in Azerbaijan and Karabagh led to the deaths of 6,000 (de Waal 2013: 285), wounded 20,000 (Bertsch 1999: 297) and left missing hundreds of Armenians (Hakobyan 2010). Concurrently, as the Karabagh movement that would lead to this war was taking shape almost daily in the streets of Yerevan and in Nagorno-Karabagh, on December 7, 1988 Armenia experienced a devastating earthquake that, by some estimates, killed 50,000 people (Brand 1988).

Aside from the daily experience of horror, the war also created massive political-economic upheaval. Azerbaijan’s blockade against Armenia cut important means of accessing petroleum and other important resources. During the 1980s, Armenia received
80% of its fuel from the USSR, 82% of which went through Azerbaijan (Astourian 2000). Needing to quickly develop its own economic processes because of these geopolitical restrictions, the government of the new republic began to rely on privatization based on demand – through the “pro-rata” system (Roth-Alexandrowicz 1997) - with the number of shares of enterprise rapidly growing to ensure the sale of all shares (Astourian 2000: 7).

A report estimated that by the end of 1997, only seven percent of the population participated in the privatization process as shareholders. The ministry of privatization gives a precise figure for the number of shareholders of medium and large enterprises as of 2 November 1998: 143,000 citizens - that is, about 4.5 percent of the population that received vouchers. The concentration of wealth was greater, however, than these figures suggest. One economist has pointed out that 2.5 percent of shareholders control sixty percent of the shares of 713 companies privatized through open share subscription (Astourian 2000: 13).

Because of a lack of market understanding by those who were now in control of these enterprises - many of whom were the directors of enterprise in the Soviet regime - as well as the crisis in the economy during wartime and the need to privatize quickly, the pro-rata system led to mass privatization of Armenian industry in 6 years time for very low sums of capital. By 1997, almost 55% of Armenia’s industrial infrastructure was sold for around $800,000 (Astourian 2000: 14). And furthermore, those who now controlled these industries were not investing in reconstruction and investment to these industries. Rather, most enterprise was liquidated and parts of scrap metal and machinery were sold to enterprise outside of Armenia. In a 1997, the World Bank (Roth-Alexandrowicz) reported “Armenia’s mass privatization, now under way, is expected to be substantially completed by early 1998. Unlike programs in other transition economies, Armenia’s program has
been implemented without massive amounts of donor assistance. The main lesson from Armenia’s experience is that it is possible to achieve mass privatization in a simple, transparent, and popular way” (181). However, as the story usually goes, on the ground, this was felt as anything but popular. A few came to power by privatizing Armenian enterprise, and rather than investing in and building them, mass privatization was followed by mass liquidation. This led to the few who had profiteered during mass privatization to come into large sums of money and develop what is popularly called in Armenia today the oligarchy. It was evident that those who were now in power got there by taking advantage of war, poverty, and technicality.

The government of the newly independent Republic of Armenia transitioned from governance based on nationalist claims to sovereignty, ruled by the Armenian Pan-National Movement (APNM) that rose out of the Karabagh and independence movements, to a government of oligarchs and their close friends. The first president of the Republic of Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, was a leader in Armenia’s national independence movement, making him a popular figure in Armenian politics. As the director of the APNM in 1990, he was elected as President of the newly independent Republic in 1991 with a large number of votes. His first term in office coincided with the “cold and dark years,” during the war with Azerbaijan. As such, by the 1996 elections he was no longer the popular figure he was during the Independence movement. Ter-Petrosyan was re-elected to office in 1996 through his connections with the rising horde of “unsavory men” who had come to power through privatization schemes and political corruption (Astourian 2000). The elections in 1996 started a political trend, in which each
election would be seen as “steadily more corrupt and less ‘free and fair’” than the last (Ishkanian 2008: 36), leading to mass post-election opposition movements from then on. By 1998 Ter-Petrosyan was forced to resign and was replaced by Robert Koacharyan, an independent politician – with close ties to not only the Republican Party, but the military-formed government of Karabagh. From 1994-1997, Kocharyan had been President of Karabagh. This started another trend: the domination of Armenian politics by those who had gained a rise in Armenian political affairs through war.

In 2007 Ter-Petrosyan not only made a come back – positioning himself as a candidate for presidency in 2008 – but he succeeded in drawing out a number of people in a post-election movement. He ran a campaign based on calling out the last decade of governance in Armenia – by the Republican Party – as full of corruption, anti-popular rule, and theft from the public and the people. He also acknowledged the criticism of his own last presidency. He was also confident that whatever he had done, and whatever he could do, would not be comparable to the anti-morality displayed by those within the ruling party. Within the official results of the 2008 elections, Ter-Petrosyan only received 21.5% of the vote, but even before the vote count he began a protest in Liberty Square claiming that the elections had been rigged by Sargsyan and the ruling party. Joined by his supporters, he celebrated his own victory. The opposition – with Levon Ter-Petrosyan as the charismatic leader of what became the Armenian National Congress (in Armenian 
*Hay Azgayin Kongres* or *HAK*) – continued for days.

The tension around this presidential campaign was thick. Kocharyan’s regime had already seen one major violent episode in 1999 when on October 27 a group of 5 men
armed with AK-47s, led by Nairi Hunanyan, entered the National Assembly meeting hall in central Yerevan and shot dead eight men, including Vazgen Sargsyan, then Prime Minister, and Karen Demirchian, then Speaker of the National Assembly, injuring 30 others in the building. Hunanyan was a former journalist and member of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF). The act carried out by Hunanyan, his brother Karen, his uncle and two other men was positioned as a patriotic coup d’etat – for their nation and their people – calling an end to the illegitimacy that had taken shape since 1996.

10 days following the February 19th 2008 presidential elections, on March 1, when the opposition led by Levon Ter-Petrosyan had set up camp in Liberty Square and many were refusing to leave the site, sleeping in tents there overnight, Kocharyan’s presidency would be marked by another act of violence. On the very early morning of March 1, because of “reports” that protestors were in possession of hand grenades and other weapons, police entered Liberty Square, tearing through the tents and people camping out there and when this did not disperse the protestors, police began dispersal with water canons, beatings with rubber truncheons, and the use of electric prods. After a day of continued clashes with the police – where police were outnumbered by protesters still, the military descended into central Yerevan, armed with AK-47 and M-16 assault rifles, prepared for Kocharyan’s declaration of a state of emergency. The call for the state of emergency came around 10:30 pm that evening, at which time the military opened fire on the streets – killing 10 people and wounding many more. The state of emergency also led to the closing down of any non-state operated media.

Razmik Panossian (2006) refers to the post-1996 era of Armenian politics as the
formation a “postnationalist” government in “which elites are preoccupied with issues of power and economic gain and the main issues in the political sphere relate to socioeconomic policies and day-to-day concerns” (225). Unification in the name of national ideology, Panossian argues, died with the 1996 elections. Since then, Armenians have become largely passive, except during post-election protests. Earlier forms of mass protest, based on “a primordialist ethnonationalism” (Suny 2006: 287), have waned as economic struggle that swept the country placed national identity on the backburner, and focus has moved toward everyday survival. Through these fraudulent actions of those in power, economic decay, and the death of unifying forms of nationalism, independence has felt like a failed dream. This free and independent Armenia has had, since the mid-1990s, an uncanny resemblance to its opposite – a threatened nation. And, at least for right-wing nationalists since 2012, the homosexual figures one of these threats.

Sigmund Freud (2003 [1919]) defines the term “uncanny” or unheimlich, as “unfamiliar” or that which has resemblance to what is familiar but is not familiar. The uncanny, or “un-homely,” one of the most disturbing of human affects, is not, however, simply the opposite of “homely.” Rather, “heimlich is a word the meaning of which develops towards an ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, unheimlich. Unheimlich is in some way or other a sub-species of heimlich” (124). In other words, what makes the affect of the uncanny a disturbing one is its association with that which is familiar, marking that which is most intimate akin to its threat. The uncanny sense alive in Armenia today - that what is bringing an end to the nation is the very thing that was longed-for for a century if not more, a sovereign Armenian national government - is very
much about authority figures, or Father figures. Or, to be more accurate, the illegitimacy of authority in contemporary Armenia. Members of the Armenian government and representatives of the oligarchy, in other words, are Armenians who act as authority to the nation – subjects who are supposed to be leaders. As such, they have a resemblance to Hayk, and in many ways have taken the position of Hayk, in “leading” the Armenian people. This is an ambivalent position, however, since it is these same figures who are seen as the main threat to the nation’s future.

For the purposes of this dissertation, “right-wing nationalist,” is not in reference to those affiliated with the government nor with mass movements. Rather, small organizations and independent actors have been emerging new nationalist sentiment, forming a thread of grassroots politics in Yerevan, which takes up homosexuality as a major national threat. While questions of sovereignty, proper Armenian ethico-moral governance and the maintenance of Armenian values in the face of external threat remain major goals of these grassroots formations, the figure of the homosexual has taken a central role in these debates. Right-wing nationalists as such are a minority. However, they have been given a great deal of voice within mainstream press. From invitations to speak on television talks shows and news, to the spread of their brand of nationalist ideology within social media and blogs, they have been able to rally national anxieties concerning the disintegration of Armenianness into palpable form. This thread should be distinguished from major nationalist political parties established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Dashnakstutyun, Ramkavars and Hnchakians). In contrast to these older formations, whose affiliates advocated for an Armenian national and political
identity separate from the Church (Suny 1993), nationalists who have emerged in Armenia since around 2012 see the Church as essential to Armenian identity. Some very few right-wing nationalists, however - like Hovhannes Galajyan, the Editor-in-Chief of the right-wing newspaper *Iravunq* - reject the Church and locate proper Armenianness prior to the emergence of the Armenian Apostolic Church (Panossian 2002), privileging Hayk over Grigor Lusavorich.

Most of the research contributing to this dissertation was conducted in Yerevan. However, I often left Yerevan when my interlocutors, friends, colleagues and others with whom (and about whom) I conducted this research left the city. Yerevan is the capital city of Armenia, its once-industrial center, the heart of cultural and social life of the country, as well as the location of more than half of its population. During 12 months of ethnographic research, I spent much of my time as an intern in the offices of two organizations: Public Information and Need for Knowledge (PINK), an LGBT organization, and Women’s Resource Center (WRC), a feminist organization. There, I became involved in day-to-day conversations and activities, sometimes going out into the streets for protests and other events. These events, often disrupted by nationalists, taught me a great deal about how the figure of the homosexual as the downfall of Armenia was affecting those working on issues of gender and sexuality. To understand the nuanced ways in which various grassroots actors were reckoning with, negotiating as well as disavowing the government’s sovereignty and illegitimacy, I expanded my scope to right-

---

6 While estimates of Armenia’s population vary drastically from source to source – sometimes at 2 million, sometimes at 2.5 and at about 3 million in official discourses – most of my interlocutors claim that it is no more than about 1.8 million. In the context of population crisis, population count itself has become highly politicized.
wing nationalists, journalists, and environmental activists, with whom I conducted in-depth interviews. PINK and WRC as organizations, as well its staff members, have been the main focused targets of right-wing nationalists. The staff members at these organizations, along with many other independent activists, sardonically refer to right-wing nationalists - like Hayazn, Mek Azg Miyutyun (One Nation Union), Hayoc Arcivner (Armenian Eagles), blogger Tigran Kocharyan, journalist Hovhannes Galajyan - as azgaprkichner, or “nation-savers.”

These nationalists, also often called “fascists” or “ultranationalists” by leftist actors, are similar to brethren in older organizations, however, in emphasizing the importance of a sovereign Armenia that is ready and able to defend itself politically against foreign states and alliances. I also distinguish right-wing nationalism from other forms of nationalism in post-Soviet Armenia, such as the leftist nationalisms within the environmental movement, the Dashnaksutyun as it operates as a political party in Armenia today, as well as other organizations and political parties that might be deemed nationalists per their discussion of an independent Armenia connected to its roots to the land, such as the Heritage Party (Jarangutyun). These other formations have taken less firm and less public positions on homosexuality and LGBT rights. To be clear, while members of these Parties might support in public speech the actions of anti-homosexual

---

7 Most names in this dissertation are pseudonyms. Exceptions are for those who have a public presence that would have been impossible to anonymize, such as Tsomak Oga, and a few others. Pseudonyms were chosen by me, however I consulted with many of the participants in this study who I rename. Most of these have approved of the names I have given them. Some suggested others which I do use. All names are common Armenian names. In some cases, they are common names that have Russian origins, a prevalent form of naming during the Soviet and early post-Soviet era.
actors (such as members of the Dashnaksutyun did in 2012), or support LGBT persons through human rights language (as the Heritage Party has been known to do), they are by no means actively invested in the politics of sexuality as are other organizations like Hayazn, Iravunq Paper, Mek Azg Miyutyun (One Nation Union), and Hayoc Arcivner (Armenian Eagles). Some of these organizations, like the latter, also receive funding and other amenities from the federal government, which has also become a cause of leftist concern, leading to further theories about how right-wing nationalists are useful for the government.

**Birth of a New Problem, or the Nation’s Sexual Perversion**

It is really unappealing to me that an Armenian rocker goes to Turkey and further, says that Turkey is more free than Armenia…In the end, freedom, let’s be clear, is not about gays taking over the streets, you understand?

- Arpi Beglaryan, *Yerkir Media*

According to Tsomak, one of DIY Pub’s owners, harassment on the bar began in June 2011 after she had returned from a trip to Istanbul, Turkey. Throughout the years that Tsomak had been playing punk music – since 2003 – she had gained credence as Armenia’s first punk, which was both good and bad, in all of those terms’ significations. She was, to say the least, a bad ass that had gained some national attention. And her notoriety as the first and only – for many years – punk in Armenia, had travelled to Turkey as well, especially amongst Armenian youth there who were intrigued with

---

Armenianness in all of its various iterations. And so Pincet was invited to participate in Gay Pride Istanbul 2011 and asked to perform there. During the parade that flowed through Istiklal St. near Taksim Square, they had a good time, she told me, waving a tiny Armenian flag to show Armenian LGBT solidarity with LGBT persons in Turkey.

Since they were in Istanbul for a number of days, the Armenian newspaper *Agos*, whose editor-in-chief Hrant Dink had been assassinated on the street right outside of the editorial office just 4 years prior (in January 2007), invited her for an interview about her experience in Gay Pride Istanbul and her activism in Armenia. During this interview, Tsomak was asked how she felt about her participation in Gay Pride, to which she responded that she thought it was great that activists had been able to organize gay pride in Turkey and that she hopes that one day Armenians will find the freedom to be able to do such things in their own country. She told the interviewer that she had been to Turkey a number of times over the last few years and felt that each visit connects her to new and interesting people and that she hopes there can be solidarity amongst Armenians and Turks.

I first met Tsomak in June 2011, just a couple of days following her return from Istanbul. DIY Pub had opened in the time since my last visit to Yerevan in 2010. The bar had quickly become a venue for leftist organized discussions, everyday gatherings and punk shows. I visited the pub a number of times that summer and also conducted an interview with Tsomak there one quiet Wednesday afternoon. At that time, tension was already building. Various networks and news circulations wanted to interview her about her trip to Turkey and her participation in a gay pride parade. *Yerkir Media*, a television
network owned by the ARF (or Dashnaksutyun), was one of them. Since her return, she had been receiving many phone calls - some to tell her that she was a traitor to her nation, others asking for interviews but who largely seemed to be looking for a way to insult her in a public setting. She wanted to give an interview that would put this all to rest.

A few days after this conversation, she agreed to be interviewed by Yerkir Media. While this broadcast was supposed to be about her participation in Turkey’s Gay Pride, the network had insisted that the interview take place in DIY and had made publicly visible the building’s façade, showing clearly the address of the venue. The broadcast paid little attention to Tsomak’s actual words, giving more sway to the significance of the tattoo on her left arm, zooming in on it at one point. In July 2011, one of Tsomak’s major concerns was people showing up to the bar itself. After this interview there was constant harassment on the bar. “Every other night some group would try to enter and cause a spectacle (shukhur anel),” she told me a year later. But there was one group in particular that had started ongoing harassment:

[9 ibid.]
They called themselves the Dark Ravens, like patriotic soldiers or something. They were young boys – some of them looked like they were 15. In the beginning they started coming in to the pub, but after they started trouble a number of times we stopped letting them in. Then they started hanging out outside the pub, smoking cigarettes, throwing things at the door, spitting at the walls of the building and the door. Sometimes we would find vomit right outside with Nazi swastikas on the wall and we knew it was probably them. We would clean it up and they would do it again. That morning [on May 8, about 11 months after her return from Istanbul] – it was like 5 in the morning – I received a phone call from the fire department saying that my bar had burned. I thought, ‘What?! What do you mean my bar has burned?!’ I panicked. I was just there a few hours before that. I had left at around 1 in the morning and left the bartender to close up. When I showed up, the whole place was charred. At first, I thought that maybe someone had not fully put out a cigarette or something. It was devastating, but you know, accidents happen. Then, a few hours later, we looked at some video footage from a security camera of the store next door. And I couldn’t believe it. These assholes had broken through the door and thrown bombs inside. The video shows all of it. They approach the bar, they get through the door, they throw their bombs [Molotov cocktails made in beer bottles] inside. There were two of them in the video, but their friends were likely waiting on the street. The bombs started a fire that eventually spread and burned the whole place down.

The two boys who turned out to be brothers – Hampig and Mgrdich Khapazian – were arrested a couple of days after the firebombing, but quickly bailed out by ARF members of National Assembly, Artsvik Minasyan and Hrayr Karapetyan, who posted the bail of 1 million dram (approximately 2,500 U.S. Dollars). Additionally, Artsvik Minasyan made a statement about the attack and his reasons for bailing out the young men, claiming that he knew they were good, normal boys and that they do not deserve to be detained. He also claimed that the attack was in “accordance with national ideology,” and stated that he “consider[s] [Tsomak’s] types destructive to Armenian society.” Even though he didn’t want to “sound offensive,” he explained, the firebombing was a “practical step.” Other members of government made similar statements. Eduard Sharmazanov of the Republican Party, for example, was reported to having claimed that
the firebombing was a “rebellion” and that it is “right and justified.”

About a week following the firebombing, after she was continuously represented as a threat to national security, Tsomak agreed to give another interview on the popular political talk show *Urvagic* on the television network *Kentron TV*. The firebombing, according to Petros Ghazaryan, the host of the show, was a unique situation because “in the 22 years of this Republic, there has never been a bombing based on ideology that has targeted a particular place – be that a restaurant, a bar or any other institution. This bombing occurred, if we want to be correct, let’s put it this way, because in this bar there was so-called “cultural diversity” propaganda being spread.” Ghazaryan put the event explicitly into perspective with the newly emerging leftist rhetoric of “fascism,” especially when he also claimed that “because, well, us Armenians are fixated on all remaining the same and to not change and thus it is really important to think about how we will have to change…the owners of the pub and the customers of the pub describe this event as a moment of classic fascism.” Ghazaryan pushed Tsomak to think seriously about why DIY was firebombed, why she had become an object of negative attention, and, importantly, if she understood the implications of what she was doing within the context of Armenianness. “Do you understand? You went to Turkey and you participated in a public parade representing homosexuality. You went against our kind, do you understand?....You have opened up a place for free behavior. That is against our behavior as Armenians.” Tsomak’s response would heighten her visibility as threat to the nation:

---

Our nation has to be cured. We need to cure, and free it from these kinds of stereotypes, from these kinds of nationalist ideas. To be honest, I think our nation is a bit sick. It has a sickness in it – this nationalist sickness. The more it goes, this sickness is growing and it is growing in everybody. The more we continue like this, one day it will blow up and this will be the annihilation of the nation. This is if people do not start working on themselves.

Following this media onslaught, which led to many death threats against her, her girlfriend and her sister, in July of 2012 the three of them left to claim political asylum in Sweden, where they are now residing. When I interviewed her on Skype a few months later, she insisted that Armenia had become a fascist nation with no freedom for individuals. The nation was foreclosing its possibilities of future. Freedom in Armenia has become a highly contentious topic over the last couple of decades. Finally independent, Armenia is felt to be inching toward its destruction after centuries of survival. Freedom was beginning to look a lot like unfreedom; home was being abandoned and becoming less and less this dreamed-of fatherland.

The DIY firebombing was an event in Alain Badiou’s (2007) sense. It created fissures within a well-rehearsed narrative of a nation that has continuously been threatened and endured nonetheless, bringing into the open not only possibilities of difference, but improper difference, within the nation. In other words, something was wrong with Armenia and it was something internal to it. Journalists, right-wing nationalists, bloggers and other voices in the country, following this event, began to regularly deploy the notion of sexual perversion (aylaserutyun) as this something wrong. Perversion has become a common rhetoric in Armenia over the last few years and is often used to describe the many crises of the nation. There are two terms in Armenian that connote perversion that, as we can define it, mean the veering off of a proper path and
onto an improper one. Both these terms depend on the prefix *ayl*, meaning other or alternative. And both of these terms have become common parlance over the last few years. *Aylaserutyun* refers to sexual deviance, or having “other” (improper) affinities or desires. It is used often by right-wing nationalists to express discontent regarding homosexuality in Armenia, and, as such, is taken up by mainstream media. One can find thousands of news articles, in print and online, television talk shows, or other references in public speech about this kind of perversion and its threats to the family and nation. *Aylandautyun*, on the other hand, is a profane expression referring to corrupt behavior, or forms of sociality and morality that are other than what is understood as proper. The term can be heard from all corners of Armenian everyday life and is often used to refer to the government’s moral bankruptcy. As such, the focus on sexual perversion has made possible the emergence of criticism of the authorities through a similar rhetoric – that of moral perversion. But these two forms are in tense relationship. Sometimes congealing into one another, sometimes ojectivifying the other to displacement and condensation and allowing the distraction from moral corruption for attention to the sexually deviant, tracing talk of *aylandakutyun* and *aylaserutyun* through multiple sites of anxious expression can help make sense of political-economic transition as it affects nation.

Armenian propriety in these forms of circulation is constantly iterated as a singular form. Ghazaryan, while perhaps playing devil’s advocate as he usually does with his interview subjects, was calling attention to precisely what has driven activists to refer to Armenian culture and contemporary nationalist movements as fascist. The trouble that
Tsomak seemed to be causing, and the reason why she had become the basis of so much frenzy, was precisely her refusal of this singularity, throwing into question Armenian propriety and revealing the possibilities of multiple forms of Armenianness. As Badiou (2007) tells us, ontology does not admit the doctrine of the event because, as a “complete doctrine with normal or natural multiples,” making it a singularity, ontology cannot admit historicity (184). This notion of the proper, now exploded by the hypervisible figure of the homosexual and his threat on the nation, was at once impossible to reckon with and also impossible to ignore. Tsomak’s insistence on her difference and her actions – going to Turkey, opening up a “free” bar - as good for Armenia – threatens the very stability of Armenian propriety because it fissures the seemingly whole and singular contents therein.

In July 2011, a year prior to the DIY debacle and around the time when harassment on Tsomak regarding her appearance at Gay Pride Istanbul was only just beginning, I met with Lara Aharonian, the director of the Women’s Resource Center (WRC) in her office. I had asked her what the organization worked on and Aharonian was in the midst of explaining some of their activities: a legal clinic to support women who were victims of domestic violence, workshops to educate younger and older women about human rights, and organizing other kinds of forums – such as on feminism in Armenian culture, sexual education and discussion groups and, more recently (at least then), Aharonian explained, they had started planning for an event that would take place in the following year to raise awareness of diversity. “We hope to change things in the culture so that people are not afraid of differences,” she said. “This is a big problem in Armenia. People see it as a threat and not as a strength. So we are planning a big event
next spring or summer maybe to show the diversity of Armenia. It will include all kinds of people. Religious minorities, ethnic minorities, people who are part of subcultures like punks and emos maybe. You know, to show the people that being different can be beautiful.”

This event did take place. It was called the Diversity March. But in 2011 and the early part of 2012, when WRC, along with Public Information and Need for Knowledge (PINK) (an LGBT rights organization), and independent activists, who partnered up to put it on, they could not foresee the social and political climate of the city in the aftermath of the DIY firebombing. The march was planned mostly in response to then-recent police attacks on an “emo” subculture, during which police would detain groups of youth at a time seen walking the streets dressed a certain way – black and pink clothing, dyed hair, dark eye make-up. It was also a response to hate speech and intolerance toward religious minorities, like Jevovah’s witnesses and Mormon’s, who while very few, have also become a target of right-wing nationalists as well as mainstream media. One could describe the situation as a moral panic (Cohen 2002 [1972]), made worse when a young woman known to belong to the subculture committed suicide in November 2010. The panic over homosexuality, in other words, had some precedents, contextualized within difference itself as a threat to the moral economy of Armenian values. As heightened as the “emo” threat had become in 2011, it would never reach the climax that homosexuality would, allowing hysteria to take shape in 2012.

The organizations had invited a number of community members to represent Jehovah’s witnesses, Yezidis, Iranians and others, which would mark the other Armenia
– the 5-10% of the nation-state’s population that was non-ethnically Armenian and non-Apostolic Christian. For right-wing nationalists - and especially a newly founded nationalist organization known as Hayazn - and media, however, the march would largely be depicted as a “gay parade.” Gay Pride parades across the U.S. and Europe have become highly ritualized affairs (Davydova 2012), in which participants as well as counter-protesters make use of scripts. National values, national sovereignty and the impropriety of homosexuality have widely become parts of anti-Pride march scripts in Eastern and Central Europe (Gruszczynska 2012). However, the Diversity March in Yerevan - unlike the 2008 Pride March in Belgrade (Johnson 2012), the Baltic Pride March in Lithuania in 2010 (Davydova 2012) and various other “homo-citizen” marches and parades in Poland (Gruszczynska 2007) - made no mention of sexuality or LGBT identity. There were no rainbow flags present at this March. Rather, because right-wing nationalists had already become familiar with these scripts through displays of visible homosexuality in Europe within Armenian mainstream press, for them the March was a “gay parade” nonetheless.

According to Anna, a staff member at PINK who was one of the march’s main organizers, the debacle around the Diversity March began on its eve. A Facebook status appeared on May 20, letting Armenians know that the following day homosexuals were planning to have a gay parade. The status quickly spread, eventually became a Facebook group with its own counter-event with hundreds of RSVPs to attend the counter-march. When Anna and others at the office on the evening of May 20 saw the Facebook group and did some research to see where it had all began, they found out that the information
had started with Raffi, the boyfriend of Armenuhi, a staff member at Society Against Violence, one of the organizations that was also participating in the Diversity March’s organization. They quickly called Armenuhi and told her what had happened and eventually – within a couple of hours – Raffi had removed his Facebook status and had also publicly apologized for the “misunderstanding” on his own Facebook page, claiming that his account had been hacked. It was too late. By that point, PINK was receiving phone calls from journalists asking for commentary on the gay parade they were organizing for the following day. “I was telling them, ‘No, there’s no gay parade. That was false information,’ but they would just say ‘No, we have received information that there will be a gay parade tomorrow.’ No one cared that in fact I was one of the organizers and I was telling them there was no such thing. I even called different news websites and networks telling them to stop spreading false information but they kept insisting that they were right and we were wrong. That’s when we started feeling like something bad was coming. But we decided to go ahead with our plans anyway.”

That afternoon, PINK staff members went to the Cascade in the Northern part of the central district of the city, with all of their posters and other gear that they had prepared. This was where those who had planned the march and others who wanted to participate were to meet. “We were a few blocks away when we heard shouting and chanting, people singing songs in groups and we were confused. We didn’t know we had so many supporters!” Hripsime, a staff member at PINK, explained rhetorically. It was 5 months after the event, but she, along with other members of the organizations who had planned the march, were emotional and viscerally upset every time the event was
discussed. During my interview with Hripsime and Armen, another PINK staff member, both teared up, hugging each other, as they accounted the events of the day.

When they reached the Cascade, they realized that all of the sounds they had heard a few blocks down the street were not their supporters and were not there to participate in their march. Rather, they were “ultranationalists,” mostly young men with a few young women, singing nationalist songs like “Gini Lits,” (“Pour the Wine”) an ARF anthem celebrating the assassination of Talat Pasha in Berlin in 1921, one of the Turkish architects of the Ottoman Genocide against the Armenians in 1915. In this version, however, the “Turk” as the defeated enemy was replaced with “Gomikner,” a derogatory term akin to “faggots” that comes from the Russian term for homosexual (gomoseksual). In other words, those counter-protesting the Diversity March, saw their revocation as a valiant move against the new threat to their nation: faggots.

Hripsime continued her account: “We couldn’t get through to our people when we arrived. Everyone started marching down the street and there was so much yelling and fighting that some of us got caught up with them [the counter protesters]. At one point, I realized that I was alone amongst them and they were all yelling at me, calling me a faggot. The same thing happened to poor Lala [referring to the Lala Aslikyan, an anti-fascist activist who had been very vocal after the DIY firebombing]. They started spitting on her.” There were about 200 counter-protesters, a number much higher than those actually participating in the Diversity March. While Anna, Lara, Hripsime were expecting about 50 people for the march, including representatives of minority groups to whom they had reached out, in the end they guessed that in the midst of the clamor only
about 30 were able to make it. Some watched from the sidelines, unable to join their comrades in the march – who were surrounded by both policemen and right-wing nationalists. Others saw what was taking place and just decided to leave. Aside from singing nationalist songs about victory against faggots, the counter-protesters also shouted slogans, such as “Gomiknerin Baku!” (Faggots to Baku!). Baku is the capital city of Azerbaijan, and the location of pogroms against Armenian residents in 1988, which led to almost complete population exchange between the two republics in 1988-89, and full on war in 1991. The call for “faggots” to go to Baku, then, is essentially, a call for their death as well as a claim on their position as an enemy to the nation. In short, it was a call for exile.

The Diversity March and its counter-protest continued the media panic regarding homosexuality. That day, the March became the major news event, covered all over television news, discussed in social media and blogs, and became another point of heated debate: What did it mean that there was now – after the discovery that Yerevan had a “gay bar,” “gay parades” taking place in the city? The March heightened the problem of “homosexuality,” and continued its public hypervisibility, articulated as sexual perversion (aylaserutyun).

This fixation on homosexuality seemed to obscure other problems. LGBT and feminist activists – like Anna, Hripsime, and Lala – were apt to point out to me that the DIY firebombing occurred two days after the 20-year anniversary of the “liberation” of Shushi from Azerbaijan in 1992 (on May 6). Shushi was a city heavy with symbolic and historical significance for the nation. It was one of the major Armenian cities prior to
World War I within the Russian Empire and lies within the territory of Nagorno-Karabagh. Although today it is controlled by the de-facto government of Nagorno-Karabagh, it belongs de jure to the Republic of Azerbaijan. After the firebombing of DIY, right-wing nationalists were claiming victory once again, juxtaposing this act with the military retrieval of Armenian lands in 1992, leading LGBT and feminist activists to claim that the day was chosen for this very reason. But the firebombing also coincided with another national event – the 2012 Parliamentary elections – also held on May 6, in which the ruling Republican Party gained many more seats in National Assembly, and Prosperous Armenia, the second majority Party led by major oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan, also secured many seats. Post-election periods in Armenia have usually and consistently been marked with large-scale protests and contestation of election results and fraud. In 2012, however, there were no such protests. These activists were arguing that all of this had been manufactured by the government, who was using these young right-wing nationalists to displace vital concerns of the nation onto a much more easily panic-inducing figure, the homosexual. A new-found nationalism – geared against sexual perversion – was diverting attention (sheghum) away from more volatile concerns.

**Nostalgia, Melancholy and the Nation-Family**

Your true lovers left you, my Yerevan
Those unfortunate bastards and beggars became your new master
“I love you.” I say these words to you, my Yerevan
It was worth reaching the ends of the world
Just to understand these words
- Ruben Hakhverdian, from the song “Words”
The authorities keep talking about genocide, genocide, genocide. They are committing genocide now. They are committing economic genocide against their own people! You can forgive an enemy, but there is no forgiving this.
- Karen, Yerevan resident

It was January 2013 and I had been in the field for about five months. I had heard time again about the homosexual’s threat against the reproduction of Armenia’s population, his representation of foreign and destructive values, and the danger he posed against the family as an institution, leading to the nation’s annihilation. In these months, I wondered what these families claimed to be in danger about an Armenia in crisis. What was the role of the family for the nation? Was the family under threat? And what was the cause of this crisis? In January 2013 I hired a research assistant, lucine talalyan, with whom I developed a list of questions about family life. lucine was a friend and a visual artist who I had met through the feminist art collective Queering Yerevan. Together we conducted 150 door-to-door interviews spanning 10 different neighborhoods. We found that many residents of Yerevan did consider the family to be in crisis, but it had nothing to do with the homosexual. Rather, there was another form of perversion – moral corruption (aylandakutyun) of those in government – that was endangering the family.

lucine and I took buses, the Yerevan Metro and marshrutkas (large vans used for public transportation) around the city through the months of January, February, and March. Originally, I had planned to use the snow-ball method, starting with one household within my networks and being referred to others. However, in constructing plans for this research with lucine, she advised me to go door-to-door. This was a common method of conducting survey research in Armenia, she explained. She had been on a number of these research projects – with private communication and mobile
companies like Orange as well as NGOs conducting research for public policy – and she had practice at convincing people to invite her in and answer her questions. We devised a list of questions together and began on January 25th 2012. After about 50 interviews, we decided to add some further questions to our original set (see Appendix). While originally we had planned to do about 10 interviews a day, this proved difficult on our first day, not only because it was often (but not always) difficult to get people to sit down with us, but because those who did want to talk had a lot to complain about. We found that after about 5 of these interviews in one day we were emotionally exhausted. Over these months, we sat with many people crying, had to explain to some who were in awfully desperate conditions that we really could do nothing to help them, and heard from many more the many difficulties of life in contemporary Yerevan.

Karen and his friend and life-time neighbor Mkrtich were returning from having seen off one of their last remaining friends in the country when lucine and I ran into them coming up the stairs in their Shengavit apartment building. It was the first day of these interviews, but Karen’s words about economic genocide resonated with much of what we would hear in coming months. The material conditions of everyday life for most Yerevancis were dire. Of this much I was very aware. What I would learn during these interviews, however, was the ways in which these material conditions were attributed to the moral corruption of those in power and how they affected a sense of Armenia at its historical ends. As such, what I am describing here – perversion as a structure of feeling – should necessarily be understood as a materializing force. Armenianness at threat as it has become perverse is felt in joblessness, the dilapidation of buildings, the inability to
afford food, water, electricity and gas, in low pensions, and in the emptiness of the
country in the post-Soviet, post-independence and post-war era. The perverse nation is a
material condition that affects the everyday life of Armenians. I am interested in the ways
in which political processes, economic conditions, feelings of belonging and un-
belonging, senses of home and domestic space (from the larger national level - the
political “domestic” - to the household level) meet in various ways, making up everyday
life. Following what Anne-Maria Makhulu (2015) calls the politics of the everyday, or
the “politics of presence” that cannot fully be explained by a class analysis, I am
interested in making sense of the various forms of social life, painful discontinuities with
past, (inter)subjective experience and resistance that arise from these conditions.

The methodology of these interviews was both controlled and depended a great
deal on happenstance. We set out to learn about families and their everyday conditions.
What we found, alongside the often-horrid material conditions in which people were
living, were intense attachments to Armenianness. Popular narratives characterize the
nation as exceptional. Armenia is unique in its historico-mythology. It is the site where
the oldest leather shoe in history was found,11 the first Christian nation, an ancient
civilization dating back to biblical times, survivors of the first modern genocide. But, it is
also often imbued with uniqueness when it comes to family values, and national
belonging. There was almost no topic, no discussion, no event that did not occur on the
register of Armenianness. This was mirrored in social movements during my fieldwork,

2016.
throughout which one can hear claims of impropriety. In other words, when police illegally detain activists, when polling stations during elections are observed to have gross violations of election law, or when politicians and other authority figures act in unsavory ways (such as through murder), the claims that are made about these actions involve some sense of what is properly Armenian. One can very often hear the chanting Amot! Amot! Amot! (Shame! Shame! Shame!) at these protests, often alongside challenges like “And you call yourself Armenian?! How can you justify these actions?! You are a Turk!” Shame operates on an affective register. It is an intimate expression. To say that one acts shamefully – in relation to Armenian propriety – is to make an accusation of being outside of the notion of “nation-family” that I will be employing to make sense of these feelings throughout the following chapters. And, further, to accuse one who is supposed-to-be of the nation-family as outside of it, is to name him as national enemy.

Ideally, Armenians do not question the intentions of other Armenians. “Family is the himq [base] of Armenia,” was the most common response to our question about what the role of family is for the nation. This was often also followed by characteristics such as avandapasht (tradition-oriented, or more literally, tradition-worshipping), respectful to fathers, kind, loving and caring. In the late nineteenth century, as representatives of Armenian political parties attempted to translate the Armenian people into a politically viable group - as a nation - the word chosen to translate this term was azg. Anthropologist Levon Abrahamian (2005) argues that rather than a modern political nation-state Armenia is discursively experienced as an “azg-nation,” which may also have an
implication of "family-state" (149), and which I will refer to as the “nation-family.” Azg is a kinship term. It refers to extended family or tribe. The weight of the institution of family in Armenia, then, should not be understood as one aspect of the nation (Anderson 2006 [1983]; Carsten 2004), or the private realm through which the nation is preserved in a globalizing, or modernizing, era (Chatterjee 1993). Rather, family is the base of the nation, the nation itself an extended family. Family, not as institution but as constituting Armenianness itself, as that which forms continuity with an ancient past, is emphasized by a large literature within Armenian studies, especially within the field of anthropology (Abrahamian 2006, Platz 2000, Ishkanian 2008, Beukian 2014, Aliyev 2014). “Family and home” are the “principle paradigms Armenian identity” Abrahamian (2006) states, and poses “home” as an Armenian cosmology. In other words, because of this deterritorialized and Diasporic identity going back centuries, Armenians consider Armenia and home, and Armenia as home, wherever there are Armenian(s) (families) who reside there (150-151).

But today, “there are no more families in Armenia,” we heard many times. Of course, it was not that there really were not any families – there were – but they had become perverse just like their national leaders. In many ways, then, aylandakutyun and aylaserutyun merge, circling back on to one another. It is the aylandakutyun of those at the top, for example, that leads Armenian fathers to abandon their families and form second families abroad, or, worse, to sleep around while working seasonally in Russia, bringing back HIV to their wives in Armenia’s many women-dominated villages. But these forms of perversion also have a deeper form of impropriety at their core. As Mladen
Dolar (2014) has argued, the usurer and the homosexual’s sins take the same structure: surplus. This is why, he suggests, the homosexual and the usurer occupy the same level of hell in Dante’s inferno. It is their surplus value and surplus jouissance that is improper. In the coming chapters of this dissertation, I will take a look at how the figure of the homosexual and the perverse oligarchs – illegitimate Fathers – occupy similar positions to the nation. Both outside of Armenianness, and accused as destructive to it, these figures in many ways act as reminders of a separation anxiety, bringing the fantasy of whole Armenianness into question, and thus causing panic.

**Perversion and a Waning Symbolic Authority**

How can I sit at the banquet table  
And drink the wine of happy enjoyment  
When they do not hesitate to grab  
The morsel of bread from an orphan’s mouth?

…My soul is sick with the anguish of the world.  
- Arthur Meschian, from “Anguish of the World”

One of the major threads in postsocialist ethnographies situated in the U.S. and Western Europe since the lifting of the “Iron Curtain” has been the question of the resurgence of nationalist sentiment and movement. In her 1996 ethnography of Romania’s transition from socialism, Katherine Verdery argues that this rise in nationalism in Eastern Europe was overdetermined. While she works against the popular and mainstream theory of the late 1990s that nationalism’s rise in this region can be attributed to the lid finally being removed off of “ancient hatreds” that had been suppressed by socialist policy, she offers a few reasons for this rise that seem largely akin
to this notion. First, she attributes the nationalist projects to an earlier – pre-socialist – era, to nationalist movements that were effective in inculcating forms of social and cultural identity that would not be undone by a few decades of internationalism. Second, she points out that nationalist identity was just as much a part of postsocialism as was internationalism, an argument that Francine Hirsch’s (2009) research on Stalinist era nationalizing projects lays bare. However, Verdery also further maintains that during independence movements in the 1980s, nationalism came back as the primary form of opposition to socialist rule, making nationalism an intrinsic component of transition politics.

While Verdery’s reading of nationalist resurge may be true in generalizable ways, what does it mean to take seriously nationalism and nationalist discourse in the specificities through which it is felt, experienced and acted upon? What does an understanding of nation in crisis say about the inter-subjective experience of belonging to a nation? And what can this intensely experienced feeling of crisis and moral disintegration of the symbolic values of it say about the relation between material conditions and affective responses? This, I suggest, requires attunement to more than just a “rise in nationalism,” because nationalism is not merely an institution filled with the same content everywhere. Rather, what the pervasive rhetoric of perversion in regards to nation draws attention to is the way in which nation’s content is of crucial importance to understanding how nationalism arises, how it is experienced, and how nation can be understood as in crisis. In this way, Sergei Oushakine (2009) leads the study of post-Soviet nationalisms in another direction. Rather than taking nationalism as an institution,
a universal form, he zeros in on its content. Through the notion of “patriotism of despair,” he argues that the liminal time-space of Russia’s post-soviet transition, was not a suspension of symbolic activity that had framed the Soviet era, but filled with “new languages and skills through which people-in-passage endowed the period of radical changes with some graspable meaning” (4). For Oushakine, the patriotism of despair is “an emotionally charged set of symbolic practices called upon to mediate relations among individuals, nation, and state and thus to provide communities of loss [of motherland] with socially meaningful subject positions (5). What I am interested in here, in the context of Armenia, however, is the ways in which these symbolic practices are felt as empty, presentless, non-existent. A perverse nation, in other words, might be a form of a patriotism of despair, but rather than making sense of loss and disintegration by way of “transitional objects” (Oushakine 2009: 4, citing Donald Winnicott), Armenians feel intense evacuation: first of Soviet stability, authority and order, and second of Armenianness as it was supposed to be in its aftermath.

As such, my reading of nationalism, crisis and sovereignty in Armenia moves away from some major trends in postsocialist studies. Postsocialism is a productive site from which to examine social change and its possibilities, realities, and limits. However, as Tatjana Thelen (2011) argues, postsocialist anthropology has focused on the role of institutions, understood as aggregates of individuals acting in their own self-interest, in making change rather than the ways in which the break-up of institutions have emerged other mechanisms of economic, political and social sustainability. I am, thus, interested in the multiplicity of dialectical relation on the ground – between those who occupy seats of
governance, economic elite, residents of the capital city, leftist activists, right-wing nationalists and so on – to understand how present, past and future are negotiated. In this kind of reading, while I begin with the most-often agreed upon “fact” that Armenia’s current situation is perverse, institutions become symbolic containers rather than sites of social change themselves. The question, then, rather than becoming one about institutions as they go through transition, becomes one about how the transition, failure, and value of institutions affects everyday life in the Republic.

Recent ethnographies have opened up postsocialism as a field of multiplicity with different actors feeling and acting in diverse ways (Hemment 2015, Stout 2014, Oushakine 2009, Yurchak 2005). These new works leave behind the older structural binary of people versus institution that Thelen (2011) sees as a “dead end” in postsocialist studies. Rather than an analysis based on institutions or based on some “Truth” of material reality and conditions, here I am interested in how these are felt and experienced. As such, reader, you will not encounter terms that have now become common within studies of the Republic of Armenia or in the larger field of post-socialist studies, like “civil society” and “democratization”; or, you will not encounter them in the same way,

12 “Post-socialism” and “postsocialism” must be understood as different markings. Postsocialism, hyphenated, can be understood as a temporal divide between the era of socialism and its aftermath. Postsocialism highlights the ways in which the people within these contexts today continue to live with the reality of socialism and form new modes of production, exchange and resistance to counter neoliberal orthodoxy (Xudong 2008). Post-socialism, however, can also be understood as a geographic area, or a site of area studies, spanning the ex-Soviet Union, the Eastern Bloc, China and Cuba. Postsocialism, on the other hand, is a theoretical formation, not constrained by geographic and temporal encounters with “actually existing socialism” (Rudolph Bahro, as cited in Verdery 1991: 419). Like postcolonialism, postsocialism as a concept can help in untangling the ways in which socialism’s effects are felt across time and space.
with the same meanings attached to them. While these concepts are useful on one level of introspection, they become dead ends as they are based in institutions that are largely evacuated of the life that gives life its value and meaning and that which calls on action and non-action. In other words, I am interested in material realities that exist — of which the building of civil society and democratization, international aid, and institutions of all sorts have their fingerprints all over the small Republic of Armenia — but I would like to turn my attention to how these lived realities and affective realms produce myths of their own — myths that constantly circulate and are exchanged amongst people. Myths that create life-worlds. These myths, their importance, and the ways in which they materially affect peoples’ worlds can be evinced through peoples’ words, their countenances, their actions and non-actions, the ways in which they wander and the symbolic but greatly impacting meanings that they attach to material conditions and their causes. In this sense, then, this dissertation is invested in understanding not the structures of corruption, poverty, and emigration themselves, but the ways in which they create other myths and other structures.

Myths have social life. As Trinh Minh Ha puts it, “Anonymous myths give birth to other anonymous myths, multiplying and ramifying themselves without the fear of one being absorbed by the other, and beyond any myth teller’s control.” (1989: 61). In other words, myths create possibilities of inter-subjective relation while they also undo the center of that relation as the subject herself. Myths have a way of figuring, as well as being figured by, real, “objective,” conditions. As such, I am interested in myths — from that of Hayk, to Armenia’s continuity of an ancient people to today’s nation-family, as
well as the myth of perversion. These myths are not “true” or “false” but constitute structures of feeling.

Raymond Williams (1977) defines “structures of feeling” as that which is concerned with “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt” (132). David Eng (2010) distinguishes this concept – or the “more ephemeral, intangible, and evanescent” feelings – from “formal concepts, structural analyses, and systematic beliefs” (15). In other words, structures of feeling can be understood as that which is experienced and lived, but not necessarily part of an official discourse. To help in an analysis that takes seriously structures as they are felt and myths as they circulate and create intersubjective reality, I find psychoanalytic concepts and frameworks apt.

Postsocialism, and the particular worlds to which it has given rise, raises many questions around which psychoanalysis has been greatly invested since its foundation over a hundred years ago. Scholars of socialism and postsocialism, whether or not committed to a psychoanalytic project, have deployed concepts that make up the traditional canon of psychoanalytic rhetoric: castration (Schrand 2002; Kaganovsky 2008), ambivalent attachment to authority (de Waal 2013b) and sometimes as it is experienced as Fatherhood (Borneman 2003); melancholia (Boym2002); fantasy and desire (Naiman 1997).

Anthropology and psychoanalysis have a long-time friendship, albeit an ambivalent one. Sigmund Freud, the Father of psychoanalysis, based much of his theory of the operation of the unconscious on contemporary anthropological notions, like totem and taboo (1989 [1913]). Jacques Lacan, who saw his task as elaborating on Freud’s
work, was in many ways also indebted to anthropology. It is from Claude Levi-Strauss’ *Elementary Structures in Kinship* (1969), after all, that Lacan gains an understanding of the importance of the exchange of signs to the existence of human culture, and it is through this book that he conceives of his theory of the Symbolic as separate from the Imaginary and the Real (2013). For both Levi-Strauss and Lacan, human culture separated itself from the order of the natural through the invention of communicative exchange. For Levi-Strauss, it was first women who were exchanged, through the taboo on incest that lies as a threshold between nature and culture, which allowed the social to emerge. For Lacan, it was the exchange of signs itself, through language, which cut the individual from the experience of the Real, making impossible the knowledge of what lies without symbolic representation. Psychoanalysis has historically exceeded the individual as the domain of inquiry, often taking as object larger social contexts. I use psychoanalysis not as a theory of the individual, but a social theory of power, subjectivization and relationality.

As such, this dissertation also contributes to a wider anthropological literature which has deployed psychoanalytic frameworks to understand the emergence of the gendered subject across cultures (Moore 2007), explorations of identity and subjectivity amongst non-Western subjects in their relation to modernizing institutions (Ewing 1997), motherhood and censorship (Allison 2000), the aftermaths of genocide and war (Nelson, 2009), and sexual perversion as cultural marker (Cornyetz and Vincent 2010) just to name a recent few. While useful, however, psychoanalysis has its limits. As such, I am interested in not only deploying psychoanalytic theory, but showing how anthropology’s
attunement to the specificities of social process situated in particular historical contexts, and attention to particularities in structures of kinship, identification and sovereignty, can add dimension to psychoanalysis that has historically been criticized for its inability to deal with difference (that is not sexual difference).

Psychoanalysis helps me think about oligarchs and members of government and the ways in which their falling short of the heroics attached to previous figures of leadership creates fissures and ruptures in symbolic authority. The concept of Father is helpful here. First, the position of Father establishes symbolic authority. Armenia celebrates a long line of men for their strength and their salvation of the Armenian people – from Hayk to Grigor Lusavorich, Vardan Mamikonyan, Garegin Njdeh and others. Armenianess, in the Name-of-the-Father (Nom-du-pere) Hayk, constitutes a symbolic order, or the nation, as Law of such Father figures. Unlike these previous leaders and heroes, those who reign over Armenians today, beginning in the post-independence era and especially after 1996, are characterized as perverse (aylandak). I read this rupture, through the pervasive rhetoric of perversion within the nation today, as a bifurcation of this symbolic authority, splitting the No-of-the-Father (Non-du-pere) from the Name. In other words, the Name under which Armenianness is constituted has fissured, leaving no definitive and ensuring path for a proper future. The position of Father as such, is also similar to the political institution of “hyperpresidentialism,” in which the president is granted extensive powers:

The president appoints and dismisses the prime minister and “at the proposal” of the latter, the members of the government...He can dissolve the National Assembly and designate special elections upon “consulting” with the National Assembly’s president and the prime minister...He appoints and removes the
prosecutor general at the proposal of the prime minister. He appoints the members and the president of the constitutional court and the judges of the court of appeals and its chambers, the courts of review, the tribunals of first instance, and other courts (Astourian 2000: 3).

According to Stephen Astourian, this system reflects Armenia’s Soviet past and “lack of established democratic institutions” (3). It also, however, reflects the emphasis on genealogy, fatherhood, and heroic legacy within Armenianness.

Along with these perverse Father figures is the figure of the homosexual. The rhetoric of perversion – which takes as object both political and economic elite as well as the figure of the homosexual – can be understood as a symptom of a larger social break, or the disintegration of symbolic authority. While within most psychoanalytic literature, it is perversion itself that is the disavowal, which calls forth and demands the reappearance of the Father’s No, I argue that in Armenia it is the rhetoric of perversion, and its pervasiveness, that becomes a form of disavowal. Constant discussion of moral bankruptcy, the disintegration of the family, and the threats this perverse S/state of affairs poses against the future of the nation can be read as heightened anxiety regarding a rupture in the maintenance of propriety. The rhetoric of perversion is a disavowal of those who have taken the position of Father as Father, calling attention to their illegitimacy as not only leaders of the nation, but as Armenians themselves.

My use of the term perversion, then, is not completely in line with that of psychoanalysis. Perversion in that field is a highly technical position of the subject in relation to language (symbolic authority). My use of perversion can be understood as an emic category, but with a certain semblance, and parallels, to the concept that Lacanian psychoanalysis offers. Psychoanalysts read perversion as a disavowal of a particular
process: the separation from mother. Through the mirror stage, as Lacan (2006) argues, the child enters into the crisis of a violent cut away from the Real and into the symbolic realm, understanding Self as separate from Other. Bruce Fink (1995) regards this now-separate mother as the (m)Other, meaning that it is the mother’s function to represent for the child the desire of an Other under which the child is now forced to operate, cut away from the Real. Both the maternal and paternal functions are important in maintaining normalcy for the child, without which the child will enter into neurosis, psychosis or perversion. The rhetoric of perversion, as I will argue through some of the chapters of this dissertation, can be understood as a symptom of separation anxiety.

Perversion is a concept of ambivalence for psychoanalytic theorists. It is applied to a subjectivity, actions and symptoms having to do with mutilation, loss and death. But it also represents a kind of open, calling for the Father (or Mother, and various other forms of symbolic authority) to fulfill the promise of wholeness. As such, in this sense, it can also represent freedom (Rothenberg and Foster 2003). Perversion is a disavowal of symbolic authority’s failure to protect the subject from lack. But, as Bruce Fink (2003) points out, “The lack of a penis (or of anything else for that matter) is not a question of perception: there is no lack at the perceptual level – there the world is full. One “sees” nothing only if one is expecting something in particular and mentally notes its absence…. ‘Nothing’ exists only at the level of thought” (41).

But the psychoanalytic concept of perversion, as well as symbolic order and Name of the Father which I make consistent use of throughout the chapters that follow, have certain limits when it comes to understanding the particularities of how such processes operate within the domain of the “actual” social. Language cuts, in other
words, but does it matter what language it is that does the cutting? Understanding the particularities of Armenianness as symbolic order, and the ways in which this order breaks, ruptures, and wanes, demands some cutting of psychoanalytic concepts. For this, I am indebted to the work of Bronislaw Malinsowski (1955 [1927]) who, while contesting Freud’s work as “universal” modified claims about the role of symbolic Father rather than disputed them altogether. His engagement with Ernest Jones’ work on sexual repression highlights an interest in psychoanalysis, a push to work within these developing sets of theories, rather than a call for their inapplicability for anthropology. There is also now a large literature working with and within psychoanalysis as it travels across borders, times, and national contexts (Khanna 2003, E-Shakry 2014, Homayounpour 2012), pointing out the uses and limits of doing psychoanalysis differently. The particular attachments to “culture” as well as “language” and what forms of authority are demanded, called for, and lacking necessitates understandings of how these structures operate and how they operate differently. I am interested, therefore, in putting my Armenian interlocutors, interviewees, friends and colleagues in conversation with psychoanalytic thought, queer theory, and other forms of thinking anxiety that break open some of these canonized and universalized discourses.

My use of the concept of perversion, then, should be understood as a push-back on recent criticisms of “crisis.” Janet Roitman (2014), for example, in Anti-Crisis, argues that

 crisis is mobilized in narrative constructions to mark out or designate ‘moments of truth’; it is taken as a means to access historical truth and even a means to think ‘history’ itself. Such moments of truth are often defined as turning points in history, when decisions are taken or events are decided, thus establishing a particular teleology. And similarly, though
seemingly without recourse to teleology, crisis moments are defined as instances when normativity is laid bare, such as when the contingent or partial quality of knowledge claims—principles, suppositions, premises, criteria, and logical or causal relations—are disputed, critiqued, challenged, or disclosed. It follows that crisis is posited as an epistemological impasse and…is claimed to found the possibility for other historical trajectories or even for a (new) future (3-4).

What I find problematic about this take on crisis – though I do agree with Roitman in her general diagnosis of crisis, itself a “diagnostic of the present” - is its voidness of a desire to understand, or make sense of, how a feeling of crisis, or a felt crisis, might itself lay bare wholeness and normalcy as fantasy, but a fantasy that is still there. This critique of crisis talk avoids centralizing the (inter)subjectivity that experiences crisis and what it means for the actions of not only persons, but wider social contexts, to act in a time of crisis. Or, in Armenia’s case, as will become clear throughout this dissertation, to not act in a time of crisis. In other words, as Joseph Masco (2010) has pointed out, crisis and its discourses can make possible both action and real transformation of shared visions, as well as deter action and change. One can be critical of an Armenia in a process of disintegration and annihilation in the contemporary moment, especially since these feelings of impending annihilation are themselves attached to prior moments - Genocide, centuries of dispersal, and a prolonged war with an enemy. In other words, how is it that Armenia can be in crisis now if these feelings of crisis are based on prior moments of threat, some of which have come to define the nation itself? As Roitman asks, “crisis compared to what?” (4). But, my aim here is to understand what a rhetoric of perversion, crisis, and annihilation say about Armenia’s current historical juncture. In other words, I want to really get at the question of “crisis compared to what?” Because that “what” tells us a lot not only about the longed-for norm, not only the past or the future, but the present
and its entanglement with all of these as possibilities to work with and on. As such, I take
the rhetoric of perversion as a serious accusation of what Armenianness is, or was, even
if this form of being remains elusive.

The unconscious does not know time. It places in simultaneity events from
various historic and mythological contexts. Attachment to Symbolic order operates in the
same way, recalling anxieties and moments of violence concurrently within the present.
As such, Armenians’ sense of national disintegration and feelings of crisis in the present,
manifests a fantasy of a singular Armenia, a wholeness of a people across time and space,
a reunification with Mother. Armenianness is the expression of what Molly Anne
Rothenberg and Dennis A. Foster (2003) call a “dream of a perfect community,” so often
structuring the violence in societies living out Oedipal repression, such as in authoritarian
regimes (Borneman 2003). While this is a fantasy, it makes no difference on the actions
of those attached to it. In other words, as Slavoj Zizek (1989) has articulated it, “I know
very well, but still…” as the “formula of fetishistic disavowal” (18) that he borrows from
Octave Manoni. The fetishist, or the pervert, thus, demands the recognition of lack by
pointing precisely to, and by performatively acting out, the hole in wholeness. As such, as
Rothenberg and Foster (2003) point out, citing Bruce Fink’s (2003) essay on perversion,
“the fetish does not just fill in for the missing penis in the same way as a plug fills a hole.
On the contrary, the fetish is the pervert’s way of making a hole, of making visible the
fact of a lack (the lack that the Oedipalized adult has to accept)” (6). Similarly, I suggest,
a rhetoric of perversion acts as perversion itself in Armenia, calling attention to lack.
Whether that lack is new, of the post-Soviet era – and most definitely feel this to be the
case – or it goes back centuries and is the basis of the longing for a homeland, this
fantasy itself is now being recalled. Armenianness is in crisis.

What Follows

The chapters that follow are organized into two parts each dealing with the two forms of perversion that frame the central problem of the dissertation, bookmarked by two chapters in the beginning and end, free-floating outside of these perversions. In the first chapter, “Queer Life: Invisible Visibility, Visible Invisibility and the Coding of Everyday Life,” I examine LGBT and otherwise non-heterosexual life in Yerevan. I draw on research I conducted in 2010 and 2011 with LGBT-identified persons living in the city. This chapter includes my arrival scene, in which I became aware of the ways in which while queer life was in many ways invisible (to me), space was a major form of coding visibility. This was something I would only learn later. The chapter argues that while the figure of the homosexual is hugely visible within mainstream Armenian media, actual queer life remains invisible and would like it to remain this way.

Part I, Perversion (Aylandakutyun) takes as its primary focus the feelings of crisis, disintegration and the ways these are linked to the oligarchy and government. This section is concerned with the perversions of the political and economic elite in Armenia, and the ways in which their perverse actions have caused a wide-spread feeling of crisis. In Chapter 2, “Wandering Yerevan: Nostalgia and Post-Hope in a Presentless and Empty City of Ruins,” I explore the affective realms of the capital city of Armenia, where more than half of the country’s still existing population resides. Yerevan’s residents often describe the city as “ruins,” highlighting a feeling of emptiness after two decades of constant emigration and seemingly evacuated symbolic authority. I argue that Armenians
are currently experiencing an affect that I can most faithfully describe as *post-hope*, living with the memory of hope in the past, leaving the present empty, which is often articulated as Armenia’s futurelessness. I suggest that the rupture of a heroic past into presentlessness has transformed Armenianness into a feeling of directionless wandering, reconfiguring a favorite past-time of *man gal* (wandering the city) into an experience of a terrifying open. The chapter wanders from inside homes, where many are living in poverty and expressing a multitude of complaints about everyday life, to residential buildings - once full but now mostly half-empty - to the streets where displays of centralized power and industry have been replaced by perverse and ostentatious monuments to current illegitimate Fathers.

It is these illegitimate Fathers, or rather their (nick)Names, that I take as an object of study in Chapter 2, “The Names of Illegitimate Fathers and the Ends of Symbolic Authority.” Through these nick(Names), symbolizing criminality and often given to oligarchs and men of government, I explore how a conveyance of criminality as well as intimacy marks these figures as not only illegitimate to rule Armenia, but as un-Armenian themselves, throwing into question the whole notion of a “national government.” Beginning with neighborhood yards through which these names are acquired and tracing them to their criminal adult figures, I show how the nick-name bifurcates these Fathers, splitting their Name from their No, and marking them as unfit leaders. This splitting is critical in understanding how these figures mark their own ends to authority.

Part II, “Perversion (*Aylaserutyun*), is primarily concerned with the figure of the homosexual and “actually-existing” queer life. I move from the forms of perversion often attached to those in power, to the perversion attached to his figure. I begin this section
with Chapter 4, “The Figure of the Homosexual: Fetish, Freedom and Separation,” exploring how this figure emerged through right-wing discourse and with the help of media. The homosexual, I argue, represents freedom in multiple ways: freedom from kinship demands, freedom from the nation, and as a congealed sign of Armenia’s anxieties regarding national sovereignty. This chapter engages with my interviews with journalists on the left and the right, showing how the hypervisibility of homosexuality in Armenian media is constitutive of various national anxieties. One of these anxieties is separation anxiety, or the ways in which the homosexual – outside of the framework of proper Armenianness – represents a separation from Mother Armenia. In this way, I argue that the figure of the homosexual acts as a fetish object in Armenia’s political, economic and social landscape, allowing expression of anxieties regarding failures by other means – such as the corruption of political and economic elite. I show how this process of fetishization is akin to displacement and condensation, in which the aylankutyun of those in power, unbearable in many ways, gets congealed onto the figure par excellence of aylaserutyun. Through interviews with activists and journalists, this fetish, I suggest, is the product of the No-of-the-Father and his illegitimate authoritarianism, making direct confrontation impossible and orienting anxiety in another direction.

Chapter 6, “Kintimate Encounters: The Nation-Family and Practices of Intimacy” continues the exploration of the contested notion of freedom. This chapter examines the ways in which many young, non-heteronormative persons in Yerevan experience the nation’s sense of kinship-based intimacy, what I call kintimacy, as unbearable. I found that many of them wanted to leave Armenia so that they could attain autonomy and a
sense of individualism made impossible by Armenia’s kintimacy. As such, I suggest that rather than understanding family as a metaphor of nation, everyday practices of intimacy enact the nation as an extended kinship network. Those who cannot or who do not want to meet the expectations of kinship desire to escape the nation to escape the demands of family.

Chapter 6, “Perversion and Gender Panic: The Condensations and Displacements of Aylandakutyun and Aylaserutyun,” takes as its main object a moral panic in 2013, following the National Assembly’s passing of “The Law Regarding Equal Rights and Opportunities Between Men and Women.” This law defined the term gender (pronounced gehn-dehr) as “the acquired and socially fixed behavior of the different sexes,” inciting right-wing nationalists to wage a campaign against gender, arguing that it is a form of perversion imbued with European values, which leads to homosexuality and is dangerous to the nation. While scholars working on sex panics largely use the concept of “displacement” to argue that what is claimed to be about sexuality is actually about something else, through psychoanalytic concepts like displacement and condensation, I argue that that sexuality is very much an intrinsic part of sex panic and continues to be the cause of social hysteria, even if now weaved in with other concerns. Thus, through this newly emerged notion of gender, I link aylandakutyun and aylaserutyun into one another, and show how the two forms of perversion I have been discussing throughout this dissertation, circle back on one another.

And, finally, the last chapter here returns to presentless and futurelessness in an attempt to leave the depressing tone I (unconsciously, in many ways, as I tried to provide ethnographic evidence of felt crisis) took in Chapter 2. “No Father, No Future?: The
Politics of ‘No!’ as Negation and Affirmation” shows how certain forms of activism in the country, propelled by a new emerging politics of “No!” are returning possibilities of future to Armenia. This future, however, is not one that is commensurable to the Symbolic authority of Fathers, like Hayk. Rather, activists, through performative actions, have been producing new forms of future, in which the role of this authority is dissipating. Based on participant observation during the 2013 post-President election movement - for which I was serendipitously in the field – as well as participation and interviews with activists in the environmental movement and transparency/democracy activism, I show the ways in which the illegitimacy of the regime has forced open the possibilities of future, creating new forms of thinking power-subject relations.
Chapter 1

Queer Life: Invisible Visibility, Visible Invisibility and the Coding of Everyday Life

Unlike most white people, with the exception of the Jews, Third World people have suffered the threat of genocide to our races since the coming of the first European expansionists. The family, then, becomes all the more ardently protected by oppressed peoples, and the sanctity of this institution is infused like blood into the veins of the Chicano. At all costs, la familia must be preserved…

– Cherrie Moraga (2000: 101)

Anthropologists of non-Western queer sexuality have largely assumed that transforming incommensurability into normative criteria of belonging is the goal – that queer people in the non-West seek to communally make sense of their difference, and it is only activists, those influenced by Western politics, who make public demands out of these private struggles…[But] incommensurability is an actively desired and desirable field of possibility for Indian lesbians, whether activists or not, by demonstrating the consequences of having to commensurate radical imaginings with social norms and political banalities.


In 2010, I had arrived in Yerevan to study queer life. I knew very little about what I aimed to explore, but with the few pieces of information I had gathered online, I was aware that such a thing existed. A queer life. In Armenia. Something that my friend and fellow anthropologist Nelli Sargsyan (2012) found to be ankintima“incommensurability” for her Diaspora Armenian interlocutors in the U.S., of which I must consider myself one. During my first two trips to Armenia (2010 and 2011), I was most interested in how queer life was possible. As in, what was this life like? What were the relationships of queer persons to their families? To their nation? To others by whom they were surrounded? It was, to say the least, perplexing for me. Everything that I had learned from my own experience growing up Armenian, in a house with both Eastern and Western Armenian influences, had to some degree taught me that that sort of thing was
just not really present in Armenianness. It was completely foreign, completely other. This feeling of incommensurability and discontinuity of identity between queer and Armenian is the topic of intense discussion and focus amongst Armenian-American queer artists and writers (Maldjian 2011; Avakian 1993; Agabian 2008). This writing has much in common with other forms of queer and feminist third world traditions, including the work of Audre Lorde (1996[1984]), Gloria Anzaldua (1987) and Cherrie Moraga (2000). These works explore the ways in which gender, family, nation, race and sexual desire create matrices of inclusion and exclusion marking the woman-desiring-woman outside of patriarchal community that is the nation, the race or the family. This becomes especially true, these writers point out, when larger forms of oppression – based on class and race – produce a heavy emphasis on unity, reproduction and propriety. However, as I hope to make clear here, and build on throughout the following chapters, the particularities of Armenia in crisis after centuries of displacement, Genocide, and continued threat through the moral degradation of the nation produces something slightly, but importantly, different. Armenians’ anxieties have much in common with those of Black Americans, Chicanos, and even members of the Armenian Diaspora living in the U.S.. However, in Armenia, these anxieties become heightened through the feeling of national annihilation from internal perversions. If the moral perversion of members of government and a corrupt oligarchy, in other words, are leading to the end of nation, then other forms of perversions take on added value, charge, and importance.

It was quite rare for there to be any recognition of homosexuality in my household. And rarer, to have the homosexuality of a fellow Armenian brought to light. I
did recall one particular time this happened. I was about 10 years old. A friend of my grandmother’s was visiting from New York. They had spent years as neighbors in the Soviet Armenian city of Lennakan (now Gyumri) and were reminiscing of those days. I was passing by – in the hallways of our Los Angeles house - when I heard one bit of the conversation, in which my grandmother’s friend asked her about a neighbor from their old building - “what happened to him? He never married” – “Yes, he was, you know…” I got the reference. And my grandmother seemed to also understand that I had gotten the reference, since she spotted me in the hallway, listening, and yelled at me to go to my room.

I remember another moment – or, argument to be more accurate – when my family along with some relatives had taken a week-long trip to Mammoth Lake in California. I was about 13 at the time and listening intently at the dinner table as my father argued with Ruben, an older male relative, about whether there were gays in Armenia “back then.” Both from Soviet Armenia, both having left the Republic in the 1980s, it seemed strange to me that Ruben felt that “there were no gay people then. There was no such thing. If there is now, it’s new, it’s coming from elsewhere. Armenians are not like that. We don’t have that problem. It’s the Europeans who are bringing that sort of stuff in.” My father, on the other hand, felt differently. “Which Armenia were you living in, my dear friend? I knew soooo many. There were sooo many. If you didn’t want to see it or you ignored it, then that’s you. But if you were paying attention – especially to the artists, the musicians – you couldn’t miss it. ‘It comes from Europe.’ No! There’s no such thing! There are gays everywhere. Don’t lie to yourself.” As I found more proof that
there were gays in Armenia, I reflected on this argument and what it meant for there to be an invisible visibility of queer life.

To be clear, my fascination with the impossible yet possible queer life in Armenia was not because of Armenia’s existence as a post-socialist Republic. This brings about a whole new set of problems regarding (in)visibility. Queer scholars in the post-socialist context have repeatedly pointed out two main co-constituting facts. First, questions of sexuality were and are central to post-socialist transition. As Susan Gal and Gail Kligman (2000) have argued, transition meant redefining and rearticulating various relations between the private and public realms. In Eastern Europe, this meant a great deal of public and state attention placed on reproductive laws after transition. Reproductive politics can also be evinced in the ways in which labor – and the now-new relation between workers, plant managers and owners – played out, as argued by Elizabeth Dunn (2004), who investigated the ways in which questions of kinship and reproducing Poland’s population were a large part of the ways in which women working at one baby food factory envisioned the social work that their wage labor was invested in. Since reproduction was of utmost importance to creating a new society in the aftermath of socialism, questions of sexuality have also become – sometimes peculiarly – highlighted; one need only look at the 2012-2013 anti-homosexual propaganda campaign and law in Russia. In various post-socialist countries, where movements toward “democratization” have been well-received, gay and lesbian activism has come with enormous backlash, often from nationalists, such as in Serbia (Johnson 2012), Hungary (Renkin 2009), and Poland (Gruszczynska 2007).
Secondly, gay visibility has become a highly pointed debate not just in the post-socialist world, but all over. By gay visibility I mean legible markers of lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender identity and presence in public space. The quintessential example of this, of course, is the genre and ritual (Davydova 2012) of “gay pride parade,” which has taken root all over the world over the last couple of decades coming out of the U.S. tradition established in the 1970s. As such, visibility is also often tied to urban centers through the existence of gay bars, annual pride marches and parades, and in some centers like U.S. cities (San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York and Philadelphia) the existence of gay neighborhoods (Patton and Sanchez-Eppler 2000). Gay visibility has become a highly politicized framing over the last couple of decades. Israel’s pink-washing campaigns, for example, which highlight Israel’s friendliness toward gays in order to wash out or overcoat with rosy flavor its violence against Palestinians has become a highly contentious topic for queer activism and theorizing. As Rebecca Stein demonstrates,”During the 1990s, Israel’s gay communities were being recognized in unprecedented ways in Israeli legal spheres, while changing Israeli policies vis-a´-vis the occupied territories were creating new forms of un-recognition for its Palestinian population: gay communities were enjoying new forms of social mobility within the nation-state while the literal mobility of Palestinians from the occupied territories was being increasingly curtailed” (2010: 521). In the U.S., similarly, Jasbir Puar (2007) argues that attachments to the national imaginary, embedded in Islamophobia predicated on the equalization of the Muslim body with perverse terrorism, coincides with gay identity and notions like freedom and liberation. There have also been connections
between the projects of gay visibility and the kinds of gay identities that it emerges and in many ways demands. Dennis Altman (1997), for example, has famously argued that the traveling of gay identity into non-Western cites is a form of cultural imperialism. Similarly Joseph Massad (2008), through his notion of the “gay international” argues that gay identity in its Western formulation undoes other forms of same-sex practices and worlds in the Middle East, which demands certain forms of identification with a kind of person, or the homosexual as a “species” (Foucault 1978: 43). In the Eastern and Central European postsocialist contexts, Nicole Butterfield (2013) has articulated the ways in which nationalist projects on the ground often make use of European formulations themselves about “European values” and civilizational aptitude for European Union ascendant nation-states.

But queer life’s relationship to gay visibility and the globalization of gay identity is much more complicated than the imagery of gay pride parades and civilizational aptitude. For, within and between these spaces, places and moments of visibility and identity-making are worlds that always remain unbounded by these constraints and conditions. Tom Boellstorff (2005), for example, working on gay life in Indonesia, finds that gay subcultures operate within a wider field of archipelagic domains. While gay men have their worlds, these cannot necessarily be understood as “public,” since they remain largely separated from the other worlds that form a nation split into various islands of their own. He suggests that instead, gay identity and visibility are part of a larger genre of globalization that he terms “dubbing culture.” As he puts it: “To ‘dub’ a discourse is neither to parrot it verbatim nor to compose an entirely new script. It is to hold together
cultural logics without resolving them into a unitary whole (58). Dubbing, in other words, “is highly indirect discourse – not just paraphrasing speech but rendering it into a different language – yet it is hemmed in by a double authority: the original dialogue it reworks, and the image of moving lips with which it must attempt to unify. Yet the attempt is intended (and not doomed) to fail; a dub rejects the binarism of ‘totally affirming’ or ‘totally rejecting’ the discourse it transforms” (83-84). Similarly, Martin Manalansan (2003), studying gay Filipino men’s formation of identity between the “traditional” bakla Filipino feminine being and gay coincide and depart in multiple ways. As such, Armenian gay identity is not very different from gay identities in other parts of the world, incorporating global forms into local understandings and practices. As in many other places, the term gay refers to male homosexual identity, often also becoming a standard nominalization for all homosexual identity. Lesbian is used sometimes by women, but has less prevalence than gay. Lesbi is often used as the shortened term for lesbian, but both are understood. Transgender is an identity taken on by those who feel as if their gendered identity differs from the sex to which they were assigned at birth, while transseksual, or transsexual, refers to those who have had some kind of surgery to make their sex fit more accurately to their gendered identity. The term, however, is sometimes used to also describe transvestite sex workers – or male sex workers who dress as women to get clientele – even when they have had no surgery. Bisexual, or biseksual, refers to people who identify as sexually desiring both men and women. However, the ways in which these identities are lived out and experienced – particularly through coded space – allows an understanding of how gay identity is not
necessarily a desire for visibility and how visibility – especially in its hyper form – violates the possibilities of queer life that many had experienced prior to 2012.

Space is a major component of gay visibility. It is in and through certain spaces that visibility is made and unmade. Within queer studies, however, there has been a major focus on queer space as public space, and especially space that is generally consciously and visibly regarded as queer space. Francesca Stella (2012), working in the small town of Ul’yanovsk, Russia, however, finds that queer public space – on the street or in mainstream cafes - is “mostly contingent, precarious or invisible to outsiders” (1822). But what of queer space that is invisible? Not public? What of queer space that is domestic? As Gayatri Gopinath (2005) offers in her reading of Deepa Mehta’s Fire, queer potential that is just as potent, if not more so, can be found in private realms of queer desire that remain unarticulated, unnamed, and thus unconstrained by the work of signification that always seeks to subsume queer desire into other – national, familial, governmental or religious – spheres.

In this chapter, I offer an examination of queer visibility in Armenia, which I argue is invisibly visible. While the figure of the homosexual, who I will take up in later chapters, was made hypervisible in Armenian mainstream media and public life in general – through various protests, boycotts and other events – the queer subject remains in many ways concealed. While LGBT activists in Armenia are in some ways marking visibility for this subject through NGOs and public human rights advocacy, their work largely remains invisible and they would like it to remain this way. In many ways, non-heteronormative desire in Armenia – as I will continue to explore in Chapter 5 – is not
necessarily homosexual. In the final section of this chapter, I discuss the ways in which other forms of gendered or sexual perversion meet the figure of the homosexual as markers of Armenia’s annihilation to come.

**Invisible Visibility**

In 2010, on my second night in the city, Arpi, a friend of my father during his youth, and the only person who my father had contacted to help me out during my two-month trip, had invited me over to her place for dinner. “Arpin haskanum a. Iran inch uzum es karogh es harcnel. Qez shat Kogni, (“Arpi understands. You can ask her anything you want. She will help you a lot”) my father had told me over the phone before I left the U.S.. Now, in her central Yerevan apartment, I wondered how far I could go. Could I ask her directly about homosexuality? Would she understand what I was talking about? Would she be shocked? Kick me out? The usual Armenian response to such a shock would have been to threaten one with “I will tell your father.” I had already robbed her of this possibility, since my father knew what my research regarded. What was the worst that could happen? As she began to ask me questions about my trip over dinner - asking me about my graduate program, how long I had been studying, why I was interested in Armenia, and praising me for coming back to my hayrenik (fatherland) - these were the thoughts going through my mind.

Earlier that day, I had wandered the streets with my laptop looking for a place that had usable Wi-Fi. Sitting down at various cafes and realizing the “Free Wi-Fi” sticker on the door was misleading, I had visited various sites – many of the places I would later realize were not *alternativ*, but *normativ*, and unwelcome to the likes of me with my hair
buzzed short to my scalp and some visible tattoos. I eventually wandered down through Northern Avenue and saw Square One and at last found that their Wi-Fi actually worked. After checking the connection and deciding to stay, I spotted Alice. Alice and I would reflect on this moment various times over the next few years. She laughs hysterically every time I tell the story. Alice, with her long brown hair, her lack of make-up, her baggy, sagging pants, her unconcealed tribal tattoo on her left arm, and her general swagger, was impossible to miss. I saw her walk in through the glass doors, down the steps of the entrance to the café, greet the employees with a confident hand-shake and a loud laugh, and, in my desperate search for queer life, I started to ponder another question – a question which Alice and I discuss regularly to this day, neither of us with any kind of final answer: how does she live here and how did she become like that? These are all, I’m very well-aware, naïve questions. There are all kinds of people, looking all kinds of ways, behaving in a diverse set of manners, all over the world. Alice may have been completely unnoticeable to me in the U.S. But, there, in Yerevan on that day, I knew that I had found some kind of beginning to a project that was now underway.

That night at dinner, it was with Alice in mind – someone who I had never actually met – who set certain parameters for me about what I felt I could say and could not – and to whom I could say them. Alice’s presence, in some ways, had made me feel like the public visible non-visibility of gay life in Armenia was visible to a certain extent. Or, what I was already starting to realize, was a kind of visibility that was only visible to some and concealed for others. I had not yet learned nuance and code in this new landscape, however.
In a way my father had already vetted Arpi for me and had prepared me for these strange forms of non-visible visibility. It was in his own coded language I realized that he was telling me that she knew worlds other than the properly Armenian. Arpi was in many ways different from Ruben, the relative who claimed that homosexuality was foreign to Armenia and only existed through importation from the West. In my first two days in the city I was starting to map out certain codes of conduct that brought to life queerness or otherwise Armenianness outside of its proper form. Arpi was in the NGO world to some effect – which I would realize had its own nuances later. She worked at the UNHRC office and as conversation flowed at dinner, I learned of the various difficulties of her work – that she was working 14 hour days non-stop. The work that she was doing could not be stopped just because her work day was over (and this was before the war in Syria, which brought 11,000 Syrian Armenians to Armenia by 2013\(^1\)). She asked me about my own work and whether I had friends in Armenia. I told her that I had just arrived and did not have any contacts yet, although some friends outside of Armenia had put me in touch with people that I had been contacting. She explained that there were a lot of clubs that young Diaspora Armenians who spent summers in Armenia liked to frequent. She did not know any specific places but told me to check out the clubs around Liberty Square and the Hraparak (Republic Square). Before I could even ask, she offered this:

I don’t know if it is interesting to you, but it was definitely interesting for me [laughs]. One night some friends and I wanted to get out – go somewhere we had never been. One of my friends had heard of a fun club near Liberty Square and that there were always really fun dance parties there. We wanted to feel young again [laughs]. So we all thought, why not? And we got all dressed up and went to this club. We were in there for about 10 minutes when we realized it was a gay bar! I didn’t know there was any such thing in this city. It’s very interesting. Yerevan is changing. It’s probably not new to you – a young woman from America, but in Armenia it’s a new thing [norutyun], you know? Maybe you would want to see that too.

This opened my window with Arpi. I explained that that was actually what I was interested in – gay life in Yerevan. She said that she knew there were gay people in Armenia but did not really know anyone she could personally put me in contact with.

“But go to that club! Maybe you can understand better how to do your research by starting there. It’s located right across the street from Liberty Square. It’s a really small place, underground [meaning, it was one of the many clubs in Armenia located in basements of buildings, led to by staircases on the sidewalk].” I would later realize that she was talking about Cocoon. From the ways in which Cocoon was discussed – from Arpi, to many of my interlocutors that I had not yet met at that point – it was probably the closest to a “gay bar” that had ever existed in Yerevan. But, I would have to concede that it was not what is typically understood as a “gay bar.”

My first trip to Cocoon would be precipitated by Alice herself. That evening, after leaving Arpi’s place, I had planned to find Meline’s Pub, the most prominent place I had read about in my many hours of online research in preparation for my first field trip. Tsomak’s punk band – Pincet, formed after the break-up of her first band Incest – had performed there (which I had witnessed on YouTube), and many of the Diasporans writing online about their visits had listed it as a “cool place” to hang out, some of them
discussing it as a “gay bar” or a “gay friendly bar.”

Many of these posts were recent enough – from 2008 or so – that I thought the place was probably still there and a good place for me to start. I had an address, knew where it was, and it was not far from Arpi’s place. So as I left Arpi, I made my way over there. As I got closer to the where the address I had was located, I noticed it was also very close to Square One – where I had spotted Alice just a few hours ago. I arrived at the address – located right across the street on Abovyan from Square One. It was dark, looked closed permanently, and had some signage as a chocolate shop on the door. Meline’s Pub was not there and I couldn’t tell if it had ever been there (maybe I had the wrong address), or maybe it had actually closed. I stood in front of the building for a few moments when I looked across the street and saw that Alice was behind the bar at Square One. Apparently she worked there. Maybe she would know about Meline’s, if it was closed, if I had the wrong address. Maybe she could direct me elsewhere. In any case, from the looks of her, she would be able to help me, I thought.

I walked in to Square One and took a seat at the bar. It was a Wednesday night but in Yerevan, every night is the time for active social nightlife. The diner was packed and the two bartenders – one of whom was Alice – were busy pushing one drink after another to patrons at the bar and to waiters on the side, serving them to tables. On the left side of the bar, drink orders were coming in as Alice and her co-bartender Suren picked them up and began the mixing, pouring, shaking, filling and pushing the drink on the bar. I sat patiently as another bartender, Suren, approached me and asked if I would like to order a drink. I ordered a beer – Erebuni – which would be my first taste of Armenian
beer. When Suren brought it to me, he asked me if I needed anything else and I felt like maybe I should ask him about Meline’s Pub. Afterall, Alice, who seemed to be someone who would know, was busy on the other side of the bar. I was new to Armenia, felt somewhat incompetent in my language skills yet. I had still had no official language training and my dialect, which I had not actually spoken since I was very young, was largely Western Armenian, from my mother’s side. Eastern Armenian was the dialect of the Republic and I felt out of place. I did not feel comfortable enough to approach someone while they were busy with their job to ask them a question out of place. This, I would eventually learn a couple of years later when I delved into long-term fieldwork, was the only way to get answers to questions. So, Suren being the one most available at that moment was the one who received the question in my broken Armenian: “There was a bar across the street from here called Meline’s Pub. Is it closed now? Or did it move? I could not find it.” Suren responded casually: “I don’t know. I’m sorry,” smiled and moved on to the pile of drink orders on the left side of the bar.

I began to sip my beer, uncomfortably, not knowing what to do next. I wanted to get started on my fieldwork. The people I was contacting through email seemed to be non-responsive. I had no real contacts and the one place I thought I could start with seemed to not exist. But it had existed, right? I had seen videos of live performances there. I had read reviews. Where was it now? I sat at the bar, slowly sipping my 22 oz. beer (which I would also eventually learn is the usual serving size in bars and cafes), and writing field-notes – page 3 of a new, still almost clean composition notebook I had picked up before traveling, which would, by the end of my two month stay, be filled with
this kind of pondering and failure at access to a queer life that I had been promised through my Google searches.

Then, I looked up, and Alice was standing in front of me on the other side of the bar. “What’s your name?” she asked. I answered. “I’m Alice. Listen, why were you asking about Meline’s?” My vocabulary quite limited (also something Alice would poke fun at for many years to come), I tried to explain that I wanted to visit it. I was from the U.S. and I was doing research in Armenia. I had heard that there was this interesting bar and I wanted to see it for myself. “Listen,” she continued, “Meline’s closed a while ago. I can tell you about another place you can go to. It’s close. But you need to understand that you can’t just go around asking random people about places like that. You understand you’re not in America, you’re in Armenia, right? It’s not like that here.” At this, I was angry and also a little embarrassed. I knew that Armenia was not like America. I know that things were different. And I was embarrassed that she thought I was that naïve. But why did she assume things about “America,” anyway? And how did she even know I was from “America”? And, in any case, I thought, look at her! She’s telling me that I can’t ask about “places like that” and yet she is walking around looking like that! I didn’t say any of this. I just asked “Are there any other places like Meline’s open now? Do you know where?” And that’s when she directed me to Cocoon. She told me the bartender’s name there was Rosa. She told me to go there and to tell Rosa that I was a friend of Alice and that Rosa would make sure that I was okay. Alice seemed to be very concerned with my ability to handle myself in Armenia. A few years later, as we met for coffee one afternoon during another one of my summer research trips, she told me she was really
proud of the way that I seemed to now have more connections in Armenia than she did. This, however, has never stopped her from (playfully and lovingly) continue to poke fun at my at-times naïve questions and comments.

I went to Cocoon. It seemed like any other club in Armenia. Yes, the bartender, Rosa, was a tall, butch woman with an attitude. And yes, when unfamiliar people (especially men) entered the bar, Rosa ran from behind the bar to the door and asked them to explain themselves and would most often not allow them inside. And yes, there were some expressing same-sex romantic desire, sitting close to one another, and other men sitting alone at the bar, scoping out other men. But by and large, Cocoon seemed like any other club, at least that’s what I thought at the time, not having been to any other club in Yerevan. There was a large group of women (in their mid-to-late 20s) who had largely taken over the dance floor, which was not so much space – about 12 square feet of moving room between the bar and some couches against the wall, which acted as both dance floor and space through which to pass from door to bar, from bar to couch, from couch to restroom. The music was loud, which made conversation impossible. Those sitting on the couches were having conversations of screaming into one another’s ears, which made the room seem even louder, more claustrophobic. The way in which Rosa jumped out from behind the bar each time the door of the club opened did not help the feeling of claustrophobia. She was on watch, it seemed, for every moment opened up a possibility of harassment, instigation by qvartus, or some other crisis. I would

---

2 The term qvartu acts as both descriptor of a certain “backwards” sensibility connected to neighborhood boys who wear all black, squat in the streets, or often drive around in
eventually learn that for a space like this, which at the time had only been open for a few months, any event out of the ordinary – police citation or a bar fight – could be the reason for closing down. Cocoon was a small business, not run by an oligarch, and so was heavily taxed – by way of police surveillance, actual (over)taxation, and instigators of fights. During my fieldwork in Armenia – at this point over the last 5 years – Cocoon has opened, closed and reopened multiple times. I have been told that the major reason for this constant open/close process is taxation and the ability to pay what is demanded. And, as many people are aware, a large part of taxes in Armenia are comprised of bribes.

*Alternativ and Normativ Places*

The following summer, when I returned to Yerevan, Alice helped me further what was still my project at the time – queer life in the city. With her help and contacts, I did in-depth interviews with 20 queer persons (gay, lesbian, transgender and bisexual) aged 20-35. Through these interviews I would learn a lot about the ways in which queer life in Yerevan often played out: the rarity of “coming out” to family (although this did sometimes happen), the importance of search engines in constituting a sense of belonging to a global queer diaspora (Patton and Sanchez-Eppler 2000; Grey 2009), the importance of social networking sites for meeting people and feeling community, and what were often referred to as *alternativ* and *normativ* sites for queer being. Two months in Yerevan in the summer of 2010 and now 20 interviews with queer persons later, I was beginning to build a cartography of the possibilities of queer life in the city. Putting together the black SUVs with tinted windows as well as a subculture of Mafioso masculinity. It is a relatively new term in circulation and in many ways has come to replace the term *rabiz*. 

70
pieces – the various sites and the possibilities of expressing desire and life in those sites – meant being attuned to the invisible forms that gave life to this life.

One of my interviewees – Arthur – was a 30 year old gay-identified man that Alice had known from a particular debacle at Square One. She thought he would be an interesting subject for my work because of the ways in which his life had escaped invisibility and had been forcefully made visible, and in many ways, unbearable.

“Something happened to him and it involved Square One, but he will tell you all about it because I don’t know if I have all of the details right,” was how Alice had premised her introduction of Arthur to me before I had met him. So, I met Arthur – at Square One in a tiny corner booth slightly behind the bar that was mostly out of the way from the rest of the diner. I was with Alice when he came. She introduced us and went back to work behind the bar. Arthur sat down and at first, when I told him what the subject of my interview was – gay life in Yerevan – he spoke in the third person. “I don’t know personally, but I know that for gays it is very difficult here.” At that moment, it occurred to me that although Alice knew why I wanted to conduct the interview, she may have not told him what my goals were. She had told me he was gay, but he seemed reluctant to come out to me. And I was certainly not going to force him to do so. “Do you have gay friends? Do you know of any particular situations that have been difficult? I think Alice put us in touch because she thought you could help me, but of course if you cannot I completely understand,” I reassured him.

“I want to help in any way. I can answer any questions you have. What exactly do you want to know?” I began by explaining to him that I was deeply interested in
understanding the ways in which gays, lesbians, transgender persons and other people who were not heterosexual lived their lives in Armenia – what their relationship was to their families, in their workplaces, how they met people and how they felt like they belonged in Armenia. “Ah. Okay. It is much clearer now. Yes, it is very difficult in Armenia. You know, the problem is not gays. The problem is that everyone wants everyone to be the same. They want everything standard Hay (standard Armenian) and that standard Armenian is really difficult, for everyone I think. I think that when people see you and you are different, they might be angry at you and force you to change or try to bring you down, because they themselves have experienced that. They want you to be like them. Because they were too afraid to be different.”

I asked Arthur about how he feels about being different. Had he been criticized or brought down for being different? “There are a lot of things. Honestly, I am telling you. Everyone has had these problems. For me there are little things and big things. For the little things, its just, you understand, being very conscious of what I am wearing, where I go, who I am seen with. These kinds of persons make people crazy here!” Arthur then asked me about how I feel about it: “You know, you look very different. You have a very unique style. I love it! But I can only imagine what it is like for you in Armenia.” Our conversation extended into various topics – the change from the Soviet era to the present, the ways in which people in Armenia felt miserable, his plans to one leave the country “because some personal things recently have made my home life impossible and I just have to get out of here.” After this last statement, Arthur began to tear up. I handed him a tissue from the box on the table next to me. “I’m sorry, but, you know, there have been a
lot of things and it’s very difficult for me. That’s why I was hesitating. I’ve become very protective. But I think I can trust you. You understand things very well.” And that’s when he told me his story.

Arthur had joined a Protestant church a few years back. He felt himself to be a very spiritual person, connected to God and religion in a way he felt was no longer viable in the official Armenian Apostolic Church. “I wanted to worship in a way that was welcoming, with love and faith, and the [Apostolic] Church did not offer that. When I would go, I noticed that people who showed up were only interested in showing off their clothes, their cars, to gossip. And you know, in general, the Church is just corrupt. But I believe in God and I wanted to worship. I met someone who introduced me to a new Protestant Church and I went there. They had a choir that would practice a few times a night and they were clean – they had clean spirits. I was singing with them for a few years and was eventually appointed the head of the youth choir. I loved it. It lifted me. And then I was eventually removed as director and now I don’t go to that church at all anymore. It has been very painful for me.”

“Why did you stop going? What happened?” I asked him, as I handed him another tissue. He was still crying, now sobbing.

I was at Square One one night with a friend. I didn’t come here very often but my friend wanted to meet here and I always thought it was a nice place – alternativ, azad, lavn (it’s alternative, free, good) – so we came here and we were sitting at a table outside – right over there [points to one of the tables against the wall outside, visible from the street, which is a high point of traffic between Northern Avenue and Republic Square]. I noticed a girl from my Church walking by. She was actually one of the young women who sang in the choir. I smiled at her but she didn’t say anything, she didn’t smile back. I didn’t think much about it. A few
minutes later, Alice came up to me and asked me if my name was Arthur. I said yes, not knowing what was going on. It turned out that she had come to the table in the front [the hostess both at the entrance on the inside of the diner], and asked someone to clarify who I was. They asked her why and she had said that she was an acquaintance and wanted to say hello to me but wanted to make sure she knew who I was first. Alice then went back to her and told her that I was Arthur.

A few days later, I got a call from the pastor of the church. I went to his office and he started asking me questions about whether I was gay, what I was doing at a gay bar and other sorts of questions like that. I was first shocked. I had no idea why he would be asking me such questions. I had never been to a gay bar. Then he told me that someone had seen me at Square One and that this person had told him that I was there with my boyfriend. I tried to explain that I was at Square One, that it was not a gay bar and the person I was with was just a friend. He explained to me that he felt that it was his responsibility to tell my parents. He called my mother at home the next day – I had been out. I knew the call was coming so I tried to not be at home as much as possible. He told her that her son was gay. My mother was in shock. She called me and told me to come home. I already knew what was happening at that point. So we talked about it. She was heartbroken. She said she expected more from me. She cried for hours and I tried to comfort her. When my father came home he saw her crying and demanded to know what had happened.
At this point, Arthur had to stop for a moment. We sat in silence. I had been sitting across from him, but moved on to the couch where he was sitting and put my arm around him. After all of the pondering of queer life I had done and thinking about relationships to families, to other institutions and community-forming, I had never thought too seriously about the heartbreak, aware of it as a definite possibility. Afterall, wasn’t my own interest in this topic, the incommsurability between Armenianness and homosexuality, precisely about the heartbreak, the insurmountable social conflict that such a phenomenon could induce in this context? Arthur’s story made it impossible to ignore. I eventually learned that after a few days of leaving home and staying with a friend, he had returned. By the end of the summer he left for Moscow where, through some contacts there, got a job as an accountant and has been living since. His relationship to his parents has been permanently damaged. He still has a relation to them. But he says he had to leave Armenia because he could no longer live there, because for the one month afterwards his brother (who also lived with his parents) refused to speak to him or even look at him.

Invisible public visibility makes possible these kinds of situations. Situations in which one’s sibling will at some point become aware of a brother’s or a sister’s homosexuality and never tell anyone else. A situation in which the whole family might be aware and never discuss it and regard it as “dirty laundry.” And very important to an understanding of homosexuality as invisibly visible is the ways in which certain spaces – like Square One – become coded. As alternativ space, it becomes a gay space. These spaces – like DIY, Cocoon, Square One, and others – were places in which one could “let
go,” or “feel free,” as many of my interlocutors phrased it. They were places in which women could smoke and not be afraid of who might see them, because they were spaces in which only those who were alternativ themselves usually frequented. That is, until one was spotted and became associated within a chain of signification – from Square One to homosexual to threat to the family, and ultimately, threat to nation.

(Quietly) Queering Yerevan

On the afternoon of February 20 2013, Mamikon, Ruben, Armen and I left the PINK office to make the 5-minute walk to Liberty Square, where Raffi Hovhannisyan had called a miting (meeting, referring to a political rally) to act against the fraud of the Republican Party on the previous day’s presidential elections. As we made our way, Armen, laughing nervously, begins to pull the hood of his sweatshirt over his head, saying “I hope no one sees me there.” Armen was not joking, but was still aware that it was very likely that someone would see him there. Someone – a neighbor, a family friend, a relative – was bound to see him there as thousands were expected to attend the miting. For Armen, the threat was from and against his father, who was not only a member of the Republican Party, but the director of an office in Yerevan and thus was responsible for securing a quota of votes from the local voting station for the Party. Armen was afraid that if he was seen, his presence would be reported back to his father who would be angry at him for embarrassing himself and the family, acting against his father’s professional and political interests. “How upset would he be if he knew you were there?” I asked. “He would be upset, but mostly for himself and the embarrassment he
would have to face with his colleagues. But, my dad is not really a Republican. He just has to be for his work. He hates all of those guys.”

As we continue walking, now turning on to Sayat Nova St., Armen explains his father’s position in an unexpected way. “He thinks they’re all *gomikner* (faggots).”

“What?!?” I ask, somewhat shocked. Mamikon and Ruben did not seem so shocked by this. “Yeah, a lot of people say things like that,” Mamikon added. Armen explained, “Well, you know how Gomaygi is across from the government building, no?” “Well, yes,” I respond, still confused. Gomaygi is a small park in central Yerevan that used to be known as the children’s park but in the last decade or so has become a site of sex solicitation and is often where transgender or cross-dressing sex workers will seek clients. The park has become a location of great discontent, especially since it was once a playground for children, and is commonly taken up by many who claim it as a site that is spreading sexual depravity in the city, as a symptom of the perversion (*aylaserutyun*) of the times. Armen continues: “Well, a lot of people say that the main clientele for those at Gomaygi are members of the government, the men who work in that building. Actually, a lot of the sex workers who come to PINK for testing or legal advice also tell us that their clients are members of government.”

This last part was something that I had heard before. Arsen, for example, a gay-identified young man who came in to PINK a lot to hang out and attend events like film-screenings had spent a few months living in an apartment shared by himself and 3 transwomen sex workers. Although Arsen claimed that he himself did not do sex-work, he spent much of his time with transwomen who did. In January, at a potluck at a friend’s
apartment in Komitas, he became visibly upset when Mariam, a mutual friend, made a comment about “those poor transwomen,” arguing that they must be the most disenfranchised population in the city. “Are you crazy?!?” Arsen had asked her. “If they come to you and they complain about how poor they are, how sad their situations are or that they have no power, they are performing this as part of their jobs. They have lots of power and part of how they get it is by performing this kind of sad oppressed role. Their clients are the richest people in Armenia. They make more money than anyone else I know.”

“Arsen, come on,” Mariam rebutted. “If they make so much money, then why do they live in those rundown apartments?” asked Mariam, herself never having been to the homes of these women but having heard from others who had done interviews with them (for advocacy purposes) or who had shared space with them, like Arsen. “No, I’m telling you. It’s part of their status. They have plenty of money. They are not the sad, pathetic people you think they are. They just have to live like that so that people do not know their actual power. When they meet with their rich clients they usually go to expensive hotel rooms.” This debate went on for a while, as Arsen listed some of these women’s possessions: expensive jewelry, the ability to have surgery in other countries if they wanted it (pointing out that many of them did not want it because it would affect their business – afterall, their clients really wanted to be with men anyway). When we left that night, Mariam and I walked to the bus depot in Komitas as she continued her line of questioning. “He doesn’t know what he’s talking about. He probably knows a few trans who are in that situation and he thinks that all of them are living comfortably.”
In fact, staff members at PINK had relayed to me transwomen’s numerous accounts of harassment and economic disenfranchisement by the police. PINK staff who were in constant dialogue with sex workers had nuanced opinions about the daily lives of these women. Anna, for example, claimed that “Yeah, they lie a lot. You can’t always trust them. But that’s the street life, you understand?” Mamikon agreed: “Just because they lie about some things doesn’t mean that their experiences aren’t real. They might have more money than they claim, but many of them are often in dire conditions.” One afternoon, Sofia, a transwoman sex-worker who had come to the office for legal advice from PINK’s lawyer, was laying out the details of one police harassment event that had recently occurred with her. She was walking down the street very late at night when she was stopped by a police car. The police had not only beaten her but had stolen all of the cash that she had on hand. Sofia looked at me, standing in the kitchen listening to her story. Anna had specifically asked for her permission for me to be present during a portion of the meeting with the lawyer. “This poor girl probably thinks I am a drama queen!” she exclaimed, laughing. “Jana [dear, in the feminine], it happens all the time. This is our fatherland [hayrenik, probably calling attention to my status as a Diasporan, most of whom come with idealized notions of what Armenia is].” Sofia had come to the office in men’s attire. She was not wearing make-up, her hair was short, and her face had some stubble. Sofia, like most transwomen in Yerevan, dressed as a natural [“natural,” or straight] during the day. The consequences of appearing in “normal” places – as in non-sex work sites – in women’s clothes were too serious. Her mannerisms quite feminine, she was still aware of her queer status in Yerevan’s urban landscape.
Homosexuality’s semi-public existence in Armenia is quite new. Of course, homosexuality has always been a practice that has had its underground lived experiences. This existence of homosexuality prior to 2012, however, was often of marginal consequence to understandings of the nation. Even Soviet artist and filmmaker Sergei Parajanov’s homosexuality – often alluded by his incarceration in 1948 for charges of homosexuality – is often under-discussed. At his current house-museum in Yerevan, the tour of the vast archive of his works, memorabilia of his relationships with other artists, and his influences through cultural artifacts like rugs and religious symbols begins with a timeline of his life. The timeline includes the months he spent incarcerated, but lists the cause of this incarceration as “political crimes.” During one visit at the museum I asked the curator on duty to elaborate on what these political crimes were in 1948. “The Soviet regime often imprisoned people who they thought were a threat. Art was very difficult to do in those years,” he responded. There was no discussion of homosexuality.

Homosexuality was criminalized in the Soviet Union in 1933 through Criminal Code 121 (Healy 2001; Essig 1999). Earlier, however – in 1922 - homosexuality had been decriminalized through “penal silence” (Healy 2001: 142-43) and relegated to medicine as a problem of both environment and endocrinology (126-151). The discourse around the new legislation, as well as its justifications, were embedded in important larger social, political and economic concerns. As many historians of the Soviet era have been apt to point out, the relationship between the “individual” and the “collective” (Kharkhordin 1999) was not only of political interest, but structured daily life in the Soviet Union in highly politicized terms producing both public discussion through
official periodicals like the magazine *Pravda* (Krylova 2011), films and novels
(Kaganovsky 2008) as well as the higher echelons of the Communist Party. Stalin’s First
Five Year Plan created massive changes. It caused huge migrations amongst agrarian
sectors of society and peasant classes, movements to cities where heavy industrialization
was underway, produced living arrangements with people crammed into communal
apartments (Gerasimova 2002) while new structures were being built as well as mud huts
and other de facto housing forms on the margins of cities and villages (locations of new
mining practices and where the production of necessary materials were underway, such
as steel) (Healy 2001: 181). All of this caused immense reverberations in intimate family
life, gendered roles and practices, and sexuality.

In the context of these massive economic and social restructurings, the worst of
which occurred from 1933-1934 with major famines across the Union both in urban
centers as well as villages, the Communist Party was also undergoing purges: “The
purge, with its review of biographies and its intense scrutiny of Communists’ political
and intimate actions, contributed to a mentality of suspicion and a search for scapegoats.
In this atmosphere, the impatience with the continued existence of urban “social
anomalies,” and the impulse to social cleansing in the cities increased” (Healy 2001:
182). “Conversations, letters, diaries, dress, and, of course, desire were becoming matters
of state” (Essig 1999: 5). One cannot underestimate the importance of the collective
individual, whose desires were being restructured, reorganized, disciplined and in some
ways also undone (Kaganovsky 2008). As Dan Healy (2001) puts it: “Communists set
about to change Russia not solely in economic terms, but in human terms as well. A
cultural revolution would transform the way individuals worked and played, thought and acted; indeed, it would seek to transform their desires” (163).

Article 121, in this context, was a large part of forming this New Soviet Man, with new revolutionary desires, and importantly for the discussions of the time, as an anti-fascist citizen of Communist Russia. “Among the ‘hundreds of facts speaking of the destructive, demoralizing influence of Fascism,’ homosexuality was but one of the most ‘revolting’ features. At stake was not only the purity and health of a population but of its culture. Where the proletariat rules, homosexuality was regarded a force for corrupting youth and was punished, while in the ‘land of the great philosophers, scientists and musicians [Germany], it is practiced freely and with impunity.’ Fascism’s ‘poison’ of nationalism and anti-Semitism was schooling youth in ‘social cynicism, a sadistic passion for murder’” (Healy 2001: 189). Much of the justification for the sudden recriminalization of homosexuality in the Soviet Union after a decade of decriminalization during the New Economic Plan era was based not only on internal debates of what constitutes a good Communist subject, but international debates and geopolitical positioning. The figure of the homosexual, during this period, was variegated: on the one hand, he was mapped on to “survivals” from backwards forms of life such as the “primitive” cultures of the Republics and the remains of a “terminal bourgeois” (Essig 1999: 5) of Tsarist Russia; on the other hand he figured a threatening fascist way of life, something European that threatened the between-East-and-West perfect middle way of life being developed in the Soviet Union (Healy 2001).

In Armenia, the contents of Article 121 remained on the books until 2003 when
Mamikon Hovsepyan of PINK (which had not yet been founded) and Mikayel Danielyan (the director of the Helsiniki Association of Yerevan), worked toward its removal and succeeded. Since then, homosexuality is not criminalized, but remains to be explicitly protected by any new laws. As of yet, there are no anti-discrimination laws that take homosexuality as one of the markers of outlawed discrimination. As many of my interlocutors at PINK would explained to me, discrimination against gays, lesbians, and transgender persons have been documented in all spheres of life – from school, to healthcare facilities, the military, political institutions and the workplace at large.

It’s not that there is no homosexuality, or other forms of queer life, in the city. There are. But, they are few and far in-between and when these lives do exist, when they do walk the streets, when they do produce small communities and spaces, they do so quietly, almost non-visibly. PINK’s office, for example, when I began my fieldwork, had no kind of signage or posting of the goings-on within the office on the building’s façade. There was almost no display of visible queerness on the door or the outside walls. The only kind of marker that made that door look different from other doors in the residential building out of which PINK rented its space on Nalbandyan St. was an anti-bullying poster taped to its door. When they moved to Abovyan St. at the end of 2013, staff members would boast about their new pink PINK office. The building, located in a residential inner yard was salmon colored. This was the closest to a display of gayness their exteriority would ever get.

One could argue that the existence of an NGO, which has as part of its mission the advocacy for LGBT persons and their rights, is already the existence of gay visibility
in Armenia. However, much of what PINK and its staff members do is work against their own visibility, at least de facto. In 2012, after months of spending full-time weeks in the office as an intern, I conducted in-depth interviews with each staff member. During these interviews, when I suggested the possibility that the events in May – the DIY firebombing and the attack on the Diversity March, which almost every single member of the organization regarded as tragic – might have a silver-lining because it brought homosexuality into public existence in the city, I was disagreed with each time. They did not find the new-found visibility of the figure of the homosexual productive, even if it meant more discussion of sexuality and the birth of various new discourses and knowledges around it. Theirs was not a politics of visibility.

While the interior space of the PINK office was covered in various rainbows – flags, drawings, and other rainbow-colored paraphernalia – and there was a certain code-switching that occurred within the office or in other semi-private spaces, most public events outside of the office remained rainbow-free. There were no rainbows, for example, at the annual December 1 HIV awareness day, for which PINK co-hosted free-HIV testing tables on Northern Ave., an event at Charles Aznavour Square to raise awareness, with a host and a DJ, where staff members were passing out pamphlets and leaflets. This, of course, was because HIV is not directly tied to homosexuality in Armenia and the event was co-hosted by other organizations as well, such as Positive People Network of Armenia.

The (non)appearance of rainbows at events had become contentious during the Diversity March, when one of the posters for the Diversity March displayed a pencil
drawing of a blue colored globe with rainbow-colored geometric people figures around it, to exemplify Diversity. This poster was cited many times by members of Hayazn and others who had joined in on the counter-protest, arguing that it was a rainbow flag through which the organizers were spreading homosexual propaganda. The appearance or non-appearance of the “gay flag” has become a highly politicized event itself in Yerevan, where the flag has since 2012 made some appearances, although not for too long and not without discontent.

Visible Invisibility

When I began year-long fieldwork in Yerevan in 2012, homosexuality had become a full-blown public spectacle. The largely underground and non-visible network of connections that had comprised most of my previous fieldwork experiences was by then on constant display within the media. While my previous research plans were to understand the ways in which LGBT identified persons were living their lives and connecting with others when homosexuality had no visibility at all, I quickly became interested in the larger-than-life visibility of homosexuality that had taken place through the events of May 2012. Indeed, as I discussed in the Introduction of this dissertation, these were events, in the Badouian sense. They created shifts in the social and symbolic possibilities of life. They seismically shifted, for example, the ways in which PINK carried out its day-to-day activities, they made those who were politically uninterested hyper-aware of the backlash against their personal affairs, and made many leftists who had previously been unconcerned with the politics of gender and sexuality vigilant in
regards to the fascist enclosures they were witnessing within the daily press.

After conducting interviews with households across Yerevan and asking questions about family, sexuality, virginity, the arrangement of households and how they think generations (older and younger) differ in their opinions on these questions, my research assistant and I were surprised by the lack of mentioning of homosexuality by most of our interviewees. Within 150 interviews in various households, only 3 persons mentioned homosexuality at all. Two of these three made casual mention of homosexuality. The first was Narine, a young housewife who had advocated moving out of her husband’s father’s home when she became pregnant with their first child. She told us that while she got along with her mother-in-law, she knew that living with her in the same home was eventually going to lead to problems between them and her mother-in-law’s mediation in her and her husband’s marriage and decision making. Her husband finally agreed and they moved into an apartment of their own, a rare but occasional living arrangement in Yerevan. When asked about this decision, she said that she thought young people should do what feels right for them since times are changing and we’re not living in mer papperi gyughum (our forefathers’ village), referring to the notion of a rural/urban divide when it comes to the importance of some traditions. “I think as long as you are not hurting anyone then you should be free to do what you want and what is going to be most comfortable for you, you know? I mean, except in some cases where it’s just not appropriate.” “What would be inappropriate, for example?” Lucine, my research assistant, asked. “You know, like when they become hamaseramol (homosexual) or something like that.” Lucine, in her often casual indignation at such off-the-cuff remarks that had large
political implications, retorted, “Who are you to say what is appropriate or not? If it doesn’t hurt anyone, why shouldn’t a person have relations with whomever they want?” To this, Narine just responded with, “Yes im [a shortened, somewhat slang, meaning I don’t know], that just seems wrong to me.” The discussion of homosexuality started and ended there. The second moment which brought about an honorable mention of the homosexual was during our interview with Vazgen, a man who was in his 30s and squatting in the apartment he invited us into for the interview. Vazgen had had trouble finding employment. He had made many complaints, he told us, to the ministry of labor and each time was ignored or told to work harder to find a job. “This is Satan’s country. Some evil force is pushing people to behave terribly to one another, to abuse one another. This is not Armenia anymore. This is the land of pillagers (talanner),” exclaimed Vazgen. He was repeating the often-used rhetoric of Armenia not being a country and not having a government at all because those at the top were evil and in no way providing for the safety and well-being of the citizens of the country. “Talanum en (they are robbing us), they don’t know how to do anything else. They’re all faggots (gomikner).” To this last statement, lucine asked him, “What does their robbing have to do with their sexual orientation?” to which Vazgen responded, “What?” looking confused. And that was that.

When we stepped out of Vazgen’s squat half an hour later, I asked lucine why she had not pushed him further on his claim about faggots. “He wasn’t even talking about gay people it seems to me. He was just cursing at everyone. I don’t know. He seemed to be in a bad place and I don’t think gays are his biggest problem.”

lucine had been attuned to the ways in which gomikner was being used as a catch-
all insult – the worst thing that Vazgen could say about those in power. But it was not necessarily a coincidence that the chosen insult had sexual valences. This statement about “them” all being faggots is a common one in referencing the state and its immorality and corruption as I discussed above. This is another dimension of the figure of the homosexual; a dimension, however, that refuses the obfuscation of the state’s actions through the figuration. In other words, as I will discuss in Chapter 4, while many LGBT and feminist activists argue that the use of homosexuality as a hot topic in the press acts as a way of deflecting actual material and political concerns of those in Armenia – including those of LGBT and otherwise queer persons – the use of figuring state actors as homosexuals bridges anxieties about the state and its actions with anxieties of sexuality and propriety at a more intimate level.

The third case in which homosexuality was brought up was different from these other two. It did not come in passing and it was anything but a casual remark. Lydia was a woman of about 50. She had one son, who had just been married – the wedding had been celebrated about 3 weeks prior to the time I interviewed her in the Spring of 2013. Lydia was one of my more interesting interviewees. Her demeanor was serious and her voice and presence demanding. She invited my research assistant and I in for coffee, which she had her son prepare and bring us. She told us before we began our interview, which we framed as “trying to grasp the role of the family and members of the family in Armenia,” that she had volumes to speak on the subject and that perhaps she was not such a good interviewee because she was scared she would never stop talking. Excited about the prospect of someone who felt they had so much to say on the subject, I told her...
that I had as much time as she was willing to give me. She would not let me record the interview, but I took rigorous notes, writing down some her sentences word for word. When her son brought us the coffee, she told him to leave us alone and he left the room. Then she told us that he is a very nice man and that she is glad that he is finally married, but he is not so bright. His bride, however, is an intelligent woman and she is glad to have her join their family.

Lydia was deeply aware of the media debates around homosexuality and women’s sexuality. She discussed the DIY firebombing and the horrendous implications of the existence of a “gay bar” in Yerevan. She also talked about “our young heroes,” referring erroneously to Hayazn as the Dashnaks (ARF) who saved the country on the event of the gay pride parade (the Diversity March) the year before. She also included discussion about a prior moral panic around the “red apple” tradition that had occurred around the 2009 feminist initiative of holding a mock burial of the red apple. A large papier-mâché red apple had been constructed by feminist activists with the support of Women’s Resource Center, as well as Utopiana Association, which was then marched around Yerevan in celebration of International Women’s Day (March 8th). The police eventually halted this march, but later in the day actual red apples were buried in the back yard shared by the offices of Utopiana and WRC at that time. The photographs of these burials were then disseminated through social networking sites inciting a large media scandal around the destruction of Armenia and the destruction of proper Armenian traditions by feminists. Lydia complained about feminism and about this complete lack of respect for Armenia by these “so-called Armenians.” “Why do they want to pervert (aylaserel)
everything about Armenia? Stepping all over the purity and virginity of our women was not enough, now they want to spread homosexual propaganda?"

The red apple tradition is a generations-old marriage custom, in which the white sheet from the “first night” is either displayed outside of the groom’s house the morning after the wedding or is checked by the female relatives of the groom to make sure that there is a stain evidencing the previous purity, or virginity, of the bride. If the sheet is stained, the female relatives of the groom bring a gift of sweets and red apples to the female relatives of the bride to thank them for giving them a “good girl” (Poghosyan 2011: 378). While this tradition is observed today, both in small towns and villages as well as in Yerevan, there is largely a more “liberal” notion of virginity in use. Like Alina Poghosyan (2011), who conducted ethnographic research among multiple generations and Armenian sites on the use of the red apple custom, I also found that most families who honor the tradition today gift the red apples without performing the “check” of virginity. However, there was usually a general agreement amongst those I interviewed that virginity is still important. Many of the older women lucine and I interviewed, especially those who had sons, claimed that they did not or do not intend to check the virginity of their bride, but still do consider it an important virtue. One woman, who had a daughter and a son, both of whom were at a marriageable age, but had not yet been married, told us that her mother-in-law did check for her virginity using the sheet. This was a very embarrassing moment for her, although she passed the test. She will not perform the check herself, when her son is married, because she finds it degrading. She added, “Purity is of course important – I don’t want my son marrying an immoral girl –
but sometimes a woman has done things against her will. And she shouldn’t be judged for these actions.” Virginity, thus, is taken to be a necessary ideal, whether or not it is evidenced fact.

Important for me here is the conflation of a feminist politics against the virginity ideal of unmarried women with homosexuality. This is an important conflation, especially within the kinds of ideas that circulate bundled under the heading – or figure – of the homosexual within media as well as nationalist circles. And it is also particularly important to understanding how the figure of the homosexual came to be the cathexis of national anxieties, at least for right-wing nationalists. As I will discuss in later chapters, the figure of the homosexual embodies various attributes of a subject that stands against the proper Armenian value system – the family, the Church, the nation. This anti-national position includes various other discourses like human rights. The ways in which Lydia spoke of perversion – linking feminism with homosexual propaganda, drawing on a popular domino effect anxiety of feminism then homosexuality then the end of the nation. The examples she cited – the red apple burial, the Diversity March framed as a gay parade – made lucine and I hyperaware that she was not only following nationalist press and circulations of information framed in a particular way, but was probably also an active participant in such movements.

While homosexuality itself might be part of one conversation which has taken a very particular form, the constellation of anxieties concerning the survival of the nation – which takes the figure of the homosexual as its root cause – articulates a certain instability and vulnerability of the nation itself which is part of a larger social
unconscious at work. It is the survival of the patriarchal family that is at issue here. And this family, with the moral male head of the household, has become vulnerable for a multitude of reasons: emigration, un(der)employment, moral corruption of government and oligarchy members and their effects on the (inability of) preservation of proper morality within households. The lack of a strong male head of the household becomes metonymy of the lack of moral leadership of the nation – perverting proper Armenianness and contributing to the coming of the end of nation, at least as symbolic order.

**Conclusion**

This chapter, which acts as my arrival scene of sorts, has aimed at introducing the reader to the sorts of possibility, restrictions, (in)visibilities and spaces that make up queer life in Yerevan. By tracing the ways in which homosexuality – hypervisible in mainstream media since 2012 – is in many ways largely invisible to those who do not know the codes through which to see it, my goal has been to introduce to the reader what is at stake in the claims that right-wing nationalists make about sexual perversion. In moving now to the discourses, rhetorics, experiences and effects of *aylandakutyun*, or moral perversion in the next section of this dissertation (comprising two chapters), I travel into different spaces and places that highlight the anxieties that give homosexuality in Armenia its charge.
Chapter 1
Wandering Yerevan: Nostalgia and Post-Hope in a Presentless and Empty City of Ruins

The streets have emptied of your intimate faces,
Walking around are merely the shadows of the past
It is the same city, the same sun, the café on the corner,
but they are other, foreign eyes, unfamiliar foreign faces,
in the steps that follow behind you.
- Arthur Meschian, from “Same City” (Nuyn qaghaq)

I remember this city of mine, where people lived like people.
- Ruben Hakhverdian, from “I Remember” (Hishum em yes)

At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a
different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader
sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and
progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective
mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time
that plagues the human condition.
- Svetlana Boym (2001: xv)

In 2010 a taxi driver who found out it was my first time in the country decided to
show me what Yerevan was really like: “You need to see Yerevan as more than just
beautiful tourist sites. You need to see Yerevan’s hopelessness,” he said, as he pointed
out a young woman waiting for the bus at the corner of Abovyan St. and Isahakyan St. in
the central city. “She’s in her late 20s and still waiting to get married. But she will never
find a husband. All the men are gone or cannot afford to raise a family.” As he turned the
corner on Sayat Nova St. and drove up toward the Opera, he showed me high-rise
condominiums on Northern Avenue that had replaced low-income Soviet-built housing
demolished in the early 2000s after the land was sold to Russian-Armenian developers.
The displaced residents, who were poorly compensated for the homes they lost, moved in
with relatives or into smaller apartments and while at first advocated for compensation from the government, eventually gave up this seemingly hopeless project. The taxi driver turned his head around to stress: “No one can afford to live in those buildings. They have built them for no one.”

“They have built them for no one,” he repeated, because “no one” signposts two different sets of understanding the city’s hopelessness. “No one” was in reference to the fact that it is a very few, if any, Yerevancis (residents of Yerevan) that can afford to live in those buildings. In fact, they are largely empty. “No one,” however, also points to the general emptiness of the city. In other words, new housing is being built while many other buildings in the city are empty. And, this housing is even less accessible than those forms that these high-rises have replaced, for the people that they have displaced.

Yerevan feels, and in many ways is, empty. This emptiness is experienced in a space where Soviet-era housing, a reminder of a once-paternalist and caring state, is now marked by dilapidation. As such Yerevancis wandering through these spaces, places and times often describe the city as ruins (averak). Ruins because a once full Armenia now feels like evacuated space, hollow and ghostly. Ruins because buildings are, sometimes quite literally, falling apart, without any continued attention from a non-paternalist state. These spaces in and after transition act as symptoms of Armenia’s felt crisis in the disintegration of morality, the family as well as nation. The perversion of space is felt as a perversion of time, producing nostalgia for another time – past or future – that the present seems to have made impossible and itself feels impossible. Lacking a central ideology and moral leadership, filling Armenians with a sense of moral degradation, has
led to nostalgia for hope. This feeling has also led to a rhetoric of perversion which can also be understood spatiotemporally. For, if morality has guided the nation from past to present, perversion leaves the future as openness, without paths.

To understand space as ruins means to see through a lens of perversion. The problem of missing fathers within households, metonymized through a missing Father or moral leadership of the nation has, over the past couple of decades, produced a seemingly vacant symbolic order of Armenianness. Independence in 1991 was felt by Armenians as a real victory, one that was celebrated in the wake of a strong national independence movement. This celebration quickly dissipated through four years (1990-1994) of war with Azerbaijan, in which many died, and many more fled the country’s dire conditions of shortage and economic despair. In the mid-1990s, as the war turned into frozen conflict through a cease-fire, the newly established nation-state had experienced extreme and violent forms of economic and political transition, through privatization and liquidation of industries, leading to wide-spread un(der)employment, the emergence of an oligarchy class that became rich on these pawning schemes and a government whose power gains are popularly attributed to the emigration and death of other, possibly more moral, options for leadership.

This openness of future can be understood in two ways, which are closely related: first, as a not future, or the feeling that Armenia no longer has a future and is fated to keep remembering the lost past. Second, this can be understood as a future with perversion as its only possibility. If morality has died in the present, then the paths that lead to the future cannot be guaranteed as moral, and thus can only perverse. As such,
through my own wanderings through the city and interviews with people who reside there, I argue that existing in Yerevan can be understood as wandering through time and space. A present evacuated of Armenians and of proper Armenian morality should be understood, rather, as presentlessness. In other words, if Armenia is characterized as a nation that has endured threat and atrocity because of moral perseverance, the lack of this will that allows continuity with the nation’s heroic past leaves no Armenia at all. “There are no families in Armenia.” As I have already discussed, this statement is not just about families, but about the possibilities of the nation, its propriety and its future. Armenia does not, in other words, exist in the present, but is wandering through time and space, without goal, without definition.

In this presentlessness, Armenia is a nostalgic space, haunted by its pasts. It keeps turning on and coming back to two past moments/eras: the years of the national independence movement in the late 1980s and 1990s, in which there existed a national ideology unifying the people of Armenia through a common cause and producing hope for a tomorrow in which Armenia would finally have the independence and sovereignty for which it longed for centuries; and the days of the Soviet Union, before these major losses and when there seemed to be stability, paternalist care by a centralized government, a hope for growth of a national economy and belonging to an internationalist project of allocution.

A presentless nostalgia for the past, a time in which there was hope, obfuscates the possibilities of future, which can be likened to the affect of hopelessness. However, this affect is also different from hopelessness. It is not that there is no hope – a lack of
hope – but rather that there is a sense of hope that is missing. A memory of there once being hope. Hope haunts Yerevan. I suggest calling this affect *post-hope*. As in other neologisms in the context of Armenia, such as post-Soviet, postsocialist and post-memory (Hirsch 2012), which express the continued existence of something that is already passed, post-hope refers to the passing of hope which leaves its ghost present. Post-hope is temporal as well as spatial. The past, and the hope that once lived there, is remembered through the spaces it continues to haunt. The past seems to linger and does not allow for a future to make itself known.

Post-hope is a chronic affect, with moments of reprieve (hope) here and there. 2008, 2013, 2015 – moments in which somewhat unifying movements returned possibilities of future. These leaderless movements – post-election campaigns and the now infamous #ElectricYerevan - move the city, bringing a sense of possibility of an otherwise located in a time to come and a spark of momentary potential. But almost as soon as the city begins to move again, it stops. In this way, hope is fugitive. Since the setting in of illegitimacy of the government and rise of the oligarchy, hope has become unsustainable, uncontainable. It disappears as quickly as it may appear. Post-hope, marked by passivity and inaction, disappears these moments back into (a longing for) the past. (Post-)hope is spatial and temporal, like the nostalgia that produces it. The stagnant sense of a not future is felt within the streets, in buildings, in alleys, in homes. If the future can be traced by marking a path from the here and now to the then and there, that then and there constantly falls off of the horizon because the here and now has merged with the open – unlocatable, impossible to experience in any bearable way. This is a spatiotemporal perversion.
Armenia has lost its path of propriety within time and space.

Futurity has become a useful trope of making sense of late capitalism’s strange temporality. Futurity signifies more than the vernacular notion of future. Future exists. Or, it will, necessarily, exist. Futurity, however, is the preoccupation with a different register. For Jose Munoz (2009), *this* future is in the present, signifying the present as already past, bringing forth the potential that is yet to come. For Lee Edelman (2004), on the other hand, there is no future. Or, rather, there should not be a future and (queer) possibility can be found not in bringing forth this “yet to come,” but demanding and insisting on the present without the bounds of this future. Hope as one measurement of futurity is caught up in these promises and denials of future. Anne Allison (2013) explores this “hopology” (91-96) in the context of twenty-first century Japan, in which “flat futures” (88) of a precarious present have both led to an abandonment of hope for the good life but have also made demands for a change in the social and political – demands, for example, for income security, employment, and government-provided family support. In these ways, futurity is often thought in relation to present. Otherwise, future makes little sense. What future without a present? Future in relation to what? To when? But, as I will suggest in this chapter, Armenians’ attachment of morality and propriety to Armenianness is not a problem of the precarity of the present, but the very lack of it. *Yerkir yerkir chi*, goes a very popular colloquialism of Yerevan cab drivers. The country is not a country. Armenia is not Armenia. Armenia is already past. I am interested, then, in how future becomes a foreclosed possibility for many. In the final chapter of this dissertation, however, I return to this question and following the cues of
young activists, I challenge this notion of no future as well as presentlessness.

The sense that hope is of days now gone is diffuse in Armenia. As an affect it affects life, making life into something that is not life. “Sa kyanq a?” [“Is this life?”] asked many of my interviewees. This sense of having no hope expressed itself on peoples’ countenances: facial expressions with middlebrow raised, eyes drooped, mouths curled, fed up, tired. But post-hope has its own potentials. As a melancholic – nostalgic - process, it forces the production of anger and the search for an object to mourn. It remembers and it holds on to a past, attempts to (re)produce this past and continues to hold on to the possibility of hope that once existed: pulling, pulling, pulling on it to constantly make impossible the present which is leading to no future. In Chapter 7, I will more directly turn my attention to the possibilities of post-hope and the ways in which the negation of the present affirms future once again.

I begin within the space of home and residential buildings. Empty and hollow, the felt crisis regarding family and national annihilation manifests these spaces as ghostly, leaving remnants and traces of the lives that once resided there, the joyous experiences shared with family members who have left, and the fullness that leaves lack. I then move to a discussion of the ways in which the lack of morality amongst the political and economic elite of the Republic metonymically affects the possibilities of maintaining moral composure in the household. I point out the ways in which many of lucine’s and my interviewees in these homes broached the topic of “families in ruin,” or the impossibility of forming proper families in an age of moral perversion (aylandakutyun). Stepping back out into the streets of the city – its public spaces – I trace the ways in
which the missing “strong father” of the household, understood as intrinsic to Armenian propriety, is mirrored by the evacuation of centralized and paternalist authority in the city-space. What once was a cartography of symbolic authority has become the ground on which oligarchs build monuments to themselves. No longer emblems of moral authority, these monuments – Churches, shops and high-rises – signify the emptiness of the Name of the Father (a notion I take up in greater length in the following chapter). And, finally, in the last section I offer a genre of melancholic songs of wandering the city that highlight the ways in which presentlessness and post-hope create attachments to the past and signify the present as a space of impossibility. Wandering, these songs make clear, is an everyday condition of existence in Armenia.

**Hollow Spaces, or Living in Ruins**

One afternoon during one of our wanderings through Yerevan – in the neighborhood of Sasuntsi David - lucine and I discussed a pattern: the sound of hollowness as we knocked on doors of many empty apartments. We had noticed this sound many times in the 7 neighborhoods we had visited in previous months. That day we were in the neighborhood of Sasuntsi David. We took the elevator up to the top of a 14-story and, beginning at the very end of the hallway, knocked on each door until we reached the eighth floor. There had yet been no answer. Many of the doors we knocked on no longer had a doormat placed out front. Some of these units still had a sign remaining on the door, a metal or wood carving of Mount Ararat or some historic monastery with a family name - Sahakyan, Galstyan, Hayrapetyan – leaving a trace, a
Finally - on the eighth floor - Rosa, a woman in her 40s, answered the door. She invited us into the small front room of the apartment. “Our home is small, but please, sit down,” she said as she started putting away the vacuum cleaner she had been using on the bright red rug that covered most of the floor of the room. The apartment had two rooms when they received it from the centralized government in the early 1980s, she explained. As JaneR. Zavisca has shown in her work on Soviet and post-Soviet housing in Russia, a two room apartment in the (post)Soviet world does not mean two bedrooms, but, rather, two total rooms (2012). By the 1980s, “a high-quality apartment was one with at least two isolated rooms, a kitchen no less than eight square meters in size, and all key utilities, including running water, hot water, sanitation, and central heat” (40). This “separate apartment” was “normal living” when occupied by a nuclear family – mother, father and children (41). Two-room and one-room apartments do not say much about the occupancy of the apartment, however. The sleeping and spatial arrangements of the various homes Lucine and I entered greatly differed. In some homes, the common room (living room) was also a sleeping space, often for children. Kitchens were not exempt as a venue for sleeping, often featuring backless sofas for seating space, which could be converted into sleeping space at nights with an addition of pillows and sheets. These homes were most often multi-generational, with grandparents, parents, and grandchildren all living in two or three rooms. Often adult siblings continue to live in the home with their parents, especially men who, after married, bring their wives into their fathers’ homes and share
the space. This was seen as normal or properly Armenian by most of our interviewees, although sometimes, and most often women, complained about this normalcy and thought that it should be normal for families to live separately in nuclearized form. But “separate apartments” were highly contested nonetheless.

Rosa’s husband had received the apartment through his workplace, given by the centralized Soviet government, and because they had two young sons at the time, two rooms were seen as plenty. But it was not enough space for them they thought, so they added some more rooms by building walls, creating a much smaller living room but four isolated rooms. This practice of remont – remodeling – was a common Soviet era practice and continues today. Remont means making one’s home feel more like a home. Given a living space by the workplace or the centralized government was not enough for many families, especially most, who lived multi-generationally. Adding rooms by tearing down or building up walls, turning outside balconies into inside rooms hanging off the edges of buildings, etc. (Platz 2005) was a practice that took what the state provided and made it particular to the needs of Armenian families. Rosa’s husband’s parents were also living with them at the time. Since then, however, her father-in-law had passed. Now, her eldest soon occupies one room with his wife. Her mother-in-law sleeps in another. Her and her husband have their own bedroom while their younger son lives in a separate apartment with his wife and children.

As would often happen during these door-to-door interviews, Rosa asked us if someone had recommended her to us as a good interviewee. “I’m just wondering you know, because you are asking about family and home and I have a lot to say about this!”
We explained that we hadn’t come to her particularly but were glad that she was open to talking with us. “We’ve been knocking on every door from the 14th floor and you are the first person who answered. Is everyone else gone? Do you know?” lucine asked her.

“Yeah, many of them have left. We’ll probably go too soon. We can’t live in this building like this for much longer, I suppose.” lucine and I were confused. The emptiness of the building was not particularly alarming for us. We had knocked on various hollow doors, in various empty buildings, on quiet streets, which had left their traces of bustle and hustle of the past. Yerevan was emptying out in general. There did not seem to be anything particularly hollow about this building, at least not any more so than many other buildings in the city. “But you saw the building when you approached it right? Did you see what is happening to it?” We had not. Rosa elucidated: “Oh! I thought this is why you had come to this building. When you leave, look at it! Our building is bending and coming closer to the building next to it. For the last 20 years it has been getting closer and closer. In a few years, it will touch the next building! At that point, we don’t know what we are going to do. And for that reason we have not yet registered this apartment as our property. We don’t know if we’ll be able to continue living here. The walls are starting to crack.”
Rosa was the only one in the building to agree to an interview. As we made our way down the stairs, knocking on every door of every floor, few answered and those who did declined to be interviewed. Some apartments were obviously lived in. A small plastic
grocery bag of trash placed outside waiting to be taken to the trash receptacles downstairs, or a pair of shoes on the doormat gave them away as occupied. Many more, however, were empty. The sound of hollowness was a dead giveaway. As we exited the building, we made sure to take a look at the structural problem Rosa had brought up. The buildings were, in fact, coming closer to one another (see Fig. 1). Time had taken its toll on this space and there was no caretaker, no Father, and no responsible party or parties who wanted to make themselves responsible to do something about it. Looking at these merging buildings, with cracks on the tilting sides becoming apparent, I remembered a question that Jemma, one of our interviewees the previous day in the same neighborhood, had posed heavy-heartedly: “The country has turned to ruins. Whose responsibility is it now to fix it? Who wants to do it? There is no one.” Yerevan as a space was becoming something of a historical site—once vibrant and occupied, now empty and crumbling. But these ruins were still occupied by people, living with the memory of more hopeful times, a time when it was someone’s responsibility to care. When there was a sense of order, a Father, and, importantly, hope for a future.

Nostalgia for Soviet times can be read on the disrepair of residential buildings. What was provided for and cared for by collective bodies (worker’s collectives, unions of a building’s residents, the municipality, etc.) has often been left uncared for after these networks dissolve into private ownership. Svetlana Boym (1995) and Stephanie Platz (2005) both discuss the ways in which residential buildings look bleak and uncared for in post-Soviet times. Hallways are no longer cleaned and kept up with, light bulbs go unreplaced in the common areas of the hallways and entrances to buildings; trash piles up
in the external sites or basements of the building now left with no one who feels responsible for making sure that they do not become rat or cockroach dens. When separate units in buildings get privatized, or become de-facto private space even in the absence of registration, these public spaces within private domains are left abandoned. In 2013, for example, a few of my activist friends had taken it upon themselves to criticize authorities who no longer provide the support that people who live in these buildings need. When I left the field at the end of Summer 2013, Talin was working on a documentary about one building in particular – in a Masiv neighborhood – which had a rat infestation so horrid that children were afraid to go downstairs into the yard behind the building to play out of fear of being bitten by rats. When I went with her to shoot some scenes one afternoon, one resident of the building, Arsineh, opened up the basement latched door, housing the trash from the building’s residents and showed us the nest, with rats crawling all around the building with access to go up the chutes through which trash was dropped from the building’s 8 floors. The residents of the building claimed that they had complained to the municipality many times, and had requested that someone come and clean these common areas so that their children could at least feel safe in going out to play. They had received no response.

These residents’ anger was projected through memories of better times. Many of those Talin and I talked to that day had themselves grown up in this building. Elderly residents had raised their children there. They remembered how the outside courtyard shared with neighboring buildings were playing grounds for them or their children and lamented the ways in which they did not allow their own kids to play there anymore. The
dilapidation of these buildings and spaces that once felt more like home produces a dead present, as a perversion of time. As such, living in Armenia means living with nostalgia, or living in nostalgia.

Many of our interviewees, when asked to discuss the goings on of their current day-to-day life, would use the past tense. This was done for a number of reasons. First, because many of the questions we asked were in regards to what the Armenian family should ideally look like, the proper roles of men and women (if any), or the ways in which the family spends time together. “Family is the himq (base) of Armenia” was often the first statement toward a response to these questions, but this quickly slipped into discussion about how the kinds of meanings attached to the family were no longer possible in Armenia. For one, many of the families had become transnational, split by emigration. The holidays that people once spent with large extended families, sharing in feast and celebration – such as New Years, regarded one of the most important holidays – now seemed evacuated of this joy. Those with whom they would be celebrating were no longer there and putting together a feast was a difficult task. When asked to describe holidays that were meaningful for her family, for example, Oxanna, a woman in her 40s who had a daughter and a son in their 20s responded,

**Oxanna:** When the children were young, birthdays and New Year were our main holidays we spent together and always did something special. On New Years especially, there was always the gathering with the family and all of the cousins and uncles and aunts. They also enjoyed their birthdays. We made sure to do some kind of celebration every year.”

**Me:** And now? Do you celebrate New Years?

**Oxanna:** We do, but the kids, they’re grown. Our son and his family celebrate separately [arandzin]. They live together. They usually invite us over. Our daughter is still with us. Many of our relatives live in Los [Los
Angeles, CA]. Yeah, we get together, but it’s not the same. There isn’t that same kind of celebration these days. But we have very fond memories of those days. That’s important for a family, you know? Memories.

It is not just emigration that has affected these celebrations. Many claimed that those who had stayed had become different. Oxanna’s son, for example, had not left the country but was living “separately.” This statement carried with it a burgeoning complaint. When Oxanna uttered “separately,” she tilted her head and raised her eyebrows. Lucine and I had become familiar with this gesture. Many of those we interviewed whose sons had decided to live separately, as a nuclear family, explained it with a sadness, often coming through with a slight raise in tone, hinting a loss. Later in the interview, lucine asked Oxanna what she thought of sons or daughters living separately with their own families. Oxanna responded:

Yeah, it’s normal. It’s better, you know. I spent years fighting with my mother-in-law. About everything. And at the time, we didn’t really have any other options. It was normal. Everyone was in the same situation. I didn’t like it when she intervened in the kitchen or got mixed up in my marriage affairs or how I should raise my children. I would always think to myself that when I had a daughter-in-law I would stay out of their lives – his marriage and children. That’s their business. But still it’s a new thing. My son continued to live here after they were married for a year. It was crowded. But when they moved out, something was different. But it’s good. Eventually, it will become the normal thing and no one will think that it’s against tradition. Because it’s more practical for everyone. But right now, I have to say, that it feels different, you know? When my daughter marries, it will just be us. That’s not good either.

While Oxanna felt saddened over her son’s separation, she ultimately reasoned that it was the best for everyone. For others, however, this “change” among the younger generation to live alone was seen as the deterioration of the Armenian family. This deterioration was
connected to emigration of Armenians, but also to the immigration of foreign, non-Armenian, values that Armenians learn when they go elsewhere and bring it back with them when they (very rarely) moved back or when they came to visit. This was elucidated by Anna and her mother-in-law, Elizabeth, in another interview. When we asked Anna and Elizabeth if the Armenian family and its role in society were different than that in other nations, they both responded with a strong “Yes, of course.” Lucine then asked them to elaborate on what the Armenian family was and how it differed. Here is how the conversation followed:

**Elizabeth:** The Armenian family is *avandapasht* [traditional, but more literally, tradition-worshipping], my dear. It’s in the blood, the blood.

**Lucine:** What traditions are Armenian?

**Elizabeth:** Just imagine, you have to imagine… I had gone to an excursion *ardasahmanum* [literally, on the outside, meaning in a foreign country, most likely referring to a European country here] when I was young and there, there were half naked women in bars dancing. They invited me to come out with them to one of these nightclubs. I didn’t want to go.

**Anna:** Well, they’re different, of course. What we call tradition differs…

**Elizabeth:** And this was waaaay back, probably 30 years ago. Imagine what has happened to them now. But with us too, of course, a lot of things have changed…. For example, now young people say “okay, that’s your opinion. Don’t push it on me. Don’t violate my rights. Let me grow up however I want. Live however we want. Breathe the way we want. Wake up when we want, eat what we want.” How can this be allowed?! A family is a family. They have to wake up together, sit down to eat at the table together, understand each other, recognize each other, right? But now they’ve made it so that everyone is for himself – when they wake up, when they eat – everything the way they want it for themselves. But see this is not good. This is not proper (*chisht*). The value of the family gets lost in this way.

**Anna:** But now this has nothing to do with anything. It comes from the conditions of the country, from not having bread…it’s all dependent on money, if people can get by.

**Elizabeth:** Jan [dear], listen… a strong family is the basis of our country. If the family is strong, where everyone is strongly connected to one another – where the big family is the public itself – when that itself connects and relates as a family, where everyone in the public relates as a
family to everyone else in the public, do you understand what a big success for our country that is? After that there will be no defeating us. We have been a small people, but against that big Persia, Vardan Mamikonyan [the 5th century military leader who led Armenians in a battle against the Persian Empire and was able to defend Armenia’s rights to practice Christianity] pretty much won when he forced the opposing army to go back. Or else why would they move back? The Turks, they would have by now eaten us raw otherwise. The Armenian people are very smart. When we play chess, when I feel in a bind, I start to think stronger. And in these cases I always win. We always come out of difficult situations. Why am I telling you this? Man, especially the Armenian people, when he feels constrained, his mind works better. You see it all the time. Whenever we are in tight times, we start to cooperate with one another. See?

Elizabeth points to the sense of Armenia itself as a family when she connects the family to other families who make up a public, itself a family. This nation-family, however, is being weakened, according to her narrative, by those who learn foreign values. One of these foreign values is the sense of liberation that young people want from their kin, an issue I take up in Chapter 5. This is often mourned as a loss of the traditional Armenian family, especially when young people choose to separate from their paternal homes, and one of the ways in which Armenia’s perversion is felt. The separation of sons, and sometimes daughters, from the father’s home is also tied to a wider felt individuation of homes, a turning in within households now with closed doors and separate from the larger nation-family. Elizabeth and many others mourn the loss of national interconnectedness that they feel characterized an earlier Armenia, in which neighbors relied on one another and doors remained open to other families, to relatives and friends as a practice of nation-family.
While both Anna and Elizabeth agreed that the Armenian family, and thus Armenia’s strength as a nation, was disintegrating, they disagreed on how and why. Armenia is in a difficult situation, in a political and economic bind where people were finding it difficult to have access to “bread,” as Anna states when she interrupts her mother-in-law, referring to the lack of access many Armenians have to food. But for Elizabeth, the problem is not this political and economic situation, for, as she points out, Armenians have become even stronger historically in times of difficulty because they have relied on their kin in and through moral strength. The strength of Armenia lies in the family. Where they meet in agreement, however, is on the question of perversion. Perversion – in its varying iterations - marks both of these conditions. For Anna, the structural politics and economics that make everyday life unsustainable for the people is a perversion that many tie to those in power, or the authorities. Their corruption violates their loyalty to the Armenian people, for the good of the Armenian people. For Elizabeth, the swerving away from proper Armenian values also marks perversion, based on a disruption of the continuity of Armenian propriety. In other words, the problem is not just political and economic: it is not made only by poverty, inaccessibility of work, or the rising and inaccessible costs of food; it is not only made by fraud, illegal monopolies and the selling of land and industry. For, if the problem was just political and economic, Armenians would be able to overcome, endure, survive and thrive as they have through centuries. The very basis on which this survival has been made possible is at stake. Or, is no more.

In the Eastern Armenian dialect, hac (bread) stands in for food, or a meal.
Levon Abrahamian (2005) shows how the Armenian sees himself at home in his “universe,” or the space that is at any time the land on which Armenians reside, or the place that he can make his own by reordering, reshaping or doing. He traces popular colloquialisms like the prayer of success “Tund shen mna” (Let your house be prosperous) and the curse “Tund k’andvi” (Let your home be ruined) to signal an inseparable connection between Armenian cosmology and the feeling of home. He suggests that the post-Soviet “documented cases of Armenians razing their houses to the ground in order to sell the components as building materials…should be a signal to the collapse of the Armenian ‘Cosmos’” (151). As such, when lucine and I entered dark hallways, smelling of trash and stale cigarettes, and climbing dark staircases with cracked and broken cement, often with ridges in them, ideal for trips and falls, in buildings all around Yerevan, I wondered about what kind of present, if any, was embodied there for Armenians’ sense of history and survival. Many of our interviewees were wondering the same thing when they told us over and over again that “there are no families in Armenia.” Or, perhaps they were no longer wondering. In the following section, I turn to the feeling of post-hope built out of the loss of present.

Families in Ruin, or Post-Hope

“My sweet girls, it’s good that you are interested in finding out about Armenian families. It’s very important. But you will not find anything. There are no families in Armenia. There are no families left. You should research something else.” These were the words of Arpineh, an older woman in the neighborhood of Erebuni, who had invited us into her home. She offered us coffee, we refused, as we usually did, but she insisted so
we waited in the living room as she went to the kitchen. Arpineh had agreed to give an interview, even though she thought there was no point. When she returned with the coffee, we asked her our first question about the role of family in Armenia. “Family is the base (himq) of Armenia,” she said, which we had come to expect. We had heard this statement in almost every interview we had conducted over the last month already. From the neighborhoods of Shengavit, to Erord Mas, and now to Erebuni, most of those we had spoken to in their homes about home, family and nation seemed to agree. Family was the basis of the nation. And, nation, as some further articulated, was a family in itself. But, there seemed to be an inherent contradiction in this statement for most of those we interviewed. While the family was the base of the nation, that base we were frequently told, no longer existed. As I often would, I asked Arpineh about this contradiction. How could family be the base of Armenia but not exist? “This is the problem. The government does not let the people have families. Most people are leaving, starting families elsewhere and those who stay are unable to create their families and because of the economic situations they face, even when they do, the pressure ruins the family,” Arpineh clarified. Families were in ruin, and the nation was on a similar path.

Karen and Mkrtich had a lot to say on this topic. On our first day of these interviews, in Shengavit, Lucine and I had accidentally run into them as, we would later find out, they were returning home after seeing off one of their last remaining friends in Armenia. When Lucine and I had gotten off the Shengavit stop on the Metro that day, we made our way to the closest residential building, up the 6 flights of stairs, knocking on each door as we made our way back down. By the third floor, after knocking on 15 doors,
only one resident, an older man, had agreed to an interview. While a few had answered and did not want to give an interview, most of the apartments were empty. As we left this man’s apartment, thanking him giving us his time, we decided to stop on the 3rd floor for a smoke break on the outside balcony of the building’s common space. At that same time, Karen and Mkrtich were making their way up. “Who are you? Are you looking for someone?” asked Mkrtich suspiciously. He had lived in the building his entire life and was familiar with most residents. We explained that we were conducting interviews with households regarding the role of the family. Mkrtich’s suspicion waned as he began to explain it to us. “If you want, I can tell you everything and you wont have to conduct any more interviews,” he started.

Karen and Mkrtich both lived in the same 6-storey building in Shengavit. Mkrtich was in his 40s, married with two children. Karen was in his late 20s, not yet married. They had known each other for Karen’s whole life – both had been raised in the building, in separate units. Mkrtich was living there now with his parents and his wife and sons.

Like many of our interviewees, Mkrtich and Karen first responded to the question of what the role of the family is for Armenia by saying simultaneously:

**Karen:** What family?

**Mkrtich:** There is no family in Armenia! What are you talking about!?

When asked to elaborate, Mkrtich offered this:

There are no Armenian *people* left. If out of 4 or 5 million people, there are 1 left, what Armenian people? There’s no one left here. These Armenian people in a few years will become Turk, or Russian, Chechen, Yezdi, I don’t know, anything, mixed. People, because of the pathetic conditions in this country, leave, wandering (*man galis*) about in other places, with other people. And wherever is better, he leaves, with his
children maybe or in-laws (*khnami*) – he takes everyone and leaves. So, whether with Russians or with others, people want to live their lives well. If this government had the sense to give people jobs that paid let’s say 200,000 dram [roughly 422 U.S. dollars] or so and said here, take this money and take care of your family, the man would take care of his family here. They pay 200,000 just for one *sheesh* of barbecue to eat. But you are left to work all day and night for 100,000 with which you can’t even survive.

As such, for Mkrtich, there is no Armenian family because there are no Armenian people; at least not in the way that proper Armenianness this entity. The disintegration of the family that many of our interviewees had referred to is contextualized as a problem directly caused by the surplus *jouissance* of the oligarchy. The fulfillment of personal desires of those who belong to this class has meant making impossible the lives of other Armenians in Armenia, causing massive unemployment, which has led to continuous, and massive, emigration leaving the country with no Armenian people and no families.

When lucine and I asked Karen and Mkrtich to discuss the ways in which Armenianness – or the proper Armenian family – differs from those of other nations, they identified the “strong father” as intrinsic to this propriety:

**Mkrtich:** For the Armenian man, one characteristic that makes him better is that he will do any job to take care of his family. He is the master [*der kangnogh*] of his wife, of his children. The father. He will do anything and never complain about it.

**Karen:** The good remains good and the bad remains bad. You can’t say that the Armenian man is only good, but there is a proper Armenian man.

**Mkrtich:** A man who loves his family, I mean someone who really loves his family, he can’t live here. This is not about some kind of patriotism or who really loves his nation and who doesn’t or something like this. This is a matter of really loving your children. If a man really loves his children, he cannot stay here. It becomes a matter of time – leaving one hour or two hours earlier is a matter of how much you are going to benefit your children.

**Lucine:** But things change, of course. Roles are changing – men and women are changing.
Mkrtich: Yeah, but the negative changes are coming from the wrong places. Everything changes, of course. The country changes, the government changes, families change, new technologies emerge. But if it’s a negative change, then why? Because the Armenian father makes sure that his children are raised right so that things will only progress toward the good. In our own time we didn’t know what family ruin [dun qandvel] was, but now a three-year old kid understands all of that. He sees everything and then notices what is happening. He is only a three-year old boy [talking about his own son].

A proper Armenian father ensures that change is only positive change; that things only get better for his children and his family. Change, they conceded, does occur over time, but change toward the worse is today’s only possibility. The fathers of Armenia are not capable of working toward a better change – progress - because of the conditions set forth by those at the state level and the oligarchy class. I want to make clear here, that material conditions are only one aspect of these feelings of crisis. This is not to say that this is not an important aspect. But what we found interesting in our discussions with families – mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, grandmothers and grandfathers – was the ways in which these material realities of un(der)employment and the inability to make ends meet was felt strongest in terms of the affects of national and familial crisis. While poverty was a reality, the main form of how this was expressed as crisis was through its specificities to Armenia. It was not a question of employment and the increasing costs of goods that our interlocutors expressed as a problem. Rather, it was that this was a process set into motion by those who claimed to be Armenian. If Armenian families were in ruin, it was because the nation-family was also, metonymically, in ruin.

Families in ruin (dun qandvel) was a major theme of discussion within many of our interviews. Often, it signposted domestic violence. Picking up on this cue, after
conducted about 25 of these interviews, Lucine and I decided to add a question regarding domestic violence directly. Most of our respondents henceforth agreed: there is domestic violence in Armenia, there is too much of it, and, important here, it is because of social and economic conditions affecting familial relations. As Violet, a woman in her late 50s, explained: “People fight a lot more now and sometimes, because everyone feels so anxious all the time, it leads to physical violence.” Violet used many comparisons between “now” and “then” (Soviet era) to describe the changes to the Armenian family. “Armenian men are not violent. But, they have become pathetic in these conditions and unfortunately, sometimes they resort to violence.” Aghavni, a woman in her 40s, explained, “There are so many reasons to fight nowadays. It wasn’t like this before. Husband and wife fight about money, they fight about their children and how to raise them right, they fight about whether she should work, how much she should work. There are too many reasons. These conditions are ruining families.”

Shushan was putting her new-born daughter down for a nap when we knocked on her door. She joined us in her living room a few minutes later. Becoming a mother, she told us, had changed her opinions on many matters.

2 There seems to be a contradiction between the ways in which domestic violence was discussed by our interviewees and the ways in which it is taken up by public discourse. Recently, psychologist Anna Badalyan made commented on domestic violence, claiming that “is it largely through a woman’s fault that a hand is raised against her” and that “if a woman is well-established and psychologically mature, cases of violence will be reduced.” This statement caused great uproar, especially amongst feminists, who claimed that it was another version of the same patriarchal story – that if a man beats a woman, it is because the woman did something wrong. (Alina Nikoghosyan. “Breaking the Stereotypes: Activist Says Blaming Women for Violence Against them is Wrong.” ArmeniaNow.com. http://armenianow.com/news/69819/armenia_domestic_violence_women_campaign Accessed March 9, 2016.)
It’s hard, you understand? Living in this country, with all of the corruption, economic concerns, people leaving. We don’t know our future. Before I had the baby my husband and I were both working. I plan on returning to work soon but we fight about this a lot. I want to work but I also want to raise my daughter. He thinks that I should be home with her. But we cannot afford that. We both need to work. And he feels like if he is a good father he should make enough for all of us as a family. But this is not possible. These are the kinds of things we fight about. And our situation is better, I think, than most Armenians’. I used to think that domestic violence or other such things were extreme situations, but now I am thinking about these kinds of issues a lot. It’s not happening in our home, but I can understand how it happens. Ours is a masculine culture. Men like to feel strong. But in these pitiful conditions it is hard for men to feel strong so they start becoming anxious.

Violet, Aghavni and Shushan contextualized the common occurrence of domestic violence within larger economic crisis. The perversion of the authorities was leading to the perversion of households, no longer able to sustain and reproduce properly Armenian values.

Mkrtich and Karen, however, were not specific about how families were ruined. Rather, when we asked, they seemed shocked, as if the answer to this should be self-explanatory: “What do you want me to tell you? Everything from fighting to separating fathers from their homes, their fatherland homeland [hayrenik], their families. Our people have been left hungry. We are living in a ruined country!” They both repeated chen toghnum, chen toghnum, (they don’t let you) almost compulsively throughout the interview. At one point, lucine asked them, “What do you mean? Who doesn’t let you? What don’t they let you?” Mkrtich explained:

Mkrtich: They don’t let you provide for a family. The family is impossible (anhnarin). It’s impossible to have a family in Armenia today. Me: You just told me that you are married and have a son. So do you mean that for many the family has become an impossibility, but not for
Mkrtich: No, for everyone. Right now I’m here but that doesn’t mean that I am not constantly looking for opportunities to leave. I work any job I can get my hands on – construction work here, electrical work there. But there are so many like me looking for employment, so I get paid very little. If I refuse a job, someone else will be there to take it right away, for lower pay. Listen, the problem is not only economic. The problem is about dignity. The Armenian family has to have a strong father. When my son sees me constantly struggling, he doesn’t see a strong father.

Me: But your son sees you struggling for the good of your family. Isn’t this what you mean by strong father? [He had made mention of this earlier].

Mkrtich: Yes, of course, the Armenian father will do everything he can to do the best for his family. But what I mean by struggle is that those in the government do not allow me to have my dignity. And my son sees this. Lots of children see this. It is not just fathers. Mothers too. Everyone. I do not have any personal or familial freedoms here. If I want to start a business, for example, so that I can make a better life, they will not let me.

Me: But what do you mean they will not let you?

Mkrtich: The taxes and restrictions they place on businesses – I won’t even discuss the ways in which these larger chains, supermarkets, and so on already make it impossible – some oligarch or government official working for an oligarch will come stomp me out. In short, Armenian citizens are not treated like people. And our children see this. And we cannot have the family life that our forefathers [mer papery] – even in the Soviet times – had. Do you understand?

Me: Can you explain a little bit about looking for ways to leave?

Mkrtich: I know I cannot stay here. Either I have to leave and find work so that I can support my family better, or I need to take them all with me. My mother is old. We live with her. She doesn’t want me to leave or any of us to leave. But, I see this as a necessity. And the problem is, when we leave – if I take my wife and son with me, for example – this is happening all around the country. People who care for their families are leaving. And who is left? These aylanakner [morally corrupt, or perverse, persons, referring to government authorities] are becoming even stronger and making it more impossible for others like me to stay. We all want to leave. In this way, in a few years, there will no more Armenia.

This lack of dignity, or the perversion of the figure of “strong father,” making him an impossibility, was connected, for Mkrtich, to the corrupt actions of government and oligarchy. As I will examine further on in this chapter, the dilapidation of spaces and
especially homes in Yerevan is often felt as the changing toward the worse of Yerevancis
themselves. The perversions of the political and economic elite affect the citizens of
Armenia, especially in Yerevan. As such, the link between the perversion at the top and
the perversions at the bottom, felt as the family’s swerving away from propriety and its
moral undergirding, is one of metonymy, in which a part is taken for the whole. As such,
in the nation-family, the disintegration of morality and the deligitimization of the Father
that I will discuss in the following chapter, signals the perversion of the smaller units of
that family, or the fathers of households.

“Because here there is no future. I look for one, but I have not found one yet and I
don’t think there ever will be one,” Karen added. “What do people have left here?
What can they have? What opportunities do they have for some kind of life?” he pressed.
All that people have left, Mkrtich explained, is the home their family received from the
Soviet system. And this often becomes the only thing of value that they can sell to leave
the country. “But is there no other way? What about struggling against this system –
against the oligarchs and the state?” Lusine asked.

Karen: Struggle for what? What are you going to struggle for? What are you
fighting against? Today I go out and struggle, tonight they come and
take me from my home. How can I struggle? We were there on March 1st
[referring to the 2008 post-election protests that were shut down when the
military descended onto protesters, killing 10 and injuring many more].
What happened? Nothing changed and people died. All of this, one day
we’re going to up and leave this country.

Mkrtich: Yes, of course we participated on March 1st. There were
thousands of people there. If you pay attention, at those meetings, and
what was happening there, you’ll notice that only workers were
participating. People who had a business, or a job, or something to lose.
90% of them were people who had a theory about how to save this
country. These are the kinds of people who struggled. So that things would
be well for them. So that their families would be safe and taken care of.
But now – let me tell you what is happening now. Back then – it wasn’t that long ago, 5 years – people had a sense of how to change things to go better. But now, things are only turning toward the bad. When I think about the future, in this country, I see nothing good. This is the difference. Because when people look forward, they see nothing.

Seeing nothing good now means being unable to project the present into a future. When people look forward, they see nothing, Mkrtich tells us. I will return to this spatiotemporal perversion, in which propriety is imagined as a path that leads toward a future, in the final section of this chapter. Mkrtich and Karen, like many Yerevancis, remembered the past as a time of hope and felt the present as evacuated of this hope. For them, struggle is futile because it necessitates hope – a “what” - that in today’s illegitimate, perverse national context is absent.

This feeling, akin to hopelessness but not quite, is what I would like to call post-hope, in which only the memory of hope – then and there and not here and now – lingers. This affect, which was expressed to lucine and I in multiple ways – from expressions of struggle and protest as futile or impossible, to claims about how the nation has already long been undone, to the feeling that there is no one left to fight and for whom to fight. Illegitimacy has won. Many of our interviewees mourned the emptiness of the Republic, left vacant of those they loved, family members, friends and social networks; but they simultaneously expressed an understanding for this desire to leave. Most of them had some plans to leave themselves, some had tried and failed already, and many desired to emigrate without having actual plans or possibilities to do so. Like Karen and Mkrtich, who saw leaving the country as the only possibility of survival and the maintenance of dignity, leaving was often expressed as the only form of struggle left available.
When there is no hope with which to continue to live in Armenia, the future becomes an open abyss – anything and nothing all at once. Armenia, the fatherland for which generations of Armenians had longed and millions had struggled for through their participation in the late 1980s nationalist independence movement, had seemingly now climaxed as a failed dream. The illegitimacy of this supposed-to-be national government, which had made the everyday livelihood of Armenians impossible causing mass exodus of the population and the moral disintegration of those left behind, had produced a feeling that there was no longer any hope for an Armenia in the future. Post-hope, then, is the affective outcome of a lack of a proper path that leads the nation from the present to a future. It is a problem of the present, evacuated of hope, that makes future impossible. In the following section, I trace the dimensions of post-hope from inside empty, hollow, homes to the buildings, and out into the streets to demonstrate the ways in which emptiness of Armenians, because of the evacuated moral order of Armenianness, has made a once thriving Yerevan a city of ruins. In this city of ruins, the affect of post-hope can be evinced through the ways in which what was once a favorite past-time of man gal, or wandering the city, becomes the only way of existence. No longer a practice of leisure, wandering aimlessly becomes a mode through which Yerevancis experience everyday life. In the following section, I move in scale from familial homes and residential buildings into the larger city to explore this new, post-Soviet, mode of wandering and how it disturbs Armenians’ sense of Armenianness.

Wandering through Time and Space
The fountains, known as the “singing fountains” (*yergogh shatervanner*), in Republic Square lie in the center of the city. In the evenings, when the sun goes down, the fountains light up. Music plays as the water from the fountains springs into the air, performing to the rhythm of the music and the lights. Not only are the fountains themselves in internal rhythm – the lights, with the water, with the music – but they are in rhythm with the city around them. In the summer evenings, after a very hot day, families and tourists begin to gather around them, in front of the National Art Gallery of the Republic of Armenia, causing a strange sense of foot traffic. The movement is slow. People have come – some from other neighborhoods of Yerevan, some from other towns or villages in Armenia, and others as foreign tourists, Diaspora and not – to see the fountains. But life as usual for those in Yerevan continues as well. Those who work go home, trying to avoid the crowds building around the fountains. The restaurants, cafes and bars fill up, as the evening begins, and those socializing in such places try to avoid the sound of the fountains and the people on the streets who have gathered to watch, as they make their own noise comprised of laughter, talk, hellos and goodbyes.

The fountains of Republic Square are important for Yerevan. They are a sightseeing must for those guiding any new visitor through the city. They are an important venue for many *Yerevanci* families and even those outside Yerevan, who cannot afford many other forms of entertainment. The fountains, right there in the middle of Republic Square, are free. One can watch and listen without paying any *dram*. The fountains, along with other central spots of Yerevan like the Cascade or Northern Avenue, are wandering grounds. To wander, or *man gal*, is a term often used to convey
leisurely walking about, roaming, taking pleasure in swaying to the rhythms of the city. But those who visit the site now cannot help but be slightly out of sync with the feelings of time and space once attached to that particular site. The fountains were once the location of Lenin’s statue. They now remain the site of evening entertainment.

Lenin’s statue was brought down in 1990 during the independence movement, prior to Armenia’s independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Like other sites in Yerevan, once the concrete centers of ideological activity, the fountains are now the site of deflection: a show of lights, water, and music in celebration of something not quite sure of itself. In sites like these, the city’s rhythms are felt through what many often call frivolous entertainment. Like Republic Square, Liberty Square, once the location of the national independence movement, is now (at least on most days) the site of pure leisure: children’s toys for rent, like bikes and electric cars, bouncy houses, coffee and ice cream shops. In the first two sections of this chapter I discussed the lack of moral center within households – described by Lucine’s and my interviewees as the problem of the missing “strong father” and the disintegration of the family – that is often metonymically linked to the moral bankruptcy of those who govern Armenia (the illegitimate Fathers I will take up in the following chapter). I now turn to the city itself, once a center of Soviet ideology and now a space lacking a sense of order. The members of family and father missing from the household is mirrored in the city’s larger space, which is felt as empty and evacuated of Armenians and a national Father.

The fountains at Republic Square and their surroundings highlight a *rhythmanalysis* (Lefebvre 2004) in which space produces a life out of sync with its past,
present and future. Henri Lefebvre (2004) defined *rhythm of space* as that which is “everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time, and an expenditure of energy.” (25). A method of rhytmnanalysis would be concerned with bringing together the studies of space, time and energies. In Armenia, a rhytmnanalysis, based on a method of wandering, reveals a sort of skipping, an attempt to move forward, but staying in one place which is not the present, nostalgic of a past, and never future. For, while the fountains of Republic Square are a site of leisure, for many in Armenia and especially those who are unemployed, leisure has become the primary mode of life. Leisure, however, can only be leisure when it is time away from laboring. But with no work, or little time at work, lesisurly wandering becomes one’s occupation. Wandering becomes a way of life.

In 2013 there was a controversy over how to develop Republic Square. Although the leader of the Architect’s Union of Armenia, Mkrtich Minasyan, argued that Square was complete and had been for a long time, and did not need any further development, the city called for proposals of plans for the square. A reporter for ArmeniaNow wrote: “Studying the submitted projects makes it clear that the majority has focused on the vacant space left after removing the Lenin statue, each of them suggesting a solution of sorts. The statue of the communist leader erected in 1940 was dismantled in 1991, while his pedestal was removed in 1996. One of the project authors suggests a church be built in that space, others suggest a giant cross, or an arch, or a lighthouse.”³ It seems that the

---

³ Gevorgyan, Siranuysh. “Union Architect: No plan is best for Republic Square.” *Armenia Now*. Available from
absence of Lenin’s statue has left a vacancy, a gap, that many, at least the architects who participated in the project, feel needs to be filled.

This is not to say that Yerevan does not have other statues of other Fathers. The city is speckled with statues. The most common way to give directions is by its proximity to one of these statues. Most of these statues are of men deemed heroes in one sense or another. And many of these men are characterized as “father” of something or another. The statue of Mesrop Mashtots, the “father” of the Armenian alphabet, resides in front of the Matenadaran, the hall that houses ancient manuscripts. Inside the structure of the Matenadaran one can find the statue of Moses Khorenatsi, patmahayr, “father of Armenian history.” Some, like the statues of Sasuntsi David, Vardan Mamikonyan, or Hayk are of warrior figures in history/mythology. Others are of artists, poets, writers, musicians and composers. Yerevan can thus be conceptualized as a cartography of heroic and fatherly men of Armenia’s past. But the removal of Lenin’s statue is meaningful. For, having not been replaced, it calls attention to Armenia’s inability to produce contemporary paternal figures. With no moral leadership, the site becomes emblematic of a lack, a symptom of Armenia’s perversions.

This is, of course, not to say that Republic Square or Liberty Square were not also sites of leisure and entertainment during the Soviet era or the 1990s. But that leisure and entertainment were focused around a central ideology, a celebration of a common cause. For this reason, I will differentiate between wandering as a form of leisure and wandering as a state of life. What has changed in the time and space of Yerevan in the last 25 years,

at least in the way that most Yerevancis feel it, is the disappearance of a sense of order and leadership: a Father. This lack is experienced through time and space as the landscape of the city transformed itself from the capital of a Soviet Republic, to the capital of a finally-Independent Republic of Armenia, to what many now describe as “ruins.” Within these ruins, new structures are going up all the time. But, unlike Soviet era structures, which produced space through the displays of centralized power, these new structures produce other forms of (illegitimate) power.

In 2013, oligarch Gagik (Dodi Gago) Tsarukyan opened a church in the city of Abovyan on the outskirts of Yerevan, part of an ongoing project in which he aims to build at least 10 more in Armenia in the next 5 years. Dodi Gago is known as one of the wealthiest men in Armenia and was until 2015 the leader of the Prosperous Armenia Party. The opening was a big national event to which were invited President Serj Sargsyan, Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko, Robert Kocharyan and others. Gathered outside of the church on a hot day in May, the invited, as well as the public, stood in front of a long banquet table serving snacks and drinks. For the (un)respected statesmen and businessmen who had been officially invited, this event looked like many other social events they attended regularly: full service of drinks (including bottled water) and food. For those who comprised the “public,” also officially invited as a gesture to Armenian society, however, this was anything but regular. Bottled water and other kinds of bottled drinks are expensive for most Yerevancis and other residents of Armenia, whose income, if any, does not make room for these kinds of indulgences. For them, the banquet table was much more attractive than the church itself, as well as more immanent
to life. As Azatutyun news network reported that evening, the President and the other political and business officials had already left the Church’s consecration and did not notice the hundreds of “hungry” people crowding the banquet table and grabbing anything they could get. The report included a video, showing security guards hired for the event helping people grab from large bowls of radishes and other food and stuffing it into plastic bags. This “scene” was one discussed for weeks that spring in Yerevan. The ostentatious display of food, drinks and water, that went largely untouched by the authorities and ravaged by the crowds, was a picturesque display of Yerevan’s perverse economic gap and oligarchic authority.

This large gap between everyday existence and the oligarchy’s demand for recognition of authority is made more complex by the layers of history in Armenia’s landscape. In 2015, there was another Church opening, this time involving a more complex politics of deconstruction, construction, and renewal. Saint Anna Church was built right next to the 13th century church, known as the Holy Mother of God Katoghike Church, which sits in the center of Yerevan, surviving and preserved through the Soviet era. Until 2008, next to the church was Armenia’s National Academy of Sciences, another building exhibiting the centralized Soviet State’s ideological devotion to learning and science. Academic institutions were important locations of state ideology, exemplifying the claims of the importance of learning. In Lenin’s words: “…I must say that the tasks of the youth in general, and of the Young Communist Leagues and all other organisations in particular, might be summed up in a single word: learn” (Lenin 1920).

But in 2008, this building of learning was taken down to build up another monument to the oligarchy’s “mini-empire,” in the words of Mika Artyan, one leftist Armenian blogger.\(^5\) The opening of St. Anna was, like the opening of St. Hovhannes in Abovyan city, another scene of power. The consecration of the Church’s four pillars, on April 30, 2015 was undertaken by Archbishop Navasard Kchoyan, de-facto pocketed official of the church of President Sargsyan’s government. Kchoyan has had a longer than 15 minutes of fame in recent years, coming under heavy criticism by alternative press and activists for not only owning a Bentley, but also a handgun, and defending his right to do both. He has become the symbolic representation of the corruption of the Armenian Apostolic Church in its connections to the government and oligarchy class. President Sargsyan, as well as other state officials, attended the consecration, making the ceremony one among many rituals celebrating not only new churches filling Yerevan’s urban landscape and the many layers of erasure and revision of the past, but also the illegitimacy of this assemblage of corrupt institutions.

During the Soviet era, all major landmarks in the city acted as space as well as symbol of state authority. Republic Square, for example, the location of the National Gallery sitting behind the vacancy left by Lenin and the fountains, is across from the Government House, which is the location of many governmental offices. The Square is made by five other main buildings - including the Ministries of Finance, Transportation, Foreign Affairs, and Territorial Administration. Power, in post-Soviet times, however, is

---

spacialized not through ideological display, but vulgar showcasing of money. The square now also includes the grandiose Marriott Hotel, franchised by AK Development, a group of Armenian-Americans.

Northern Avenue is one of the most contentious sites of these redevelopment projects. As you will recall, the taxi driver who decided to give me a tour of the other Yerevan in 2010 insisted on showing me the high-rise apartment buildings on the avenue and explained not once, but twice, that they have built them for no one. Northern Avenue, since these reconstructions, feels like urban desert. Made up of these high-rise buildings and stone pedestrian road, the avenue acts as a promenade in the evenings. In the daytime, however, and especially in the summers, when the sun beams from directly above the avenue and its lack of trees, it makes for a dreadful walk as one aims to get from the northern central city to the southern. While the high-rises house largely vacant several million-dollar condos, the first floors of these buildings accommodate a retail market, such as Armani Exchange and expensive lingerie shops. These lower levels also include trendy European and American chains like Cinnabon, KFC, and Segafredo. While the food courts are sites for socializing for young Armenians - where they usually order a cup of coffee or a pastry and spend hours occupying tables – and where many Diaspora and tourists come for lunch or coffee, the retail shops are usually empty, accentuating a desolation produced by new post-Soviet free market logics.

One hot Saturday afternoon, Armen and I sat on a bench on Northern Avenue. He had just given me a tour of yet another Yerevan – the queer Yerevan. After a couple of hours at Square One, we traveled on foot through tunnels used by “emo” kids for their
graffiti art, connecting us to Mashtots Avenue. Walking further down Mashtots, we had
seen the canyons at the end of the central city used by men who have anonymous sex
with men, then made our way up into Gom Aygi, the park used by (often trans women)
sex workers. Now, we were waiting for some friends under Northern Avenue’s hot sun
watching people wandering the city. “Where are they going? Where are they coming
from?” Armen asked sarcastically as we fanned ourselves. “It’s a Saturday afternoon,” I
responded naively. “What difference does that make? They spend all their time
wandering about. What else are they going to do?” As a group of men passed us by,
giving us a disapproving look over, Armen snickered and put his arm around me. “My
dear girl. Look at where you have ended up. Leaving your Amerikaner [Americas] for
this dessert! Don’t feel bad. They look at you that way because they have nothing better
to do. They have no joy in their lives. All they can do is wander about the city, looking at
people.” This phrasing was familiar to me by then. But, in the context of Northern
Avenue that afternoon, it gained new meaning. “Aren’t we doing the same thing right
now?” I asked Armen, adding “If they’re walking around looking at people, we’re sitting
here looking at people looking at us.” “Yes, but Tamar jan, this is all they ever do. They
don’t even have any desires to do anything else anymore. This is their main source of
pleasure.” As we sat there watching as people wandered, watched, and sometimes also
took a seat like us, the shops up and down Northern Avenue saw less action. Every once
in a while, a child walking with her parents would wander into Armani Exchange,
Burberry, Steve Madden or any one of a number of designer shops. After enjoying the air
conditioning for a few moments, her parents would go in and carry her out. Free market
ideology in postsocialist spaces promised to bring in new goods, and new opportunity to buy and sell these goods (Verdery 1996, Pine and Bridger 1998, Zavisca 2012). On Northern Avenue, however, these promises have been proven empty by the very emptiness of these sites of consumption. “They don’t have bread to eat, so they eat each other,” Armen contemplated.

The failure of free market logics become most visible by travelling the city by way of public transit – where one can see forms of public divestment and the disaster of private investment in the abandoned city, moving past them at high speeds (as most bus and marshrutka drivers are known to do). Marshrutkas are vans that seat about 12 used for public transportation. Often, however, they take in up to 20 passengers, leaving some standing or sitting on others’ laps on the route. Taking a marshrutka from the center of the city to the nearby neighborhood of Komitas, for example, one sees the disrepair of the metro stops on the way up Baghramyan Ave., the old staircase leading up to the rundown buildings of the American University of Yerevan. These spaces are in contradistinction to the brand new, and yet unoccupied, buildings of Northern Avenue and the hundreds of new cafes, bars, clubs and restaurants opened in central Yerevan. The bleakest sight offered to the Yerevan wanderer, however, is the metro ride south toward Charbakh or Shengavit, which passes by the dozens of abandoned factories in Gordzaranayin (the neighborhood aptly, and tragically, named “Factory District”). From the Soviet era to contemporary post-independence Armenia, Yerevan is the same city, but different. These empty spaces once sites of a thriving city, an industrial center along the Soviet route of allocation, fills Yerevan with a strong sense of nostalgia and produces lives filled with
wandering, lacking other forms of pleasure, occupation and life.

**Songs of the City, Songs of Nostalgia**

Nostalgic wandering is the topical mainstay of many popular Armenian songs. These songs are mostly produced by men in their fifties or sixties, who experienced the transition in the 1990s as not only redefining political and economic life in the country, but the disintegration of their social worlds through the great emigration in the war years. Everything seemed to fall apart in the primes of these artists’ lives. In fact, one could argue that those within this age-range had the most to lose, remembering a better past and being forced to live a present that seemed to be evacuated of these more beautiful times.

While an older population often remembers the years of the Soviet era as stable but painful, say in the years of Stalin for example, and the younger generation has little to no recollection of this past (except through post-memory), those in their middle ages remember the good old days of the productive 1960s and 1970s.

Forsch, a popular singer/songwriter who claims that all of his songs are about the

---

6 Forsh’s music and persona is on the margins of what could be considered rabiz. Rabiz has a long tradition in Soviet-Armenia, but today characterizes something quite different. In fact, many of those who throw around the descriptor are not aware of this history. Abrahamian (2005) traces the roots of the term to the Soviet Rabis, an acronym for the all-union professional organization of cultural workers founded in the 1920s. At this time, until the 1940s, rabiz was not necessarily a style, but referred to this organization, which included the best musicians in the Soviet Union. By the 1940s, however, these musicians began leaving the organization for other, more prestigious musical ensembles and societies, leaving rabiz as a genre and an organization for non-professional musicians who developed a particular Soviet style that had until then been on the margins of a viable musical style. By the 1950s and 1960s, however, there was another major change in what can be considered as rabiz. Abrahamian characterizes this new emergent musical style as well as the subculture to which it gave rise as having two distinct subgenres: the
city that he loves, encapsulates this theme well. Forsh’s songs deal with life in the city, the pleasure of the streets and the practice of roaming them. In songs like “This is How We Live,” his lyrics point out many small but important peculiarities of Yerevan such as dark and dirty hallways of buildings, suspicious friends, gossiping as a past-time, as well as some absurd jokes about a friend who does not chew after drinking and a dog who does not bark, highlighting the form that much of Yerevanci banter and jokes take. The chorus of the song signals what it is really about – “This is how we live in our beloved city.” Although some of his lyrics pay attention to the more troubling aspects of Yerevan joyous one often performed and played at weddings, parties and banquet clubs and the sad one used for more somber occasions like funerals. This Soviet 50s and 60s rabiz style developed in lines with “national color,” Abrahamian tells us, using aspects of traditional national styles, mixed with some aspects of Orientalized form, including some American aspects like some mix of Blues, which developed a particularly Soviet style of music. Interestingly, Abrahamian argues that what is often considered rabiz has not much to do this this distinct style. The rabiz that is popularly known today is a form of pop-music that mixed certain elements of this rabiz music from the Soviet era with other and newer styles within the Armenian Diaspora in the U.S. Thus, what is now considered rabiz in Armenia is actually a Diaspora product considered authentically Armenian (98-108). As careful as Abrahamian’s historical analysis of rabiz is, however, it establishes rabiz as a particular authentic form that is often confused within popular understandings today. My interest, however, is not so much in this careful history, but the ways in which rabiz as a style named and relegated to a particular subculture and particularly Armenian way of ostentatious existence says something about the ways in which Yerevan becomes spaciotemporalized through a joyous celebration of what many find quite troubling. Artists that are most often grouped within the rabiz style are those who sing about topics like how wonderful it is to be Armenian and falling in love with beautiful Armenian ladies. Take Armenchik’s “Hayrev (Armenians),” giving cheers to all Armenians everywhere, describing their wonderful hospitality, their kindness, and the fact that they have been chosen by God and pleading for Armenians everywhere to remain Armenian: “Armenians, Armenians, the world’s Armenians, wherever you are, remain Armenian,” goes the chorus. The song features the classical Armenian zurna (a wind instrument) as a popular appropriation. And popular it is, internationally, for Armenians everywhere. In Yerevan, however, the song is attached to images of a new subculture, known as qyartu, blasting it in black SUVs, behind tinted windows slightly rolled down, allowing for a slight glimpse of men with black sunglasses.
– through references to the “abandoned city” or Yerevan as “your old, tired friend” in “Yerevan Waltz” - his compositions often remain within the realm of light-heartedness rather than the disturbing. In “A Walk Along Yerevan,” to an upbeat tempo composed through guitar, piano, accordion, bass and drums, Forsh says about Yerevan: “as much as it is new, it is old.” He characterizes his walk as “without goal, without rush,” emphasizing the city’s beauty as seen through a particular rhythmic roaming, an aesthetic pleasure that demands upbeat slowness. His songs can be read as celebration. However, in an era when wandering has become the only option, these songs can also be read as lamentation. They are not purely joyous or simply sad, but what can be described as an expression of nostalgia, living in and enjoying a state of loss of the past. “A Walk Along Yerevan” represents a Yerevan living a past in the present. Despite the upbeat tempo and the singer’s lyrics about a joyous wandering, this Yerevan becomes a nostalgic city, as he “sit[s] in a café, leafing through the pages of [his] past.” By walking along Yerevan, “a city of hope” as well as “a city of memories,” Forsh highlights a city ideal for joyous reflections on ruins. As such, Forsh’s Yerevan demands an existence characterized by wandering itself. To live in Yerevan means to live the life of a wanderer. Many of my household interviewees complained about these forms of post-Soviet wandering, especially among males “who have nothing better to do but just squat in the streets” or “playing chess, wasting time” and often characterized as “hooligans who walk the streets with gangs of hooligans, going nowhere.”

It would be important to note, then, that while wandering or to man gal in Yerevan in the stable 1960s and 1970s of the Soviet era may have been a form of leisure,
this practice and form of existing in the city today, is marked not only by alienation, but by what Freud (1917) referred to as melancholia. Melancholia is the feeling of a seemingly timeless inferiority, mainly moral, attributed to the loss of ego. As such, the Yerevanci wanders because he has nothing better to do. Because of high rates of un(der)employment, he is aimless, no longer even searching for hope, which now only remains a memory. This sense of melancholic wandering can also be evinced during political rallies, in which attendees, especially older men, can be seen walking on the margins of the crowds, chewing on sunflower seeds. As Vardan, one of Lucine’s and my interviewees, explained: “They come just to see what’s happening. They don’t believe anything will change. They just have nothing better to do.” As Mkrtich noted in discussing the difference just 5 years prior to the post-election protests in 2008 – then, people came to these demonstrations with a theory, an aim, for how to make things better. Now, with no hope for this better future – with no hope for any kind of future – people come because there is nothing else to do.

There are a number of other popular songs that can be heard in Yerevan cafes, bars, at political rallies, sung by friends walking the streets drunk at night, or being played by musicians on the streets, such as on Northern Avenue, that have this characteristic of an upbeat melancholy. “It is Possible” (Hnaravor e), for example, a song popularized by singer Karen Mamikonyan, which became a kind of anthem for Raffi Hovhannisian’s presidential campaign in 2013, is composed of various possibilities of events that are both hopeful and damning. The lyrics, which list all of these possibilities, are set to an upbeat and light yet wistful guitar melody. “It is possible that the moon will
one day not rise again,” “that this life we are living is criminal,” and that “the balsam you are drinking is poisonous” are all possibilities coupled with others like “our love will never end,” and that “you will forget your torturous memories and no longer feel sad.”

This song, like many others, captures the contradictions of the affect of post-hope. For, the memory of there once being hope demands that one recognize that as possibility, but only as one that once, in a time now-past, existed.

As Svetlana Boym (2001) points out in the context of Russian collective memory and what she calls a sense of “reflective nostalgia,” nostalgia that is experienced collectively in the post-socialist world has elements of both mourning and melancholia. But while Boym contends that reflective nostalgia is a form of deep mourning through “pondering pain” as well as “through play that points to the future,” (55) in Armenia this sense of nostalgia is experienced as foreclosure of the future itself. The use of “It Is Possible” for Hovhannisyan’s presidential campaign, for example, was not to point to the glorious possibilities of the future through a new presidency. In fact, this would not have been possible anyway since most Yerevancis did not believe in the possibility of Hovhannisyan’s claims to hope and change (I discuss this further in Chapter 7). Rather, the song acted as a condemnation of the present. The long list of possibilities weaved the impossible present with the perverse futures to come, allowing only glimpses of hope.

Contributing to this theme of nostalgic wanderings of Yerevan are also artists of a marginal yet strong intelligentsia of the 1990s. These artists can be most characteristically represented by Ruben Hakhverdian and Arthur Meschian. Also currently in their 60s, they watched as many of their close friends, allies, and larger social
circle left the country, which becomes the topic of many of their songs. While Hakhverdian and Meschian share an audience, some fans orient themselves toward one or the other. Their music could maybe most accurately be described as melancholic expressions of the loss of Soviet Yerevan, decimated by a greedy, unrepentant and illegitimate class that came to power in the 1990s.

Of the two, Hakhverdian’s songs can be characterized as more nostalgic than Meschian’s but only in that his songs are more descriptive of the city’s past and contain an often severe longing for it. “I Remember,” for example, describes a city in his “far away memories” in which “people lived like people.” While the material conditions of Armenia at the time the song was written, in the early 1990s during the war, are what drive Hakhverdian to write these words, they also signal a breakup of something else. While the time when “people lived like people” makes a claim on the living conditions – the access to electricity, heat, water, and food - in a past now left behind, it also signals a shift in the “person.” People no longer live like people because they are incapable of trust, of love, and care for others. The theft of the commons by the state and oligarchy class is mirrored amongst the population who, competing for scarce resources steal from one another, lie, and cheat, in order to help themselves and those most intimate to them. The song traces moments of both a dream and waking life. Hakhverdian sings to his wife, and tells her that he remembers those nights, when he dreamt of a beautiful life, when he woke her up by his snoring, and her blood pressure caused worry. How they helped each other fall back asleep, go back into a dream, to remember a city in which “boys, crazy and mad, and girls unlike any other” were part of the Yerevan with carousels and parks.
In the song, melodies become the infrastructure of memory and dream, as well as life now. Trapped in between waking life and this dream/memory, Hakhverdian and his wife have no hope of escape: “Our old carousel, turns around repeatedly, makes us remember our forgotten melody.” But while trapped in dream/memory, this old world of people living like people returns again and again, refusing to be forgotten completely. An intangible hope lingers. References to carousels and parks recalls, spatially, times of leisure. Turning round and round, inactive and aimless wandering were moments of an era of economic and industrial productivity. What gave pleasure to life now feels like an inescapable dream-state filled with memories.

Hakhverdian’s songs also carry heavy condemnations of the present, but always expressed through the past. In “Old Friend” for example, he sings to a friend now lost, wondering “Where have you gone, my old acquaintance? Where have you gone, my old friend?” The song is about the political transition from Soviet to post-Soviet governance and is likely about a friend who left the country during this transition. He narrates to his old, lost friend the goings on of Armenia in the 1990s:

Our old days have escaped us. Approaching are new times….Gone away are those dark and brutal days, coming closer are brilliant times. The old masters have supposedly changed, new masters have come to take their place….These new masters are still in festivities. These new masters have yet to become satisfied. The old masters are in deep surprise as to how arrogant the new ones have become.

These “brilliant times” coming closer, however, never came. By the 2000s, Hakhverdian was no longer waiting for them and in yet even more condemnatory songs, he discussed the absurdity of holding elections when one does not have the right to elect and a nation
that has turned into a society of beggars. In a song entitled “I know,” he uses the metaphor of dogs gone wild to reflect on Armenia’s moral perversion. The masters, who are well-fed themselves, refuse to feed their dogs. Hakhverdian warns in a quiet threatening murmur that the masters should feed these dogs, even if with the scraps of their elaborate meals, so that these dogs do not eat everyone alive one day.

Meschian’s songs, on the other hand, are of a nostalgia that occupy an angrier site and are often much less playful than Hakhverdian’s. Rather than describing the wondrous city that once was, his songs express the lingering feeling of loss in the present that cannot seem to escape its past. “Same City,” for example deals with Yerevan in a moment of change – it’s the same city, but it’s different. No longer the familiar faces, no longer a living city, but filled with shadows of the past. A city that perhaps remembers hope, lives with the passing spirit of that hope. Meschian continues the song, “And the light of the past goes out, but the future is also late. Who is right? Who is wrong? No one understands anymore.” In a liminal space, Yerevan’s future is late, like a record stuck on a repetitive skipping in the present. This present, however, is a specter, a ghost of past.

Meschian’s songs often depict Armenia as dead space, ghostly, or haunted. In “Farewell” for example, a song that was written about his exile from Armenia in the early 1990s (he has since returned) he bids farewell to his past, his youth, and all of his friends. In 1976, Meschian’s first band, the Apostles (Araqelner), was banned by Soviet censorship and although he gained popularity among his generation, he eventually fled Armenia before Independence, settling in the U.S. “I am escaping from myself, not burning the bridges for my return. I am leaving so that I can open the thousands of doors
that are now locked,” he sings. Like others who sing nostalgically about Yerevan and what it means to wander its streets, Meschian’s songs are not just about the city, but about a particular kind of person produced by this city. In “Farewell,” he continues:

Farewell, my last love,  
A silent moment of loss and frozen lips  
An irretrievable night, hands pressed  
and doors open to loss - I closed them  
Farewell.  
Adieu, absurd days  
My thousands of sleepless nights  
Farewell, old, tired words, and weary faces  
Doors open to new deception  
I do not believe.  
Farewell.

His decision to leave is not without sadness. He seems particularly sad about leaving behind the person he was in Yerevan. And importantly, his bid of farewell is not meant only to the city he leaves in his exile; much of what he bids farewell to is already gone, before he has himself left. He leaves Yerevan because of the loss that the city already represents. By the late 1980s, Armenia, as well as the larger Soviet Union, had become a different space. A new class was on the rise. This class was starting to privatize industry in “grey” ways, taking advantage of new market structures by Gorbachev’s *perestroika* (reconstruction) to make their millions. Even in 1989, when no one predicted that in a couple of years the Soviet Union would become history, the changes that were already in motion were, especially for those who comprised this intelligentsia, toward the bad.

One evening while Albert and I listened to Meschian’s songs over beers, as we often did, Albert began to reminisce on this sentiment of “doors closing.” He was too
young, he told me, but he does remember his mother having various friends and acquaintances in their Yerord Mas neighborhood building who would come and go for coffee, cakes or tea. Their door was always open. When his father passed away, Albert was really young, but he remembers his mother relying on neighbors for their help. Now, he tells me, his mother complains about feeling alone. People have changed. They no longer trust each other. “You help someone out now,” he tells me, “but often they don’t feel like they have to help you. So people just stop helping each other. Doors have closed.”

Talk of changing relations amongst neighbors was a major theme within the household interviews that Lucine and I conducted. Hospitality, kindness and care for others, it seemed, remained ideal forms of Armenian sociality. In the context of these ruins, the prices of goods constantly increasing while unemployment and underemployment remained large concerns for many as well as the emptying out of the country of familiar faces, had made this ideal impossible to live up to. Or so many of our interviewees believed. In a book chapter entitled “The Shape of National Time,” Stephanie Platz (2005) discusses the effect of “deindustrialization” on Armenia’s sense of time. Because of the break down of industry in the 1990s due to war and privatization, Platz argues, Armenians took on a rhetoric of living in a different time than other nations, which highlighted a sense of isolation as well as “going back” in time, often framing the present as the Middle Ages. In this context, “neighborship,” the feeling of interconnectedness through domestic space differentiated from state space, suffered as many families were forced to burn books and furniture for fire to stay warm in the cold
winter months of 1992 and 1993. Since this kind of neighbor sociality depended on the obligation of return, families did not want to put out their neighbors, relatives and friends for setting tables and serving coffee, which required goods that were hard to come by. Thus, isolation, counter to what was thought of as proper Armenian sociality, set in.

Twenty years after Platz’ research in the early 1990s, national time and domestic space have furthered on a path of perversion, leaving only traces of these once-ideal feelings of Armenianness. Then, family life and neighborship might have been suffering from the conditions of war and recent political and economic transitions. Now, there are no longer families in Armenia.

As such, these songs of wandering the city, like the facades of buildings, empty hallways, hollowed-out apartments, and closed factories tell two interconnected stories: one about morally vacant leaders, the illegitimacy of Fathers who build their corruption on ruins, leaving those still occupying these buildings and these streets orphans in their own country. The theme of wandering tells another story as well: one about the relations amongst those who reside there. Wandering Yerevan today is no longer a leisurely activity, but a forced state of existence. One a beloved past time of taking pleasure in the city’s fullness, is now a ritual of mourning the city’s emptiness and loss.

To live in Yerevan, it seems, is to live the loss of yesterday in a present that is made presentless by this nostalgia. To wander with the past and around it, aimlessly toward a not future, or toward a nowhere. These songs of wandering a city filled with memories and melancholic possibilities – songs taking pleasure in loss - tell us a story about a changing Armenian subject that is produced by these spaces in transition. As
Forsh puts it in another song about Yerevan: “Yerevan is not house and building, Yerevan is us.” This subject that comes into existence, even if through loss, is situated in a strange present constantly imbued with the past. Once Armenian – loving, caring, and giving to other Armenians – this subject is now forced to live outside of Armenianness. There are no families in Armenia. There is no present in Armenia. There is only wandering, remembering Armenia while circling around ruins.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has taken on a seemingly depressing tone, addressing space as dilapidated ruins - broken stones, cracking walls, rat dens, which threaten children’s play. My aim has been to show the ways in which the past is inscribed on Yerevan’s current space, producing a sense of nostalgic longing for another time – where there was still hope. Nostalgic forms of art – such as songs that reminisce about an Armenia of the past – articulate the present as being emptied out of possibility. As such, since present is past, constantly past, the future is increasingly out of focus, off-roading into a vast space of possibilities. Or, in other words, the future that is led by the present perversion of the nation – mourning a better past – can only be perverse, with no clearly defined road, or path, leading from the present to this future.

If the breakage of home and house signals a collapse of the Armenian “Cosmos” (Abrahamian 2005), what are the sites, places, corners, and walls on which this collapse is resisted? Anthropology on neoliberal time and space has shown that communities and people are resilient, that they resist and that new forms of sustainable life are made
possible in the wreckage (Ferguson 2006). I do not want to discount the importance of these findings of future, even in nostalgia (Piot 2010), or the development of new forms of sociality when older forms of intimacy have been undone by the logics of free markets (Stout 2014). Afterall, even in the midst of these wanderings where I found a great deal of break-down, I also found up-lift that I will turn to in Chapter 7 in which I discuss new forms of activism that have produced other possibilities of futures to come. But the nostalgia and feeling of directionless wandering that mark Armenia have high stakes. It is the affect of post-hope that these new forms of activism have to contend with. It is the passivity of the body politic, born out of melancholic alienation, that endangers the future that these activists have to first undo. In other words, while life in Armenia continues, as it might in many years to come, Armenianness, once the propellant of a great national movement, is on the decline. Building a viable future out of ruins is no easy task. With no Father, or illegitimacy of those who now fill the seat that was once occupied by Hayk and other historical emblems of moral leadership for the nation, what future? In the following chapter, I continue my exploration of Armenia’s moral corruption and perversion (aylandakutyun) by taking a closer look at these illegitimate Fathers through an investigation into their criminal (nick)names.
Chapter 3  
The Names of Illegitimate Fathers and the Ends of Symbolic Authority

This is your street, the school of life  
Where they remember you, they still haven’t forgotten  
- Ruben Hakhverdian, from “This is Yerevan”

Sophacles’ text [*Antigone*] makes clear that [kinship and sovereignty] are metaphorically implicated in one another in ways that suggest that there is, in fact, no simple opposition between the two. Moreover, to the extent that the two figures, Creon and Antigone, are chiasmatically related, it appears that there is no easy separation between the two and that Antigone’s power, to the extent that she wields it for us, has to do not only with how kinship makes its claim within the language of the state but with *the social deformation of both idealized kinship and political sovereignty that emerges as a consequence of her act.*  
- Judith Butler (200: 6)

If one were to discuss the politico-economic elite of Armenia – those who wield the “No” of the Father and exert force to maintain authority - Ruben Hayrapetyan’s name would surely come up. But it would likely not come up as Ruben Hayrapetyan, but rather through his nickname, Nemets Rubo. Nemets Rubo is one of the major oligarchs of Armenia. Like many of these wealthy men, he was elected into office as a member of National Assembly in 2003 in the Yerevan district of Avan, where he grew up. He is the president of the Armenian Football Federation, from which he has been asked to resign time and again for reasons most would describe as “criminal behavior.” He is the co-owner of Grand Tobacco, and the owner of Aragats textile production plant, several gas stations, the Bijni mineral water company (the object of various boycotts in the 2000s), and the high-end Harsnaqar hotel and restaurant in Yerevan.

On June 17, 2012, during a party at Harsnaqar, Vahe Avetyan, a surgeon for the Armenian military, was beaten to death and other military doctors suffered severe injuries
in beatings that were carried out by a group of men. Police arrested four suspects – two security guards, a restaurant manager, and a waiter - and charged them for the murder and the assaults. Many, however, suspect that the beatings were ordered by Hayrapetyan himself. Following this incident protestors demanded that the state bring charges against Hayrapetyan in connection to this violence at Harsnaqar hotel and restaurant. The charges were never brought forth and Hayrapetyan continued to act as a member of NA (until he resigned in July) as well as the president of the AFF, even in the face of constant criticism and demands for resignation.

Nemets Rubo is a nickname. It is a combination of the characteristic “German” (Nemets) connotatively synonymous with “Nazi,” and a shortened, diminutive, version of his first name, Ruben. There are many reasons for this nickname, which render Nemets Rubo an intimate, criminal and authoritarian figure. The name was in circulation even prior to the violent event at Harsnaqar restaurant. For a long time now people in Armenia have known Nemets Rubo for harassing journalists. He has more than occasionally in his career approached journalists with threats. He is also commonly known for his openness about his role in election frauds and aggressive usurpation of power. Many often point out that although Nemets does not officially belong to any political party, his close relationship to the Republican Party, and especially President Serj Sargsyan, signals the trickiness and cunningness of his politics (and of others like him). While not the first demand for resignation of an authority figure (ishkhanutyun), the protests calling for criminal charges against Nemets for his responsibility at Harsnaqar formed a large-scale accusation against an oligarch, and created the beginnings of building a critical mass
against an oligarcho-authoritarian regime. Not only did Nemets Rubo deny that he should be prosecuted for the murder of Vahe Avetyan, which he never was, but he also did not necessarily deny the murder, marking himself as illegitimate in several ways: criminal authority, uncouth toward the people of Armenia, and someone who had no concern for what the people he governed thought of him. It seemed as if those belonging to this elite class of oligarchs in Armenia were criminals and that criminality should be expected of them. My use of criminal here does not refer to actual legal charges being brought against these figures. As I’ve pointed out, they are rarely if ever prosecuted. They are widely known to break all kinds of laws, however. But, as I will point out further on in this chapter, what is more important is their breaking the Law of the Father (rather than the law of the state) and their swerving away from Armenian propriety. As such, Nemets Rubo was and continues to be an undesired leader of the nation, figuring the ends of symbolic authority, or political Fatherhood.¹

Much of this information about the position of Nemets, and other such Father figures in Armenia, is transcribed through the nickname, the name of illegitimacy and criminality. These nicknames are the circulating signs of these Father figures. They are symptoms of “perversion,” or aylandakutyun, the straying away from proper morality within Armenia’s symbolic order. As such, reading the ways in which they circulate and the ways in which they bridge condemnation of authority with this authority’s intimacy to

¹ While I use the term “Illegitimate Father” for reasons I outline in this chapter, others have suggested other concepts for understanding these ends of authoritarian legitimacy. Avital Ronell, for example, uses the term “loser sons” (2012) when discussing the ends of democracy as well as authoritarian rule – the emptiness of each of these systems – and the sons who fail to live up to the expectations of their Fathers’ legacies (for example, George W. Bush or Mohammed Atta).
the body politic provides a particular narrative of proper Armenianness. From centuries of survival due to moral strength, forming what counts as legitimacy, to post-Soviet rupture through moral perversion, sovereignty is at a critical cross-roads, meeting its own waverings, negotiations and limits.

In this chapter my aim is to show the ways in which “the authorities,” or those in the government as well as the economic elite, in Armenia are intimately linked to those over whom they rule. The nickname marks this intimacy as well as impropriety – or the criminality of the authorities. Marked as such, these Father figures fail to meet the demands of symbolic authority, marking them as illegitimate not only for governing Armenians, but also as illegitimately Armenian themselves. I begin by reading the Lacanian concept of “Father” as a position within symbolic order onto theories of sovereignty and kinship. I then outline the ways in which the (nick)name emerges from intimate settings in Yerevan’s neighborhoods, marking these criminal yet authoritarian figures as Armenians themselves but improperly so. In the section that follows, I consider the criminality of the nickname and how those to whom it is attached often provide their own revisionist etymologies. These revisions themselves are laughable for Armenians, producing further laughter in the face of authority. And, finally, in the last section, I contextualize the ways in which this authority, by way of its illegitimacy, constitutes an outside to Armenia’s sense of symbolic order and thus its own limits.

**Authority and Kinship, or, Name and No**
Anthropology has long been interested in the relationship between kinship and authority. In so-called “state-less societies,” which did not have a discernible institution of governance, early anthropologists thought kinship played a large role in maintaining social order. At least in “primitive society,” kinship was not just one sphere of everyday life, but established the laws through which everyday life was governed. In more recent years, however, through the emergence of what is often called “new kinship studies,” (Carsten 2004; Franklin and McKinnon 2001; McKinnon and Cannell 2013) kinship

---

2 From Meyer Fortes’ (1958) mapping of politico-jural domains onto lineage and descent, to E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s (1969) understanding of how everything from time, space and war was structured not through environmental factors but social rules regulated by kinship laws, to Marcel Mauss’ (2000) insistence that the gift is a “total social fact” governing relations across tribes, clans and moieties, kinship in “primitive” or “non-modern” societies articulated not just domestic rules, but political order. As such, “elementary structures” in kinship depended on both prohibition on incest, or rules regarding whom one could not marry, as well as proscription, or rules regulating whom one should marry (Levi-Strauss 1969). In “complex structures,” such as in the “West,” however, this earlier structural-functionalist tradition understood families as formed only by way of the first law – the prohibition against incest. In more recent years, this split between the “West” and “non-West” has come under criticism. Janet Carsten (2004) shows the ways in which anthropology split the West and non-West by assumptions that the former has families and the latter has kinship (15). For Susan Mackinnon and Fanella Cannell (2013) these assumptions have created “unhelpful silences” in anthropology and beyond. Even earlier, in a paradigm-shifting book, American Kinship (1980), David Schneider argued that there is no particular cultural realm of “kinship” that can be separable from other institutions within society. While anthropologists had been using “kinship” as an analytic category, Schneider argued, this was too often mistaken as a cultural category, which scholars imported from their Western contexts onto others. Following Schneider’s book, kinship seemed to fall away from anthropology’s interest. As Richard Feinberg and Martin Ottenheimer (2001) point out, following these claims about kinship as an analytic category mapped onto cultural claims about the work that it does, anthropologists began to stray away from kinship as an institution of social organization and began to take it up through various other categories of the social, as an integrated part of society rather than an ordering principle.
practices, beliefs, and ideals are not privileged as a site of order but are integrated into various other aspects of social organization, including, but not limited to, governance.³

Contemporary readings of the relationship between sovereignty, authority and kinship often articulate the co-constitution of these spheres, in which political (or larger social organizational mechanisms) both produce forms of kinship (such as through law and social norms), but wherein which kinship feeds back into the sphere of these laws and norms. Susan McKinnon and Fenella Cannell (2013), for example, argue against the notion that in modern societies “kinship has been effectively cordoned off in the domestic domain and has become irrelevant to the operations of modern economic and political institutions” (12). Rather, they find that political and economic relations penetrate and shape kinship, but also, and perhaps more importantly, that relations of kinship penetrate and shape political and economic relations in the public domain (10). This dialectic between “private” and “public,” “domestic” and “political” are in constant interplay.

In Armenia, this dialectic can be evinced through the intimate processes through which authority is established and the ways in which these same processes place limits on that authority. The illegitimacy at the level of the political and economic elite often meets up with the body politic of the nation as made up of families (and as a family), creating illegitimacy, or perversion, on various scales. As such, I am interested in the relation between Father and fathers in psychoanalytic theory, namely in the Freudian and

³ Carsten (2004) points out that what was a focus on “kinship” in anthropology became studies of other analytical categories – such as gender and personhood – leading to closer examinations of cultural practices such as marriage, inheritance and lineage but no longer through a reading of kinship as political order.
Lacanian traditions. The psychoanalytic notion of father is useful here because, as in the Armenian form of patriarchal father-right, authority for the subject – what can be referred to as identification - is established through father figures on various psychic levels that often congeal within symptomology. The father of the household, in other words, is often placed within the same plane of reference to authority, threat, castration, fear, desire and love as mythological figures like Hayk, historical heroes like Grigor Lusavorich, or leaders of the nation such as President Serj Sargsyan. It is precisely these forms of slippage that make room for rupture. For, while Hayk remains emblematic of proper Armenian heroism and moral leadership, Armenia’s current president – who occupies the same position but does not meet its demands – breaks this historico-mythological continuity. As I discussed in Chapter 2, Father and fathers are in metonymic relation, wherein which the father of the household is one part of Fatherhood in the larger nation-family. As such, when the larger sphere of moral leadership – Fatherhood – perverts onto corruption, fraud and general immorality – it takes the fathers of households with it on these perverse paths. But this metonymy is also necessarily linked to Father – as political author – as the sovereign within a symbolic domain which constitutes the very possibilities of moral order in Armenia’s patriarchal landscape.

Historically, anthropologists have been generally cautious about the uses of psychoanalysis in anthropological inquiry (Denham 2014). These debates have often circled around whether the “internal” psyche of the subject is appropriate as an object of study for anthropologists whose main focus is culture, often based on the conflation of “psychology” and psychoanalysis. But psychoanalysis, as a field of investigation goes far
beyond the internal structures of the individual human mind. Psychoanalysis can, rather, be understood as the investigation of the person as always-relational and as always constituted by larger cultural and political interactions. Jacque Lacan referred to the discipline of “psychology,” especially in its American version, as “ego psychology,” or as a practice that works to strengthen the ego within the Imaginary realm of psychic structure rather than undo it (what should be the main goal of psychoanalysis) (Macey 1994: xxi-ii). As such, psychoanalytic concepts can be thought of as informing a particular theory of sovereignty – or, how identification with authority figures subjectivity, desire, and social order. These are questions that have a particular anthropological feel to them, especially within traditions that aim to understand the relationship between authority, law and kinship.

What would it look like to merge this newer dialectical understanding of the relationship between kinship and authority with the psychoanalytic tradition of the metonymic relation between Father and fathers? Following older traditions in anthropology - like that of Claude Levi-Strauss (1969) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1955 [1927]) who were keen on making use of, as well as challenging, psychoanalytic structures - I suggest that rearticulating these categories – nationalism, politics, kinship, social order and identification – through one another in “modern” society enables an understanding of the complex ways in which they constitute one another. In this chapter, I do this through tracing the (nick)names of authority figures from their intimate worlds to the national context. The nation-family of Armenia, I demonstrate, makes these notions inseparable.
Using psychoanalysis to understand how those of a polity form symbolic identification with authoritarian figures such as Stalin, Hirohito, Ceausescu, Hitler and other national Fathers, John Borneman (2003) argues that the death of these figures – whether their literal death or the symbolic Death through their removal from the ranks – marks moments of loss and also liberation, drawing from psychoanalysis the ambivalence of both “Father” and “Death.” As such, questions of politics, civil society, culture and kinship are linked within household and national scales through psychic mechanisms of symbolic order and authority. Borneman points out first the distinction between “actual father” and “father-substitute,” who is sometimes also the identifactory father, such as the mother’s brother in matrilineal societies (23). He, then, however, maps this distinction onto another differentiation between pater and genitor. The pater “is associated with authority and repression, whereas the genitor is the biological or reproductive father.”

In anthropological terms, in some cases the pater and the mother’s husband (genitor) may be different figures but in some they may also be the same (23). In other words, in some systems of kinship “actual father” – what in modern conceptions can be referred to as “biological father” – may not be an important symbolic figure at all. As Malinowski (1955 [1927]) has shown, in the Trobriand Islands, subject formation as a process of repression did not occur through the genitor (in Borneman’s terms “actual father”), but

Scholars of Stalinism, however, point out that Stalin’s Symbolic authority made him not only pater, but also genitor. Because of the symbolic castration of all males within the Stalinist regime, Stalin (as the state) came to be seen as the father of all children, since many fathers were forced to migrate for labor, military service or had just disappeared (Naiman 1997; Schrand 2002; Kaganovsky 2008).
through the men on the mother’s side of the family, placing limits for the male child on women on his maternal side.

For my purposes here, “Father” corresponds to a symbolic position while “father” refers to “actually-existing” fathers – those within the household. Armenia is a patriarchal and patrilineal society, in which pater and genitor are one and the same. But Father and father also meet at certain moments and symbolic spaces. Armenia’s current oligarchs and members of government – within a newly sovereign Armenia with continuities to an ancient people – hold the same seats of moral leadership as Hayk and the various other Father figures in Armenia’s heroic genealogy as the Fathers of nation-family. As I will show in the last section of this chapter, the distinction as well as the interconnections between symbolic position and actually existing fathers is critical in understanding the ways in which illegitimacy within the symbolic order places limits on authority.

Borneman draws on Freud as well as Lacan to argue that democratization projects in post-authoritarian contexts do not necessarily mean the end of the Dead Father’s authority. For Freud’s model of the Oedipus complex, authority and law in general – or the sense that one must abide by social constraints enforced by authority – is articulated and organized around the position of father. The symbolic position of father is linked to the actual father (see, for example, the case studies of “Dora” (1989 [1905]) and the “Wolf Man,” (1989 [1918]) as well as “Totem and Taboo” (1989 [1913]) and Moses and Monotheism(1939)). This happens by way of the subject’s entrance into “civilization” (Freud 2010), or what Lacan (1997; 2013) referred to as “symbolic order,” through traversing the Oedipal complex. Entrance into social law – the sense that one is regulated
and threatened by political authority – is first structured by the position of Father who figures both desire as well as threat of castration, entwining authority itself with the position first taken by the father. The Oedipal myth is about the way in which the subject (the child) becomes introduced into culture by way of repression. The father blocks the child’s access to the mother through the threat of castration (also a symbolic mechanism) as well as orienting the child’s desires to meet identification with himself (a desire for the desire of the father). In “Totem and Taboo,” (1989 [1913]) however, this narrative is not only stretched in time – creating an origins myth of social organization – but scale as well, expanding paternal authority beyond the domestic union and into culture itself.

Freud presents a myth in which “law” was established by the murder of an original, primal, Father by a horde of his sons. Consuming this Father after his murder, Freud tells us, allowed for the Father’s name and order in his corporeal form be maintained, which developed into the “totem.” As Zizek (1997) asks, “If we effectively killed the father, why is the outcome not the longed-for incestuous union?” (1). The answer, of course, is

The boy child’s desires will (in normal situations) eventually form identification with the father and open up to him other possibilities of a woman (any but the mother). The girl child will be cut off from her first form of desire (for mother) completely, ultimately having to reorient her desires toward men. This normative process, which is ultimately much more violent toward girls than it is for boys, is described by Freud as feminine “masochism” (1965). Gayle Rubin (1975) takes up this masochism, placing it in conversation with Levi-Strauss’ theory of the origins of human culture in the “traffic in women,” as ultimately necessitating a prior taboo, one that precedes the taboo on incest: one on homosexuality and especially female homosexuality. As Rubin argues, The “incest taboo presupposes a prior, less articulate taboo on homosexuality. A taboo against some heterosexual unions assumes a taboo against non-heterosexual unions. Gender is not only an identification with one sex; it also entails that sexual desire be directed toward the other sex (180).”

---

5 The boy child’s desires will (in normal situations) eventually form identification with the father and open up to him other possibilities of a woman (any but the mother). The girl child will be cut off from her first form of desire (for mother) completely, ultimately having to reorient her desires toward men. This normative process, which is ultimately much more violent toward girls than it is for boys, is described by Freud as feminine “masochism” (1965). Gayle Rubin (1975) takes up this masochism, placing it in conversation with Levi-Strauss’ theory of the origins of human culture in the “traffic in women,” as ultimately necessitating a prior taboo, one that precedes the taboo on incest: one on homosexuality and especially female homosexuality. As Rubin argues, The “incest taboo presupposes a prior, less articulate taboo on homosexuality. A taboo against some heterosexual unions assumes a taboo against non-heterosexual unions. Gender is not only an identification with one sex; it also entails that sexual desire be directed toward the other sex (180).
because prohibition is not maintained by the living father but in the name of the Dead Father.

But the myth of Hayk, as a differently structured origin myth of Armenian symbolic authority, necessitates revisions to this narrative. Hayk was never murdered by his people. Symbolic Law in his name, rather, is maintained by genealogical lines demanding that each father, like Hayk, stand as moral leadership of his own home and family. Hayk himself as the Father of all Armenians was just one amongst many that would follow in his name. As such, Armenians demand strong fatherhood as the head of household extending to the nation itself as protected and cared for by moral leadership in the name of Armenian family values and continuity with this past. Each father, then, bears the responsibility of maintaining this continuity. It is precisely this break in genealogy of moral and proper leadership that causes rupture and the rise in rhetorics of the perversion of nation.

The removal of authoritarian figures – such as Ceausescu – from their position of power is often framed and understood as taking away “the power to act in the name of the people” (Borneman 2003: 27), as a kind of death, or the end of political authority. However, this Death is ambivalent as the Father continues to be mourned, recuperated or replaced creating new forms of authority in his Name. As such, Borneman argues that Death of political authority is as symbolic as it is real. While he may have died, He remains alive, continuing to exert power, sometimes through continued threat (castration), and sometimes as a memory, producing nostalgia for times in which there was authority (Zizek 1999). Following a similar line of thought regarding political
authority, Thomas de Waal (2013) claims that “Joseph Stalin is not yet dead, it would seem”:

He remains in a prominent tomb in the heart of Moscow, his image is on sale in flea markets in Russia and Georgia, his portrait is carried in political rallies. In 2012 Stalin held first place in a poll of great figures in Russian history. In 2013 buses carried his image as Russians marked the seventieth anniversary of the Battle of Stalingrad in the city of Volgograd, which has been renamed Stalingrad for the day (3).

But to claim that Stalin is not yet dead is not necessarily a statement about Stalin himself, or his image. In other words, while it may be alarming and a “puzzle” that Stalin himself, as an actually existing historical figure, is still remembered and celebrated today, even after Khruschev’s general moratorium on Stalinism in the 1950s and the end of the Soviet Union onto which Stalin wielded his power, the legacy of the kind of fatherhood or political authority Stalin came to represent exists in many other respects. Stalinist political authority left its legacy in the years of the Soviet Union following his death, but even after the death of the Soviet Union. In Russia, this kind of authority is reproduced and reiterated through Vladimir Putin, who though ambiguously, perpetuates Stalinism as “the embodiment of the state at its most powerful” (Lipman 2013: 22). Maria Lipman, also writing about the “Stalin Puzzle,” argues that while Putin’s paternalism has strayed slightly from that of Stalin’s, “the sadistic father who keeps his children in constant fear of undeserved and cruel punishment,” he draws upon the nostalgia for Stalin that is more oriented toward the Soviet Union of the 1970s “when the Soviet regime was milder, when people no longer lived in fear, and when the state guaranteed a reasonable level of security and delivered somewhat improved living standards.” But the Putin-style paternalism, drawing on the nostalgia of the 1970s, produces a more intense nostalgia for
that time, Lipman tells us, since “shocking inequality, egregious cronyism, corruption, the impunity of state servants, and, more recently a growing sense of uncertainty and insecurity” (22) has led to a state far removed from that period. Putin does not necessarily position himself against this history of Russia, that of Stalin’s legacy, but uses it to his advantage, to cull up state power in his Name, drawing on the fear that Stalin rendered in his.

Stalin remains a Father in post-Soviet worlds because his Death, like his leadership (Kaganovsky 2008; Schrand 2002), was always ambivalent. In Death, Stalin has created further order in his Name. His Death has not necessarily signified liberation from his authority (Borneman 2013), but nostalgia and longing for his authority. Putin’s paternalism, like that of Armenian leaders at the state level and the oligarchy class, are symbolically anchored by the Name of this Father, but do not have the same characteristics to give them the required legitimacy of that Father. If the Stalin Puzzle (de Waal 2013) is a puzzle because a substantial percentage of poll-takers in these post-Soviet republics express feelings of both fear and admiration for Stalin (7) and agree that he was both a “wise leader who brought the Soviet Union to might and prosperity” (8) and that he was a “cruel, inhuman tyrant, responsible for the deaths of millions of people,” (9), this ambivalence also marks the figure of the Father in psychoanalysis.

But if these are the feelings toward Stalin, the Fathers who fill today’s Armenian national leadership do not present such a puzzle: there is not much ambivalence about them. The fear, anger, and hatred reserved for them by most Armenians today are not coupled with the respect, admiration, and love that Stalin received. While I am borrowing
the concept of political Fatherhood from Borneman, then, I am also making room for a particular departure. Attachment to figures like Stalin, as well as the continuities that Stalinism and the Soviet regime brought to Armenian symbolic order, are in the contemporary moment breaking. While attachment of this sort is made to Stalin, it is harder to find these attachments to those who are in power in the Republic of Armenia today. These illegitimate fathers, as I will show in this chapter, are illegitimate because they are only the figures of disdain without the paternalism, prosperity, development, growth and security that was afforded the subjects of Stalin. Their nicknames will allow me to trace the ways in which rather than producing ambivalence, they produce laughter. They are also illegitimate because they do not abide by the Law of other, Dead, Fathers of Armenia’s historical past through popular narratives of Armenia’s survival through strong moral commitment to nation, Church and family. As such, illegitimate Fathers are Fathers – they maintain authority and cull up fear in many Armenians. Their illegitimacy, however, limits this authority, and, thus, their position as Fathers.

The Caucasus present a particular case in the study of sovereignty and kinship and their dialectic, complicated by systems of exchange that place kinship, and other practices, in a particular network with states. Bruce Grant (2009) calls these forms of sovereignty “open sovereignties,” differentiated from the classical sense of sovereignty as a “closed-book affair.” Open sovereignties take forms of rule, enmity, and war that remain open to future relations rather than end on finite conquest. For Grant, this form of sovereignty is important in understanding not only the pre-Soviet Caucasus, a site of constant warfare, exchange and changing forms of alliances, but also the ways in which
this region of the Soviet Union would incorporate Soviet rule into these pre-existing forms of alliance, kinship-making and exchange. Importantly for Grant’s argument concerning “open sovereignties” is what he calls the “gift of empire,” in which the Soviet Union’s authority over populations in the Caucasus depended on an act of civilizational benevolence. “The gift of empire,” as such, while framed as a gift, comes in the form of “taking of lives, lands and resources” (xiii). Open sovereignty, thus, enables one to think about the position of authority as both loving, caring, and paternally giving as well as violent and threatening. This dialectic of authority, or sovereignty, in Armenia has become illegitimate because those in power – the Father figures – produce fear and threat without benevolence.

Kinship is and has been a primary node of social existence in the Caucasus, and as Grant (2009) shows, intricately caught up in negotiations of sovereignty. But for others, like Huseyn Aliyev (2013), this dependence on kinship for goods and services as well as the building of networks on which people are increasingly relying in the Caucasus has caused civil society to suffer. In the post-Soviet era, the South Caucasus have been in turmoil due to aggressive forms of an emergent market economy and war. People have relied on kinship networks for survival, argues Aliyev, which has blocked the possibilities for strong civil society to emerge. These networks are concerned with insularity – on scales of kin proximity - and not necessarily on creating change in the larger social and political structures. Rather than the formation of civil society to create advocacy and care, structures that may be able to make changes in what I am here calling

6 It is important to note, however, that the notion of the Soviet Union as “empire” is contested (Hirsch 2005; Chari and Verdery 2009, Verdery in Hann et. al. 2002).
illegitimate Fatherhood, these kinship networks sustain everyday life. Thus, Aliyev argues, these networks are necessary, and yet a block toward political change. In Armenia, these blocks caused by the dependence on kin – or KhTsB, standing for khnami (in-law), tsanot (relative), and barekam (friend) – is often referred to as a backward “mentality” (mentalitet) or the belief that Armenia is a traditional society and that human rights, civil society and other such “European” imports have no place in the country and its proper operations (Ishkanian 2008). What I aim in highlighting by tracing the nicknames of these illegitimate Father figures in government and other forms of authority, however, is to show that it is not the case that civil society, the state and kinship are separate domains, but that they are linked through the intimate (or kintimate) nation-family, constituting as well as placing limits on authority. In other words, I question the assumption that it is “civil society” that brings about political change, or the site through which to recognize the need for it. If kinship and authority are linked through a particular symbolic position of Father within Armenia’s sense of moral, symbolic, order, those in authority are found illegitimate precisely through kinship.

Illegitimate Fatherhood is embedded in conversations not only about how kinship itself is always already political, but that what we understand as the political is fixed by various orderings of kinship and kinship-based relations: how the F/father treats the child; how he orders and organizes desire around himself; and how he produces and reiterates what is considered to be proper (Armenian) morality. And more central here than any of these questions is the problem of the Father as authority, his ability to conjure up
legitimacy, and the limits of this legitimacy. Or, what is more common in Armenia’s state
and oligarchic rule today, *illegitimacy* and its limits on authority.

Illegitimate Fatherhood can be understood as a bifurcation of the figure of Father.
The illegitimate Father is a split figure. The “brutal raping” side of him, as Slavoj Zizek
(1999) calls it – the “No” - is separated from the adored, respected, paternalist side. The
illegitimate father continues to wield authority through maintaining the “No,” but his
Name is appropriated by his intimates – those he rules. The nicknames, the
appropriations of this Name, are performative utterances which constitute perversion as
an ongoing problem of Armenian authority. This act of renaming, or *nicking*, involves
cutting, or rupturing (Grosz 2004) the figure of authority – splitting his “Name” and his
“No” from each other. The relationship of this ruler and ruled – terms I borrow from
Achille Mbembe’s (1992) work on the carnivalesque laughing in the postcolony - is one
of intimacy. These names originate in the very yards in which these figures grew up and
the intimate networks of kin and neighbors who raised them. Almost always tied to
criminal behavior these figures grow into these nicknames as they become young men
and begin exerting their power. Once a name for a troublesome child, the nickname
travels to wider circles until it becomes the public face of the figure himself. Once a
name of tenuous endearment toward a kid in the neighborhood, it becomes a mechanism
through which that very neighborhood laughs with disdain at the bully they raised.

**The Intimate Etymologies of the (Nick)Name**

In 2013, during a press conference held for the AFF, a year after the events at
Harsnaqar restaurant, Nemets Rubo announced that he would not be resigning from his post as President of the Federation. He also declared that he did not understand any of the claims for why he should resign. He stated, “And who has demanded of me a resignation for me to give it to them? You have to understand one thing well: if the people and those in charge want me to go, then I will go. It is not pleasurable that people, sitting in front of social networking sites, are discussing a bunch of nonsense. Let all of them who have suggestions and thoughts come forth. I am ready to talk with them for hours.” Of course, those asking for his resignation and for charges of murder to be brought to him were not just “sitting in front of social networking sites.” They had been organizing many protests and demonstrations in front of public buildings – including the National Assembly – for months.

His expression of interest in “talking” with people seemed like a threat, considering that in an earlier comment – in a 2011 press conference – he openly admitted to “beatings” as an acceptable form of punishment that he himself carries out in his district of Avan. When asked about how he deals with crime in his district, Hayrapetyan responded, “Go to Avan and ask them, ‘How does he deal with drug addicts? How does he treat someone who is a drug dealer? A hashish dealer?’ Everyone knows how I treat these kinds of people.” When asked, further, to explain how he deals with “these people,” he responded, with a smirk: “I call him and talk to him and say “You have done a very bad thing.”” The audience laughed, along with Nemets himself. The laughter, however,

---

was serious: still laughing, he said, “Don’t you know what I am going to do? I am going to punish them, beat them up,” as he slipped back in his seat, poised himself more erect and gave a gesture of “Yeah, so what?” The audience continued to laugh uncomfortably. Nemets, however, made more comfortable by this bit of comic relief, claimed, “Or you think that I am going to avoid doing so [sarcastically]….If someone tells you that I have played violin, then at that time you can be surprised. That’s when you should be surprised, my dear people.” And the laughing continued. Nemets was managing his own violent caricature. While he did not name himself Nemets Rubo, he seemed to find it suitable. While the name recalled his violent excesses, it also indicated that he was in a position of authority.

Nemets is not the only one with such a name in Armenia. Most oligarchs, and many public officials, as well as members of National Assembly have such nicknames. The President of Armenia, Serj Sargsyan, for example, is called Serjik, a diminutive of his first name. The Prime Minister, Hovik Abrahamyan, is known as Muk, meaning mouse, because, as many people told me, he was known even during the Soviet era to steal slowly, small pieces at a time, like a mouse. These names, as they floated around conversations and discussions in Yerevan, seemed somewhat out of place to me in the beginning of my fieldwork. Diminutive names, similar to those one would call a child – for example adding the suffix ik (giving the characteristic of small) or o (attributing intimacy and innocence) at the end of the shortened first name – were given to those high up the political and economic ladders. I eventually learned that these names had etymological roots to the names that these figures were called when they were children –
the names by which they were known in the particular neighborhood yard in which they grew up.

Living in Yerevan for a year for fieldwork, I got firsthand experience of how these names emerge and operate. Residential buildings in the city all have their own yards shared by other buildings in the area. These yards are squared in by other buildings, which often have one or more small grocery shops for fresh fruits and vegetables, a bakery, a butcher shop, etc. The popular film, *Mer Baky (Our Yard)*, and the comedy TV show by the same name which tells a similar story, captures the ways in which these small yards are intimate settings. They are places in which one can witness and experience the same dramas, comedies and tragedies characterized by the same caring and agonistic kin relations which take place in the home. The *bak*, or yard, is an extension of the homes that surround it. Because housing in Yerevan is often small, much of kin practice takes place right outside of the doors of the home - the entrances to buildings, and especially within the yards that surround residential buildings. The bakeries, grocery stores, convenience stores and sometimes cafes in the yard become the sites through which these relations take place – involving members of various households who are bound by living in the same yard, consuming the food brought to their neighborhood by the same vendors, and time, which is often spent together.

One important aspect of this practice of *bak* intimacy is the boy child, who is known for his propensity for trouble. While girls also form small groups that play (often all day, especially in the summer and on weekends) in the yard, boys are often treated with more liberty to venture further out. Girls often find dolls and other toys more
desirable – staying closer to the home to play, even if in groups. This is, of course, not to say that it is only boys who form these fraternal hordes, going out into the yard and sometimes beyond, often causing havoc. But, even when girls do partake in these activities, it is through a fraternal means. It is important to note, however, that while the shortened first name aspect of these nicknames I have been describing exist for both boys and girls – “mer baki Armon” (“our yard’s Armo,” a shortened version of Armen, a masculine name) or “mer baki Lusiky” (“our yard’s Lusik,” a shortened version of Lusine, a feminine name) – it is only the boys who grow up and into the nicknames attributed with criminality, where in addition to this diminutivized first name a further characteristic, often associated with the criminal activity of the boy/man at hand, is given. Rubo, after all, is not just Rubo. He is Nemets Rubo.

Let us take the example of my own neighborhood yard during 12 months of fieldwork when I lived in the center of the city. The eight-story building in which I lived, on the 6th floor, had three apartments on each floor. In other words, there were 24 units in the building, including mine. Some of these units were occupied by older couples, whose families had left Armenia long ago. And some of them, as is the case for many of the residential buildings in Yerevan today, were owned but vacant. Those who owned them were living elsewhere at the time – perhaps in Europe, Russia or the U.S. - and would occasionally come back and stay in their home, resisting selling the place. Some of them, I would guess, were also renting, as I was. Narine and Arthur, the couple from whom I rented my apartment, lived in the neighborhood of Baghramyan, near the center of the city but a bit further off the central grid. The apartment was a studio and Narine and
Arthur explained that they lived there for many years when it was just the two of them and their older son. Arthur had received the apartment from the centralized government as part of his employment with the Yerevan symphony in the 1970s. It was fine when they had their first son in the late 1980s but when their younger son was born in the post-Soviet era (1997), they decided to rent out the place and buy a larger home.

It did not take long for me to learn some of the names of the children in the building – especially those of the boys. In the afternoons, when school let out, I heard young boys calling out “Haykooooooroo” from below. Hayko was one of the boys – about 10 years of age – who lived in my building one floor below me. His friends lived in the 10 buildings that made up the square of the yard and would often approach the building and call out his name so that Hayko could come out and play. The name Hayko is dimunitive for Hayk, which was his official name. Sometimes I would hear Hayko’s mother, grandmother, or aunt respond, “Hayko can’t come out now” and the boys would scurry away. Often, when they yelled for him, Hayko would come to the balcony that had a view of the yard, and yell back at them, *Galis em!*, I’m coming! In the evenings, I would hear someone else, most likely his mother or grandmother, calling “Haykooooooroo,” for him to come back home.

The boys in the yard were friends. They played soccer in the small area of green that was fenced off in the yard, around which they also often rode their bikes. Sometimes they just stood around and made fun of people together. They also tagged their names on the walls of the buildings surrounding the yard. Walking out of my building, or around the other buildings in the yard, I would often see names tagged on the bricks: “Hayko,”
“Arto,” “Sako,” and others. This was their neighborhood; this was their yard. And their names carried some weight for them.

What happens when these kids get older, come into some money through these very connections they made growing up in these neighborhoods? What will happen when Hayko grows up and Arto from the yard connects him to some business? If he becomes involved in an unsavory form of business or power, then he might become Hayko with an added flare: perhaps he will acquire a monopoly on television broadcast and become *Herusdades* (TV) Hayko; perhaps he will join the ruling party by winning votes in smaller then bigger elections by putting pressure on the constituents within that yard, those who raised him, and become *Dajan* (Cruel) Hayko. Or perhaps he will not become criminal, or illegitimate, at all, and grow up to be Hayk, or even just Hayko. From childhood antics to adult business, nicknames carry the weight of this neighborhood intimacy.

These kinds of nicknames in Armenia, however, are also managed by way of a revisionist narrative of their etymologies. Levon Abrahamyan and Gayane Shagoyan (2012) point out that oligarchs and members of the government who are given nicknames often try to manage their image of criminal behavior. In the 2003 and 2007 parliamentary elections, for example, the discussions and rumors of the nicknames of candidates were an object of great interest, enough for opposition newspapers to be eager to list them. Khachatur Sukyasyan, for example, a deputy of the National Assembly elected three times, and a major businessman (oligarch) in Armenia, is known also as Grzo, a somewhat vulgar term that connotes savagery. Sukyasyan released a TV documentary in
which he tied his nickname, which previously did not have any specific etymology, to his peasant ancestry (Abrahamyan, 2012: 23). Nemets Rubo has attempted a similar endeavor by claiming in an interview with a French journalist in 2012\(^8\) that his Nemets nickname is derived from his uncle’s courageous acts in World War II.

These attempts at moving a nickname from a criminal context to a non-criminal history usually fail. As Abrahamyan and Shagoyan (2012) tell us, even after Sukyasyan’s documentary about himself, “A joke arose that the parliamentary seats were going to be reshaped so that the newly elected deputies could squat – another pejorative reference to their lower class descent” (23), which refers to the squatting position that many gangster-like rural or suburban men take in the streets as well as to the act of defecation within rural outhouses. Here, the joke about squatting in parliament refers to these oligarchs and men in power as not only of a lower-class, a class of men who are unfit to rule over others since they are uneducated or uncultured (a common reference in Armenia is the phrase cultura chunen, they have no culture), but also exhibit criminal behavior.

**Criminal Names**

To understand the ways in which these names circulate and the criminal and intimate connotations they carry, we can explore some other figures with such nicknames. Samvel Aleksanyan, another member of the NA, is widely known for his

---

monopoly on sugar. This monopoly caused major political and economic concern in 2007 during the “sugar crisis,” placing a spotlight on the monopoly problem amongst oligarchs in Armenia, when no sugar was available for purchase in Armenia except in grocery stores owned by Aleksanyan himself. Additionally, Aleksanyan also holds a monopoly on cooking oils and butter. Aleksanyan is popularly known as Lfik Samo, which, again, takes a diminutive of his first name – Samvel becomes Samo – and adds Lfik, a vulgar term for brassiere. When I asked about the etymology of this name, most people told me that it had something to do with his involvement in the bra-importing industry during the Soviet era. Aleksanyan is a widely disliked figure who in more recent years added another institutionalized faux pas to his criminal resume when he shut down the Pak Shuka (“Closed Market”), which was an inside venue for farmers and small vendors to sell their produce in central Yerevan. Aside from the pragmatic values of the Pak Shuka, the building had historical importance to the city and its people. But, as many other public sites of a now-old Yerevan, like the Notary building, the Afrikyanner building, or the outdoor theater of Kino Moskva, privatization often leads to demolition as I discussed in Chapter 2. In 2013, Lfik Samo hired bodyguards and paid off residents of neighboring buildings to not allow anyone inside as daily protests in front of the not-yet demolished Pak Shuka were taking place. He has responded to complaints about his shutting down of the Market with claims that it is his personal property. In 2013, Hetq, the popular left-of-center online press, published a video in which they showcased a discussion with one of these guards. As journalists approached him to ask questions about the Market, the guard threatened them verbally, shoving one of them aside and attempting to grab the camera.
away from the cameraman. When I asked activists and journalists present at the time why the guard would be so invested in casting away interrogations of the plans for the Market, Juliette explained: “He’s being paid! Probably a lot! If he’s on Lfik’s side now, he probably wants to stay there….for his own good.” What is really astonishing about Lfik Samo is that while most people know him as the oligarch who has a monopoly on importing various foodstuffs and has acted out aggressively to protect these monopolies, he claims that he is not an oligarch and that he is “just a poor man who happens to be a member of parliament.”

Gagik Tsarukyan, also known as Dodi Gago, is possibly the wealthiest of all of the oligarchs of Armenia. His nickname was the most hilarious for me as I kept hearing it in the media and in conversations about politics and economics in activist circles at the beginnings of my fieldwork. The name, again a diminutive of the first name – Gagik becomes Gago – also includes Dodi, which literally means “belonging to the idiot.” Thus Dodi Gago is the idiot’s Gago, or the idiot’s son. I figured that there must be some kind of explanation otherwise – a meaning other than “idiot’s Gago” - that I somehow was not grasping. The reader should keep in mind that this is not just a name that circulates amongst one group of people, but is widely used, and some say Tsarukyan is known better by his nickname than his official name. It took me months of hearing and seeing the printed name “Dodi Gago” in conversations, news, and blogs until I realized that this was a nickname. And it took a Google search thereafter to realize that the figure attached

---

10 ibid.
to the nickname had a proper name, one that I had not previously heard. Most people I asked attributed the name to his father, Nikolay Tsarukyan, who was an electrical engineer in the Soviet era and often considered an idiot. Thus, Dodi Gago, as his son, became an authoritarian figure, in his connection to his father, the idiot.

Dodi Gago was, until March 2015, the head of the Prosperous Armenia Party (Bargavach Hayasdan), which he founded in 2004. Properous Armenia is popularly known as a clan of oligarchs, one of the akhperutyuns (brotherhoods) of Yerevan. While Prosperous Armenia is separate from the ruling Republican Party, it is important to note that for all intents and purposes, the alliance between these two parties has been effective at not only propping up the rule of the Republican Party, but ensuring the maintenance of power for these oligarchic brotherhoods (what can be closely resembled to mafia). Until very recently, these two Parties had never actively – or in any apparent way – worked against one another and in 2012-2014 many of my interlocutors claimed “they’re the same thing.” This was both a common gesture to how all political parties basically do the same thing, but in this case it also often had a more literal meaning, that they were actually working toward the same thing. Having different political parties devoted to the same (criminal) cause allowed for democracy as a spectacle, a doctored image with no reality behind it, as well as strategies of maintaining political dominance (for the Republican Party) in National Assembly and the executive branch of

---

government, which still has full control over the judicial branch of government.\(^\text{12}\)

In February 2013, talk of a possible constitutional change began. These changes, initiated by the Republican Party, called for transforming Armenia from a Presidential government to a Parliamentary one. Most opponents to this change argue that it is meant to allow President Serjik (Sargsyan) additional terms as Head of office, this time as Prime Minister. Having “stolen” the presidency in 2008 through fraudulent elections, these opponents claim, was not enough for him to highlight his criminalized authority. He is now seeking lifetime power. Before these talks, the next likely candidate for the theft of the Presidential seat would have been Dodi Gago. Thus, he was, maybe rightfully yet criminally, infuriated. While the elections for this constitutional change have not yet taken place – they have been constantly delayed since early 2014 and are next scheduled to take place in December 2015 - these talks, and Dodi Gago’s condemnation of them, led to his resignation from office as well as the break-up of the alliance between the Republican and Prosperous Armenia Parties.

Dodi Gago saw this act as a declaration of “war,” calling on Prosperous Armenia, the Armenian National Congress (ANC) (Levon Ter-Petrosyan’s organization), and the Heritage Party to form a unitary opposition against Serjik and the ruling Republican party in December 2014. The notion of Properous Armenia as “opposition” is laughable for most of my interlocutors. Joining forces with “opposition” parties like the ANC and Heritage is also ridiculous, and was found as such by ANC and Heritage, both refusing to join forces. In a sense, though, this kind of act is true to his caricature in popular

\(^\text{12}\) Stephen Astourian (2000) refers to this system as “hyperpresidentialism.”
representations of him, including his nickname. Dodi Gago graduated from the Armenian Institute of Physical Culture in 1989 and in 1998 won the title of World Champion in arm-wrestling. Thus, strong-arming, literally, is his game of choice.

These nicknames, emerging from intimate kin relations in Yerevan’s neighborhoods (which in Chapter 5 I refer to as kintimacy), produce laughter in the face and Name of authority. In his work on the sixteenth century writer Rabelais, Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) was interested in the festive laughter of ritualistic carnival, in which the people came together as a formation of symbolic equality, materializing this equality through festive laughter. This laughter was, for Bakhtin, manifested through “the culture of folk humor,” in which “[t]he entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity.” This laughter is “ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives” (11-12). Carnivalesque laughter in folk humor marks the world with new meaning and is oriented both at the “highest spheres,” those in power, God and so on, but is also oriented toward the people: “the all-human” and the world, which folk humor mocks, all the while recognizing its belongingness to it (12). Folk humor, carnival laughter and the grotesque are expressed through three distinct forms: “1. Ritual spectacles: carnival pageants, comic shows of the market-place; 2. Comic verbal

---

9 For Bakhtin, the grotesque is marked by degradation through unflattering imagery of the human body, but one of a positive nature. The human body in the grotesque, thus, in his reading of Rabelais and of other works within a range of what can be called grotesque realism, does not represent the human body – with its shitting, eating and fucking (“defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth”) – as a negative aspect about the human as disgusting. Rather, it figures what is abstract and non-material – the spiritual, the world of God and deity - as in a process of “coming down to earth” (21). As such, the human form, the body, is taken away from its conception as a complete form, “cleansed, as it were, of all the scoriae of birth and development” and placed in the lower stratus (of the body as well as from the heavens to a more material reality).
compositions: parodies both oral and written… [in which he also includes nicknames (40)]; 3. Various genres of billingsgate: curses, oaths, popular blazons” (5). Nicknames for those in power in Armenia act, as Bakhtin describes folk humor, to bring those within these higher echelons, those “above” the law or within a higher order of institutionalized criminality, back into the familiar of this (terrible) world. Few of these nicknames for Armenia’s political-economic elite – the horde - are grotesque in reference to bodily functions. Bodily functions do appear, however, in jokes, such as the one provided by Abrahanyan and Shagoyan (2012) about National Assembly seats being converted to allow squatting (ostensibly for shitting). Within this genre of the nickname and the jokes that follow, those in power are usually described as “stupid,” “perverse,” inadequate or in generally illegitimate, marking them as not only of this world but less than the averageness of it. These nicknames, while not necessarily recalling images of the shitting, digesting or fucking body, are obscene nonetheless. They insult those in power. But in addition, the nicknames attach familiarity and a possibly innocent stupidity to these Father figures.

The diminutive nature of these nicknames, as a merging of the obscene and insulting with the familiar and innocent is possible because of their etymologies from neighborhood intimacy. In his essay on the banality of power in the postcolony (1992), Achille Mbembe diverges from Bakhtin, arguing that "Bakhtin’s error was to attribute [practices of obscenity and vulgarity] to the dominated. The production of burlesque is not specific to them. The real inversion takes place when, in their desire for splendour, the masses join in madness and clothe themselves in the flashy rags of power so as to
reproduce its epistemology; and when, too, power, in its own violent quest for grandeur and prestige, makes vulgarity and wrongdoing its main mode of existence” (29). Mbembe is interested in the way in which the dominated and the dominator in the postcolony are linked through their own powerlessness - “the practices of those who command and those who are assumed to obey are so entangled as to render them powerless” (30). The link here is what he refers to as the “intimacy of tyranny,” in which the postcolony is a regime of “constraints as well as a practice of conviviality and a stylistic of connivance” (22). The ruler and the ruled share the desire for obscenity and vulgarity - in feasting, shitting, pissing, praising the phallus and enjoying the reign of the extreme. Mbembe does not deny that the jokes of the ruled about the ruler farting and shitting, his obsession with the phallic, and his general distaste is marked by an act of familiarizing the ruler - making him one of the people, who is also embodied with an anus and a penis. However, the joke and the laughter here are not necessarily “opposition to the state,” “deconstructing power,” “disengagement” (22) or resistance. Rather, these acts form an assemblage of both ruler and ruled who are attracted to the ostentatious, where in the moment of obvious lies and corruption on the part of the ruler “this body breaks into laughter” (23). This laughter is one which works not against power, but within it, a kind of play surrounded by that power and the very desire for it itself. In the case of Armenia, however, the intimacy between the ruler and the ruled is determined both by naming the ruler as a child - through the often-used diminutive of the first name - but also the fact that these names were the very names ascribed to him as that child who was raised by the neighborhoods which he now threatens in order to maintain his power.
In this sense, these nicknames are not given for the sake of making familiar or
making one who is seemingly above the law, or the law, into “one of us.” They index
another kind of relationship to the law: criminality. Having such a nickname renders its
bearer criminal. This is why so many of the oligarchs and political officials who have
such nicknames try to manage them, give them familial or more honorable etymologies.
But the form of the nickname always carries with it a criminal characteristic. They also
index familiarity, and familiality, but only through recognizing the actual forms of
intimacy that allowed his rise to power. Those within these neighborhoods bring up the
oligarch from a troublesome child into a member of an “unsavory band” (Astourian
2000) of young men, who then institutionalize vulgarity through these networks of
familiarity. These neighborhoods become the ruled who are now supposed to admire him
(showcasing their votes for him, honoring him as one of their own). But the nicknames
both legitimate him as one of their own, but also position him as illegitimate precisely
because of the intimate knowledge of who he really is. The attempts at revising the
etymologies of nicknames, which criminalize him within symbolic authority, ultimately
fail because it was these people who had named him and it is now these people who will
not believe other, fabricated, accounts of this name.

This intimate etymology of nicknames is critical in understanding the illegitimacy
of these Father figures. The ruled both know him as already always illegitimate but must,
nonetheless, perform belief in his legitimacy through the fear of what might happen
otherwise. He is in power, and he might stay in power, but only because he is feared. He
is an authority, but only as criminal. And while he might be an authority, a Father, he
ultimately fails to conjure up the admiration through which he might sustain his authoritativeness. The nickname itself is not a form of resistance but a symptom of the internal contradiction of illegitimate rule. These names or the jokes expressing disdain for the illegitimate Fathers, will not themselves bring an end to the illegitimacy that marks the S/state of politico-economic authority in Armenia. Rather, they index what will come, or the actual resistance against this S/state. They provide limits to this authority because they inherently refuse to commensurate these Fathers’ “No” with their “Name.”

**Government Against Nation, or the Emptiness of Symbolic Authority**

The problem of illegitimacy of those in power breeds many other felt cultural and familial crises. As I have already described in Chapter 2, one of these – possibly the most important for my household interviewees – was the way in which immorality at the level of government and economic elite created conditions in which it had become impossible for households to stay clear of moral perversion. But another important theme related to this concern regarding the metonymy of perversion of the Father and the perversion of fathers, was the separation or opposition between Armenia’s government and the nation. While I touched upon this in Chapter 2, an expansion of this discussion is necessitated here, especially in thinking about the limits illegitimacy places on Fatherhood. The government against the nation, not limited to household discussions, has become a large part of politics-making in Armenia spurring debates about how precisely illegitimacy can be encountered, faced and resisted.

In 2013, some leftist activists pulled a prank on right-wing nationalists. Anna from
PINK (Public Information and Need for Knowledge, an LGBT organization in Yerevan) had been drinking with these activists, friends of hers, the night before and had been witness to the end of the prank, which she relayed to me the next day. Her friends had staged a mock protest in front of the Italian Embassy in Yerevan condemning the recent loss of the World Cup of Armenia to Italy. There, they shouted phrases such as, “There was a shoe found in Areni that was made and used by our ancestors, a shoe that they used to play soccer! Where were the Italians then?!” This was a reference to Armenians’ jubilant celebrations of the oldest shoe found by archaeologists in a cave dwelling right outside the village of Areni, Armenia, as proof that in fact, Armenia is the oldest and most civilized civilization in the world. They also shouted, “We do not accept the defeat of Armenia! We believe in the moral triumph of Armenia!” Hayazn was infuriated by the act, Anna told me, because they knew that the mock protest was mocking them. One member of the organization had approached them in the street, in front of the embassy, and asked for a spar, but was further mocked. That evening one of these pranksters posted a Facebook status about the mock protest and scoffed at Hayazn for wanting to spar, creating an opportunity for another member of Hayazn to contact him to say no, that Hayazn wanted to discuss this issue for the purposes of “constructive criticism,” a phrasing that Anna found most hilarious for the situation. The pranksters and members of Hayazn, thus, planned to meet at 80s pub, a bar in central Yerevan known to be the meeting spot for some nationalists (mostly Armenian Revolutionary Federation [Dashnagtsutyun] supporters, including those who came to Armenia as repatriates in the recent years from Syria and Lebanon). There, Shant, one of the pranksters, began to
articulate the group’s intention in pointing out Armenia’s moral triumphs over a perverse nation like Italy, and so on. This form of both mockery and politics-making is what Alexei Yurchak (2005) discusses as svoi, or “we,” in Russia’s late-socialist period. Because of the enclosure of all discourse with official and authoritative forms, overidentification with power became one of the means of subverting it. As such, Shant continued to mock Hayazn not by outrightly calling their discourse absurd, but calling attention to its absurdity by overidentifying with it. However, according to Anna, who had seen the tail end of this exchange when Hrant, another one of the pranksters had texted her to tell her “You have to come and see what we are doing!” Shant’s rhetoric was slightly different. He purposefully used “big words” that were supposedly “lost on” Hayazn members in order to confuse them even more. To further their prank and mockery, Hrant, another one of the pranksters simultaneously translated these big words into qyartu – a Yerevan slang that is associated with a so-called “backward” machismo street subculture. This, of course, was even more infuriating. Finally, Shant asked a member of Hayazn why they wanted to “spar” instead of just suing them, taking legal action. Grigor, a member of Hayazn responded, in Anna’s words: “It’s better to deal with things morally rather than through a trial.” This led to a more serious conversation - a couple of hours of debate over “morality” and its place in politics. When I asked Anna what Grigor may have meant by the statement that it was better to deal with things morally, she explained that “For them, law isn’t the realm of enforcing morals. Law is immoral…It’s pointless trying to talk to them, you understand? It’s a waste of time,” Anna ended her story.
This encounter highlights a dispute among many in Armenia over how to create legitimacy. While both groups found Armenia’s current state of affairs intolerable, leftist activists – like Shant, Hrant, and Anna – saw these changes necessitating shifts in law, or enforcement of law, while right-wing nationalists, as well as many other Yerevancis, often referred instead to the domain of morality. As such, the debate seems to circle around two forms, while somewhat connected, also quite different: law and symbolic, or moral Law. How might we understand the implications of the difference between these two domains? What could Grigor have meant by “morality,” including sparring, as a better avenue than a trial?

While for leftist activists, the government’s illegitimacy is based on their violation of law – such as through the development of monopolies, other forms of economic corruption, fraud in elections and so on, for many of the right-wing nationalists that I interviewed during my research, the illegitimacy of the government was based on their immorality. This was sometimes defined as their straying away from Armenian culture. For example, during an interview with me, Hovhannes Galajyan, the editor-in-chief of the right-wing newspaper Iravunq, explained that Armenia was becoming too dependent on other cultures, essentially becoming anti-national, and the government was allowing this. He complained about television programming – which was largely devoted to serial shows filled with sex and violence and not enough celebration and time devoted to Armenian culture and history. He blamed those who owned private networks, as well as those within the government, and especially the Republican Party, who were responsible for public broadcasting. “They sell. They only sell. They worry about what will be
popular and not about what is best for the nation,” he told me.

Others, such as Armen Mkrtichyan, the founder and director of Hayazn, understood illegitimacy as the government’s undignified treatment of their constituents. As such, those in power were not fit to rule. These were their people after all, Mkrtichyan kept emphasizing. I met Mkrtichyan in July 2013 at Chocolad Café, a seemingly popular café for nationalists, apparently, located in Liberty Square. This would be the meeting spot with most of the right-wing nationalists who I would interview, always suggested by them independently of one another. Mkrtichyan told me that the mission of the organization, Hayazn, is to form a “national government” based on “national values.” When I asked him what he meant by “national government” he explained:

A government of which control is founded by citizens and not extra-governmental institutions like the European Union or European this or that, etc. Or Russian dominance through oligarchs and so on. As in an independent government and a government in which citizens find themselves safe within, which, unfortunately, does not exist today in Armenia.  

For Mkrtichyan, Armenian citizens were living undignified lives. He brought up examples of taxi drivers and other workers who were putting in 20 hours a day “and are

---

10 Mkrtichyan also added that “When we say “national government,” we don’t mean that Armenia needs to be for Armenians only. No, Armenia must be for Armenian citizens. If a Yezidi, or a Russian, or a Ukrainian is an Armenian citizen, then that person should live a dignified life. Equal to all. Just because we are a nationalist organization, we do not put any difference in someone’s nationality when it comes to equality. If Yezidis or Russians have issues pertaining to nationality in Armenia, it should not matter. If one has a passport or documentation that they are citizens of Armenia, then they should be able to have access to all civil rights, their rights should be equally protected in Armenia, etc…”
even happy for this because they have a job”; the “forced emigration” of Armenians from their fatherland (hayrenik); the fact that those who govern Armenia politically and economically are “like aliens, from somewhere else, who have come to take as much as they can get….they have no regard for the land and the people of Armenia”; and finally, that the government was “waging a class war” on the nation. As such, the Armenian citizen, uncared for by those who comprised Armenia’s current government, does not have dignity. Rather than contributing to the well-being of its citizenry, Armenia’s current government was carrying out a “class war.” The government stood, and acted, against the nation; and, as such, was not Armenian.

This notion of government against nation was one that was mirrored by many of my household interviewees. As I have already discussed in the previous chapter, there was often a contradiction in how these interviews began – with the claim “Family is the base of Armenia,” very often followed by “There are no families in Armenia.” When I asked about this contradiction, most respondents pointed to the government’s – as well as the oligarchy’s – corruption as the cause for the disintegration of the family and thus the nation. Some, however, extended this claim, by pointing out that the government was not Armenian.

These various claims about the government – that its members were too self-interested to be properly Armenian, that they were waging war on national values and the Armenian people, and that they were not Armenian themselves– highlight an opposition between Father and fathers, marking those who have taken the seats of authority as illegitimate as both. By perverting a proper Armenian morality – “national values” as
Mkrtichyan calls it – these Father figures break with symbolic authority. Their violation of this higher order of Law delegitimizes their symbolic authority. While Armenia remembers, celebrates and carries the legacy of many other legitimate Father figures of its past (Stalin being one of them), these Father figures are placed outside of what constitutes that position. It is within these larger claims and feelings about a lack of symbolic authority in Armenia that Grigor’s insistence on morality over law should be understood. After all, law in Armenia is enforced by a government that is largely regarded as operating outside of morality altogether, occupied by Fathers who are illegitimate to Armenian propriety. This law does not operate within the bounds of Law – through “national values” or the paternal care provided by a proper Father figure. It is illegitimate, not because of its violation of law, as many leftists activists will claim, but because of its violation of a higher Law ordered by the symbolic position of Father.

This difference – especially in the domains of kinship (here, nation-family as discussed previously in this dissertation) in its opposition to the “authorities” - recalls a major theme of Sophocles’ play, Antigone. The play begins in the context of the end of the war of brother against brother (the two sons of Oedipus, one of them Polynices, having just murdered each other) in Thebes. The new King of Thebes, Creon, has decreed a law forbidding the burial of Polynices, who is considered a traitor to Thebes. The new King of Thebes, Creon, has decreed a law forbidding the burial of Polynices, who is considered a traitor to Thebes. Antigone, the heroine of the play and sister of Polynices, meets with her sister Ismene, to tell her that she will bury her brother anyway, that is the lawful and moral thing to do. The law forbidding the burial, after all, breaks with a “higher law” of the Gods. Antigone does bury her brother and is sentenced by Creon to a slow death – trapped in a tomb.
where she will spend the rest of her days. Antigone, however, hangs herself in the tomb. The play, considered a tragedy, ends not only in the death of Antigone, but both Creon’s son and wife, who kill themselves.

In a reading of the play, Judith Butler (2000) argues against many common interpretations, especially that it exemplifies kinship’s defiance of sovereignty or authority. In her reading, Antigone does not defy the state through kinship, as has been argued by many others (including Hegel, Lacan, and Irigray). Rather, Butler contends that Antigone poses an aberration of the state and its language of masculinist law. She appropriates the law and uses it for her own perverse ends. Thus, Antigone might disturb but she does not defy; she reiterates deviantly, but she does not constitute an outside to the symbolic order structured by masculine will to power. By doing this, however, she makes possible a mechanism of the failure of that very symbolic order, reiterating perversely, inching toward its undoing. In a way then, Antigone’s claim, or her act of burying her brother, backed up through her insistence that this was the moral thing to do, puts limits on sovereignty not by defying it, but by occupying it. Butler’s reading of Antigone provides a theory of kinship and sovereignty that locates both within the same symbolic position – the authority of the Father.

Lacan and Lacanian theorists understand symbolic order as that which not only produces social norms through a symbolic authority, but also as that which is beyond, or beneath, the realm of the symbolic, defining the possibilities of Being in itself. Lacan, after all, based his understanding of the symbolic realm on Levi-Strauss’ (1969) notion of “exchange” of signs, originating in woman herself, as the “threshold of culture,” or that
which is both in nature as well as culture (or in Lacanian terms, the real and the symbolic). Thus, the symbolic Father’s authority is not just cultural – or social – but pre-exists this symbolic domain, as that which makes culture itself possible. For Butler, what is disturbing about this insistence on Father, even if not necessarily father or fathers, is the universalization of masculinity itself as the condition for authority. As she writes, “The distinction between them does not quite hold, for in each instance we are still referring to social norms, but in different modes of appearance. The ideal form is still a contingent norm, but one whose contingency has been rendered necessary, a form of reification with stark consequences for gendered life” (21). As such, for Butler, to say that “father” and “Father” are different is to ignore the ways in which the symbolic Father gets reified once again as father, as an authority that is necessarily masculine.

For Butler, this is the cause for the common misreadings of Antigone. Antigone comes to represent kinship’s defiance of state purely because of her gendered position as the sister of Polyneices. Her act, thus, cannot be informed by her own desire, or her own masculine will, but purely as an act constituting kinship as higher, as pre-social undergirding, to the state’s law. Reading Antigone as kinship against state reproduces the universality of the Father as Law, since it does not allow for the alternate reading – of Antigone and King Creon both speaking the same language of L/law. Antigone does not disturb law or the state by way of kinship, but performs kinship as intrinsic to the operation of law. Rather than locating the potentials of undoing state sovereignty through undoing that masculinity, Butler tells us that Antigone’s potential for disturbing symbolic authority is in her “assum[ption of] manhood by vanquishing manhood, but she
vanquishes it only by idealizing it” (11). By burying her brother, she repeats his defiance, herself becoming defiant, but only by replacing him and “territorializing” him herself.

If we put Butler in conversation with right-wing nationalists who find Armenia’s political and economic leaders illegitimate, we see both resonances as well as stark differences. Let us take for example, Nikolay Ter-Nakalyan, the right-wing self-identified nationalist who is also one of the co-editors of BlogNews.am, a very popular site for the dissemination of both nationalist and as well as anti-authority information in Armenia’s cyberscape. When I interviewed Ter-Nakalyan at, again by his insistence, Chocolad Café, he asked me what the purpose of my interview was. I, hesitatingly (knowing his anti-homosexual politics) told him that I was writing a dissertation on sexuality and kinship in Armenia. We had already been speaking for about 20 minutes and he had become curious as to what I was planning to do with the comments he was providing. “Ah! He said. Then why don’t we talk more explicitly about that?” He continued:

You know, I’m sure you know, there is a lot of talk these days about how Armenia is patriarchal and that there is a lot of discrimination toward women here and violation of women’s rights and so on…. But, don’t believe everything you hear. You should know that Armenia is a woman-pedestalizing (knamecarutyun erevyuty goyutyun uni) culture. It always has been. When you see or hear about all of these moral perversions (aylandakutyun) and the bad treatment of women, this is something else. This is not Armenia. Armenians respect women and especially mothers, right? A man takes care of his wife and his mother and his daughters. Don’t mistake today’s hype about domestic violence and so on with Armenian culture. In real Armenian culture, the man is chief of his home and will do anything to protect women.

For Ter-Nakalyan, then, Armenians pedestalize women, regarding them as important values, as mothers, and objects to be protected. Of course, for Ter-Nakalyan, there is
nothing anti-woman about this discourse. Protecting women within this nationalist rhetoric is not necessarily seen as a demeaning of their position within society. Rather, what he is countering here is something else. Women are protected in Armenian society – at least in a proper Armenian society. Today’s cases of domestic violence, which he agreed also had its place in political discussions – was not to be equated with a higher significance of what Armenianness means. As such, if in Armenia today there is a high-rate of domestic violence, which he did not deny, it was because of some kind of perversion – an aberration – of Armenianness and not constitutive of it. If Butler argues that Antigone’s act – the burial of her brother – was a demand to speak in the same language of masculine will, which structures both kinship and sovereignty, Ter-Nakalyan is pointing an outside to the entirety of this, an outside to symbolic authority itself. As such, the moral perversions of today’s Armenia – from the level of government, the economic elite, to the domestic violence within households – is caused by something outside of what constitutes proper Armenian morality, authority and kinship. Not only does kinship map on to what should be proper – legitimate – form of authority, but that this authority is necessarily masculine. But those who reign as Fathers today do not meet these demands of masculine will to power. In other words, if kinship and symbolic authority are not in opposition but operate within the same realm, Armenian authorities are outside of both.

Thus, the popular claims that government is against the nation manifest the limits of the nation-family, producing a sense, albeit often assumed rather than explicated, of what constitutes Armenian morality and thus proper Armenian authority. The illegitimate
Father figures of Armenia, then, have constituted their own limits through their perverse and corrupt acts. While the nickname and other forms of recognition of them as illegitimate do not necessarily act as resistance, they place limits on their authority; they place them outside of Armenia altogether.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have shown the ways in which those who are within the political and economic elite – those who rule Armenia – are outside of the bounds of Armenian symbolic authority. As such, they are illegitimate. This is not so much because they violate laws – such as the laws regulating economic practices and elections – but because they violate a “higher” law, that of Armenian propriety. Much of this sense of illegitimacy is carried through by circulating nicknames that mark these figures as criminal. While I have shown how the dialectic relationship between kinship and sovereignty can be understood through the psychoanalytic relationship between Father and fathers, within the nation-family of Armenia, these can be understood within the same realm of masculine authority. However, because Armenian figures of authority are outside of these bounds – through their violation of Law – they are placed outside of Armenianness. In the following section of this dissertation, exploring the other perversion, sexual perversion (*aylaserutyun*) - I think about what it means for sexual politics in Armenia to be operating with this context of moral perversion. In other words, what can a pervasive discourse about *aylandakutyun* that I have explored here tell us
about the work that the figure of the homosexual does? In what ways do sexual and moral perversion meet up and what can be found in these sites?
Chapter 4

The Figure of the Homosexual: Fetish, Freedom, and Separation

You know what? *Hay Hay Hay* (Armenian Armenian Armenian), we’re tired of it already. We’re already a tiny nation and we give nothing to the world and think of ourselves as *es im inch* [I don’t know what]. I am in solidarity with everyone. I do not recognize borders. I am an artist, I am a person. I will go wherever I want, relate to whoever I want, and say whatever I want to say. I have never hurt anybody. But those people who have invaded my personal life, that’s a terrible thing. And it’s not enough that they have invaded my personal life, but they have threatened me….saying that this isn’t enough, that I must be murdered, they’ve put up my picture [online] and said ‘Remember this face. This person must be burned. In 1941 when World War II started, 300,000 Armenians died fighting against fascism and now we have these ants, these pathetic little bugs, who are trying to propagate their rotten fascist ideas?*  

- Tsomak Oga

I am indeed inclined to define ‘competent’ mothering, paradoxically, as the ability to resist an optimal distance from one’s children. I know it might sound absurd, but I would have to define “good enough mother” as a mother who loves violently. A mother who cannot resist getting as close as possible, providing all the warmth in the world for the child, but of course simultaneously and inevitably pricking the child with quite a lot of quills.

Gohar Homayounpour (2012: 95)

In the summer of 2011, my language instructor, Lusine, suggested that we take a field trip to the museum commemorating the life and work of the poet Yeghishe Charents1 in central Yerevan. We were reading his poetry and the trip was meant to

---

1 Yeghishe Charents is considered the most important Armenian writer of the 20th century. Charents was a young poet when he was sent to a prison where he died in 1937. He was born in 1897 in Kars, then part of what made up Eastern Armenia within the Russian Empire. In 1915, he volunteered to fight with the Russian army on the Caucasian Front, where the genocide had already begun. He was sent to Van, a city within the Ottoman Empire, where a large Armenian population was being massacred and deported. This witness to massive destruction of Western Armenia and Armenians would later fill Charents’ poetry with an intense melancholy - with descriptions of Armenia’s beauty and suffering. In 1919, Charents returned to Armenia, which had at that time established itself
acquaint me with Charents’ life and the circumstances in which he wrote, and was also to be a history lesson in Armenia’s Stalinist experience. The curator at the museum explained to Lusine and I that Charents was a hero in his time. And he was a true socialist. But his love of Armenia had made him a threat to the Soviet Union and it was for his patriotism that he was murdered. “You see,” she explained, back then, Armenians were not allowed to freely show love for their country. For this they were deported, exiled, put in prisons and executed. Now we are independent and so we are free. And how do these people choose to express this freedom? By becoming faggots [gomikner] and screaming that they want homosexual marriages? It’s a pity what they have done with the freedom for which they had longed for so many years. At the time, I was confused about where this deep resentment for homosexuality came from. It seemed arbitrary for me at that time, new to Armenia and definitely new to the political and social climate. For the next few hours I reflected on why Armenian independence or the Great Purges should have recalled for the curator at this museum homosexuality and, more importantly, homosexuality as an index of Armenia in crisis. I would eventually discover that this was a precocious use of a hermeneutics that would

as an independent nation-state being run by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) as the First Republic of Armenia. However, within a years, this Republic would become part of the USSR. During his years in Armenia, Charents became a socialist, advocating for Bolsheviks. It was also during these years, beginning in 1934, that his work was deemed “nationalist” and along with various other writers in Armenia, Charents became an object of Soviet and Communist Party criticism. In this time period, various writers, such as Vahan Totovents and Zabel Yesayan, were executed or sent to prisons in which they died, precisely for nationalist (seen as anti-Socialist) sentiment. Charents, one of these victims of the Stalinist Great Purges, was interrogated and watched by the Party. His arrest in 1937 has been attributed to a talk he gave to the Armenian Writer’s Union in Yerevan in 1934 addressing the issue of “national language.” Charents had been part of a great literary debate at the time regarding form and content, or the ways in which literature could retain its socialist content and develop a national form. The stakes of this debate would eventually cost him his life (Nichanian 2002).
become full blown by 2012. What does homosexuality have to do with the independence of Armenia? How does it figure into the relationship between the new State in the context of anxieties about corruption and a sense of F/fatherlessness? What does it speak to the survival of a nation with a proper morality, or its disintegration without? And, what does the homosexual as a figure mean for various groups like nationalists, activists, and others? These are some of the questions I explore in this chapter on the figure of the homosexual and his fetishization as the ultimate sign of the nation’s failure.

I begin with the ways in which the homosexual became a fetish object for nationalists and journalists, who would take him up in order to bring forth a certain conception of the nation. In this first section, I consider the ways in which media censorship, by the government and oligarchy whose members own most mainstream media outlets, leads to the expression of national perversion through other means, namely through the homosexual. In the section that follows, I explore journalists’ accounts of how the homosexual became such a fetish object and the reasons why journalists would choose him as an avenue through which to display corruption in their work to “save the nation.” I will be particularly interested in one journalist’s explanation of this process, who described the obsession around the figure of the homosexual as a “deep jealousy” of most Armenians for a kind of freedom he represents. And, finally in the last section I think about “freedom” in a larger sense, and how the homosexual marks Armenia’s “separation anxiety.”

Fetishization
In 2008, *Inqnagir* magazine, edited by writer Violet Grigoryan, published some of Charents’ poetry for the first time. During the Great Purge of 1937, these poems were hidden away with other documents, and brought to the attention of Harvard Professor of Armenian Studies, James Russell, who was given copies of these papers by a man who had known Charents in his youth. Some of these poems had a homoerotic character to them. One of them discussed the poet’s love for drugs and the beautiful light he felt from morphine, alcohol and hashish. But the greatest and most beautiful thing in the world, Charents declares, more beautiful than gold or the prettiest woman, was a young boy aged fourteen or fifteen. This poem set into motion debates through prominent online presses about whether or not Charents was a homosexual. Vahan Ishkhanyan, writing for *Tert.am’s* blog at the time, expressed frustration that those in Armenia’s literary circles are hypocrites who deny and refuse the realities of the artists, writers and film-makers that they love and consider national icons. Ishkhanyan claimed that while Armenians celebrate artists like Parajanov, the Soviet-Armenian film-maker and artist (most well known for his film *Color of Pomegranates*), “rais[ing] him to the sky,” they simultaneously maintain their homophobia claiming homosexuals need to be cast out of Armenia. In 2011, as the curator of the Charents museum was explaining to me the bad form in which Armenians today had chosen to interpret the freedom they had, I wondered if she had these recent publications in mind.

---

3 Blog no longer available.
The discovery of Charents’ “homosexual” poetry in 2008 was a precursor to the events of 2012. The full emergence of this figure would occur through the DIY firebombing, the Diversity March and the constant discussion of him within mainstream media, social networking sites and blogs. These events are crucial in understanding the molding and shaping of the homosexual as a national threat – each event adding a new layer on to this now-born figure. This figure must be differentiated from the queer forms of life I discussed in Chapter 1. This is a figure, an abstraction, who often does not take any real form in the real world. Most of those who evoke the figure of the homosexual – from right-wing nationalists to journalists – often do not have an example, or reference, of an actually existing gay person. Raffi was one of these right-wing nationalists. When I interviewed him at The Patriot, a nationalist pub that opened a few months after the DIY firebombing and just a block down the same street, he claimed that his duty as a nationalist was to stop homosexuals from destroying “our” Armenia. When I asked him who these homosexuals were, Raffi responded: “They’re here. I hear about them all the time. They had a gay bar right down there [points down the street to the building where DIY had once existed].” “Do you know any personally?” I asked. “No, I don’t have friends like that!” he exclaimed. In short, for Raffi the threat of the homosexual had been formed through various abstractions, a simulacra through which the homosexual had crystallized as an existing (yet intangible) figure of nation in crisis. Others, who have been more involved in anti-homosexual politics, use the example of Mamikon Hovsepyan, who is currently the only publicly “out” gay person in the country and the director of PINK. As such, often PINK itself comes up to figure the fetishized
homosexual I will discuss here.

In Chapter 1, I discussed the ways in which homosexuality – or queer life – is largely an invisible existence in Yerevan. While homosexuality is visible through certain codes and understandings of what constituted alternativ life, space and behavior, it is invisible within the social landscape of Armenia unless one had access to the coded ways in which it played out. In other words, for those who are not directly in relation to queerness – queer themselves or having friends who were – homosexuality is largely invisible. In this way, it is possible for many to continue to claim that “there are no homosexuals in Armenia.” It was precisely this invisible visibility that led me to be shocked by the status of the “homosexual” within Armenia’s mainstream media.

In 2012, Armenian right-wing nationalists, beginning with the firebombing of DIY Pub, waged what would become a long-term and on-going anti-homosexual campaign. Homosexuality was a major topic of discussion in media. The circulation of stories about how European spies are endangering Armenian sovereignty by promoting homosexuality, LGBT activists were demanding that there no longer be men and women and how homosexuality was an “environmental danger,” the figure of the homosexual made many appearances. During my year-long fieldwork, I became fascinated by this constant public discussion of “homosexuality.” For activists, such as those at PINK, homosexuality was a distraction tool that was very effective to those in power. The firebombing occurred two days after the parliamentary elections, in which the Republican Party, utilizing its illegitimate power and techniques of corruption, took a majority of seats yet again. Spurring intense focus on homosexuality in Armenia within news, social
networking sites and blogs, this figure effectively obfuscated larger political issues like election fraud. LGBT activists saw this process as not only an act of fascist enclosure of who belongs to and in Armenia, but also as a useful tactic to those who were actually threats to the Armenian people: the government. Post-election moments are historically times of mass movement in Armenia as I have discussed in previous chapters. In 2012, many activists were claiming, this was avoided by distracting attention to something else.

Some nationalists, these activists further claimed, were being paid by the authorities to spread ideas of homosexuality’s threat to national security in order to displace attention from the government’s and oligarchy’s corrupt actions. PINK staff members, for example, strongly believed that the very popular nationalist blogger Tigran Kocharyan, who is one of the most adamant voices in anti-homosexual rhetoric, was working for the KGB since he was often spotted coming and going out of the KGB headquarters (now officially known as the National Security Service), which was across the street from the PINK office. Tigran Kocharyan aside, these activists conceded that most nationalists were opposed to Armenia’s current government. When I asked them why they would be distracting attention from their corrupt actions, then, many responded that they were tools to the system, unknowingly contributing to their illegitimate rule.

In November, 2012, during a Human Rights House Network meeting, the conversation became directed at the new protests against homosexuality – namely, the boycott protests against the Parada screenings. “As far as I understand, all of the screenings were cancelled. This is a grave violation of the freedom of expression. What can we do about this?” asked one member – looking at Anna, PINK’s representative to
the network. Before she could respond, Zabel, the representative of WRC, spoke up:

“Honestly, I think we should do nothing. I’m sick of this. Look, there are presidential elections coming up and there are other very serious problems in this country. Everyday I hear from another woman who has been beaten by her husband and I have to deal with these problems. I don’t have time to be drawn in to some stupid game that they are playing. The best thing to do is to ignore them. They will get tired after a while.” Anna agreed: “Hence ed en uzum. [That is exactly what they want.] For us to be scrambling to deal with their new made-up problem so that we get nothing done. We have better things to do.”

Since then, these activists have rarely, if ever, engaged right-wing nationalists and their rhetoric. Up until that point, members of these organizations had been appearing on talk shows, interviews and other broadcasts, to discuss human rights and homosexuality and the realities of the problems in Armenia. In other words, they were sick of hearing the constant “homosexual as threat” narrative and felt that maybe if they spoke – and did not let these right-wing nationalists be the only speakers – they could get their own ideas through. This hope quickly dissipated when it became clear that these talk shows and other programs who had been inviting LGBT activists ended up using them as props, rarely giving them voice to speak. In most of these situations, activists were put on a panel with conservative voices who dominated the conversation, often with the help of the host. By November, they mostly agreed that the best way for them to carry their project forward was to not associate their work with the way in which homosexuality was generally being discussed – as national threat and sexual perversion.
Some activists had slightly different ideas on what the figure of the homosexual was doing and why there had been so much media attention on/against him. Lala Aslikyan and Karen Hakobyan, who were two of the most vocal advocates of DIY Pub in the aftermath of the firebombing, agreed to a certain extent with WRC and PINK staff members. They claimed that nationalists who focused on their opposition to homosexuality instead of the real enemy – or the real threat to the nation and its citizens (the government) – were playing into a game that was set up by that government to create opposition amongst grassroots actors and to keep opposition toward themselves at a minimum. This was a systematic tool used by governments all over the post-Soviet world, they claimed, especially in Russia. But Aslikyan and Hakobyan argued that ultranationalists themselves were a product of a fascist government, born out of nationalist projects in the late 1980s. These projects, they told me, were geared toward developing an international claim to Armenianness, organizing conferences to bring Diasporans with the Armenians of the Republic together to celebrate Armenianness. At that time, however, Hakobyan explained, nationalism meant something different. It was a time of war – the beginnings of pogroms against Armenians in Azerbaijan (and vice versa), and armed conflict between the two Republics, which lasted until the mid-1990s, ending in a “ceasefire” but never a resolution. After the ceasefire, the continuation of this nationalist energy, which was previously used against the “Turk” (as Azeris were and continue to be

4 Timothy Snyder argues that these kinds of strategies were also used during the Meidan revolution in Ukraine in which leftist organizers were often referred to as homosexuals and European spies, creating an opposition between homosexuals and nationalists, obfuscating the fight against government forces. (http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=280759125&m=280759126) Accessed on August 26, 2014.
called) has produced a different effect. Nationalist energy, according to Aslikyan and Hakobyan, is no longer about an external other, but an inward policing of behavior and identity based on a notion of pureness, or what they called “sacrilization of Armenianness,” which for them is the equivalent of fascism.

Hakobyan elaborated on the “sacrilization of Armenianness”:

In Armenia, independent thinking or thinking alternatively or any kind of different thinking was at that time [during the national independence movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s] already based on national identity because it was considered that Armenia was oppressed in general so we have a picture of this oppressed Armenia and a picture of Armenia as oppressed for centuries – Armenia as a victim. You become this oppressed nation with old roots, old culture that is oppressed for so many centuries by everyone… So when you are talking about fascism we need to remember this longer history of the story of oppression to understand where it came from. That we were oppressed and oppression is continuing and when we say “we” we mean everyone speaking Armenian or sharing the blood. Instead of being like maybe native indigenous groups in different countries, which are oppressed and which are trying to get back their territories or their cultures or whatever, the difference is that Armenia was a Republic already and Armenia is a country – unlike those other groups. It has a territory…. What does it become? Well, we were oppressed for so many centuries, and now we have a chance to create a little republic and the rest of the world we are dividing into our enemies and our friends.

The rise of fascism in Armenia, then, at least for these two activists, was directly linked to the notion of an independent, sovereign territory. If Armenia had been a victim for centuries, it now had the freedom for which the nation had longed for centuries.

Human rights was the basis on which Armenians began the Independence movement in the late 1980s. Eventually, by the time the independent state was established in 1991, the human rights discourses of those who had started the movement in 1988 had disappeared. This is the beginning, according to these activists, of the end of the “human” within Armenianness in the Republic of Armenia:
**Hakobyan:** The human being doesn’t exist….The human is not there. When we are thinking about blood, territory, language, etc., the human being is not there. No individual. No one is asking you, “Do you want to be Armenian?” You are born Armenian and then you have to do this and this and this and this.

**Aslikyan:** And if you don’t do that you are betraying your nation and you are an enemy.

It was this context of sacrilization of Armenianness – or fascism – that allowed the government, no matter how corrupt, to make many of its illegitimate moves. Under the headline of nation, Aslikyan and Hakobyan claimed, they were organizing a society that would allow a longed-for sovereign, and now sacred government, to make any moves it wanted, erasing the possibility of the individual human being, with his or her own desires and wills. The sacrilization of Armenians defines Armenians as Apostolic Christians, supportive of their military that is held up as a sacred institution, and unquestioningly proud of their country.

Aslikyan and Hakobyan put great emphasis on the government’s intentions in creating this sensibility. Razmik Panossian (2006), however, refers to governmental politics in Armenia as “postnational” in “which elites are preoccupied with issues of power and economic gain and the main issues in the political sphere relate to socioeconomic policies and day-to-day concerns” (225). Unification in the name of national ideology, Panossian argues, died with the 1996 elections. My own research and analysis of the government, also, does not show any indication of national ideology-building. This, in fact, was the reason why most of my interlocutors – from journalists, to right-wing nationalists, to other residents of Yerevan – found so obscene about this government. It was not that they were creating a common national ideology; rather it was
that they were not doing so. In other words, it might be more accurate to say that rather than forming a nationalist discourse under which to continue illegitimate acts, the Armenian government has been relying on already-existing nationalist discourses to prop up its illegitimacy. And, in many ways, as I have discussed in previous chapters, it is the lack of this “national government” that creates wide-spread rhetoric of perversion.

For Aslikyan and Hakobyan, Armenia had developed not only a fascist, but highly militarized culture of extreme right-wing nationalism. “If you are a man, your job is to be a soldier and fight for your nation. If you are a woman, your job is to make soldiers. You are not human, you have no desires, you have no humanity,” explained Aslikyan. This non-humanness of subjects could be evinced from the particular arguments that occurred during the Diversity March. In one instance, Aslikyan explained, a friend of hers who is a mother of a son and a daughter, was attacked by some counter-protesters who encircled her telling her that she should be ashamed of herself for being a faggot (gomik) and spreading homosexual propaganda. According to Aslikyan, her friend’s response had been, “I am not a faggot. I am a mother and I am looking after my children by advocating for a diverse Armenia.” The counter-protesters asked her if she had a son and when she responded that yes, she had a son and a daughter, they backed off with “Lav. Togheq (Okay, leave her alone). She has given us a son.”

In May 2013, when some LGBT activists - including myself - organized a roundtable discussion on the aftermath of the DIY firebombing, I learned the importance of understanding this problem from the perspective of journalists. The discussion included journalists, but also human rights defenders, representatives of NGOs and
independent activists. Kolya, a journalist who worked for Epress.am, a prominent leftist alternative press, claimed that one of the biggest problems in Armenia is the way in which journalists operate and do their work. The problem, according to Kolya, is not so much homophobia, but the ways in which media explode questions of homosexuality on a regular basis. Kolya insisted that it was not that people in Armenia generally took a (negative) position on homosexuality, but that media was constantly placing such inciting topics in their headlines creating a sense of homosexuality as a threat. Journalists are often looking to incite something that is already controversial, because this brings in interested readers, and also works for the editors of the presses, who are often under great pressure to divert attention away from their oligarch bosses who own the press. Kolya saw the problem of DIY, when the firebombing ignited heated debates in the public about the dangers of homosexuality, as a “journalist-manufactured homophobia” (*jurnalisticneric-steghevac homofobia*).

Following this discussion, I interviewed 14 journalists – from leftists like Kolya who were working for “alternative” presses, moderates who were working for mainstream presses, to right-wing nationalists who had themselves at some point displayed homosexuality in the press. The most common response to the question of why homosexuality had become such a visible problem within media was, as Hranush at Hetq put it: “They want to collect clicks.” It should first be noted that there is very little circulation of in-print media in Armenia. Printed newspapers are largely the domain of official political parties – the Republican Party, the Dashnakstutyun (ARF), and Prosperous Armenia. Printing is expensive both for the publisher and the audience. As
such, most of my respondents first pointed out that much of the information that circulates in Armenia happens online or on television. Eleeza Vorperian Agopian noted in 2009 that the Internet was still a marginal medium of information in Armenia because of infrastructural problems (access in villages, for example), as well as the fact that one must have a computer to access the Internet, which was rare, especially in villages. While the Workbank of the World Development Indicators reports that in 2009, there were an estimated 191,000 (6.4% of the population) Internet users in the country, by 2011, that number jumped to 1,369,550 users (47.1% of the population). By 2015, this number has yet increased to 1,800,000 users. This significant increase in a few year’s time can be credited to infrastructural changes and the increase in competition between telecommunication providers, bringing access to many new places.

“Collecting clicks” for many of the journalists I spoke with meant that a “sexy” or “taboo” headline would draw in an audience, who would click on the link for the article, and thus contribute to the ratings of the site, which most often depends on selling advertising space to remain a viable business. It was precisely this business model that most of the journalists I talked with took issue. “They usually don’t care about providing important information, as long as they collect clicks,” explained Tamara at CivilNet. Araxi also expressed the problem as “a lack of real journalism in the country.” Journalists who worked for “alternative presses” defined this domain as circulations free of business

---

interests. CivilNet, for example, was run by Civilitas Foundation, a non-profit organization which received funding from various international organizations like the OSCE (The Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe), universities in foreign countries (like Tufts University in Boston, U.S., the Helsinki Committee in Turkey at Bilgi University and the Graduate School of Corporate Management in Russia), and independent donors (like filmmaker Atom Egoyan and musician Serj Tankian). In this way, CivilNet is not dependent on “clicks,” nor editorial management from an oligarch who runs the press, and so can publish what they feel is important and timely information. Hetq and Epress also understood themselves to be “alternative” in this way. Both Araxi and Kolya, had worked at Tert.am, a few years prior to my interviews with them. They both expressed discontent with the circulation, which was in many ways “alternative” when they worked there because it was not connected to a major oligarch. Araxi eventually left because of constant problems with the Editor, who would not let her freely write on current issues. For example, she had written an article on the ways in which Armenia’s diplomacy with Russia was standing in the way of normalization of relations with Georgia. The editor, who in Araxi’s opinion was too “self-critical,” was afraid to publish such an article, which directly criticized the Armenian government. In this case, it was not business concerns, but fear of the government, that blocked her from being able to publish the article. She felt that Epress allowed her more journalistic freedoms and was largely less afraid than other presses. Epress, both Araxi and Kolya maintained, was not interested in click-baiting or diverting attention. The site published timely and important information.
Many of these journalists made an important distinction between “actual” problems and the manufactured ones. Like LGBT activists, they were concerned with the obfuscation of human rights violation and discrimination – problems that deeply impact the lives of LGBT people in Armenia – with panicked accusations of national threat. When I asked Hranush, from Hetq (another “alternative” press), for example, why there was so much media attention on homosexuality in Armenia, she asked me “But why shouldn’t there be? There are a lot of grave violations of human rights in Armenia and homosexual (miaserakan) rights are among them.” I clarified, of course, that I was not asking about news attention to rights violations, but more about the spectacle of homosexuality. “You have to differentiate it. Writing about how homosexuals are coming from Europe and destroying Armenia is not the same as writing about how nationalists are threatening the lives of activists. In my opinion, there is not enough written on homosexuality. Look, I don’t care about who people are having sex with and what else they are doing. I don’t care about someone’s “values” and so on. But as a journalist I feel that it is my responsibility to expose human rights violations. There is not enough of this.” For Hranush, the many articles and pages of news sites devoted to what I am here calling “the figure of the homosexual” had nothing to do with politics and nothing to do with homosexuals. Those were all just distractions.

Araxi connected the figure of the homosexual back to questions of politics. “It is hate propaganda….that comes out of a general discontentedness in Armenia,” she argued.

There’s a lot of such things in Armenia – a person is upset, discontent – and that needs to be expressed in some way. But if we go deeper into it a little bit we understand that the reason for this discontentedness is not a person’s sexual orientation, but corruption, fraud, all sorts of violations [at
the government level]. But because that anger and all of those things exist, they try to, in various ways, target something else. Like, “You know what? Everything is bad because they bring from the outside values and impose it on us. Everything was okay but now we are losing our nationality and this is why things are bad. They want to extinguish Armenianness.” That, basically, yes, you’ll remain Armenian, but what kind? If you’re not Christian? If you’re gay. “See,” they say,”back then there were no homosexuals and now there are.”

Araxi’s analysis, then, is that economic and political concerns in the country – which have led to wide-spread feelings of the nation’s moral disintegration and emerged pervasive talk of perversion (aylandakutyun) – is rerouted onto those considered sexually perverse (aylaservac). The homosexual figures this sexual perversion and is taken up as a form through which to displace anxious energy against the illegitimacy of the oligarchy and members of government. Within this displacement, which I will also consider a process of condensation in Chapter 7, Armenian “values” get charged with anxious energy as the nation is felt to be at threat. For many of the leftist journalists that I interviewed, the issue is not homophobia but fears regarding the nation’s insecurity because of the perversions of those in power.

Kolya echoed this analysis. When I asked him the same question – why there was so much focus on homosexuality in Armenian media – he re-focused the question: “Can you imagine this position [of the nationalist activist or the nationalist journalist]? He wants to do something. He sees his nation suffering, but he’s terrified of the oligarchs, one of whom is his boss’ boss. He knows he can get fired, at best. So he has to find some other way to be a hero. To save his nation.” Concerns about the nation’s (lack of) reproduction, the immorality of those in power, and anxieties regarding non-Armenian (and often considered anti-Armenian) values penetrating the body politic were being
congealed into one particular figure: the homosexual.

This particular process of displacement is akin to what Freud called fetishization. In a very short 1927 article, Freud (1974) argued that the fetish is not only a “penis substitute,” but the substitute “for a particular quite special penis” – that of “the woman’s (mother’s) phallus which the little boy once believed in and does not wish to forego” (215). The fetish is developed, according to Freud, because of the initial horror at the realization that if the mother does not have a penis then she must have been castrated, which puts the little boy’s own penis in danger of castration. In Armenia, one can witness the ways in which the relation between nation and state has formed an Oedipalized drama in which state is often seen as threatening, or castrating, the nation. Thus, I suggest that the figure of the homosexual has become a fetishized object for nationalists, given voice by media, because of the horror caused by those in power, Armenia’s contemporary illegitimate Father figures. As Freud adds to his discussion of the larger implications of the process of fetishization: “In later life, a grown man may perhaps experience a similar panic when the cry goes up that Throne and Altar are in danger, and similar illogical consequences will ensue” (215). Mother Armenia at threat through perverse authoritarian figures manifests an object on which to displace these anxieties. In the following section, I think with and through journalists on the question of why homosexuality was being fetishized and how this process of displacement was working.

Freedom and Its Discontents
The journalists that Kolya was referencing are those who see their nation at a cross-roads and want to do something about it. But the authoritarian regime who wields the “No” has not only become the cause of the nation’s felt disintegration, but made itself in some ways untouchable. The hero, then, must look elsewhere to save his nation. The sardonic term “nation-saver,” which many leftists used to describe right-wing nationalists and their agendas, is deeply rooted in this anxiety regarding a nation failing because of a lack of moral authority, or what I have discussed as a disintegrating symbolic authority in Chapter 3. The political and economic elite who wield the “No-of-the-Father” without the Name, bifurcating symbolic authority and marking themselves as illegitimate as Armenian and as rulers of Armenia, have created a situation in which many Armenians feel as if the nation itself is being made impossible. This rupture in the narrative of centuries of survival and thriving into post-Soviet perversion (aylandakutyun), has emerged new forms of nationalism. For Araxi, the genre of “hero” did not only include the nationalist journalist, but even leftist activists who, feeling the weight of the oligarchy and authoritarian regime as impossible to confront, would aim their “protest” to an online world – through blogging and Facebook statuses:

People write statuses, for example: “fuck the system [in English]” or similar kinds of things, like “Oh, the prime minister is so terrible...offshore business...” and whatever kinds of emotional statements in bad words and the person will consider their work completed. So, this was their work. And the more “Likes” they get, or comments like “Oh, brother, good for you for noticing that we have so much corruption,” that much more unloading/discharging [parpel] happens – the energy, the anger, passes through. Like if you say something bad, or write it, or when they put up an event there, like “We demand that Nemets Rubo resign,” or you join that event, you consider your work as having been done. This activism has kind of gone too far into this passive condition. It’s turned into a different world. Like you go on Facebook and you see a completely different world.
And different world it was. Araxi’s statement recalled for me the ways in which homosexuality, hyper-visible in media, was invisible in the streets, in homes, in most of Yerevan’s hundreds of bars, cafes and restaurants, as I discussed in Chapter 1. But, this different world had shut down many possibilities of what Araxi considered actual action. She compared Armenia’s “passivity” to the movement in Tahrir Square in Cairo and the Gezi Park movement in Istanbul – claiming that these kinds of actions were impossible in Armenia. “They have these huge movements and what do we have? BlogNews? BlogNews would be impossible anywhere else.” BlogNews is a popular site which actually posts Facebook statuses and other blogs as news, recirculating them through their own website and Facebook page, making these posts widespread. BlogNews.am is one of the major sites through which (anti)homosexual “news” circulates.

The popularity of blogs and social networking sites, and its formation of passivity amongst Armenians, including activists, was an issue that many of the journalists I interviewed broached. People were not receiving their information from journalists but through Facebook statuses and posts on blogs, which conveyed opinions rather than actual information, they told me. According to Araxi, the popularity of social networking sites as sources of information in large part stems from the lack of trust in mainstream journalism and the circulation of information through actual news sites themselves:

After, 2008, when March 1 happened, and when they implemented the state of emergency, when no one could give any news information and it was a time in which only bloggers were writing certain things, it was at this time that the media went one step forward – toward change. As in toward some kind of critical information being written about. Livejournal was really popular at that point in Armenia. Armenian youth were really proud of themselves when they had Liverjournals and they started
expressing their opinions via Livejournal. Then, people started creating blogs on Wordpress, Blogspot, etc. and at that time, being a blogger was really popular, because people read blogs more than the news. Because the news was directly controlled by politics and was concretely either opposition or state controlled. And bloggers expressed a kind of alternative opinion, which was read a lot and became more popular at that time. But at the same time, while they were becoming popular, they also went underground. So, after Facebook started becoming more used, many of these bloggers, and people who had been expressing their opinions online, registered with Facebook accounts. And Facebook was the only place where we could freely express our opinions – both civil societal opinions and political opinions – as youth.

She refers to the March 1 massacre, when the military was called in to shut down protests in central Yerevan, and during which they shot 10 people dead in the streets. It was at this moment that then-President Robert Kocharyan declared a state of emergency and created a media blackout. To share information, many activists turned to social networking sites and blogs, which, being new tools at the time, were not being controlled or censored by the government. In many ways, actual news sites have been mirroring these blog-practices, often reporting on Facebook statuses and blog postings as news in online articles. The most popular format for this is BlogNews.am.

For Kolya, however, passive heroicism through nationalist claims and insults against particular groups – especially the homosexual - arose out of a context of deeper anxieties regarding freedom. The question of freedom was one that would constantly emerge in many of my discussions with families, activists, nationalists, artists and journalists. As the curator at the Charents museum had hinted at in 2010, the independence of Armenia had somehow turned into a freedom that was not freedom, or in some cases, a freedom that was far from what the expected freedom of earlier periods had meant. Prior to the Karabagh movement as well as the national independence
movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s, a “free Armenia” was already built into a sense of Armenianness since the 19th century, when nationalist organizations like the ARF, Ramkavars and Hnchaks developed theories of autonomy and sovereignty for an Armenia to come (Nalbandian 1963). For many of my interlocutors in 2012 and 2013, this commemoration of freedom often continues in schizophrenic complexities. On the one hand Armenia is free, with sovereign territory and a self-governing body. On the other hand, the nation is now much less free, with rampant unemployment and poverty that have led to massive emigration, the gross corruption of those who rule over the Armenian people, and a rise in supranational alliances based on new forms of extraction, like the Eurasian Economic Union. Independent, but dependent. Hayasdan (Armenia), but not. It is as if a free Armenia has an uncanny resemblance to its own opposite – the ends of the nation once and for all.

Scholars discussing the Karabagh and independence movements noted sweeping feelings of solidarity, huge hopes, and the return of national cohesiveness and belonging (Abrahamian 1990, Ishkanian 2008, Platz 2005, Malkasian 1996; de Waal 2013). As Levon Abrahamian describes it, the sentiments of unity enveloped Armenians into “a common soul, a common mind, and (finally) a common feeling of ethnic self-consciousness…[A] remarkable feeling was generated, as though one were present at each instant wherever this massive body swept and thrived” (1990: 72). The national independence movement, as such, realized the national vision of nation-family that had remained an ideal through the nationalist movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. While in some ways this sense of national cohesion was actualized on every day levels through
“neighbor relations” (harevanutyun) during the Soviet era (Platz 2005), in the late 1980s and early 1990s it picked up an unprecedented velocity as the potential of an actual sovereign Armenian leadership for the Armenian people – an official Father – became less and less a dream and closer to becoming reality. But by 2010 when I went to visit the Charents museum, almost 25 years of independence had not realized this dream. And, what’s more, that very government which had felt so promising during national independence, seemed to be actively working against such potentials, which even the non-Armenian Soviet leadership had to some effects maintained. By the 2000s, in the post-war period, Independence had meant the liquidation of the means of production - leading to large-scale unemployment - the perfection of the government’s “machinery of falsification” (Abrahamian and Shagoyan 2012: 19), the removal or significant reduction of state forms of security provisions – like housing, the end of fixed pricing for food and petroleum, and the privatization of education and public transportation. Within this backdrop of the disappearance of the paternal state, which I discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, after years of longing for an independent Armenia, the results were far from the expectations held within earlier moments of the independence movement. Freedom had become unbearable.

The connotations of freedom were multiple. First, freedom stands in for independence of the nation from a foreign sovereign. As such, Armenia had in a way become free. Gaining national sovereignty in 1991, Armenia was no longer, at least de jure, under the control of any other sovereign. The government of Armenia could, finally, represent the people of Armenia and particularly Armenian values. This is what Armen
Mkrtichyan refers to as the ideal of a “national government” – as I discussed in Chapter 3 – which, as we’ve seen is largely felt to have never come into existence. The second sense of freedom, however, can be understood as a loosening of the controls on individual desires. This is a freedom from what Freud (2010 [1930]) understood to be “civilization,” or the ways in which the self, or ego, is restrained by “the world about it” (725), creating an antagonistic feeling between the self and the social. As many leftists in Armenia will argue, “the self” does not yet exist in Armenia’s social and moral landscape. In other words, there is no personal freedom, because “person” is not yet a viable category. The tension between these two kinds of freedom can be found in almost all discourse around the figure of the homosexual. For the curator at the museum, for example, “freedom” was supposed to be national freedom in which one could openly proclaim their love of nation and live by national values. This freedom, however, had instead become a freedom from that very sense of nation, giving rise to a subject who now has desires that work against this sense of nation-family and is free to express and live out these desires. The figure of the homosexual comes to embody this sense of freedom. In other words, Armenia itself could only be free if those who were Armenian did not consider themselves free from Armenia. This second sense of freedom will always stand in the way of the first. If Armenia is free, then Armenians cannot be free of it. If Armenians are free of Armenia (as a nation-family), then Armenia cannot exist even if it has become free. Regulating the propriety of Armenianness becomes critical in maintaining the freedom of Armenia as such.

This brings us to the question of what “proper Armenia” is. For Kolya, to be
properly Armenian was a violent obligation that robbed people of all pleasures. Everything becomes a responsibility and any pleasure is seen as self-indulgent and an irresponsible escape from reality. “This is the problem,” he summarized in response to my question of why homosexuality had become the object creating so much dissent. I pressed on: “What, then, is the relationship between this problem of propriety [chisht or sometimes karqin], as you put it, and the homosexual’s constant appearance in the press?” He leaned back in his chair, thinking about it, and then, after a few seconds of silence, he sat up again and, bringing all of what he had said into its condensed form, he stated: “Really, this needs to be explained psychologically. And I would say that all of this is because of a deep jealousy.” He nodded and then sat back again.

I was a bit stunned. Out of all of the explanations I had received from journalists and activists for the power of homosexual talk, this was quite different. “Deep jealousy?” I asked. “Yes,” Kolya responded,

[There is] this obsession of getting married, when a boy comes back from the military he must get married right away, we must find him a girl, and it doesn’t matter with whom – whether he has a home or not – just so they have children and the conditions under which they raise those children don’t matter either. Then the child becomes this precious doll who must sit quietly and not disturb anything. There is no pleasure, there is only necessity, responsibility. And then there are people who are not expected, don’t have to, who have made a deep and difficult decision…It seems to me that there is a jealousy…precisely because of that freedom. His sexuality doesn’t belong to the nation, doesn’t belong to the family, doesn’t belong to anyone. He decides. And it seems to me that…I mean, [there arises this sense of] “Go away, so that I won’t see you, a free person. Because I’m not free. I want to get pleasure too in my life. I talk about pleasure, but I’m not free enough to be able to be open with another person. So, my not receiving pleasure is justified by the necessity that I will have children.”
The homosexual is thus free, and this freedom stands as something that needs to be disavowed so that others can rest assured that their lives of necessity, of responsibility, dedication to the proper Armenian path, is the right one. Receiving no pleasure and living a life of obligation only seems worth it when one does not have to confront the other possibilities. For Kolya, sex for pleasure, or free sex, is associated with being open with another person. The representative for this kind of sex in Armenia is the homosexual, for whom sex is necessarily always this kind of free sex, because it is inherently disentangled from marriage, family, reproductive responsibility and obligation, and thus the nation and the state. But this kind of sex, which is about pleasure and freedom, is also a “deep and difficult decision” because in order for one to get to that, in order for one to have (homo)sex for pleasure, one must first lose attachments to the family, to the ideal of marriage, and to the responsibilities of reproduction that are forced onto those in Armenia. But in the nation-family of Armenia, losing attachments to family obligations places one outside of the nation itself. The homosexual becomes separated from nation-family.

For Freud (2010 [1930]), it is the feeling of love that limits the antagonism between self and “the world about it”: “At the height of being in love the boundary between ego and object threatens to melt away. Against all the evidence of his senses, a man who is in love declares that ‘I’ and ‘you’ are one, and is prepared to behave as if it were a fact” (724). This kind if intimacy, between lover and loved one, in which pleasure becomes a practice of co-constituting joy, comes up against the “properly Armenian,”
which demands that the subject not experience joy for the self, in order to ensure the well-being of the nation. In other words, by way of Kolya’s calculations, this kind of inter-subjective love – or the possibility of being a subject with personal desires that involve the openness to another’s desires - is made impossible. Rather, love itself in the nation-family is oriented toward the nation-family, in which ego or “self” has no place.

Kolya’s theory regarding a “deep jealousy” is based on the assumption that everyone wants to be an autological subject (Povinelli 2006); that this is the natural freedom inherent in all subjects and that the nation-family in Armenia stands in the way of this natural freedom. The question of freedom in this sense has a long history in European humanist thought: from Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalysis based on the notion that the subject comes into civilization and language and is cut away from their attainment of pure enjoyment and must sublimate enjoyment into pleasure within social forms, repressing deep-seated libidinal forces; to theories of “natural rights” of the European enlightenment in which the subject is born free but is only constrained by human forces and that social contracts help secure a limited freedom for the subject; to Foucauldian thought in which the subject only exists as an exercise of power and can never actually be free of power. Kolya seems to be arriving at his sense of freedom through a similar dialectics of society and the subject and the possibilities for the freedom of the subject from social constraint. As a newly independent nation-state with a sense of a long national history, and the current social, political and economic ills it is facing at this historical juncture, independence, and hence freedom becomes a highly contentious issue. Is Armenia free? What does Armenia’s freedom mean for Armenians themselves?
What kinds of subjectivity are evoked within these questions? Can Armenia, as an independent nation-state, survive if Armenians themselves become too free?

Circulating notions of freedom based in different ontological and historical understandings create a complicated scene where “freedom” comes to stand in for different things for different subjects. Depending on the position to the “properly” Armenian, freedom becomes something desirable and something to be resisted in a multiplicity of ways. For those whose intimate desires reflect a large difference from the popular notion of a “proper” Armenia, freedom is freedom from kinship, from obligation and from constraints of the expectations of intimacy with all Armenians. Freedom would mean the release from this belonging – freedom from intimate approach and encounter, freedom from certain intimate expectations that interrupt personal – or individual - desire. On the other hand, the notion of freedom was also used to refer to national sovereignty, or the freedom to be Armenian without the constraints of foreign (Stalinist, European, Western, Russian, etc.) values and interruptions. But freedom has become, for those like the curator, the freedom of each to do whatever he desires without any understanding of obligations and responsibilities toward the family and the nation - which are in metonymic relation.

This complex constellation of freedom and its discontents was rife in the aftermath of the DIY firebombing and the homosexual panic that followed in 2012. On May 11, three days after the firebombing, Hakobyan and Aslikyan were invited to an interview on Civilnet, to talk about the event, its aftermath, and what it meant for politics in Armenia. They appeared on the weekly program Didaked (or Perspective), where
journalist Arpi Makhsudyan interviewed them. The title of that week’s program was “On what basis was DIY blown up?” Aslikyan and Hakobyan argued that the firebombing was not just an isolated incident by two young men, but that their action was linked to the rise of fascism in Armenia. They narrowed their scope of this larger fascist trend to the extreme focus on the family, reproduction, and the incorporation of all sociality into kin-relations. According to Hakobyan and Aslikyan, the family was being used as a mechanism of control over not only women, but the entire social body. As Aslikyan argued:

I think women are the first to build patriarchy in our society. And this fascism that we have is only based on patriarchal relationships and thinking. A girl must be beautiful and shy, she cannot be courageous, she must stay at home. Must be a “baby”, “cute” as they like to say. A woman is only a part of the idea of the family. Now we hear from the president Serzh Sargsyan: “You’re all brothers and sisters”. Which makes you feel that the society is one entire family.\footnote{Makhsudyan, Arpi. Interview with Lala Aslikyan and Karen Hakobyan, “On what basis was DIY Pub Blown Up?” CivilNet. Available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ch0fUlcdCY. Accessed on March 16, 2016.}

Aslikyan and Hakobyan’s reference to Armenia as “brothers and sisters” is a common one. Politicians, including President Sargsyan, often refer to Armenians as brothers and sisters, part of a family – Armenia as one big family. This has its roots in the modern translation of the notion of nation through the kinship term azg (Abrahamian 2006). Often, this kind of kin-language is used by elites for affective purposes, to achieve a moral claim for what is too difficult or stirring to do “politically” otherwise. As such, disagreeing with Panossian’s (2006) claims about a totally “postnational” politics in Armenia, Ronald Suny (2006) points out that the continued use of “nationalist language” by elites is an “instrumental, strategic, and calculated” move (288). In other words, while
the government is not the longed-for Father/leader, working within this language nonetheless is highly effective in maintaining links to a sense of national governance.

Aslikyan continues her account of “fascism” – the notion of the nation as made up of brothers and sisters - by asking, “Why is this bad?”

Because when you look at citizens not like a separate, independent piece, you exchange the society-citizen relationship with being a family, then you can control them easily. We’re sisters and brothers, you’re my sister, you stay there and just trust me. And you need to sit quietly… The first power that can destroy the patriarchal structure, is the woman, she needs to start it. Our youth is used to obeying their parents, we bring the child up and since childhood we tell them “Listen to your mom, listen to your dad”, but when we look at evolution in other countries, the 1960’s movement totally was about the youth rejecting to obey their parents. They wanted to build their life and control it themselves. We can’t bring a change in this country with the youth who constantly listen to moms and dads. The new will come when the young person one day stands up and says “No, I want to live like this.”

The family, then, is used to override what are actually political issues, making them seem like intimate or familial things – things that have no place in public discourse, no place in debate, and definitely not something up to choice, but obligation. Turning “society-citizen relationships” into kin relations allows for a kind of patriarchal domination that has its roots in the nation itself as a patriarchal household, in which problems are dealt with as if they are within what is supposed to be the “private” realm. Aslikyan and Hakobyan, then, are trying to bring a private/public division into a place where they feel such a division is missing yet necessary for freedom.

Bringing this rhetoric of the child who wants to be something separate than what the parents want her to be – or who wants to recognize herself as a person who has separate desires and inclinations than those demanded by the (nation)-family - to Kolya’s
insistence that the homosexual is a threat because of the unattainable-for-many freedom that he represents, we can see the ways in which various forms of becoming that are not of the proper nation-family become something outside, something queer, something separate.

**Separation Anxiety**

The homosexual, thus, figures a space that is outside of the nation-family and the obligations that are demanded therein. And within this configuration – the queer outside to the nation-family – exists the individual that is often characterized as “separate.” This separate individual provides a tension between what right-wing nationalists often understand as the (binary) difference between rights and responsibilities/obligations. It was in this vein that Armen Mkrtichyan, the director of Hayazn, discussed the notion of “rights” that were not the same as “human rights.” During the interview I conducted with him in June 2013, he claimed that while rights are important in a government that is operating properly – and not perversely – that there should also be limits on these rights. “Rights should be limited when they go against the rights of another – for example, while I have rights to do anything I desire, I do not have the right to kill, because this right would go against the right of another to live. Thus, the limit of rights is the encroachment of another’s rights.” For Mkrtichyan, however, rights should also be limited by responsibilities toward others. In other words, it is not enough that one’s rights be limited by the rights of another. They should also be limited by the responsibilities a person has to their nation and morality in general.
This dialectic between rights and responsibilities was highlighted in 2014, when Conchita Wurst, an Austrian competitor who performed as a drag queen – wearing a beard as well as long gowns and make up - won in the Eurovision competition. Many nationalists claimed that this was European homosexual propaganda and that Armenia should pull out of the 2015 competition so as not to participate in this kind of violation of morality. Violet Grigoryan, the writer and editor of Inqagir magazine who spoke up against this kind of public discussion against Europe and Eurovision because of homophobia, was invited on the national program Urvagic, hosted by Petros Ghazaryan, on KentronTV. Grigoryan argued that everyone in Europe and in Armenia had the right to dress however they liked and express their sexuality however they liked, and to be free of harassment while doing so. In response to this, Ghazaryan asked her about the violation of the rights of children, who, in seeing this kind of perversion on television and in other media, were being exposed to phenomena that could ruin their futures as normal Armenians. Here, there are two notions of rights in operation. Grigoryan’s notion of rights is in regards to the individual who is endowed with the freedom to express herself and behave in any way she desires, as long as she does not violate any laws. And, because since 2003, there is no law against homosexuality in Armenia, LGBT people have the right to express their sexuality the way they please. Ghazaryan, however, was speaking from another notion of rights – the rights of the nation. In other words, while “individuals” have rights to do as they please, there should be a limit on these rights when it violates their responsibility toward the Armenian nation, or national rights. “Children” here come to stand in as the future of Armenia and the many potentials of the
path of Armenianness toward this future – between propriety and perversion.

“National rights,” or “cultural rights” is often conceived of in Armenia as the rights of the family, or of family values. The word “right” is not completely absent, in fact, from nationalist discourses. One of the most popular nationalist circulations today is named *Iravunq* (Right) newspaper, which is one of the only remaining in-print presses. I interviewed Hovhannes Galajyan, the editor in chief, in June 2013. Galajyan argued that there was too much objectivity in the press in Armenia and the reader does not get any sense of analysis - they do not know how to interpret many things - which he thought was irresponsible. According to him, because of this tendency, any journalist can write about human rights, sexual revolution, or sexual minorities and not provide any of their own analysis, making the politicized (and irresponsible) position seem like a fact. The reader then gets their own national values confused with other, foreign and destructive, values. But this is why many journalists and liberals do this, he claimed. They know that by being “objective” they can easily sway public opinion and ruin national values by anti-national (*apazgayin*) values.

But *Iravunq* was different, Galajyan explained, because they present current events, but also offer a proper (Armenian) analysis of these events. The biggest topics of discussion in *Iravunq* at the moment I interviewed Galajyan were *aghandner* (religious sects, usually referring to Jehovah’s witnesses but also Mormons) and the “gender revolution” (which also included sexuality and "sexual revolution"). Galajyan saw the task of *Iravunq* as presenting the public with important information that they may not be getting from elsewhere - like these dangerous movements that were taking place right
there in Yerevan under everyone’s noses - and to give them a proper analysis based on Armenian national values. He told me that the future for the media he desires is one where there are more limits on freedom of expression – to prevent the destruction of Armenian religion and propriety by way of sectarian and homosexual propaganda.

Television, Internet and print press should set quotas, he said, on how much of what they publish or broadcast has to be devoted to Armenian history, national values and the representation of Armenian heroes.

Thus, for Galajyan, the concept of “rights,” written right into the title of the newspaper, does not apply to individuals or a sense of diversity or tolerance. He reserves the notion of rights as that which belongs to the nation and its proper culture. The title of the paper, *Iravunq*, comes from the Constitutional Rights Party that initially founded the press. This party wanted to make it clear that they were concerned with law and protecting the Armenian constitution and thus its citizens who were protected by it. When I asked him about human rights, he responded:
Human rights is a concept that I really don’t understand because the government has a constitution and laws which the citizens of that government have their rights defined by. Of these laws, there is not one under the government whose rights are not represented by that constitution and those laws. So what kind of a thing is “human rights?” It’s incomprehensible. And under these so-called human rights, what is being pushed forward is not rights of the healthy majority, but the separate rights of sick⁸ sexual minorities.

Human rights is incomprehensible to him because he cannot see a reason or a cause for any person, or human, to have rights separate from those defined by the constitution for its “healthy majority.” For Galajyan, then, human rights are for the “separate” subject: he who is not already with the majority. By considering human rights something other than constitutional rights or outside the scope of the constitution, Galajyan’s conception of “human rights” is foreign to Armenian law, and especially foreign to the Law of the Father, in the name of Hayk, under which all Armenians are brothers and sisters and have the same set of rights and responsibilities toward propriety. Thus, if human rights are to be applied to Armenia, it would necessarily come from the outside (Europe) and bear down on Armenia, negating Armenia’s sovereign national “freedom.” This separate subject needs rights because they are a special, “sick,” case; a separate individual. And the individual - who is separate from all others, who is not within the boundaries of the

---
⁸ While one may read this through medical discourses of homosexuality as physiological or psychological illness, in Armenia the term for sick, hivand, has various other connotations. I read this statement about “sick sexual minorities” not as a claim for the need to treat homosexuality, but as homosexuality outside of the normal capacity of any actual Armenian. Thus, the minority he is speaking about is “sick” because they are anti-Armenian.
national, the family or Armenia\(^9\) - is a sexual minority, the homosexual.

As discussed in the previous chapter, this separate figure is not necessarily always the homosexual, but anything that is deemed outside of the nation-family, widening the horizon of queerness. Like Lydia in the previous chapter, who included the “red apple” burial organized by WRC as part of the devaluation and ruination of Armenianness, this separation constitutes anything that is outside of what is considered to be properly Armenian. This includes, for many, young heterosexual couples who leave the husband’s father’s home to make a home for themselves, sex for pleasure, and women’s sexual activity prior to marriage. It also often includes the domain of “human rights” altogether, which is understood as European, and thus anti-Armenian.

This notion of the separate subject brings us back to the Oedipal relation between state and nation. As you will recall from Chapter 3, I argued that many of my interlocutors within households understood Armenia not as a nation-state, but a figuration in which the state largely stands against nation, destroying the full potential of nation, and thus Armenians. As such, those within the government and oligarchy class, are considered illegitimate to rule over Armenia, since they themselves are not properly Armenian and do not care for Armenia the way that proper Armenianness demands.

The notion of this subject who is too separate from the majority to count within

\(^9\) Often, this sexual minority is conflated with the sectarian, who is also outside of the scope of what is rightfully Armenian. By practicing a religion that is un-Armenian, or anti-Armenian, like Jehovah’s witnesses, one places himself outside of proper Armenia or the family of Armenia, which belongs and should belong to the Apostolic Church. Or, like in the case of Galajyan and others, an Armenian may also properly be pagan. This version of nationalism takes into consideration Armenia’s ancient civilization, including Hayk and his sons, and the fact that before Armenians became “the first Christian nation,” they were pagans.
politics is a feeling shared by some leftist activists as well - from environmental activists to anarchists to neo-Marxists. In 2012 and 2013, many of the LGBT and feminist activists with whom I had been working were discussing a split that had taken place within the newly emerging environmental movement. This split, according to Grigor, Anna, David, Arda and other active participants who had occupied Mashtots Park, taken trips to Teghut as part of the Save Teghut anti-mining project, and organized around what they considered a political movement regarding the human right to public, or common, space - occurred after the DIY firebombing. Although certain tensions were building prior to this, I was told, the firebombing highlighted some major differences within what had been a strong movement. As Grigor explained, “Some of them believed that environmentalism was a national project that should stay close to national values.” When I asked him if he would characterize these members of the movement as homophobic he explained: “No, I wouldn’t say homophobic. You know what the real problem is? They are focused on one thing and don’t understand that politics is about multiple problems at once. The environment is not only a concern about clean air or water [laughs] – your, our, pure Armenian land – but that it is as much about the politics of privatization, of economic issues. It is about the oligarchy, the selling of lands – not just because these are our national lands, our heritage, you understand? But because there are human rights violations afoot when certain elite can just sell land that was common to all Armenian citizens.” Anna – from PINK, who herself was more directly involved in LGBT rights activism – argued that these other activists – who she referred to as the “nationalist side” – did not think that it was right for environmental activists to show solidarity with LGBT
people when DIY was firebombed. “I got into many fights with them and then I grew tired. I don’t want to be in solidarity with homophobes.”

In my own interviews with some of the members of this “nationalist side,” references to “protecting the purity of our national lands” dominated their mission statements. Elizabeth, for example, told me that “I see this as my patriotic mission. It is not enough to have an azad, ankakh Hayasdan [free, independent Armenia], if the actual land that my people live on is not protected. If you really are patriotic, then you will understand how important it is that we protect the air that we Armenians breathe, and the water that we drink.” When I asked her what she thought made this a political movement, she explained: “I don’t know about politics. I mean, it is a political movement. We have organized protests; we have sent petitions and have tried to get the government to recognize our mission. Maybe this makes it political. But, really, for me, this is more basic. It’s patriotic.” I tried to push on by asking “What about human rights? Do you see that as part of your mission?” “Of course, it is a human right to have a clean environment.” This was not enough for lucine, however, my research assistant. She had come with me on many of these interviews with environmental activists, and was more interested in getting at the question of why these activists had abandoned the political issue regarding DIY. She interrupted by asking, “And what about homosexuals [miaserakanner]? Do you see it as important to advocate for their human rights?” “Lucine jan [dear – Elizabeth and lucine had been long time friends as many activists in the country are, but with some very obvious political differences], I have nothing against homosexuality. You know me. I respect everybody. But that has nothing to do with my
environmental activism. If you organize a protest against the violations of homosexuals’ rights, I would be there, of course. But this is a separate issue.”

Mary, an older activist [she was in her 60s] occupied a more complicated position. Mary has been an environmental activist who had been working on issues like pollution in Yerevan in the 1980s, the 1988 anti-nuclear plant movement in Armenia and eventually the independence movement, as well as the anti-mining movement in Teghut in 2012. Mary considered these matters to be highly political and very important for the future of the Republic and the possibilities of life there. During my interview with her, as was part of my usual list of questions with most of these activists, I asked not only about the movement at large, but also about its internal politics. Like with most of these interviewees, I broached the question of gender within the movement. I had received some interesting responses by many of the participants of this movement – especially women. Taguhi and Anahid, for example, had each explained that although it was largely the women who had taken the most active roles - such as in dismantling the boutiques in Mashtots Park in 2012 that I will be discussing in the final chapter of this dissertation - because of a hope that police would be less violent toward them (which proved to be untrue), it was usually the men who had the most public face within the movement and were most involved in speaking to the press.

Mary’s response was different, which lucine, who had been present for the interview, would attribute to her being of an older generation (who had “Sovyetic mnacac gaghaparner,” ideas remaining from Soviet times). Mary told me that “gender” or being a man or a woman did not matter. Those who were creating these issues, by constantly
talking about them, were trying to distract the public’s attention and were acting as tools of the state, starting in-fighting so that serious activists would not be able to do this work. For Mary, gender issues were unimportant to politics. She argued that women had full rights; there was no difference legally between men and women in Armenia. There was nothing there to fight for. The Soviet regime had taken care of all of that long ago. “Now these issues are being employed as a way to destroy existing political movements based on actual and necessary concerns.”

While Mary’s perspective was, in some ways, inflected with a generational difference, other activists that I had interviewed up to this point had taken similar lines of thought. Some had referred to gender and sexuality issues, framed through “human rights,” as a process of “atomization,” where each activist becomes concerned with issues that directly reflect him or her and breaks up the possibility of collective action. The general idea, to be brief, was that not everyone shares “gender” concerns and not everyone shares concerns of LGBT. Thus, these are private rather than political issues. When Lucine, at various moments, interrupted Mary to ask, for example, “Well, what about all of these cases where women are beaten by their husbands, when courts do not rule in their favor – even when the husband eventually kills her…?” Mary responded to these interruptions shortly and to the point: “Yes, it happens, but it’s not a political problem. It’s a problem of individuals.” Mary believed that homosexuality was fine: “One can be homosexual all they want.” But it is not a proper object of politics-making. This individual subject, who is born at the moment of the private/public split, acts for themselves and the private life that they lead is one separate, individual, sphere, having
nothing to do with the public, the real stuff of politics.

The subject of this larger (political) Armenia is constituted as one who should not necessarily have any gender issues with or as part of the collective “majority,” is heterosexual or if homosexual does not use this generalized space of politics to discuss sexuality. Important, also, to this sense of private/public divide is the individual not defined by family but by self. Thus for these activists who do not see gender or sexuality as being political issues, because they understand the subject as self-constituted and not through “family” or a “proper” way of being Armenian, they envision a political space as completely free of any notion of the “proper” coming from what should be a familial or private space. The political sphere - where political action can be taken - is bounded by the individual free of any kind of “personal” characteristic. This individual may have personal desires, express themselves however they please, and may even have notions of what is “proper” or not, but none of these matter in the public sphere.

For right-wing nationalists, however, the political sphere should maintain a “proper” Armenianness - an emphasis on family, on Armenia as a family, and on national moral rights and responsibilities. There is no desire for a separation between private and public and in fact, Galajyan and Mkrtichyan’s notions of what Armenia should be has what one can read as a heavy emphasis on a merging of private and public. The term for public, hanrayin, is not used to denote the “public sphere” in the ways that Habermas (1992) defined it. Rather, hanrayin consists of Soviet overtones having to do with common – state-owned – property, belonging to everyone, and can even be understood as the masses themselves (the citizenry). But it usually means all of these things through a
feeling of kinship. Thus, “the public” is not understood as the binary or dual opposite of “private” but the merging of these two together on a larger scale. In other words, what is hanrayin (public) and what is andznakan (personal) describes a larger to a smaller context rather than a separate sphere. Andznakan yndaniq (personal family, one’s own family), would, thus, be on a smaller scale to the hanrayin, or nation-family.

The separate subject is also in a particular, Oedipal, relation to nation and state. In a context where there has been great anxiety spent on condemning the government for its perversions and for destroying the future viability of the nation, as I discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, the separate subject becomes an object that raises this concern once again. If there has been anxiety regarding the separation of nation from state (a proper leader, or Father), because of the perversions of those in government, this separation anxiety becomes reiterated on a smaller scale with the homosexual as a subject separate from the nation. As a fetish object, displacing the fear of the (illegitimate) Father’s No, the separate subject becomes the second moment of trauma, articulating a separation anxiety of the Armenian forced apart from Armenianness. The nation stands within the position of the Mother, threatened by the function of the Father, and continuing to be threatened by this separation of its supposed-to-be familial subjects. As Gohar Homayounpoured (2012) puts it in the epigraph I have used for this chapter, “competent” mothering is constituted by a violent loving. Nationalist claims to a wholeness of Armenia – what Aslikyan, Hakobyan and others would refer to as “fascism,” - take up Mother Armenia as a position within symbolic order, demanding an intimacy – a oneness – of those whose perversions have led them away from nation.
In Armenia, a heightened attachment to Mother (Armenianness) has been the product of a lack of or weakness in Symbolic authority. When the political and economic elite who occupy the seat of national leadership, but perverse the moral proprieties of what that leadership entails, they endanger Armenianness itself, placing it on a perverse path to no future. Anxieties regarding these improprieties are commonly expressed through rhetoric of perversion, or as refusal of separation that has already taken place. “[T]he clinical fear of breakdown is the fear of a breakdown which has already been experienced (primitive agony)… and there are moments when a patient needs to be told that the breakdown, fear of which is wrecking his life, has already occurred,” writes Donald Winnicott (cited from Barthes 2002: 29-30). Perversion has, according to Bruce Fink (2003), a particular relation to separation: the ”pervert has undergone alienation – that is, primal repression, a splitting into conscious and unconscious, an acceptance or admission of the Name of the Father that sets the stage for a true coming to be of the subject in language…. – but has not undergone separation” (48). In other words, within this context, those who make use of the rhetoric of perversion - whether that be the sexually perverse (aylaservac) or the morally corrupt (aylandak) - continue to relive this separation trauma as separation anxiety. They refuse to undergo this separation (yet again) through a fantasy of Armenianness as wholeness and reunification with Mother. Mother, then, a violently loving feeling of wholeness that captures all of those who may or may not want to be included within this violent love, has an unbearable hold on those who (are forced to) belong to the nation. This is what Aslikyan and Hakobyan refer to as fascism. Taking up the position of nation, of Mother, that has refused separation and
disavowed the knowledge that this separation has already taken place, nationalists rehearse this anxiety by reiterating disavowal. In other words, the homosexual as fetish comes to embody the panic and anxiety regarding the separation of Mother Armenia from (il)legitimate Fatherhood, a proper moral leadership. Perversion onto increasingly immoral paths toward non-existent futures, Armenia’s state of endangerment bubbles up through anxieties regarding a second separation – Armenians atomized into individual subjects, no longer comprising national unity. Standing in as the outside, this separate subject (the homosexual) heralds the undoing of this fantasy of wholeness (that has already been undone). The wide-spread rhetoric of perversion is a symptom of the anxieties surrounding freedom and the separation that it constitutes. The separate subject breaks open once again the trauma already experienced by a freedom holding an uncanny resemblance to complete disorder.

**Conclusion**

Armenianness, in this sense, becomes a violently loving mother, even to those who try with all their might to separate from it. They are called back in through claims of being nation-traitors, as Tsomak was in 2012. Although desiring to not be Armenian by this unbearable feeling of Armenianness and nation-family, as I will discuss in the following chapter, they are assumed to be supposed-to-be-not-separate subjects. They are *demanded* to come back into whole Armenianness, since their mere existence poses a threat to this symbolic order, now derided for failing to meet the standards that they never meant to meet in the first place. Homayounpour (2012) directly connects her sense of
motherhood to the feeling of motherland (in her case Iran), which pulls and pulls, demanding to love you even when you want to be separate. But for those who long for Armenianness, there is a forced separation that occurs by the will of illegitimate Fathers. In other words, the homosexual recalls an already-existing separation anxiety, stemming from the perversion of its leaders. Anti-homosexual campaigns through right-wing nationalist discourse and media onslaught can thus be understood as a demand for proper Fatherhood, and the return to morality, restoring unity with Mother Armenia.
I don’t want to worry about what the neighbors will say. I want inner peace, real comfort. And for that I have to leave. Do you know what that is, really? What I live through? I have to and more importantly, I am willing to, give up my jobs, everyone that I have ever loved, my friends, my girlfriend, my entire social life, my right to work, my citizenship - everything - for that inner peace.

-Alice

One November morning at the PINK office, the smokers sat in the kitchen sipping on coffee, blowing smoke, making jokes and teasing, as was our ritual. I had become accustomed to this kind of morning banter, which would sometimes lead to more sober conversation, such as on this particular morning. Anna and I found ourselves in the middle of a serious discussion about feminism and sexual objectification in Armenia, not noticing that the others had slowly trickled out of the kitchen and back to work. Anna was explaining something to me:

In the U.S., when women go out, they’re afraid of being raped, because men see women as sexual objects. Here, women are seen as sisters, daughters, wives. And if they are not your sister, daughter or wife, they are someone’s, and because Yerevan is such a small city, you feel like you may even know whose sister, daughter or wife a woman is, or could be. Then women are not people who you can just rape. If you rape her, someone – her father, her brother, her uncle, someone – will come after you. And, when you start thinking about women as sisters and daughters, then you can’t even think of her as someone who can want to have sex with, because that’s someone’s daughter. She should be home, she should be protected. What would her brother or her father say? You, as a man, you become every woman’s brother and father. So as a woman, it is more likely for a man to approach you and tell you that you are a slut for being out drinking and dancing, than approach you and suggest having sex or try to rape you.

The conversation had begun when Anna insisted that she was not so bothered by the
prospect of being seen as a sexual object. Or, rather, why she desired to be seen as a
sexual subject but preferred sexual objectification to the current lack of sexual desire
attached to her when she met men (like most of the women who worked at PINK at the
time, she identified as heterosexual). Anna, a 23-year-old staff member at PINK,
understood sexual objectification as a bad thing. But for her it marked a path to women’s
liberation from the constraints of family in Armenia, or what I will call the kintimacy of
the nation. But what is particularly telling of this explanation is the way in which for
Anna the familial intimacy of the streets and other public spaces like bars and clubs were
both an obstacle and yet still a protecting institution. Women are always seen as familial
subjects – always a daughter, a sister, a wife or a mother. This prevents them from being
able to express their sexuality, but it also protects them from rape.\(^1\) In this chapter, I
argue show how the Armenian nation is practiced as an extended kinship network, which
both constrains and makes possible certain forms of desire and life. I am especially
concerned with the ways this sense of kinship and nation is felt by younger non-
heteronormative persons as “unbearable,” a term I borrow from Lauren Berlant and Lee
Edelman (2013), often producing intense desires to leave the country.

Walking down the streets of Yerevan, one is likely to be confronted, greeted,
glared at, discussed, welcomed, or approached in various other ways: generally, one will
be encountered. But only if one belongs. Those deemed tourists or otherwise non-
Armenian do not get the privilege of these encounters. Frustrated and sometimes

\(^1\) But, of course, rape does occur in Armenia and none of these activists would deny that. Although research on this is sparse, according to my interviews with 15 women’s rights and advocacy NGO representatives in the country, most incidents of rape, whether reported or not, occur in the home by a husband or other family member.
humorous anecdotes about *kintimacy* begin conversations when people gather. One afternoon coming back from lunch, Anna dropped her bag angrily in the PINK office as she screamed, “A woman just called me a whore for wearing red pants!” Hripsime complained consistently about having to wait at the bus stop in Charents Avan, a small town outside Yerevan from where she commuted to work at PINK every morning. She would express annoyance with the woman who had commented on her hair, the man who had glared at her for the length of her skirt or the shoes she had chosen to wear or any number of advice or comments she was given by people she knew or people she had never met before. She also refrained from ever smoking in the streets, or in restaurants and cafes that were not generally regarded “permissive spaces” out of concern for what others might say to her, the disapproving stares they might throw her way, or that they may even complain about her habit to her mother. Her mother knew she smoked occasionally but would be embarrassed by this commentary. A proper lady does not smoke. Most young people I met in Yerevan had some story to tell me about such encounters.

I had had my own experiences with this kind of intimacy of Armenia. One memorable incident had occurred in the summer of 2011. The temperature of the city was at a high of 120 degrees Fahrenheit of dry heat and I was on my way to an interview in the neighborhood of Masiv. By that point, my second summer doing fieldwork, I had adopted a practice of wearing long sleeves, long pants and scarves no matter how hot it was to cover up my tattoos - on my arms, legs, chest and neck – to avoid particular unbearable encounters: men who stared, pointed and laughed; older women who shook
their heads with a *tsk-ts-tsk*, sometimes asking me if my parents knew what I had done to myself; advice on tattoo removal and the various other disapproving looks and comments. By 2011 I had decided that although the heat was uncomfortable, it was bearable while these kinds of encounters were not. In the summer of 2011, wearing a black cardigan and a scarf, I stepped on to a *marshrutka*. I took a seat, a rare option. As the van made its way up Abovyan street and entered the traffic circle up the road to Masiv, a woman in her 50s sitting behind me started tugging on my cardigan, and pleading: “My dear girl, you will have a heat stroke! Take this off!” As she began pulling the sweater off my back and shoulders I found myself in a strange situation, explaining to someone who I had never met before that I was fine wearing what I was wearing. She gave me a disappointed and confused look as she shrugged and said “Fine, do what you want but you are not doing good [lav ches anum].” After all, it was likely her contention that she was doing what was best for me.

For activists, such as those involved with PINK or WRC, these kinds of encounters are both bemoaned and seen as an opportunity to act on the world. Armen, a staff member at PINK, explained to me that while it may be uncomfortable sometimes – to know that everyone is staring at you and that they care about what you are doing, wearing, where you are going and who you are with - it also gives you a chance in every moment to say something, to do something that can change the way that person thinks. “People are very invested in you and your every move,” he told me, “so you can take advantage of that investment by helping them understand you.” For others, this kind of investment of Armenians in each other’s lives and willingness to approach is understood
as the beauty of Armenia – its warmth as a social space where people care about each other’s existence. Armenians care for one another. But for many, these encounters are unbearable.

In this chapter, I start with discussing what I mean by the “kintimate encounter.” I define this term within a constellation of kinship, intimacy and encounter by way of queer and kinship studies and use these terms and the literatures to which they are attached to understand the way many Armenians understand their nation. I will then draw on the experiences shared with me by friends and interlocutors in Yerevan, Armenia to understand the ways in which this feeling of kintimacy in Yerevan makes impossible a certain notion of “freedom.” Following this, I discuss the ways in which kinship-based networks are critical to survival in Armenia writ large and the ways in which even for those who wish to escape this kind of kinship-based intimacy, these forms of sociality become the means to do so. And, finally, I examine this sense of constraint on autonomy felt by young women, especially those with a feminist sensibility, who desire a room of their own in a context of patriarchal and patrilocal kinship practices. As such, I show how nation as family is not only metaphor in Armenia, but a practice deemed unbearable for those whose desires are located within independence and autonomy.

The Kintimate Encounter

Kintimacy can be understood as intimacy that is based on and holds an expectation of kinship, or a feeling that one’s life is intimately connected, caught up in, or tied to those of (an)other(s). Marshall Sahlins (2013) has defined kinship as “mutuality of
being.” “[K]in-folk are persons who participate intrinsically in each other’s existence, they are members of one another” (ix). Berlant (2000) tells us, “intimacy… involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way” (1). But the trouble with kintimacy, of course, is that one’s desires and actions do not follow the narrative it of what is expected.

In this context, care is ambivalent. It refers both to intimate relations that provide security and ensure survival, but also the weight of becoming the object of another’s concern. In both cases, caring is an intimate act. It involves a proximity and an affinity to a person or thing. To care for in the one sense – to provide for or look after – also implies the act of taking interest. Thus, for those in Yerevan who want to be free to do as they please – wear what they want, sleep with whom they want, smoke, be out late, move out of the family home – this act of loving care becomes an unbearable act of intrusion into the space one wishes were personal. This “dark side of kinship” (Geschiere 2003), care and intimacy, however, have their good sides as well – intrinsic to livelihood. Intimacy, kinship and care are thus both comforting and agonistic.

What I mean by encounters are moments of relation that occur through approaching another and the expectations that are held within this moment. Berlant (2011) describes the intimate encounter as that which interrupts (32). To encounter is an eventful act that transforms the subjects involved. To encounter means to expect intimacy (33), to expect to be changed by one who comes up to you, or to change and be changed by this act of approach (34). In the case of Armen’s theory of the uncomfortable position of one who also has the opportunity to transform, the encounter is the site that is
distressing yet open. By becoming the object of a shocking interest, approachable – reproachable – one also has the privilege of interruption. But the encounter – in the form of commentary, ridicule, reprimand or even advice - in moments when one just wants to walk to work or wait at the bus stop– is not always welcome. In using the term “unbearable,” Berlant and Edelman (2014) are interested in recognizing the ways in which encounter and relation undo the self/other division, troubling the sovereignty of self. In the context I will be discussing here, however, those for whom kintimacy is unbearable do not see the potential of shifting, making and unmaking worlds through relation and intimacy, or in the way Berlant puts it, “potentially recontextualizing creativity” (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 88). Rather, it is a world without intimacy that they desire: a world of autonomy, a world of one’s own desires uninformed by the realities or demands of others’. However, as I explain below, unbearable kintimate encounters in Armenia are not without ambivalence.

While many anthropologists working in the post-Soviet and post-socialist region have shown that kinship was a critical institution through which many forms of necessary exchange in the Soviet Union occurred – such as access to jobs, positions within the Community Party, of goods and resources, often called blat (Ledeneva 1998) - in Armenia the importance of kinship to sociality was not only a material reality, but a cosmology of existence (Abrahamyan 2005). These informal systems of exchange were necessary for allocation and distribution in the Soviet Union and in many ways the centralized government was actually dependent on them. The post-Soviet era in Armenia, with large-scale deindustrialization (Platz 2005) due to the liquidation of the means of
production (Astourian 2000), has strengthened these familial networks of exchange since these now remain the only forms of access available to many in the absence of a strong paternalist state that can provide. Huseyn Aliyev (2013) argues that in the Caucasus the Soviet importance placed on familial bonds and exchange remain intact even in the disappearance of a centralized government enforcing these networks. Market-based economies have not eradicated kin-networks as the bases of exchange and access to goods and resources. Ara Wilson (2004) has argued that kinship and social ties are inseparable from forms of production and exchange, even in market-economies, and in order to grasp the realities of the effects of global economies on local contexts, an examination of intimacy is crucial. This intimacy in Armenia, however, is felt by younger people to stand in the way of their individual desires, especially by those who want to break away from what is considered “proper” in Armenia – the formation of a heterosexual family unit which reproduces Armenian traditions and is tied to the larger networks that make up the nation.

My queer colleagues, friends and interlocutors in Armenia, thus, can be understood through what Lisa Rofel (2007) calls “desiring subjects,” or what Tomas Matza (2009) has called the “self/personal subject.” As both Rofel and Matza point out, post-socialist contexts provide new forms of desires, including new forms of a desiring self – the emergence of a new subject who desires autonomy, which includes the ability and freedom to desire itself. These young Armenians can also be understood as aspirational cosmopolitans (Cheah and Robbins 1998) who desire a flexible citizenship (Ong 1999) to transcend the kintimate nation and become transnational subjects,
imagining a life (in the West) where they can become anonymous and autonomous and no longer in-relation but on their own. It is no coincidence that these aspirational cosmopolitans are emerging at a time when a global identity and forms of globalized political-economy are becoming more and more the tissue that binds, breaking apart identity as fixed by national belonging. Most of the young non-heteronormative Armenians who I met in the field wanted to eventually live in Europe, imagined as a place free of national and familial belongings and the site of individual freedoms. These desires – for cosmopolitanism, anonymity, and transnational subjectivity – can be understood as pull factors. My focus here, however, is on the push factors, or why they want to leave Armenia.

To be clear, my own feelings about Armenia as a kintimate nation are ambivalent. Because of my own Armenianness, which could be discerned phenotypically as well as the way in which I spoke the language, I was placed within this national imaginary as well and thus had access to some of the ways in which Armenian kintimacy hails subjects. As Elizabeth Povinelli (2006) points out, the “autological subject” free of constraints and “genealogical societies” based on familial constraints can in no way be understood as clear-cut boundaries of existence. While seemingly incommensurable, Povinelli points out that these two forms of being in the world merge at various points in the West and in the non-West. While I felt uncomfortable with the forms of kintimate encounters I had to bear while in Armenia, I was also well aware of the ways in which this sense of belonging provided forms of care and sustenance that were harder to find in the U.S., where I grew up and spent most of my life. For one, kinship networks provide a
buffer to help one out within what is an emergent aggressive market economy, lessening the vulnerability one feels in such a system. Armenians are subjects in relation, akin to what Marilyn Strathern (1990) describes as “dividuals.” As Anna explained, one is always a sister, a brother, an uncle, a grandmother, a father or some other form of being-in-relation. The desire of queer or otherwise non-normative young Armenians to leave Armenia is embedded in a desire to not be in relation. Thus, what I will be describing below as freedom refers to a freedom from kin and intimacy – from kintimacy – and the desire to become an autonomous subject, or an “individual” (anhad), a term often used by my interlocutors to describe their aspirations.

Armenia became an independent nation-state in 1991 after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As a nation it is primarily understood by those who live there as well as the millions of Armenians who live outside the borders of the Republic as the “first Christian nation,” having established the Armenian Apostolic Church in the 4th century A.D. Importantly for national identity is a reiteration of a narrative of atrocities and survival (Panossian 2002). A “small nation” (poqr azg), Christian amongst Muslims, and historically under the rule of various non-Armenian sovereigns (the Persian Empire, the Ottoman Empire and most recently the Soviet Union), it was because of belonging through Church, the particularity of the Armenian language and distinct alphabet, as well as the importance of the institution of family that Armenians have survived through the centuries. At least in the way it is most often narrated. This narrative is currently most operative within the framework of the Genocide of 1915 in the Ottoman Empire, in which an estimated 1.5 million Armenians were massacred and many more forcefully
displaced. As Ronald Suny (1993) argues, great importance is placed on “culture” within recent discourse on national identity: the belief that this is what has ensured Armenia’s survival even in the face of genocide. As such, genocide does not pose as much threat to Armenians as “ethnocide,” (11) or the end of Armenian culture, tradition, or values.

I want to return now to the oft-repeated statement: “Family is the base of Armenia. Without family there is no Armenia.” There are two important points made here. First, family is of utmost importance when it comes to the survival of the nation since it is through the family, which guards traditions (like Church and language) that constitute continuity in the face of threat. And second, Armenia is often imagined as a family. In his work on Armenian national identity through changing times, Levon Abrahamyan (2005) explains the way in which the notion of nation in the mid-nineteenth century was translated into Armenian through the term azg. The term azg, he maintains, encapsulates both the concept of a people but also the sense of extended kinship system or tribe. Thus Armenia must be thought of as a “nation-family” (46). In this way, nation, as Armenians understand it, is one large extended family that bounds the people of Armenia. Thus, kinship here is not limited to a unit of domestic life, but defines the modes through which various institutions, including the nation itself, operate and are imagined. Through my use of the terms *kin* and *kinship*, I take into consideration those with direct kin-ties, within the context of the immediate home (or yndaniq, those who share a roof) as well as those who see themselves as belonging through nation – Armenia, which is another conception of home, or the sphere of the domestic. Thus kintimacy can be understood as operating on multiple scales – at the most intimate (seemingly private)
level such as the family home, as well as at the largest scale (seemingly public), like the nation. While many anthropologists have pointed out the ways in which the nation is often expressed through metaphors of kinship (Carsten 2004; Yuval-Davis 1997; Delaney 1991), I am interested in the ways Armenia as kinship is practiced, as if rather than metaphor Armenia *is* a family.

**Leaving Armenia to be Free of Kintimacy**

Sarkis was a 29-year-old gay identified man. I first met him in September 2012 in the PINK office, where he and many other LGBT people would frequent for events like movie screenings, discussions or just to stop by, catch up with staff members who were friends and have a cup of coffee. Sarkis had many complaints about Armenia and the limited possibilities for happiness and freedom there. Indeed, this was the topic of our first conversation, which we revisited over drinks, coffee, and PINK kitchen talks over the next few months. In our first encounter, his biggest complaint was about the phone calls he suspected were coming from the KGB\(^2\) to his mother’s home in Berd, a small town in the Tavush region, which shares a border with Azerbaijan. In the summer of 2012 he had been involved in a South Caucasus alliance project, which was working toward a human rights defenders’ alliance between organizations in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Sarkis had travelled to Tbilisi, Georgia to attend a workshop organized

---

2 The Soviet Centralized Committee for State Security (KGB), has, according to official discourse in Armenia, been disbanded and replaced by the National Security Service (*Azgayin Anvdangutyun Carayutyun*) of the Republic of Armenia. However, the KGB often comes up in grassroots activist conversations and implies that Armenia still has secret service and that the Armenian secret service work in concert with Russian agencies.
by the alliance. Georgia was often the meeting ground for these kinds of workshops, seminars, conferences, etc. within the Caucasus because of its relative neutrality in the region, a country to which both Armenians and Azerbaijanis could travel. Upon his return to Armenia, however, he began to notice that he was a subject of interest for the Armenian government. He was being called at his mother’s home, where he was no longer living. He had moved to Yerevan in his early 20s to attend University and stayed there. In Berd, his mother would answer the phone, he told me, and would be asked questions about Sarkis. Where had he travelled to recently? What were the purposes of these travels? What can she tell him about his activities in Armenia? To what organizations did he belong? And so on. The first time she received one of these phone calls, she called Sarkis right away to tell him what had happened and to ask him if he knew anything about it. He told her never to answer their questions and to tell them that she does not know and that he no longer lives there.

Sarkis’ main concern was neither detainment nor even further harassment by the government. His unease was around the possibility of blackmail. He was gay and almost certain that the KGB was aware of this. Sarkis had participated in various PINK activities, was closely associated with many of its staff members and frequented certain bars and clubs, which no one doubted the government closely watched. And now that they did not want him to participate in projects with Azerbaijani activists, they could use that information against him. He was afraid that one of these days, they would call his mother and instead of asking her questions, they would “tell her all about [him].” The government was not Sarkis’ only concern. When he moved to Yerevan to attend Yerevan
State University at the age of 20, he had lived with relatives in the city, which is a common practice for non-Yerevan University students. After graduating and deciding to stay in Yerevan, he rented an apartment and had since been living by himself, but relatives were never too distant - not the ones in Yerevan and not the ones in Berd. In the building in which he was living in September 2012, his neighbors were relatives of relatives in Yerevan, who kept a close watch on him, for his own good, paying attention to when he left, when he came, who he was with and even what he was eating. They would often inform his Yerevan relatives, for example, that he was losing weight, who would contact his mother in Berd to tell her, which worried her. The fact that Sarkis did not have a girlfriend was the main cause of concern for these relatives, “who were only interested in helping him reach happiness in life,” he said to me.

I go home and I am asked who I was with. Have I met a girl? The relatives in my building will then call my aunt and ask them if I have a girlfriend, a fiancé. Of course, they do not know of any because, in fact, I do not. So they call me concerned. Every family gathering becomes an opportunity for them to explain to me the importance that I marry soon. I have a decent job. I can afford my own place, I am well-educated. So why am I not married? I’m 29 years old now and I’m lucky that I’m a man. I understand that. They put this pressure on women at a much earlier age. But 30 years old for a man is really a limit. I don’t know how much longer I can put it off. I need to leave soon. Very soon. Because soon they’re going to start understanding why I’m not getting married and why I don’t have a fiancé.

I asked him why he is so concerned with his family, his mother, his sister and all the other relatives finding out about him being gay. Sarkis had his own place to live and he could afford to be independent, which was not the case for most people I knew. Therefore, if his family did find out about his sexuality, he would not be left out on the street. And in any case, he likely would not be left out in the street even if he did live
with his family and they found out about his sexual orientation. While many young gay
and lesbian people in Armenia were careful not to have their parents or other family
members find out, those whose families had found out had rarely ever kicked them out.
As Armen from PINK once explained, “They (the family) usually feel responsible and to
blame, even if it is about their child being gay” and added that “even if they are
homophobes, they want their child to be happy so they try to make their child’s life better
by curing him or convincing him he’s not gay.” But Sarkis’ relationship to his direct kin
affected him more than he himself wished it would. “They won’t be able to handle it,” he
said. The shame and embarrassment, the heartache, and the confusion that Sarkis’
homosexuality would cause his family was enough for him to constantly be aware of his
public, as well as his private, behavior. And this was an unbearable burden.

In October of 2012, Sarkis was certain that the only choice that he had left was to
leave the country. And for this he had made plans to join EVS (European Volunteer
Service). He would take up a position in Poland, where he would be able to make
contacts and spend the time he had there to figure out a job possibility as well as get his
paperwork in order. He decided that even if he could not get legal residency and
employment in Poland, he would stay and do the best that he could anyway. When I
asked him what his family would think about him living in Poland and not getting
married there either - that even if he left Armenia, they might still eventually come to the
conclusion that he was gay - he told me that at that point it would not matter:

Because if I’m gay in Warsaw, then that’s my business. There, I am free to
do with my life whatever I please. In Armenia, I would embarrass my
family and their friends and the neighbors and anyone else who would find
out. I don’t want to hurt my family. If I am somewhere else, it’s no one’s
business what I do. And even if they think it, even if they know it, they will not see it and they cannot talk about it all the time. I will no longer be their problem.

In Armenia, no matter how far away he lived from “home,” his life was connected to his family’s. I visited Armen in his home-town of Berd in November 2012 when I was there conducting a human rights workshop with PINK staff and he was visiting his mother and sister. As we walked from one end of the town to the next and Armen greeted almost everyone we passed in the road by name, he laughed as he said “Now you see how I had to escape here?” But moving to Yerevan had not solved Armen’s problem of constraining kinship expectations and a lack of anonymity, which he saw as critical to be able to live the life he desired. Sarkis, like many other young Armenians whether gay-identified or not, described Armenia as a constantly widening network of kin where your “home” is connected to neighbors who are relatives or friends of other relatives or friends, acquaintances and other neighbors. In this way, every step he took in Yerevan had the potential to be reported to his family in some way who could be socially harmed by his behavior and others’ feelings about it. Having a place of his own in Yerevan had not given Sarkis the ability to be able to have a private (from family) life.

“Why should my life be so difficult when it can be easier?” Sarkis asked me once as he complained about not being able to have a decent adult relationship in Yerevan. One had to be able to have a private life as well as have access to a public comfortably, neither of which he felt he had.

Yes, I understand that I can, we all can. We have the right to at least. But because of the stares and people talking all of the time…. – everyone! I was coming home with a boyfriend once and we were a few blocks away
when we passed by these men. They started laughing at us, calling us *gomik* [“homo,” from the Russian term for homosexual, *gomoseksual*], you know. I’m sure you’ve heard these things before. But I felt so angry when we got home. My boyfriend and I got into a really big fight that night. He was telling me to not care about what they say. But how can I not care? Why can’t I have my own life? Why does it have to be important to everyone what I do, who I do it with. Maybe I care too much too. Afterall, I’m Armenian too… [laughs].

There were no private spaces in Armenia, many young people claimed, referring to the lack of space away from their families in which they could have personal, or sexual, encounters. Or live life without their expectations. But there were also no public spaces — since this kind of intimacy transcended the home and seeped into the streets. As such, privates and publics are enfolded into one another. Private spaces, like home, become public when one’s actions and behaviors are policed by other members of the household. Public spaces – like streets, cafes, bars, etc. - become private space when they become the sites of kintimate encounters. This private/public enfolding is understood by Susan Gal and Gail Kligman (2000) through the notion of the fractal, in which all private space includes within it publics and all public space, in turn, privates. And so on.

The popular desire of gay and lesbian Armenians to leave Armenia seemed to be an anomaly for Armenian politicians. Many of them insisted that there is no threat or discrimination toward homosexuals in the country. Homosexuality was decriminalized in 2003 and Armenia even has a few registered NGOs who work for gay rights – PINK in Yerevan and a couple of others in other cities. Armenian LGBT activists, however, insist that Armenia’s government, as well as its population, is homophobic and intolerant toward LGBT people. This insistence was heightened by two major events in 2012: the firebombing of DIY Pub by two young nationalist men who had deemed the pub a “gay
bar”, after which various politicians made public statements championing the act; and the attack on the Diversity March, deemed by nationalists a “gay parade,” which sparked debate in national media about whether homosexuals should be allowed to have any kind of public event. Most activists, such as those at PINK, understand these acts as symptoms of a larger homophobia and not isolated events. But where can we locate this homophobia? My interviews with activists and conversations with queer friends in the city suggest that many of these claims of homophobia stem from a sense of an unbearable kinship-based intimacy of the nation.

This is made clear by those who identify as heterosexual and still feel burdened by the pressure to belong to nation-family. Albert and Anush, for example, a heterosexual couple, both living with their parents, also felt the need to leave Armenia to find “freedom.” Like many queer persons, “freedom” for Albert and Anush was structured around complaints regarding intimacy, kinship and the obligations of everyday encounters. Albert, who was 26 years old when I first met him in 2010, lived with his mother and his unmarried sister. Albert had become the “man of the house” at a young age, having lost his father when he was just 11, and responsible for taking care of his mother and sister financially and otherwise since, and especially in his adulthood. This meant that Albert had to make money to support his mother and sister as well as live with them. If Albert were to marry, his wife would be expected to move into his “father’s” home - meaning the home in which his family lived. Anush was 20 years old when they started seeing each other. Her father, often through her mother, demanded she be at home at all times. Anush, however, got a job as a waitress, which according to her father was
an improper job for a young lady who should not spend her days associating with men in public. This job is where she met Albert, who was the bartender at the restaurant. Anush and Albert’s relationship was organized around plans for leaving Armenia. It was their main topic of conversation, the container of their hopes and dreams, their future together. They insisted that they could not possibly have a life together in Armenia. As Anush reasoned,

Do you think that we can just live together and have a life of our own here? We would have to get married and every decision we ever made would be about what our parents, in-laws (khnaminer), and all the other relatives wanted. They would get mixed up in all of our affairs. All of our decisions would have to take them into consideration. We would be pressured to have children right away. We wouldn’t be able to do anything just because we wanted to.

When Anush was not home right after work, her parents called and worried, insisted that she return immediately. Anush's parents, especially her father, had threatened on more than one occasion to not allow her to work anymore if she continued to come home late. Sometimes she would lie to be able to have some time with Albert. If she was working until 10 pm, she would tell them that she was working until midnight, to have a couple of hours to roam about central Yerevan with him. For Anush and Albert, staying in Armenia meant losing their autonomy in their romantic relationship. If they were to be together, their parents would necessarily be involved. Anush’s parents would insist on an engagement if they were to spend any time together. If they were to marry, they would have to move in with Albert and his mother and sister. Their plan was to leave Armenia. They were particularly attracted to Europe as a destination, like most of the young people I met in Yerevan. There, they could live together and go at their own pace. If they wanted
to be married eventually, they would do so. And whenever children became desirable, they could have them. But they did not want to structure their romance based on these necessitated events. Leaving was the only way they could freely decide how to be around each other, how to progress into different steps of their relationship and when to do so. Or at least this was their (very strong) feeling about it. Freedom was at stake. It is this freedom that is trampled upon by the family, by responsibilities to the family and the expectations of the family. Whether homosexual, heterosexual, married or unmarried—kintimacy and its demands are seen to stand in the way of individual rights and desires, longed for by many young people in Yerevan.

“In Armenia no one does anything for him/herself. Everyone lives for others,” Albert told me one night over a beer. I had heard this kind of sentiment many times. It is not the immediate, or even extended, family that are the only obstacles to this kind of freedom from kin obligation. It is the feeling of kinship in general: the sense that all have rights over all others to approach and to put into intimate encounter. For Sarkis, immediate family was not a direct cause of the desire to leave. Rather, it was the feeling of kinship in Armenia. Through Raymond Williams’ concept of “structures of feeling,” defined as concerns with “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt” (Williams 1977), David Eng (2010) distinguishes the “more ephemeral, intangible, and evanescent” feelings attached to certain intimate lived experiences from “formal concepts, structural analyses, and systematic beliefs” (15). Kintimacy in Yerevan is not so much often directly stated, is not encoded into official discourses, but is felt by many, and in often troubling ways. This feeling of kinship feels inescapable for those who feel
like their belonging to nation is made impossible by desires other than what is expected of them. And so - like Sarkis, Anush and Albert - many of them want to leave the country.

Kintimacy to Escape Kintimacy

Over the last two decades, emigration has become a serious concern for the small republic of Armenia. This emigration often hinges on help from kin and other intimates. The costs of leaving are usually greater than most people can afford on their own. Most of my household interviewees had relatives in other countries and many had immediate family (sons, daughters, sisters, brothers) from whom they received remittance money. Julie Chu (2010), working on emigration from a village in a rural Chinese region, discusses this transnational movement as a *cosmology of credit*. Those who leave are indebted to those who stay behind. Leaving requires a mixture of help in the form of monetary loans, care for children and other family members left behind, as well as what one informant described as “tears” given for the loss of a beloved village. A physical return of those who leave is unlikely because of a lack of sustainable income over “there” as well as the need to send back what little money is made back to China. Thus, Chu explains, the money sent back comes to be seen as the debt repaid for the affective pain as well as the large amounts of energy and care spent on sending the person “there” (219).

In Armenia, this reliance on kin is popularly referred to as *KhTsB – khnami* (in-law), *tsanot* (acquaintance), and *barekam* (relative) – an acronymn used to both
characterize the institutionalization of the importance of family and to bemoan an obstacle to change in the right direction, especially by young activists such as those at PINK and WRC. Armine Ishkanian (2008) defines KhTsb as “the friendship and family networks or relationships that individuals may rely on for assistance pertaining to a vast variety of concerns from gaining entry into a university, finding a job, etc.” (Footnote 4, 167). For many of those I met in Yerevan some form of relation – a friend, acquaintance, family member or in-law - was responsible for a job that they had, access to a university, etc. While I do not want to claim that there is no personal merit involved in these situations, the reliance on these networks plays an important role. And the lack of these social networks in one’s profession may result in great difficulty in obtaining a position.

Reliance on these familial networks is also important for those who use them to escape Armenia’s sense of kintimacy. In other words, family is what stands in the way of freedom, or so many of my friends and interlocutors told me, but is also the institution that provides for one’s survival and well-being and is also often the road to the very freedom one wants to obtain from it. In June 2013, for example, Anush finally left. Her uncle and his family had emigrated to Denmark during the “cold and dark years” (tsurt u mut dariner) of the war and one of Anush and Albert’s plans was the possibility of going to live with them in Copenhagen. The costs of airfare, paying someone to deal with the visa complications - which, inevitably had to be dealt with in somewhat “gray” ways – the visa itself and living expenses in order to survive in Copenhagen before she was employed – were impossible for Anush alone. Because their initial aim was to travel

3 This term signifies the often in-between legal and illegal forms of accessing goods and services under the Soviet Union (Humphrey 2002).
together, Anush and Albert had been saving money over the year and a half that they were together. However, when Anush was finally able to get the invitation from her uncle, these plans changed. Her older cousin had agreed to let Anush stay with her and her uncle took on the responsibility of helping her get settled once there. But Albert and Anush only had enough for Anush to go. Albert would go later, they decided. He gave her his entire savings. Anush also took some money from her parents and relatives in Armenia. When I asked Anush about how her parents had agreed to let her go (they had always been against her wishes to leave Armenia), she told me that they had only agreed because she was going to be looked after by her uncle and cousins. “They think it will be the same as if I were still at home. But I will be in Europe. People are different there. My cousins were raised in Copenhagen and they are much freer than me. I’m sure that once I am there I can do whatever I like and no one will care. I won’t be in Armenia anymore, even if I am with my uncle,” she explained.

When she arrived in Copenhagen, she stayed with her cousin for about 8 months while her relatives there helped her apply for permanent residency and secured a job for her. She finally received a place of her own to live outside of the city. The last I spoke to her, she seemed content about her decision to move to Denmark, but, like many others who had left Armenia, felt rather lonely or “disconnected,” as she put it.

Many of Armenia’s emigrants send back remittances to their families and extended kin and often hold on to the possibility of return one day (when the conditions of the country are better). For those that desire to leave Armenia to escape intimacies, however - like Anush – return is rarely expressed as a desire and sending money back is
not necessarily a goal. Rather, escaping kintimacy through these very forms of relation is not often considered something to be reciprocated. The desire for autology is framed as an autonomous desire, bracketing the sources of achieving it as something else – a past and a somewhere else to remain in their own spatiotemporal dimensions.

Not everyone who desires to leave leaves, however. Some make attempts and fail, having to come back home. Some carry on the desire to “escape,” but continue what they understand to be an unbearable being in-relation with their nation. Others, however, turn this feeling of unbearability into a line of flight into action toward change. Much of grassroots feminism in Armenia, for example, is implicitly or explicitly structured around and against these expectations of kintimacy, to which I now turn.

**A Room of One’s Own (Away from Kintimacy)**

In February 2013, a feminist initiative was in the making and its primary goal was to organize March 8, International Women’s Day. The group was made up of women activists, some of whom worked at local NGOs and others who considered themselves independent activists. While this group had various demands for changing the ways in which women were thought of, discussed, represented, and treated in Armenia, a certain kind of intimacy and relation to kinship was at the center of all of their demands. Women, they argued, needed to be liberated from family pressures – the pressure to get married, the pressure to have children. Important for this was for women to be seen as sexual subjects – recognized as beings who had sexual desire and pleasure. And, probably the
most important demand and connected to all of these demands: women needed a room of their own.

Interestingly, the meetings for the feminist initiative almost always took place at a café – Retro Café, Van Gogh Café, The Club, or some other privatized public space – located in central Yerevan. In other words, not in the home. In planning meetings about what to do about the lack of personal or private space for themselves and other women in Armenia, the circumstances of their gatherings were themselves influenced by the problem. But having “a room of one’s own,” a concept I borrow from an essay by Virginia Woolf (2012 [1929]) by the same name, does not only refer to a physical space surrounded by walls on all sides, which is already a concern for many in Armenia. It also takes into consideration the “immaterial” (54) difficulties of space and the demands of kin.

On March 8, one of the many events that the initiative had organized and carried out was a group reading at a very central spot: Republic Square. The venue was picked precisely because of its centrality to life in Yerevan – a site of governmental affairs, as the square is where various public buildings like the National Gallery, the Ministry of Transportation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Central Post Office, etc. surround a large traffic round-about as well as a fountain. The fountain is a popular site of leisure, where in the evenings people gather to watch the water and light performance to musical ensembles. The reading on this evening began around 7 pm, when Yerevancis (residents of Yerevan) were gathering around the fountains or roaming about on the streets. About 10 women had prepared “Public Confessions” (“Hanrayin Inqnahosdovanyun”), that
they read out loud to the group and anyone who had gathered around to listen, as well as a “Feminist Manifesto” which was read out loud as a group. The manifesto declared the aim of the initiative – to struggle for a notion of women in Armenia as “valuable individuals” (liarjq anhadner), and defined this category of being as “a person who has her own desires, capabilities, imagination, fantasies and can operate at her own will.” The manifesto also proclaimed the right to be free of pressures, controls, and discouragement from others so that she could be this woman without any constraint. The manifesto was written in the first person, to characterize this as the aim of each woman reading it, and as a desire to see herself reflected in all women in Armenia.

One of the “Public Confessions” that was read that evening was Suzanna’s. Suzanna had somewhat misunderstood the discussion of how these events would take place during the February meeting in which the action was planned. She had thought that all of those participating had agreed that they would post their confession online (as their Facebook status) on March 8, before reading it out loud at Republic Square. She was the only one that did this. And, like many other controversial Facebook statuses, Suzanna’s status was taken up and circulated by Blognews.am, a popular site that shares blog posts and Facebook statuses, disseminating them more broadly. The BlogNews.am post was, like many of their other posts, picked up by other online news sources like 1.am, iLur.am, and lurer.com, rendering it an object of national discussion. Suzanna’s confession was the following:

I am 31 years old, I do not have a family or children, I am not a virgin. A few months ago I separated from my parents [as in, decided to live separately]. Now I live by renting (which my parents to this day cannot accept…to put it gracefully). I work, I take care of my needs on my own. I
struggle against the system (I don’t like it) by creating my reality. And to
do that sometimes I scream, sometimes I defer to serious texts, and
sometimes I am exposed to violence. Many argue that this is not a fitting
way of behavior for a girl. However, I am sure that the life that I live
today, is the result of my conscious choice. Good, bad…this is not
significant. The important thing is to be conscious of the fact that within
this choice I am absolutely honest with myself and the world that
surrounds me. This honesty is not given to me easily. An everyday
struggle with myself, the forced values put in place by society, and
stereotypes. And even though I have stopped being the image of
“tradition,” I get happy and sad like everyone else, I get angry and I get
excited like everyone else, I win and lose like everyone else, I learn and
err like everyone else, I love like everyone else, I speak my mind like
everyone else, sometimes in front of everyone…

This confession was not received very well by the media that reported on it. It was
represented as the downfall of young women in Armenia, in some cases as a joke and in
some as a serious problem (sometimes both). Many of the comments on the sites that
shared it expressed outrage about the impropriety of her life: that she is not a virgin, lives
separate from her parents, and that she takes pride in caring for herself. Some of the
commenters expressed sadness that Suzanna is 31 years old and is still unmarried, a
reality that many Armenians feel anxious about in the face of large-scale emigration over
the years, especially of men who leave Armenia to find work elsewhere.

Suzanna was one of a small handful of young women that I knew in Yerevan who
had decided to move out of her parents’ (father’s) home. As she indicates in her
confession, her parents, with whom she had a very difficult relationship at the time, did
not take this lightly. Her decision to leave home was taken as an insult, an act of refusal
of her belonging to the family. She had rented a two bedroom apartment with Nvard,
another member of the March 8 feminist initiative, who had as much difficulty moving
out of her own father’s home. Having this room of her own, however, was not enough to escape the demands of kinship in her life. Suzanna had been experiencing a great deal of pressure from her parents to move back in with them. After this public confession, she became a popular anti-national figure, represented by some as an enemy of the nation, spreading anti-Armenian propaganda. When I interviewed her in April to discuss this public confession as well as her feminist and environmental activism, she explained that what she had posted was the honest truth and for this she was not bothered by the backlash. However, she was affected. As a college professor at the American University of Armenia, she explained, this could reflect badly on her, no matter how determined she was that what she was doing was perfectly moral.

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf describes the ways in which woman spends much time, often on her own, in rooms imbued with her creative force – with walls and shelves decorated by her. These rooms, however, are not her own because she is expected to live a certain kind of life deemed practical based on a set of masculine values. Importantly, Woolf points out, these rooms are owned by men in her life – a husband or a father – and do not belong to her. Unlike men, Woolf maintains, woman has no space to express her own desires. This is especially true for women who wish to write. Thus, life, the desire for and the act of writing or creating for herself “conflicts with something that is not life” (72). Whether or not a woman is in a room that is, at least temporarily, her own, she lives continuously with the obligation of remaining available for approach, especially by kin. I do not mean to imply that Armenia today is the same as Europe one hundred years ago. This is obviously not the case. But Woolf’s writing on woman’s lack
of a room of her own reflects the ways in which many feminists in Armenia understand the constraints of the feeling of kinship within the nation.

Armenia is a patriarchal society in which men are understood to be the chief of the household. It is also, importantly, a patrilocal society, in which kinship is structured by the practice of living in and belonging to the father’s home. The expectation to continue the patrilocal tradition makes it difficult for a son to make decisions on where he will live, since often he is expected to stay in his father’s home. However, it makes the situation more difficult for daughters, who are seen to have no choice in the matter until married to a man with whom they will then be expected to live. In this way, although rare for an unmarried man to move out of his father’s home, there is still a bit of room to argue for a “modern” situation in which he is fixing a home for his future family who will live outside of his father’s home. “Living separately,” as many people call this practice of nuclear families separating from extended kin, is becoming somewhat acceptable in Yerevan while it is largely seen as an improper form of kinship in smaller cities and towns. While becoming more popular in recent years, however, moving out on one’s own or with room-mates for unmarried young people is also made difficult by financial constraints. Housing in Yerevan can be quite expensive, especially when one has to pay rent. Most Yerevancis, like residents of other post-Soviet Republics (Zavisca 2012), live in the homes secured by the centralized government in the Soviet era. Some have privatized these homes to provide some protection from demolition projects by development investors (which often does not provide much of a buffer in any case). Many, however, have not made any attempts at privatizing their homes, which can be a
cumbersome process and also then makes them responsible for paying property taxes. In a context of widespread un(der)employment, housing is one site of security for many of these families.

Suzanna became a figure of anti-Armenianness not only because she confessed to pre-marital sex, but also, and as much, because she had decided to become an “individual” by separating from her parents and financially taking care of her own needs. Even before her public confession, moving out of her father’s home was a problem for her neighbors, acquaintances, and anyone else who might became aware of this decision. Many young women also complain about finding an apartment of their own, since many landlords are hesitant to rent out to single women. In other words, living in her fathers’ home, a woman’s life is opened up intimately to an extended family with whom she may already be living (grandparents, aunts, uncles), the neighbors who come in and out of the home, or watch from a slight distance, as well as those who she meets for the first time who come to know her as her father’s daughter. Living in a room of her own, however, she is still intimately connected to and approached through these networks by expectations about how a proper woman should behave. In some ways, her experience of kintimacy increased when she left her father’s home.

Conclusion

As the cases of Sarkis, Albert, Anush and Suzanna indicate, the problem of escaping the domestic and intimate expectations and approaches of kinship do not end when one has a room of one’s own or when one steps out onto the street outside of the
family, or father’s, home. In this chapter I have aimed to show the ways in which the “nation as a family” can be understood as not simply a metaphor, but as everyday lived experience as well as a practice of nation-making. I have shown the ways in which Armenia imagined as a kin-network bears, through experience and structures of feeling, on those who feel outside of what is deemed proper. Thus, it is not that Armenia is conceptualized as a family, but that these encounters enact this metaphor as reality. These narratives define the experience, for many, of what it feels like in Armenia. The encounters on the streets, with which I started this chapter, are so common that they become an essential part of what Armenia is, what it means to be Armenian, and how one can experience their nation. And because this kind of kintimate encounter – at home, in the streets, on public transit, online, at work, in the courtyard, at the café, etc. – is such a large part of everyday experience, those who feel it to be unbearable come to think of Armenia as itself unbearable. When one no longer feels as if they can live with their family because of the obligations, expectations, and approaches forced onto them, they move out. In Armenia, this feeling of the need to “move out” is often the desire to leave Armenia itself. In the following chapter, I continue my exploration of the sexually perverse nation by examining one particular moral panic.
Chapter 6

Perversion and Gender Panic in Post-Soviet Armenia

I am Little Gender, I am Little Boycott.
I am the little bastard of an unknown whore.
   I have run away from grandpa, 
   I have run away from grandma,
   I have run away from school,
   I have run away from the army,
I have even run away from manliness.
   Let me go and turn, from our village, 
   A participant in a gay parade…

- Krist Manaryan, from “The Tale of Little Gender-Boycott”

On October 15 2013, the No to Gender Perversion Initiative protested gender in a march through the center of Yerevan, Armenia to the main government building in Republic Square. At the square, Komitas Hovnanian, a prominent priest of the Armenian Apostolic Church, gave a speech to about 100 protesters. The march was later aired on many Armenian national news networks. In his speech Hovnanian stated: “I think that for us this thing called gender is the decision of certain persons whose goal it is to pervert the nations [azgeri aylaserumne, referring to Europe’s perversion of non-European nations].” He continued:

   By promoting the gender law, we are paving the way for our nation’s annihilation... I don’t think that any Armenian… should allow their daughter or their son to one day enter the church with another woman or another man to complete a homosexual marriage… [This will mean] the drying out of a nation, because if a man marries a man, he cannot ensure a next generation.¹

¹ “This thing called gender does not have any complaints among European or Western values.” INCTR.  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FPTBmBlte0 (accessed on February 4th, 2014).
In his speech Hovnanian conflated gender with homosexuality and both with the “perversion” of the nation and thus its destruction. This use of the term gender, as a form of perversion, was coined by right-wing nationalists in their response to the National Assembly of Armenia’s passing of the Law Regarding Equal Rights and Opportunities Between Men and Women in May 2013. The legislation used the term gender throughout, and within Article 3, defined the term as “the acquired and socially fixed behaviors of the different sexes.” Thus, the law came to be popularly called “the Gender Equality Law” or sometimes just the “gender law.” The term gender, pronounced with a hard g in Armenian, became the object of great debate and protest regarding the annihilation of Armenia. By August, as journalist Samson Martirosyan noted, the law and the term that it defined became the topic of a “frenzied debate,” which he referred to as the “‘Gender Equality Law’ Hysteria.” Armenia was in hysteria regarding gender.

The way it was conventionalized during the anti-perversion campaigns, gender (italicized here to refer to this particular usage), congealed various meanings. For the campaigners, the term signified a force imbued with European values that spreads

---


3 Armenian Weekly most often reflects the views of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (or the Dashnaksutyun) and is an English language circulation. The concept of “hysteria,” however, circulated widely amongst LGBT and feminist activists to make sense of gender and its new meanings.

homosexuality, destroys the family, halts proper social and biological reproduction and thus corrupts the nation, leading to its annihilation. Gender came to stand, in other words, for many of Armenia’s national anxieties. How did gender become homosexuality? How did gender become a tense sign, constellating a web of national concerns? And why did this all take place in 2013? After all, as Martirosyan outlines, Armenia had accepted a number of protocols and laws related to gender equality since Independence in 1991, none of which had caused so much disturbance among the public nor produced protest. 

In tracing the use of gender through this campaign, my aim in this chapter is to provide a method of interpreting what I will argue was a moral/sex panic, contributing to understandings of sex panics that take gender and sexuality as significant in themselves while still maintaining links between these categories to other social or national anxieties. I suggest that the psychoanalytic understandings of displacement and condensation can help with this kind of interpretation.

I focus my analysis in this chapter on three main formations around which, as I will argue, a chain of signification into gender cascades. These are: understandings of the relation between gender and homosexuality, the contentions regarding Armenia’s agreement to join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) (locally known as the Customs Union, or the Maqsayin Miutyun), and the felt crisis regarding the disintegration of the family. I begin by laying out the ways in which the literature on moral and sex panics can benefit from psychoanalytic methods and contextualize this discussion within the already-contentious ground on which gender gained its meaning – the 2012

5 ibid
homosexual panics in Yerevan. To unravel the ways in which gender was charged by multiple significations, the three sections that follow outline the formations mentioned above, linking them to one another. I will show how the panic concerning gender congealed all of these national tensions and thus can be understood as a symptom of Armenia’s current social, political and economic troubles, including discontent regarding gender and sexuality.

Moral/Sex Panics and the Problem of “Displacement”

“Moral panic” was given academic credence by Marshall McLuhan (1994 [1964]) and Stanley Cohen (2002 [1972]), largely in reference to how modern media produces “folk devils” (Cohen 2002 [1972]) through social reactions that, when circulated constantly, create forms of knowledge about “morality” by which certain people become outcast as either criminals or otherwise enemies of social order. Moral panics have largely been defined as social episodes, often not lasting more than a few weeks or a few months (Best, 2011), when “the societal and personal expressions are out of proportion with the threat posed by the so-called… evil-doers…” (Herdt, 2009; 1). In other words, as Joel Best (2011) has shown, the term moral panic indicates an irrational rise in social fear about a particular phenomenon that some group claims to have dire consequences for society at large, although scholars working on the issue have often disagreed on this sense of irrationality. Erich Goode and Nachim Ben-Yehuda (2011), for example, see moral panics as rational and routine features of social order.

Moral panics often take the form of sex panics (Weeks, 1981; Rubin, 1984), in
which particular acts and behaviors of subjects are categorized into “species” (Foucault 1978, 43), or kinds of persons, made into perverts and disciplined by various institutions, including the formation of punitive measures (Lancaster 2011). But why is sexuality the form that these panics often take? This is often expressed as a process of “displacement” (Rubin 1984; Watney, 1989; Herdt 2009) in which concerns about one thing are placed onto another object, namely sexuality. This assertion and meaning of displacement, however, often poses sexuality as different or separate from these other concerns. Further, this theory of displacement prioritizes one set of concerns over another, usually characterizing sexuality as a marginal aspect of social order as compared to other, ostensibly more central, concerns like family or geopolitical alliances.

I would like to elaborate on this notion of displacement by putting it in conversation with Freud’s (2008 [1900]) understanding of it as a process of dream work, extended by Lacan (2006 [1966]). In Freud’s method of dream interpretation, displacement involves the replacement of one object, memory or thought by a wholly different one (232-241). This often occurs, Freud tells us, to circumvent the process of censorship that takes place between dream-thought and dream-content (114). In other words, if an idea or desire causes too much distress for the subject, the process of dream-work will displace it onto another, possibly less distressing one. The distorted dream-content, then, can carry out the dream and the wish-fulfillment without conscious disturbance. For this to happen, however, the two would be linked by way of a psychic mechanism – a memory, thought, or image. For, if one stands in for the other, then it must have some relation to it. The dream thoughts “render logical connections” in terms
of simultaneity.” In other words, while the ideas, memories or objects might be different, “they surely form a community in our thoughts” (239) and so “the combinations in the dream are not formed of random, completely disparate elements from the dream-material, but from ones which are also intimately related in the dream-thoughts” (239-240). “Wholly different,” then, for Freud, referred to something that is both different and yet intimately linked within the unconscious.

In Jacques Lacan’s (1966 [2006]) reading of the signifier in Freud’s work on the unconscious, he likens displacement to the literary technique of metonymy, in which “the part [is] taken for the whole” (506). For Lacan, metonymy, like metaphor, is a structure of the signifying chain that discloses a particular possibility of language: “to use it to signify something altogether different from what it says” (Lacan 1957 [2006]: 420-21). Displacement as metonymy, or as signifying "something altogether different," however, should be understood as a process in which the sign itself is already a chain of signification. Lacan approximates “signifying chain” to “links by which a necklace firmly hooks onto a link of another necklace made of links” (418). In other words, in this chapter, I am interested in thinking about the common use of “displacement” in studies of moral panic (although not necessarily always the understanding of it within psychoanalytic literature), and how Freudian and Lacanian understandings of the concept can help situate the ways in which anxiety over one thing does not necessarily lead to expressions of panic over another thing, but both at once, and especially the ways in which they may be merged notions to begin with. Throughout this chapter, then, I think about how anxieties about homosexuality, supra-state encroachments on Armenian
sovereignty, and crises regarding the family’s ability to reproduce Armenia are inseparably congealed within gender.

The panic of gender, with which I am primarily concerned in this chapter, must be contextualized within the scene on which it arrived: the homosexual panics of 2012 that emerged out of the DIY firebombing. In previous chapters, I have discussed the ways in which these panics were tied to anxieties concerning the failures of the nation to reproduce a proper Armenian people and connected to wider feelings of crisis regarding the corruption of the authorities effects on moral disintegration. While LGBT activists, feminists and leftist journalists often use a language of displacement or deflection (sheghum) in understanding the link between the aylaserutyun of the “homosexual” in media and the aylandakutyun amongst those in power, I propose that just as important is the process of condensation in Freud’s theory of dream-work (2008 [1900]). Freud defines condensation as the process in which one image, memory or thought represents multiple others, congealing within itself various displacements (213-214, 216-217). Roger Lancaster (2011) explains that condensation is one process of sex panic - along with projection, contagion and paranoia - in which sex, “the object of desire and dread…is uniquely susceptible to all the shape-shifting techniques that wrest control from disturbance” (231). In other words, sex panics in Armenia often act as shape-shifting devices, in which aylaserutyun and aylandakutyun create a composite form of anxiety, linking them to one another. If there are impending dangers to Armenia – and both right-wing nationalists as well as leftist activists agree that there are - different actors seemed to be taking different “affects of preparedness,” or anxiety (Freud 1966, 493), to raise

274
awareness of these dangers. As we will see below, gender, as a condensed form of anxiety, reveals the ways in which homosexuality, perversions of gender, Europeanization, the corrupt government, the annihilation of the family and the nation along with it are not so disparate concerns.

**Gender as Gender…and Homosexuality**

In November, 2012, while mainstream media and right-wing nationalists were still focused on the problem of homosexuality, the European Delegation in Armenia held a conference at Ani Hotel in Yerevan to discuss human rights and European integration. They invited representatives of rights organizations, including Marine Margaryan from PINK, who gave a talk about the concerns of LGBT people in Armenia, violation of their rights in almost every sector of society, and the ways these real problems are obfuscated by right-wing nationalist rhetoric. Although they did not invite Hayazn, members attended nevertheless. After Margaryan’s talk, Armen Aghayan of Hayazn walked to the podium to complain of Europe’s conspiracy to infiltrate Armenian politics and the consequences of homosexual propaganda. He directly addressed the remarks made by Margaryan:

Ms. Margaryan argues that educational institutions in Armenia violate the rights of faggots (*hamaseramolner*). But I wonder why she thinks it is a good idea to educate children to become gay. Why does she thinks it is moral to spread perversion [*aylaserutyun*] amongst them so that they go home and are confused about who their mothers are, who their fathers are, and what restroom they should use as boys or girls? Doesn’t this homosexual propaganda violate the rights of children?
Aghayan's use of “homosexual propaganda” is borrowed from Russian debates about public displays of homosexuality, which resulted in the passing of Russia’s anti-homosexual propaganda law in 2013. But his contention that children were being educated with homosexual propaganda makes more explicit the importance of gender within panic regarding homosexuality. Homosexuality poses a threat for Aghayan because it disturbs the flow from biological sex to social role, or what Judith Butler (1990) would refer to as “the heterosexual matrix” (47-106), placing in jeopardy the family, which depends on those roles. Other nationalists were also articulating the problem of homosexuality in gendered terms. Earlier that year, for example, when LGBT activists had written a formal letter of complaint to the government about forms of discrimination against LGBT persons in Armenia, Artavazd Bayadyan, musician and invited guest to a press conference to discuss the letter, responded by saying that if these kinds of complaints are heard, “in a few years from now it will be hard for us to be able to tell who the husband is from the wife,” which he claimed could lead to “the erasure of Armenia from the map entirely.” Already a small nation, Armenia is not equipped to handle such disruptions in its growth, he argued.6 The term gender, however, had not yet appeared within this rhetoric. This should not necessarily be understood as “gender inversion,” what Brian James Baer (2009) suggests is the cause of many homosexual panics in Russia, which comes to “embody …breakdown in the social order” (74). Rather,

it is a concern about the possibility of there being no sex roles at all, causing complete disorder and thus no insurances for heterosexual reproduction.

Armenian sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, social workers, and NGO representatives used the term “gender” for many years to denote social inequality between men and women. At PINK and WRC, for example, I often heard the term “gender” in discussions of gender equality (genderayin havasarutyun), gender identity (genderayin inqnutyun) and so on. Thus the sign of “gender” as reference to “acquired” behaviors was part of a professional lexicon. Yet it was unfamiliar to most Armenians except as part of a compound word in thousands of news articles, documentaries, reports and talk shows about transgender persons. LGBT activists had lobbied for transgender to characterize people who felt they were the gender “opposite” of the biological sex category they were assigned at birth, preferring it to other terms like transseksual and transvestite. Many media did switch to using transgender, although transgender persons continued to be represented as scourges on society. The connection between gender and these already existing popular notions of perversion contributed to the anxieties whipped up by right-wing nationalists in relation to the Gender Equality Law.

The Law Regarding Equal Rights and Opportunities Between Men and Women was drafted and proposed to the National Assembly in 2009 by representatives Heghine Bisharyan and Hovhannes Margaryan of the Rule of Law Party. Hearings on the bill were delayed until 2011, when the executive branch proposed a similar bill and the proposed drafts were combined, eventually producing the legislation approved in May 2013. The

---

7 Martirosyan, “The ‘Gender Equality Law’ Hysteria in Armenia”
perversion accusers most often referenced Article 3 of the law, in which the term “acquired” (dzerqberovi) was interpreted as the Armenian government’s suggestion that its citizens could choose their sex. These accusations linked the Armenian government to larger geopolitical powers, as I will discuss below. The popular site BlogNews.am published about 100 posts regarding gender from July through November 2013, discussing the perverse meanings of gender and the ulterior motives of the National Assembly. Many of these posts, such as one by Hovnanian, maintained that gender captured Europe’s demand that all Armenians would be required to get a sex change in order for Armenia to join the European Union.  

Some of those campaigning against gender understood the term to be synonymous with “homosexual.” In July 2013, for example, Tert.am, a prominent online news site, published an article about the new law with the headline: “Under the title of gender equality, National Assembly secretly accepts a law that will spread perversion [aylaserutyun].” The account quoted Sos Gimishyan, the director of the Christian-Democratic Revival Party: “I myself am okay with them [homosexuals] having rights, but I am convinced that we cannot allow specific advertising events and laws to be passed, the goal of which is to pervert our public, our people.” Others in the anti-gender perversion campaign understood gender to lead to perverse possibilities. For example, in

the same article, the popular nationalist blogger Tigran Kocharyan places the legislation in the context of a wider problem wherein Europeans demand certain laws. He warns Armenians:

> Generally there are a series of laws which are required for those who will be members of Europe…Based on those laws, we will have a sexless [sex as in male/female, not as practice], family-less society. For example, one draft for a law is about to be put into circulation, which, through its details, allows childcare centers to kidnap children from their parents. This is not my anti-European propaganda or pro-Russian, or whatever else. This is a very serious danger. We already have a law giving power to sex’s reproduction: man, woman, transgender, non-gender, bi-gender, etc. So, man now decides for himself what social sex he has.  

Kocharyan seems to be anxious about gender’s social and cultural acquisition. Not tied to natural embodiment, it can be anything. Confusion in male/female roles contributes to the perversion of sexuality and thus the family, which is intrinsic to national identity and survival as a “small nation.” As such, the moral, or sex, panic concerning *gender* was both a displacement of other concerns, but also held within it issues concerning sex, gender and reproduction. It can be understood as a condensation of all of these anxious elements within Armenia’s larger national anxieties – a series of displacements, which include among them sexuality. But to think of *gender* as solely gender or homosexuality would miss an important aspect of the issue. Kocharyan makes this clear when he links *gender* to Europe’s mandate for the perversion of Armenia. I now turn to the thread of East/West anxieties weaved into *gender* hysteria.

**East and West**

10 ibid.
Armenians have long been anxious about being caught between the geopolitical manipulations and maneuverings of foreign powers. Such anxieties are linked to socio-economic, geographical, and ideological divisions, not least of which is that Armenia for centuries was split between the Ottoman and Russian empires. Eastern Armenia’s Sovietization complicated differences among Armenians, whose dispersal was already intensified by the Genocide and its aftermath. Armenians in and outside Soviet Armenia did not agree on whether being part of the Soviet bloc saved or culturally submerged them (Libaridian 2007: 25). Soviet treaties in the 1920s that ceded Armenian land in Western Armenia to the Republic of Turkey are collectively remembered as betrayals, but so are the failures of Europe to protect Armenian interests during the era of the first Republic of Armenia (1918-1922) (Astourian 2000). After the fall of the Soviet Union and the Republic of Armenia’s independence in 1991, anti-Russian sentiment co-existed with distaste for European intervention. But as the Republic of Armenia increasingly needed alliance with Russia both for trade and security during the war with Azerbaijan (1990-1994), Armenia became increasingly (even after war) dependent on Russia (Astourian 2000), Delcour and Wolczuk 2015).

The “West” became newly important in the cultural politics of Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet republics, including Armenia, as U.S. and European organizations and governments funded “non-governmental” and governmental projects in the 1990s (Wedel 2001). Armenians widely perceive NGOs as parasitic enterprises that are opportunistically established to acquire foreign funding and facilitate cultural imperialism by encouraging “Western” values (Ishkanian 2008, 85-108). These criticisms were
particularly strong against NGOs focused on “democracy” (Ishkanian 2008), and “women’s rights” (Gal and Kligman 2000, Ghodsee 2004, Hemment 2004). More recently, “LGBT rights” (Gruszczynska 2007; Renkin 2009) in this region have come under heavy criticism by conservative groups. In Armenia, right-wing groups claim that Europe’s sexual liberation is inappropriate for Armenia and that European funders are trying to encourage Armenian activists to spread perversion, leading to the destruction of the Armenian family and nation. In this context of “intervening” European forces, and the association of Europe with sexual deviance, the idea of “human rights” itself has been interlaced with “homosexual propaganda.”

In recent years, Armenia’s relation to Europe to the West and Russia to the East is increasingly coming to be defined through the figure of the homosexual, especially for right-wing nationalists who represent Europe as not only the birthplace of homosexuality, but also the propagator of it to other places, often by force. For example, in the face of Russia’s many betrayals, such as selling arms to the enemy Azerbaijan, Krist Manaryan, a nationalist musician and playwright, still claims that Armenia should align itself with Russia as part of the EEU because “he [Russia] understands our psychology.” Manaryan argues that “If in Russia it is not allowed for men to enter the stadium during the Olympic Games in Sochi holding hands, then correct processes are going on there.”

---

Anti-homosexuality becomes a defining element of Russia and its influence on Armenian politics for grassroots actors.

Of course, EU acceptance and enlargement is much more complicated than this picture paints. Armenia’s geopolitical position between the EU and EEU is determined by factors as various as state aid, market regulations and conditions, visa liberalization (especially for EU entrance) (Delcour and Wolczuk 2015) as well as human rights protocols, including sexual rights. While Armenia has signed on to the EEU, it continues to make certain structural changes to comply with EU conditions (Delcour and Wolczuk 2015). But, while the government plays tug-of-war between these two supra-state powers, right-wing nationalists, bloggers and others structure debates around the East/West through the figure of the homosexual. In other words, questions of national security, futurity, and survival are tied into problems of sexual liberalization, which displace and condense all of these questions into provoking, and inciting, forms like the homosexual.

Manaryan, for example, also encapsulates his anti-Europe position in a sarcastic fairytale called “The Tale of Little Gender-Boycott” (“Genderik-Boykotiki Heqyaty”), which I read here as one manifestation of gender panic for its positioning of key elements condensed within and giving charge to gender. The fairytale was originally published online on August 8, 2013 and was repeatedly commented on and shared by right-wing

---

13 See Butterfield 2013 for a wider discussion of EU entrance and sexual rights
nationalists on Facebook, Twitter, and blogs. I came across it while perusing the *No to Gender Perversion Initiative* Facebook group.

Written in the traditional format of an Armenian fairytale, the story begins with the Armenian equivalent of “once upon a time” and narrates the adventures of the character Little *Gender-Boycott* as he searched for a “gay parade” in Armenia. Little *Gender-Boycott* was a gift to a “traditional grandma and grandpa,” who lived a peaceful life in a village. This peace was disrupted when “the European God of Democracy” gave them a gift in the form of a “sexless,” “half-baked being,” Little *Gender-Boycott*. Despite Manaryan’s use of the gender-neutral pronoun (*na*) and reference to sexlessness, the narrative indicates that the being is a pitiful failure of manhood, perhaps because it never studied or joined the military. Little *Gender-Boycott* fled its grandparents’ home searching for a “gay parade” with the “law” (Gender Equality Law) on its side. In this quest, it became responsible for the grandpa’s numerous heart attacks and diabetic shocks. While searching for a gay parade, Little *Gender-Boycott* ran into a “European spy”:

“Armenian!” calls the spy, “*Hav ar you* [“How are you?”], Little *Gender?* Has anyone been insulting you?”

“No way,” Little *Gender-Boycott* says, proudly. “Who can insult me? The appropriate law is with me.”

“*Very good.*” [English in original]. The spy is very happy. “So where are you going?”

“I am going to a gay parade.”

“Even more very good [sic. English].” The spy is delighted. “Do you need money or anything?”

“Why not?” responds Little *Gender-Boycott*. “I have to buy lipstick and such, transvestite bras…and all of that is exceptionally expensive.”

“*O key,*” [English in the original] says the spy, “Go and do a good, noisy gay
parade, stir the whole city up, incite everything, boycott things, the money is no problem. I'll put the amount on your card.”

Eventually, at the end of the fairy tale, the character runs into a group of *qyartus* (a derogatory term referring to disreputable, macho Mafioso types), who break Little *Gender*-Boycott’s “shaved legs” and tell him, “Listen, you fruit, you will fold that appropriate law of yours in four ways and bury it in your appropriate place, okay?” Little *Gender*-Boycott never again went outside and Manaryan makes clear that the European spy did not visit him while he recovered in the hospital.

The name of the character *Genderik-Boykotik* combines *gender* and boycott, adding the suffix *ik* (meaning “little”) at the end of each to give the character, as well as the notions of *gender* and *boycott*, a diminutive dimension. The name signifies both *gender* and *boycott* as trivial and yet destructive manifestations of European disruption of Armenian values. Boycotts have become a popular form of leftist protest in Armenia, often targeting the products made by oligarch-owned companies. Because these boycotts are often demanded and led by those who consider themselves human rights activists or advocates, right-wing nationalists connect their aims with European values and claim that “boycott” is a European form of protest.

Consistent with the anti-*gender* campaign, Manaryan uses *gender* interchangeably with homosexuality. The peaceful lives of the traditional grandma and grandpa were disrupted by the supposedly European value of democracy, which seems to require perversion of normative sexual and gender norms and behaviors. Armenia, in this

---

15 Translation by author
account, was a place where traditional, generations-old sexual and gender roles were stable and not sources of social conflict, which the European God of Democracy and European spy envied and attempted to undermine. The gender “gift” from the vicious God of Democracy, embodied in a sexless Little Gender-Boycott, was actually a socially destructive curse. Underlying this story is the missing strong father, in whose absence the grandparents were left vulnerable to European values. Little Gender-Boycott refused to be educated because it believed it is “not stupid” and knew everything there was to know, presumably through homosexual propaganda. The story implicitly warns of cultural imperialism by Western NGOs that fund naïve boycotters who do not understand they are being used as tools of larger geopolitical projects. It is ultimately the Mafioso types who stop Little Gender-Boycott. Here, Manaryan is implicitly bringing into focus the vulnerability of an Armenia evacuated by “strong fathers,” an anxiety I return to in the next section. These Mafioso types represent a strong masculinity, consistent with characters on Armenian serial dramas that researchers Anna Gevorgyan and Ani Kochoyan (2014) attribute to a post-Soviet crisis in masculinity, which produces an ideal of violence to overcompensate for the lack of “strong men” left in the country. It is only these strong men, who are also somewhat perverse in their use of violence, who are able to protect “traditional grandmas and grandpas” from perversions, Opponents of the gender law similarly used “scare tactics,”¹⁶ as it was put by journalist Marianna Grigoryan, to force the National Assembly to revise the law by the end of August.

removing the term “gender” and replacing it with “men and women.” However, by this point, gender had been fully charged with anxiety and the anti-gender campaign did not end there. Hovnanian’s speech, for example, with which I started this chapter, was made almost two months after this revision.

As Armenia’s government officials came closer to formally signing on to Russia’s Eurasian Union agreement at the end of 2013, homosexuality, and gender along with it, became structured by displacements and condensations of other elements. The Armenian government’s talks with Russia concerning the agreement coincided with the National Assembly’s passing of the Law Protecting Equal Rights and Opportunities Between Men and Women. Many, including Martirosyan, pointed out that the legislation had been in draft form for many years, gone through various deliberations, and was only finally passed in 2013 at the time of these talks with Russia, which only in its final iteration included the term gender. As Grigoryan argues in an article entitled “Armenia’s Fight against Gender Equality Morphs into Fight Against EU,” “European values” “has become a catch-all that embraces not only equal rights for women – itself highly controversial for this conservative, patriarchal society – but tolerance toward same-sex marriages and any sexual minorities; anathema for most people living in the South Caucasus.” She adds “By contrast, Russia, which recently passed a law banning so-called “homosexual propaganda,” is seen as a more virtuous model for emulation.” In other words, what better way to rally support for Russian alliance than to incite panic around

18 “The ‘Gender Equality Law’ Hysteria in Armenia”
19 Grigoryan, “Armenia’s Fight Against Gender Equality…”
what might happen with European alliance – namely, perversions like gender? By October 2013, this was the common position of many LGBT and feminist activists with whom I corresponded, who claimed the gender law was passed in 2013 precisely because it would heat up debates about East and West, and rally support toward the East in opposition to the West’s sexual perversions.

So far, we have unraveled two of the main formations of anxiety within gender. As we have seen, gender carried within it homosexuality and its threats on the nation of “traditional” grandmas and grandpas who are able to tell who the mother is from the father, who the boy is from the girl. Gender, already congealed with homosexuality, also came to embody the destructive future of European alliance. Gender was also, for grassroots actors, connected to the government’s insipient moves to rally support for alliance with the Russian-led EEU. In the following section I turn to the final signifying link of anxiety I will be including within this interpretation of gender - the felt crisis around the institution of family.

“There are No Families in Armenia”

Ninety percent of those interviewed by my research assistant and myself maintained that since Independence it has become increasingly difficult to form proper families, as I have discussed in many parts of this dissertation. Most associated this felt family crisis with the moral corruption of the government and oligarchy class. As you will recall, the claim that there are no families in Armenia was often preceded or followed by the claim that “Family is the base (himq) of Armenia.” I often asked how family could be the base
of Armenia but not exist. As one person responded: “This is the problem. The government does not let the people have families. Most people are leaving, starting families elsewhere and those who stay are unable to create their families and because of the economic situations they face, even when they do, the pressure ruins the family.” In this section, I would like to think about how this felt family crisis merged moral perversion and sexual perversion through its intimate and gendered (and gendered) expressions within the household.

Many Yerevancis felt the Armenian family to be disintegrating. The answers to most of our questions led to complaints about the government. These complaints varied by age and marital status. Older persons were often most dissatisfied with the pensions they received, which varied from 18,000 to 30,000 dram per month (roughly 38 to 84 U.S. Dollars). Verzhine, a woman in her 70s, received 18,000 dram a month, which she reported barely covered the taxes, heating and electricity costs for her home. She could not afford medication for a heart condition. Her son lived and worked in Moscow, sending back as much money as he could, although he often could not send much. Many older people stayed in Armenia while their children left permanently or temporarily to work in Russia, throughout Europe, and in the U.S., and depended on them for remittances. Interviewees in their 40s and 50s often focused on their own and their children’s underemployment. Many young people cobbled together odd jobs, leaving them with limited income and limited free time to establish a family.

Like Karen and Mkrtich, who I discussed at length in Chapter 2, many of lucine’s and my interviewees linked large-scale emigration, caused by the moral perversions
(aylandakutyun) of the oligarchy and political elite, to the impossibility of forming families, since many, especially men, often have no choice but to leave the country either alone or with their families. And when they stay, as many of our interviewees explained, constant fighting takes place within homes – between husbands and wives, parents and children – over financial issues like un(der)employment. In short, the aylandakutyun of those in power creates a situation in which families and the entire nation become disordered and precarious.

lucine and I found that fatherhood is intrinsic to national identity and feelings of propriety. In other words, while Sevan Beukian (2014) shows how motherhood in Armenia is essential to national identity in Armenia and is filtered through a sense of surviving and enduring atrocities like the Genocide and war with Azerbaijan, fatherhood has also become an important aspect of survival. A “strong father” was most often defined through characteristics such as devotedness to family by all means, the preservation of Armenian morality, and the ability to discipline children to grow up “right.” This was often contrasted, as Beukian (2014, 249) also shows – with odar (foreign) families and fathers – who “let their children do whatever they want with no respect for their fathers,” as stated by a number of lucine’s and my interviewees.

Large-scale emigration that frequently separates family members from one another and is also often compared to the mass deportations of Armenians from their homeland in Western Armenia during the Genocide, has been the cause of a rupture in a narrative of a nation that endures and survives into one that is disintegrating due to the moral perversions of those in government. Connected to this throughout our interviews
was the sense of a missing strong father not only within the household, but also within the government - as proper leadership for Armenia – collapsing nation and family.

This felt lack of “strong fathers” is also important in understanding the crisis in masculinity that I discussed above. While emigration is a step taken by both men and women, it is more common for men to emigrate, especially for work elsewhere (and usually to Russia).\(^\text{20}\) There has been much talk in contemporary Armenia about entire villages of women left behind as husbands and sons leave the country to find work,\(^\text{21}\) causing anxieties over gendered and sexual perversions when these men are also thought to be leaving behind wives to form second families elsewhere. In the context of Nagorno-Karabagh, Nona Shahnazaryan (2008) argues that “post-Soviet migration often tends to undermine” “a traditional patriarchal order” (6) since wives of new migrants effectively become “virtual widows,” a situation in which resourcefulness and strategic challenges to perceived notions of the “traditional” (submissive) woman (5) are necessary for survival. And, as Karen and Mkrtich articulated in Chapter 2, it is hard, in these conditions, for men to feel like they have their “dignity.” Even if struggling for their families, their inability to make ends meet also puts them in a submissive position - often in relation to a perverse, aylandak, government.

Here, we see a circling back between the two perversions I have been working with. On the one hand, aylandakutyun, or corrupt moral behavior in non-sexualized


terms, seems to be at the root of the felt crisis of family. As such, it can be said (as many LGBT and feminist activists do) that when right-wing nationalists displace the “real” problems facing Armenia – a corrupt political and economic elite – that they obfuscate or deflect from the actual issues. But, when aylandakutyun enters the home and perverses gendered and sexual norms - in which men are dominant, albeit monogamous and devoted to their family, and women are submissive to men - aylerutyun (or sexual perversion) seems to be condensed within this notion of moral corruption. As such, the two forms of perversion that seem to be different are internally displaced within one another. Anxieties of sexual perversion, then, can be understood as being condensed forms of moral corruption, both threatening the survival of the nation.

Sexuality, especially heterosexual propriety, as well as maintenance of proper Armenian gender norms – strong father, caring mother - are major concerns for Armenians. While only three of lucine’s and my interviewees brought up the issue of “homosexuality,” which shows that “the homosexual” as a threat was being incited by a few marginal voices (right-wing nationalists) while heightened to a public scene of panic by mainstream media, sexual perversion in its various other forms of signification should not be ignored as part of this panic. Large-scale emigration and the acts of a government that do not allow people to have their “dignity” are seen to make impossible the formation of family, placing the nation’s future reproduction as well as proper Armenianness (through gendered, sexual and moral norms) in danger. As Eve Sedgwick (1985) argues, the stakes of an “understanding of what it may mean for one thing to signify another” (11) are high, especially when it comes to sexuality, which never
signifies just one thing. “What counts as the sexual…is variable and political” (Sedgwick 1985, 15). Fears regarding aylaserutyun, which take “the homosexual” as the most basic form of this threat, have the potential to internally displace within itself fears regarding sexual improprieties and reproductive impossibilities even if not necessarily in regards to the homosexual. If, in other words, Komitas Hovananian’s fears regarding men marrying men, who “cannot ensure a next generation,” uses the homosexual as an object to signify threat, underlying this threat is a whole slew of other forms of perverse behaviors, which many of those lucine and I interviewed centralized to Armenia’s futurelessness and perverse paths because of the nation’s current aylandakutyun.

Conclusion

The question, then, is not what the panic regarding gender is really about, as if it is about something other than what it manifests. The method I have used involves understanding each sign present within the panic as one link in a larger chain of signification, which include its most manifest contents – such as gender and homosexuality – but various other elements weaved within. While scholars working on sex panic often articulate the process of heightened episodes of anxiety pertaining to sexuality as displacement of other issues, I have suggested that this understanding of displacement must necessarily also take into account the particular anxieties related to sexuality itself. Lacan’s reading of signification articulated through Freudian understandings of unconscious elements, which congeal some idea or form into another
one, but often because of an unconscious link between the two, has been helpful in linking sexuality back into panic. In this sense, to say that panic over gender was a displacement of panic concerning other issues, gender is one part of that whole and not a separate object of anxiety, already comprising within itself signifying links to various anxieties, especially ones concerning the failure of morality so intrinsic to the “proper” reproduction of the nation and thus its survival. As such, while displacement is one way to read moral panic, I have argued that condensation is also helpful, as it enables an understanding of the ways in which moral panic regarding sexuality is not necessarily a complete displacement of sexuality, but condenses and congeals within certain sexual signifiers other, related, elements, forming a chain of significations and displacements within.

While according to LGBT and feminist activists, right-wing nationalists displace this impropriety of the government on to the “homosexual,” I have argued that condensation seems more fit as a concept in articulating the ways in which aylandakutyun and aylaserutyun both represent perceived threats to the future of Armenia. In other words, perversion as it threatens Armenianness is a condensation, an amalgamation of various displacements, and gender both makes up this signifying chain, as well as contains its own chains of signification within. Gender hysteria is a symptom of this congealed anxiety.

My aim has been to suggest that sexuality, gender, the family’s precarious situation, the moral corruption of the government and the nation, Russia and Europe as they symbolically figure sexual propriety and impropriety have everything to do with one
another and that the process of displacement within moral panic should be understood as that which brings together rather than segregates seemingly unrelated elements. An interpretation of panic with all of these elements and their processes of condensation and displacement lays bare an underlying fear of Armenia’s disintegration in the face of moral degradation, which includes serious anxieties around the future possibilities of reproducing Armenia. But, activists have been emerging new forms of future-making. While many Armenians have taken up emigration and many others have become passive because of a felt hopelessness – or post-hope, as I discussed in Chapter 2 – these new forms of activism are invested in returning hope to Yerevan and Armenia. I now turn to the final chapter of this dissertation, which will examine what I call a politics of “No!”
Chapter 7

No Father, No Future?: The Politics of “No!” as Negation and Affirmation

Don’t listen to all of these international journalists who are telling everyone that the people have lost. The people have won. The people have already won.
- Raffi Hovhannisyan, April 9, 2013

Time is neither fully ‘present,’ a thing in itself, nor is it a pure abstraction, a metaphysical abstraction that can be ignored in everyday practice. It cannot be viewed directly, nor can it be eliminated from pragmatic consideration. It is a kind of evanescence that appears only at those moments when our expectations are (positively or negatively) surprised. We can think it only when we are jarred out of our immersion in its continuity, when something untimely disrupts our expectations.
- Elizabeth Grosz (2004: 5)

We are all used to having our dreams crushed, our hopes smashed, our illusions shattered, but what comes after hope?...What is the alternative, in other words, to cynical resignation on the one hand and naïve optimism on the other?
- Jack Halberstam (2011:1)

In 2012 environmental activists held an occupation of Mashtots Park in central Yerevan in protest of the privatization of that public space. Their main discontent were private kiosks recently placed there for selling clothing and other goods, which had prior been located on Abovyan street. They claimed that the removal of the kiosks from Abovyan street, based on a demand of some restaurant and café owners there who thought they were “ugly,” as well as their relocation to a public park, were illegal actions and violated Armenian laws which protected public space from private interest. After various confrontations with police who forcibly and violently removed activists from the plot of land on which they had put up tents in which many of them were spending cold February nights, they demanded that the police force’s violence and removal of citizens
from public space was illegal and should be acknowledged by bringing forth criminal charges. When the state did not hear this demand for justice, claiming that since they were not the owners of the space nor the kiosks and could not become plaintiffs, activists decided to hold their own trial, bringing charges against the city for illegally authorizing construction of kiosks in a public park. They called their court the “Green Court.” The verdict: Yerevan officials were given 5 days to dismantle the kiosks in the park; unless the city dis so, environmentalists would begin to dismantle the kiosks themselves. And, sure enough, on five days later, the activists kept their promise, dismantling the kiosks themselves, which led to further confrontation with police. The kiosks were eventually, and “officially,” removed. In my interview with Artur Grigoryan, a lawyer and one of the activists who organized the Green Court and who was active within the Mashtots Park Movement, he explained this decision to hold such a trial: “We tried the courts. We tried them various times and they would not take it seriously. They kept coming up with bureaucratic excuses as to why they could not carry out the charges against the city. There is no one with a legitimate interest who can act as the plaintiff, you cannot sue the city, they came up with millions of excuses. So we decided that we could not take them seriously and we held our own trial.”

This trial can be called a “mock trial” possibly only because it mocked the state’s illegitimacy. It acted as a real trial otherwise for all intents and purposes. A verdict was given, and actions were carried out in keeping with that verdict. The Green Court is part of a new form of grassroots politics in Armenia, what I will be calling here the politics of “No!” In Chapter 2, which I conceded had a depressing tone, I discussed the ways in
which many *Yerevancis* felt evacuated space and moral perversions of the nation-family, as the foreclosure of possibilities for Armenian future. In this chapter I explore activists’ entry points for a future yet to come. Future is made possible again, I will argue, by way of shifts in symbolic authority.

What, then, does it mean for symbolic authority to shift? In Chapter 2, I argued that the perversions of the political and economic elite and the trickling down of this perversion of the nation-family, metonymically, into households has produced a prevalent feeling of an evacuated symbolic order – now without any actual, or legitimate, authority. I then explored, in Chapter 3, the ways in which these perversions, which mark this elite as illegitimate authority (Fathers), place limits on their own viability as figures who carry the No-of-the-Father (split away from the Name). Here, I am interested in how this No of the sovereign Father goes unheard. Or, more precisely, how this No is drowned out by the mocking laughter in its face. The politics of “No!” I will be discussing here must necessarily be understand as a shift in sovereignty itself – the reclamation of authority back for the people, taken away from Serjik (the ‘President’) and his horde. The politics of “No!” must also be understood as a (queer) call to arms. Queer here becomes more than a sexual politics. It mandates a different disposition of subjectivity, claiming power for the otherwise and rejecting the here and now. Those claiming “No!” – such as the witnesses at the Green Court and others that I will be exploring – fail to heed the illegitimate Father’s No. “No!” then is a form of what Jack Halberstam (2011) calls the “queer art of failure.” As Halberstam writes, “Failing is something that queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers, failure can be a style, to cite Quentin
Crisp, or a way of life, to cite Foucault, and it can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon ‘trying and trying again.’ In fact, if success requires so much effort, then maybe failure is easier in the long run and offers different awards” (3). To fail to heed the illegitimate Father’s No, then, is to fail the very system that props him up. Failure, in this way, as I will explore in this chapter, is a form through which activists inherently insist on something else; a different measure of success, perhaps, but also a shift in symbolic authority and a call for a new notion of Armenianness.

Groups such as Save Teghut - a grassroots formation that campaigned against the building of a mine in the town of Teghut and built various new infrastructures of survival, such as generating ways in which goods produced in Teghut could be brought to Yerevan for sale - the Mashtots Park occupiers who I will discuss below, and participants of the what came to be know as the *Barev-olution*, the 2013 post-election movement, participants of which campaigned for student strikes - have been very critical in regards to a sense of Armenian propriety and morality. They require no Father, no moral proprietor. Rather, the form of authority they have come to displace Fatherhood with is linked to a sense of social good not necessarily Armenian in nature, particularly liberal sensibilities of human rights, democracy and transparency. At the moment, especially for groups like New Armenia, that has since 2015 been calling forth another Armenia, a democratic one, these young groups consider themselves, as democratic institutions, the authority.

This can be understood as the emergence of autological order through a rupture in genealogy. The break in Hayk’s genealogical order of strong Fathers allowed an opening
through which something else could have its rise. Unlike those who exist as “wanderers” in Armenia, who have given up a will to act, seeing acting as meaningless (such as Karen and Mkrtich) – these new activists are not fighting for moral restoration nor are they fighting for a particular candidate who can act as strong Father to the nation-family. Rather, through performative and often symbolic acts, I argue that the larger aim of grassroots activism in Armenia today is being driven by the necessity that these youth see in moving Armenia away from a politics of Fatherhood, which is always seen as necessarily authoritarian, and toward democracy. Of critical importance for them is the need to awaken Armenia’s citizenry, calling on action rather than passivity, in order to restore hope. It is because of hopelessness itself, many of these activists claim, that the people of Armenia have stopped acting. The exclamation of “No!” – a performative utterance - produces a different subject position than the one constituted by the Name-of-the-Father. This “No!” however is not the No-of-the-Father. Rather, it is a response to that No, a refusal of the entire symbolic order on which illegitimate Fatherhood reigns. “No!” in other words is a negation, but it is a negation that affirms possibility. “No!” negates the present, making room for future once again. It counters post-hope and demands action. In action, No!” finds hope in the present.

**Chaos, Cosmos….Or, Seismic Shifts in the Symbolic**

The “Green Court” carried the legacy of theatricality that had marked the Karabagh movement. Levon Abrahamian (1990), discussing the first few months of this movement in 1988, argued that it could be likened to a carnivalesque festival, similar to
what one can call an archaic ritual drama, at the limits and crossings of chaos with cosmos. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984 [1968]) work on Medieval Carnival, Abrahamian argues that Theater Square [now, after independence, renamed Liberty Square] during this movement, turned Armenians – with all of their differences - in language (Russian and Armenian speaking), age, city versus village residence and life, gender, disability and ability - into one large massive body of the Armenian people. “In a word, a special chaotic festival structure was created, the cosmos of everyday life was transformed into festival chaos” (74), testing the new waters of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. The chaos taking shape within the square during these first few months were characterized by emotional tension - love and solidarity - of a positive nature (since the main pogroms in Karabagh had not yet taken place), and that this positive emotion was not without reason but that reason and emotion were coupled together to create a new social consciousness, one "directed inward from without, toward the roots of community." Abrahamian argues that the analysis of the Karabagh movement as a festival drama provides the key to understanding how this drama will resolve itself: or, in other words, what will happen after the festival.

The article, published in 1990, could only ponder the changes to come. Abrahamian predicted that the drama, or the festival, would be resolved in one of two ways: either the contrasts symbolically removed within the festival - between the king (Soviet) and his subjects, the men from the women, the old from the young, the villager from the city-dweller and so on - would be restored and the prior cosmos would return; or, the new forms of symbolic chaos would change the very conditions of the cosmos and
the chaos would produce a new cosmos. He hoped for the latter. Now, with over 25 years of history unfolding, it would be safe to say that the post-festival was neither a return to the prior pre-festival cosmos, nor a complete remaking of it. Rather, new forms of social order have developed, emerging new forms of chaos.

During the Karabagh movement, Theater Square, aptly named, Abrahamian tells us, became a “scene” in which photography was not only tolerated, but the square itself became a theatrical scene precisely for the capturing pleasure of photographers. All actions within the square became a theatrical performance, including a “mock trial” of the authorities – those within the Soviet Communist Party in Armenia as well as the centralized government of the Soviet Union in Moscow - on the “stage” of Theater Square - the back stairs of the Opera building, which has since become the podium of various other political scenes. While the Mashtots Park occupation and the Green Court, can be understood as performance in this way, it might be more appropriate to claim it, rather, as performative. The Green Court, as an action, fails to recognize the state as a legitimate authority by its performative dimensions. It did not just enact failure by setting up its own judicial system, it brought this new system to action. It positioned the state as an authority, but as an illegitimate one. While the state authorizes and demands – allowing building of the kiosks, refusing to take them down, and bringing forth police brutality – it nevertheless is unable to shore up the admiration and respect of the people through which to become authority. The Green Court faced the illegitimacy of the state by resigning from its authority and setting up something else. An otherwise and an elsewhere (Povinelli 2014). The untimely (Grosz 2004). And this otherwise, while having
no official authority (without a “No”) was able to perform the deed of authority by legitimizing itself in the context of the illegitimacy of the “official” authority. In this way, it made itself heard as law, countering the authority’s illegal use of law. Less than a year later, at the end of February 2013, when the presidential elections almost naturally morphed into the post-election movement, the main symbolic expectation that elections in Armenia have come to hold, this performative failure to recognize authority and to manifest other forms of authority were taken up on a much larger scale.

In January 2013, the campaign for the next presidency began. This campaign was a peculiar one. There was an assassination attempt on one of the candidates, who ended up dropping out of the race; one of the candidates went on a hunger strike; and it seemed rather unclear who was siding with whom as many conspiracy theories (often taken as factual explanations) claimed the behind-the-scenes alliances of various candidates.

Levon Ter-Petrosyan did not run for office again. At the end of 2012, he explained his decision as for the good of a “developed democratic country,” that since he was 68 years old he could not run for the sake of his people who needed someone of better capacity to lead them. He also added that the ANC (HAK) would not be participating in the upcoming elections since this would be the “legitimization of the illegal regime” and basically “meaningless” since the current government of Armenia was “consistently

destroying any possibility of democratic and competitive elections” and “perfecting the vote-rigging machine.”

Aside from an assassination attempt on Paruyr Hayrikyan, one of the running candidates, and a couple of weeks of uncertainty about whether Hayrikyan would claim his constitutional right to postpone elections (he eventually did not), the “race” itself, if one can call it that, was smoothly perverse: with many violations, fraud, threats at polling stations, at work places, the voting of the dead, the use of stamp erasing on passports (used to track who had voted so that votes could not be submitted twice), and vote buying being reported by international and local observers. Serj Sargsyan “won” the election with 58.64% of the vote and Raffi Hovhannisian received 36.75%. This election came about in a slightly different Armenia than the one in 2008: where left-of-center activists, the ANC, and other grassroots organizations interested in making change to illegitimacy had been shifting their focus from Fathers to structure, from a change in those in power to the demand for effective transformation of the entire system. This activism, no longer concerned primarily with resignation or elections, were ready to focus active energy on the actual practices of justice rather than on the cult of a leader, the cult of Fatherhood. But, as I will show, this election was still oriented around a figure: Raffi. But, possibly because of Raffi’s ambivalence in regards to the desire to become a Father, or maybe because a different ground had been forming underneath the hyperpresidential machine by 2012, Raffi’s post-election movement would be different.

To understand these shifts, we must necessarily place them in the context of Armenian politics since independence. Throughout the presidential and parliamentary elections from 1996-2013, the government, already delegitimized, continued to be seen as the site where morality needed to be restored. As I discussed in the Introduction, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, Armenia’s first president, delegitimized by his association with the “unsavory band,” was able to make a come-back in 2007-2008, and becoming the leader of a major post-election movement that ruptured in state violence. Levon Abrahamian and Gayane Shagoyan (2012) argue that Ter-Petrosyan owed his ability to re-enter politics to “not only his fans from the rallies of the late 1980s and All-Armenian Movement [APNM] veterans, but also people who were ready to forget 1996 in exchange for free and fair elections that would allow them to elect a better president if needed” (25). Abrahamian and Shagoyan cite one young man who participated in the post-election movement in 2008 as saying, “I am here to elect him in order to depose him later” (34). Thus, Ter-Petrosyan’s reemergence should not be seen as a renewed faith in the old, delegitimized Father. Rather, the 10 years separating his departure and his re-emergence marked such extreme forms of illegitimacy that Ter-Petrosyan’s faults were minimized in scale. He was not necessarily legitimate, but was seen as one possible Father who could correct some of the ongoing forms of moral bankruptcy and introduce structural changes within the political structures in Armenia, or at least enough so that he could be removed later.

Many in Armenia still see Levon Ter-Petrosyan, regardless of his unpopularity during his presidency, as a viable political leader. The Armenian National Congress,
under his leadership, has been active in many movements over the last decade. Many of the environmental activists, journalists, and NGO representatives that I met during my 12-month fieldwork in 2012-2013 were members of ANC (HAK). But it is important to keep in mind that this kind of activism journeys away from the presidential movements—it journeys away from claims for a proper leader, a proper Father. In other words, Levon Ter-Petrosyan’s politics, and the politics of those who have followed him, has been moving away from that of repairing perversion—returning morality through reclaiming propriety to Fatherhood—toward something else.

Institutionalized hyperpresidentialism, meeting its match in the ideological importance placed on a Father figure, has been dwindling amongst those active in grassroots political work and the ANC itself. What the ANC is doing now, since 2008, is grassroots work on organizing against the state and its actions rather than placing a leader within it. Many of its members have been active participants in the environmental movement, NGOs working on democratic transparency, and issues of privatization of the commons (and the increasing disappearance of public space). But even within this move away from political Fatherhood, the ANC is largely considered by leftists who are not members to be just another cult of personality, with Levon as Father figure. As Armen commented one afternoon when I told him I was on my way to Levon’s meeting in Liberty Square in the post-election movement of 2013, “Why are you going? Everyone is just going to worship him there. Nothing happens. They do not discuss actual politics or real issues, they just go to be amazed and adore their precious Levon.”
In 2009 Ter-Petrosyan had run for mayor of Yerevan. The political system had made slight changes in the years since the constitutional amendments during his presidency securing hyperpresidentialism. Within these changes, it was decided that city mayors would be chosen by a city council, members of which were elected locally. Many saw Ter-Petrosyan’s move toward mayor as problematic: how could he who was once “king” (Abrahamian 2012: 28) lower himself to the position of mayor? In any case, it was impossible for Ter-Petrosyan to be elected mayor, since he was not within the ruling party, a necessary de facto qualifier, as most people understand it. These elections were imbued with gross violations, fraud, bribery and the like. Of course Ter-Petrosyan was not elected and in the aftermath of the elections, he and his ANC colleagues decided to renounce the thirteen seats that they had won on the city council. ANC’s stepping out and away from electoral politics made two important statements. First, this act seemed to say, the “machinery of falsification” (Abrahamian and Shagoyan 2012: 19) could not be repaired. Rather, this machine needed to be completely halted, and, importantly, this would have to be done from the outside. Second, this act would also insist on another version of politics. No longer based around Father, but a set of political visions for Armenia that brought it out of a fixation on restoring morality through the replacement of one Father with another.

The next “rightfully” elected President of Armenia (in 2013) would be similar and yet different.

In Armenia, as in many other places, voting is not taken seriously as a democratic institution. Elections are generally understood as a joke: a game that those in power play
to prove their authoritarianism. For example, in early 2013, Serj Sargsyan, speaking to journalists in the Shirak region, was asked by one reporter what he thought his chances were in the upcoming elections in that region. His response was, “My chances…Out of a 100, should I punch 90? 80? 70? 60? However much you want I will punch,” indicating that the number of votes were dependent on what he decided, echoing his No as Father once again. A video of this moment went viral, but most people did not need such blatant evidence of rigged elections to be convinced of what was to come. Rather, the elections offered a waiting period until the post-election period when the real fight was to begin. As in 2008 when Levon Ter-Petrosyan began the actual campaigning not just for his presidency but also for the institution of democracy itself, the post-election movement in 2013 began as soon as the vote results were reported since activists and Raffi himself were prepared for the results.

When he ran for president in 2013, Raffi Hovhannisyan had been the head and founder of the Heritage Party since 2002. He was also the first Foreign Minister to Armenia, appointed in 1991 by Ter-Petrosyan, but was forced to resign a year later because the president and himself had very different approaches to the question of Armenian national ideology and the prospect of self-determination. Hovhannisyan as well as the Heritage Party are pro-European, seeing accession into the European Union as a main goal for Armenia. They advocate economic liberalism, placing a competitive free market economy as the main goal of Armenia’s political-economic achievements, thus

positioning themselves against the Republican Party (which is governed by oligarchs who own and operate, or systematically support, various monopolies). But in their moderately nationalist politics, they also stand against the ANC, which has since its first government in 1991 been moving away from a conception of the “national” as figuring into diplomacy or state decision-making. Hovhannisyan was born in Fresno, CA. He is the son of Armenian historian Richard G. Hovhannisyan, who is a Professor Emeritus of the University of California in Los Angeles. Hovhannisyan was visiting Armenia in December, 1988 when an earthquake devastated the city of Gyumri and neighboring villages. Shortly thereafter he decided to immigrate (or “repatriate”) to Armenia with his family.

Hovhannisyan’s policy on domestic issues gave him wide popularity in the Armenian political landscape. In 2013, he campaigned on transparency in governmental affairs – even during the post-election period calling on Serj Sargsyan to open the gates of the presidential palace to the offices that belong to the people – insistence on a democratic process in Armenia, even in the face of years of obviously non-democratic practices. As Marilisa Lorusso (2013) writes, “His work has been in total contrast to the “normal” pattern of a country that people feel is increasingly becoming a patronal state. As a consequence, he is perceived as a man of the people and a vote to Hovannisian has the flavour of an anti-systemic vote but still within the framework of legality. In this light, Hovannisian’s success ceases to be so surprising, and becomes the foreseeable consequence of the perceived deterioration of ethics and morality in the Armenian public sphere, a process that is well documented in many surveys and studies” (5).
Hovhannisian, in other words, was untimely. He disturbed the forms that had become normal, that had undone the present and obfuscated the future.

April 9, 2013 was the day of the Presidential inauguration after months of a post-Presidential election movement. At the Karen Demirchian Sport and Concert Complex, the “fraudulent” (keghc) Serj Sargsyan was sworn into his second term in office. The inauguration ceremony was attended by various men of power like oligarchs, ministers, and members of Parliament. But on the other side of the city, in Liberty Square, I, along with thousands of discontented Armenian citizens, attended another inauguration: that of Raffi Hovhannisian, proclaimed the “rightfully elected President” of the February 18 elections. This other inauguration was another moment of something else: an affirmation through a negation. It was an untimely act in that it demanded that those who attended imagine something else, a different time, a future. This inauguration, like the verdict of the Green court, acted as a real inauguration. After about half an hour during which Raffi called on the authorities to stop their own inauguration and to join his, Raffi took the oath. And, as such, he became President. But the events that would unfold that day went far beyond just a refusal of authority by its replacement. This inauguration and the demands that followed shifted the very basis of Armenian symbolic authority. Through chaos – months of mitings, and a national movement through which many Armenians were awakened culminating in a double inauguration – the cosmos were tilted.

“Hello!”

Following the February 18 elections, Hovhannisian led an opposition movement
throughout Armenia that by March came to be known as the Barev-olution. *Barev,* in Armenian, means “Hello.” This was the Hello Revolution. “I walked into farms and flea markets and met hundreds of thousands of Armenians who lived in poverty, who had no jobs and who dreamed of leaving their homeland. I shook their hands and shared their glance, and I said, quite simply, ‘Hello’. And they responded in kind: ‘Hello’. That was our secret covenant,” Hovhannisian says about how this moniker for the movement came about (Lorusso 2013: 5). The term Barev-olution did work of its own. The Heritage Party, and especially Hovhannisian, had spoken about the emigration problem for years, which they saw as a major crisis facing Armenia. In describing the Heritage Party in its country update, the European Forum says: “Heritage states that sustaining the competitiveness of the market helps the Armenian economy grow. Furthermore, the party believes that reducing poverty and building good social services are very important for the future of Armenia. By taking these measures, Heritage has the objective to reduce emigration from Armenia and stop the “brain drain” from the country. It is generally assumed that the “Heritage” party has the only party leader with clean hands and a clear track record in Armenian politics.” The issue of emigration came up again and again during the many rallies (*mitings*) held in all parts of Armenia following the elections.

Hovhannisian stated many times that Armenians are leaving their homeland and they are doing this because they see no hope there. But instead of leaving, he insisted, Armenians should say “Hello!” to a new Armenia and to one another. Hello is an affirmation that negates many of Armenia’s felt crises. It connects the problem of the passivity that has

forced many, fed-up, to leave the country altogether, as well as the passivity that has submerged the nation into the affective realms of a post-hope in presentlessness. To say hello is to welcome. To welcome is to move toward a future and to insist that there be a present from which this future may come.

If Raffi’s hands being clean was in one way a positive characteristic for the face of his campaign, it presented a problem as well. Raffi was American, had studied law in the U.S. and many felt he was an inadequate player in the aggressive political game in Armenia. Even those who supported him – only if he presented a possibility outside the now-institutionalized illegitimacy of the Armenian state – also often discussed his weaknesses. He believed in democracy, I was told by some of my interlocutors, which made him seemingly unable and unwilling to participate in the authoritarian politics in Armenia. His pro-Western stance, able to mobilize around him the support of younger and more left-leaning crowds, left him vulnerable by others, especially some nationalist groups. Raffi was, early in his campaign, celebrated by many leftist activists because he was the only political candidate who visited DIY after the firebombing. He attended a benefit to rebuild the pub. He was also one of the very few political candidates and public officials to support the owners of DIY and express concern about such acts of terrorism, as opposed to other candidates, Party members, and officials, many of whom actually expressed support for the firebombers as I discussed in the Introduction. In his campaign, this show of solidarity for DIY was interpreted by some nationalist voices as a support for making Yerevan a gay(er) city. Hayk Babukhanyan, a deputy member of the National Assembly and the leader of the Constitutional Rights Union condemned Raffi for
comparing the DIY firebombers to the Young Turks of the Ottoman Empire and for calling them “Nazis,” which he had done when interviewed during his visit to DIY in May 2012. As Babukhanyan explained in an interview,⁵ “We traditional Armenians cannot live in the Yerevan that Raffi dreams about,” citing a claim that Raffi made during his miting the night before that Armenians should be willing to pay the price of life itself to get to their goal of creating the Armenia and Yerevan of which they dream. “Who are we being asked to pay this price for?” Babukhanyan asked, and his answer to that question was clear: “gays,” or the way he put it, hamaseramolner, a derogatory term referring to homosexuality as a disease.

While Raffi was generally seen as “clean” – legitimate – he was often accused of not being Armenian enough. While his non-Armenianness can be attributed to his pro-Europe, pro-LGBT advocacy, and his political liberalism, perhaps it also had something to do with his insistence on dreaming, imagining, and desiring a new Armenia. This insistence, in a place where many people have stopped dreaming of a future, where many have resigned to nostalgia of hope rather than on insistence for a future, where presentlessness defines temporality, dreaming was untimely. “Hello!” as a platform, I suggest, is an affirmation. But, as an affirmation, it is rooted in negation. Like the politics of “No!” that I turn to in the following section, “Hello!” as a form of imagining and welcoming a new Armenia, necessarily had to first negate the presentless, and futureless, Armenia on which it arrived. For the next few pages, I ask you, dear reader, to bear with me as I provide ethnographic moments in which I hope you will feel rupture, the

⁵ Interview no longer available. Previously published on Iravunq.com
breaking, of presentlessness into possibility as well as Father-less politics taking shape.

Following the “dual inauguration” on April 9, the opposition movement marched toward Baghramyan Avenue where the Presidential Palace is located. This march came by popular demand. Sounding much like the protest chant at the end of the 1980s - “Ghara-bagh!” (Malkassian 1996) – people chanted “Bagh-ram-yan!” until Hovhannisian finally conceded and led people toward Baghraymyan Ave.. But the streets toward the Presidential Palace were blocked by police cars and riot police. Returning the march to Liberty Square, Hovhannisian called a break for the day and urged all to gather later that evening to continue the demand to wash away Armenia’s “de facto” presidency and government. In the evening, when people had once again gathered and “Sareri Qami” (“The Mountain Wind”), the Ruben Hakhverdyan song that had become a kind of anthem for the movement, began to play on the large speakers set on the back stairs of the Opera Building in Liberty Square, Hovhannisian seemed tired. A cacophony of demands filled the crisp Spring evening breeze, as Raffi – the one who was determined, or at least seemed determined, to finally do it, to bring an end to the perversion of Armenia – could no longer make out the hails. The crowd was fractured. Some chanted “Hi-ma, Hi-ma!” (Now, Now!), others “Hay-a-sdan!”(Armenia!), and still others “Bagh-ram-yan!” “My dear Armenian people, I cannot hear you,” Raffi stated. But, of course it was not that he could not hear them. Rather, he could not make out the calls. There were too many demands. And, on a day like April 9, what Armenia needed the most was one movement, under one headline, under one Father. Or maybe not? The chants finally all merged into one, possibly the most coherent one, one that maybe all of those who were present would
agree on: “Hay-a-sdan!” (Armenia!) And Raffi followed the call. “Hayasdan,” he said, sternly and quietly. And then repeated it once more into the microphone.

It seemed as if there had been a break within the movement. The last couple of months were coming to a head. Some were tired and wanted it to be over no matter what came of all of it – they wanted to go home, drink coffee, sleep, rest. As Raffi had claimed earlier that day, calling out these people who were not present, “Those who went home, those who went home out of fear, went home to eat, to sleep, to drink coffee, to preach to us: you are ours!” On this seemingly last day of the Barev-olution – the day when it would either be a new beginning or its own end – Raffi’s words were starting to sound a bit confused. Did he want this to continue? Was he stalling? Had he already accepted defeat? He continued his speech, cursing Obama and Putin – “and all of those others who condemn us.” As he continued saying things making little sense, he made a big mistake: he said the word “tomorrow” causing the crowd to boo, scream, and groan. It would not be tomorrow. It would be now, “Hi-ma!” But there was a difference between the position that the crowd was taking and that of Raffi’s: he was leading this, they were not. Or was it the other way around? “My dear Armenian people, you have to know, this is not about me…this is for all of us.” As he had said in many earlier interviews, press conferences and speeches, Barev-olution is not about Raffi and Serj. It is about the Armenian people. He often called himself a “participant,” explaining that he felt lucky to be included in such a movement. However, whether or not he wanted it to be true, the legacy of hyperpresidentialism and the figure of the Father in previous mass movements necessitated Raffi’s position as leader. Even in renouncing this position, he seemed to be
able to live with it for the past few months. But, on that evening, more than ever before through the process of following the Barev-olution, going to every miting in Liberty Square, tracking the movement of the rhetoric, the color of wristbands being handed out at each of these rallies (yellow), the student strikes, the mini-revolts throughout the city and the country, and realizing that there seemed to be almost no one in Yerevan who was not somehow caught up in this movement, I wondered about this position of “leader.” Who became a leader and how? And, most importantly, was this necessary?

“If these dirty criminals want to shoot me today, let them come and shoot me if for all of you a good life will open up” Raffi said. The post-election movement in 2008 had only lasted 10 days before the military intervention and the state of emergency. Did Sargsyan’s regime not feel as threatened by Raffi’s movement as Kocharyan’s regime had been of Ter-Petrosyan’s? Was this purely a tactic of not allowing “martyrs” to be born of a movement in the case of such a military intervention? Or had the state, in the 5 years since this last uproar, strengthened its position enough that it no longer needed to worry about such moments of upheaval? Did Sargsyan, his brothers (literally and symbolically), and all of those who reigned upon the thrones of this new post-Soviet oligarcho-capitalist authoritarianism know their power was here to stay? A new political climate was taking shape. “Hyperpresidentialism,” both in its politico-scientific form, as well as its socio-cultural form wherein which a “leader” is taken to be of the utmost concern for developing a new Armenia, a new world, was breaking. And Raffi was at the center of this breakage. Raffi himself seemed to be breaking.

After considerable chants and demands from the crowd, Raffi finally conceded to
the demands of doing something “Hima!” – now. At first he decided to lead the crowds to Baghramyan toward the presidential palace. It is hard to know what he was thinking at this point – especially considering his strange suicidal ideations through the speech he had just given – “Take me!” and “Shoot me!” he had shouted from his podium atop the back steps of the Opera. Raffi was placed in the position of leader. Of course there was a whole network through which this kind of propping up, coming into this slot, and taking control of it - no matter how loosely at certain points – that made this possible. His law degree in the U.S., his father being a major figure in Armenian historiography, his appointment as foreign minister, his own nationalist desires, his gaining in popularity throughout the years in the Armenian political landscape, the devastation of Armenia through Sargsyan’s regime, through which he was able to become such a popular figure (as the Other of this), and somehow becoming a major opposition figure within the elections themselves (maybe only possible because ANC (HAK) had not presented a candidate), had gotten him here. And once here, there was almost no possibility of declining the invitation to do something. In short, whether or not he was tired, whether at this point he actually wanted to take the presidency even if it meant he would have to work within a government of criminals, he had to keep going until he was stopped. That evening, as we marched from Liberty Square toward Baghramyan, I wondered if he was saddened by not having been stopped earlier.

As we approached Baghramyan, we saw the police cars and the rows of riot police blocking entrance onto the street at the intersection of Mashtots Poghota (what used to be Lenin Prospect, Lenin Street, now often called Prospect) and Baghraymyan. Some of us
were determined, we would keep going whatever clashes may come. Raffi, however, was a bit more hesitant. “Toward Tsitsernakaberd!” he called out, as he led some of the people down Prospect toward the genocide memorial located there. There was a moment of intense confusion. As the crowd parted – some going down Prospect, others stalling at the intersection deciding what to do – some waiting on their friends, having lost them in the confusion – and others walking up toward Baghramyan, in defiance of not only Sargsyan’s regime, which they were marching toward the Presidential Palace to contest, but also of Raffi himself, who had called for something else. His leadership was suspended: his “No” was not heard by many of those on the street that evening as they continued up Baghramyan Ave. even if their leader had urged them otherwise.

While Raffi precariously led some to the genocide memorial in Tsitsernakaberd to recognize the loss of those who perished in the early 20th century under the Ottoman regime, others (including myself) stayed behind to recognize the nation that had perished under Sargsyan’s and other oligarchs’ regime. We placed burning candles along the center line of the street, marking a memorial of the loss of Armenia on that day. But this candle light vigil of sorts drew police attention – who were waiting farther up the street in riot gear. As they approached, clashes broke out between police and protestors. Police demanded that we get out of the street, intensifying the aggression in our demand to take over that very street. After about 40 minutes of this back and forth – as we pushed forward coming head on with the row of riot police standing guard of the presidential palace, Raffi - this could-be, should-be, why-wasn’t-he Father, returned and took the front line.
When Raffi reasserted himself in the goings-on of Baghramyan, he urged protestors to be non-violent. After all, he repeated over and over again, these were our streets and we had every right to walk on them and the police have to give us this right. The fact that this right was barred from the people was fact and testimony that Sargsyan’s regime was criminal and degenerate. “April 9 is the day of national union, and today we will [emphasis his] walk on our street” declared Raffi. These demands, for non-violence as well as the call for the police to open up the path so the people could walk their streets, led to a demand that the police chief Vova Gasparyan show his face and explain to the people why he would not allow them that constitutional right. After a short while, Vova appeared. His appearance on Baghramyan that night (for, by this time, the sun had completely set and it was approaching 10 pm) was not seen as a success. Rather, he had come to urge the people to shut down this madness and go home. A short private conversation took place between Raffi and Vova, and when they reemerged into the public once again, they had decided…of all things in that particular moment…to pray together. Videos of this prayer circulated for days afterwards within social networking sites and blogs as a joke. If the decision to march to Tsitsernakaberd instead of the Presidential Palace on Baghramyan earlier was seen as a mistake, this prayer was seen as proof of Raffi’s failure.

Failure. We can read this another way. Praying in the street with the police chief, afterall, was an occupation of the street of sorts. It was the fulfillment of the demand to be on that street. It seemed as if the stakes of the game had changed. From becoming
President, Raffi was now fighting for something else: the people’s right to walk through public space. Politics here is being re-defined. Raffi had not been placed within the Presidential Palace, which the post-election movement had framed as the ultimate goal of the Barev-olution. The Barev-olution had, however, managed to bring thousands of people into the streets and into Liberty Square in Yerevan, into meetings in other Armenian cities – such as in Gyumri, Vanadzor and Tsakhkadzor. It had spurred on student strikes and calls for general strikes. In short, it had begun an awakening. Ammending the demand, changing it from a claim to the Presidential Palace to walking Baghramyan St., in other words, is only a failure if the project itself is one of political Fatherhood. In this sense, it did fail. Rather than taking the seat of Hayk, which had already been deligitimzed by the likes of Kocharyan and Sargsyan, Raffi was shaking up and undoing the attachment to that very demand. In this sense, failure produced another kind of demand, another measure of success.

During a de facto press conference on Baghramyan St. that followed the prayer, a young man named Gevorg initiated the following conversation:

**Gevorg:** You said that we have to struggle, is this right? To initiate steps and not to be afraid. I’m not using your words here, I’m trying to state this in my own words, you understand. I want to know what steps?

**Raffi:** In your opinion, what steps should these be?

**Gevorg:** Well, in my opinion, you are a very intelligent man, firstly for having initiated all of this, and you have to understand that our government is a kind of system with which one has to struggle, specifically in my opinion, with the options of the system. In the last two and a half hours since I have been here, I have not seen normal conditions of a struggle. We were like a mob and there was no one there to govern it. People were in a confused condition. People did not know what to do. I want to know, how do you understand the future of this struggle?

**Raffi:** Aside from having the right to ask questions, which of course you do, you
should also be providing answers. You give your suggestions as well. This new
generation should express their thoughts on what they are ready for and what they
are willing to do for that so that this country and power be returned to the people.

Raffi, as he had been doing throughout the post-campaign as well as his original
campaign was countering the notion of hyperpresidentialism – with its demands for an
Ur-Father and his castrating threat through the “No,” with something else. An otherwise.
Raffi is attempting to introduce a form of politics in which there is no Father because the
Father, in all of his illegitimacy, along with hyperpresidentialism, has proven ineffective.
“I have said many times. I am not a savior. And I cannot resolve problems for the people.
If the people believe in themselves like they did on February 18th when they elected their
next leader [referring to himself] based on their own beliefs, and they are ready to take on
this struggle, and if they have concrete goals and plans about what they want and what
they want to do – new president, regional governors, new mayor, etc. - in that case then, I
will be a guide. But if the people just want – for the sake of their own disappointment –
someone to blame – then, here I am standing in front of you.” But in the midst of saying
these words, while he was repeating the rhetoric of not being a savior (Father), sounds in
the background, pushing and shoving, gained his attention, as he turned around and
sternly demanded, “Calmly!” and “Be careful!” In and between Father, Ur-Father, Name-
of-the-Father, and No-of-the-Father, Raffi seemed to be unable to find his own position
within this assemblage of believing movement participants, the
oligarchical/authoritarian/criminal state, those disenchanted, and those who want to be
led, as well as those who seem to want to move in their own way to whom he gives the
right of way but seems to come back to the position of the “elected” No-of-the-Father.
From this mob – chaos - new cosmos were emerging.
“No!” and Making Future without a Father

These waverings between position of Father and No Father emerged out of the grassroots forms of performative refusal with which I began this chapter. While on the one hand, the presidential election held a great deal of significance for activists in Armenia, on the other hand, it became a platform for a larger call for organization. It emerged what I will here call a politics of “No!” As Stephen Astourian (2000) pointed out 16 years ago, hyperpresidentialism has proven itself an “empty shell” because of a lack of support for the president himself in almost any believable capacity amongst the people of Armenia. Along with the ANC, who has focused its attention on other forms of politics and declined to even place candidates within these elections, as well as Raffi and Heritage Party, who seem to be taking similar steps now as well, a new form of not only politics and protest, but of democracy itself is emerging in Armenia and has been in its early stages over the last few years. One can credit this emergence of a democratic form of politics-making to the government itself. Through the failure of electoral politics, the failure of the state to behave democratically in any way, and the complete corruption and moral bankruptcy of the government, “hyperpresidentialism” is on the decline and it is bringing down the horde with it. This rupture did not begin with Raffi or the Barev-olution. In some ways, the ANC’s dropping out of institutionalized politics can be read as the call for something else: abandoning the hope for legitimacy in the machine of illegitimate fatherhood. Abrahamian and Shagoyan (2012) cite one ANC speaker at a
rally in 2008 who claimed that “the most dangerous opponent [for the opposition] was the party of indifferent people” (31). In other words, this speaker seems to be suggesting, the actual opponent is not the government of illegitimate figures, but the people who have for many years now become unable to expect anything otherwise in Armenia.

But young activists, while imaging an elsewhere and an otherwise and marking hope’s return, have also taken up this passivity as a process to be resisted. As such, they are making future in Armenia through actions that insist on not only this future, but a present, a register on which action can be taken. Lee Edelman (2004) positions the queer within American "reproductive futurism” as a narcissistic, anti-social, figure who cannot be incorporated within a project of moving toward a future. The homosexual, Edelman outlines, has historically been outside of the social within conservative narratives, because he is incapable of biological reproduction, as well as proper social reproduction. In other words, the homosexual does not have the proper morality, which the future - the one that is “for the children” - depends on. Rather than rejecting this notion of the homosexual as against the future, Edelman argues that this position should rather be embraced by queer practice. Claiming all political discourse as “reproductive” because it aims to produce a world, in the future, that is for the children, Edelman argues that politics itself is a conservative project, embedded in status quo structures, and aiming to reproduce those same structures, even if slightly altered. The queer subject is the one, already positioned as against this future, who is outside of this “politics,” and thus in the position of a no future anti-reproductive aim. This embrace of the death drive, that has now become a canon of its own within a certain branch of queer thought - what Jack
Halberstam (2008) has termed the “anti-social turn” in queer theory – can be thought of a bit differently in the foreclosure of futures in Armenia.

The anti-social turn must necessarily be differentiated from queer negativity, or the taking up of negative will within queer life, art, practice and being. Negativity, in other words, is not a foreclosure of the social or the demand for its end. Rather, negativity can be understood as the embrace of that which stands against the possibilities of something else, that which is yet to come. Edelman’s refusal of future, in other words, is in many ways an insistence that the social must come to an end and that the queer subject – already outside of that social – can bring about this end. But, the rupture in symbolic order that I have been discussing in this chapter – in which Father no longer holds the sway it once did, when Armenianness is having to contend with a different kind of authority, and where that old order has been shifted through chaos producing a new cosmos – is not an end, but something new. It is in this vein, that Drucilla Cornell and Stephen D. Seely (2014), in an article entitled “There is Nothing Revolutionary About a Blowjob,” contest Edelman’s claim. According to Edelman, the sinthomosexual can fuck the future itself by refusing meaning inscribed on his body, experiencing jouissance within the symbolic, disturbing its boundaries and drawing on its end. Sexuality and sexual practice, here, become realms of their own, somehow not only outside symbolic order, but against it. Sexuality, Cornell and Seely argue, is not outside of politics, nor is it somehow resistant to politics. Drawing on Derrida’s notion of re-politicization, which is “not a new history and still less a new historicism,” but rather a new event-ness that compromises the seemingly undefeatable call that “it is necessary,” Cornell and Seely
argue that the future, as open, “has nothing to do with heteronormativity, fantasies of imaginary children, or narcissistic self-projection. Or, in other words, since the future is not “there” any more than the Real, it cannot be ‘fucked’” (6).

The future as this “open,” as I have already discussed in Chapter 2, produces disturbance amongst Armenians who rely on intense attachments to genealogy and continuity for national – and familial – identification. It is the break in this genealogy – by illegitimate figures within the government and oligarchy – that have produced a sense of presentlessness, since, if Armenia is not in this continuity with heroic Fathers and the proprieties of its past, then there is no Armenia. I repeat that common statement here again to draw attention to the stakes of this illegitimacy: “There are no families in Armenia.” Armenia does not currently exist, does not have a present, and as such, does not have a future. Activists over the past few years, however, have been insisting on this future by redefining that open as not the end of Armenia, but of a new Armenia. Perhaps, this Armenia will no longer have Father figures (heroic or not), and perhaps it will not be based on moral propriety through the Names of these figures. But, it will be an Armenia nonetheless.

In 2015, the ruling Republican Party, along with support from a revamped ARF (that decided to align itself with the RP) proposed a constitutional referendum. The referendum, which eventually passed after over 800 individual counts of voting violations, \(^6\) will shift the political system from presidential to parliamentary government. The opposition largely argued prior to the elections, as well as in its aftermath, that the

\(^6\) Reported by Levon Barseghyan, the Chair of the Gymri Anticorruption Center, on CivilNet Live, December 6, 2015.
referendum was a strategy to keep current Serjik in power after his two-term presidency runs out in 2018, this time as Prime Minister. For proponents of the referendum, the constitutional change would reaffirm hope, faith and trust in the Armenian government, restructuring government to change the massive fraud and corruption that has become status quo since independence. The referendum was also claimed by the Republican Party as a shift in the system of “hyperpresidentialism,” removing many of the president’s responsibilities and powers and making the position a nominal one. Rather, most powers would be transferred to a Parliament, under the oversight of the prime minister. Political analysts have called the referendum “transnational capital’s wildest dreams” and claim that not only will it strip away all citizen’s rights to organize and strike, but will also make Armenia’s entrance into both the Eurasian Economic Union as well as the European Union possible – playing within the dictates and demands of both organizations and serving the trade interests of both. The problem, however, is that those who are largely seen as the problem to begin with are the ones who instated the changes they deemed necessary to solve the problem. As one citizen expressed to President Sargsyan:


“Change yourselves, not the constitution!” While most Armenians would be glad to have change in which the hopelessness that has set in over the last couple of decades, reforms that might be tested by faith in a system again, “reforms from above” have been largely understood as making the problem worse rather than better.

On the evening of December 6 2015, after the elections, opposition leaders held a rally at Liberty Square. Behind those who spoke on the podium - the back steps of the central Opera House - hung a large poster of the tri-color flag of the Republic of Armenia overlaid with the simple statement “No!” (Voch!). This “No!” was in direct response to the referendum. But “No!” has become the basis of a whole new set of politics, strategies and makings of a new future. “No!” can be heard from those demanding the resignation of Nemets Rubo from National Assembly and the Armenian Football federation for the beatings and murder at Harsnaqar Hotel in 2012. It can be heard in the mock trial, finding the government too illegitimate to even trust with public judgments. “No!” resounded widely during the June 2015 #ElectricYerevan protests in opposition to the hike in electricity prices, especially with the slogan of the movement plastered all over the streets and online worlds, “No to the Pillagers!” (Voch Talanin!). It is not that these advocates are protesting the future conditions of Armenia. Rather, the death of the present is the beginning of a new future. And these forms of protest – these performative gestures – can be understood as the building of a whole new world, which does not ask for the removal of illegitimate members of government, but already removes them, symbolically. Raffi

10 Solty and Stepanyan, November 26, 2015
Hovhannisian, afterall, has come to be acknowledged as the “rightfully elected
President.”

It is not a coincidence that the statement “No!” has some reverberations of a
sexual discourse of consent and dynamics of power (Kulick 2003). Saying “No!” has
high stakes. It is not just an utterance, but a reclamation of a subject position in relation to
power. Those saying “No!” seem to be saying that they will no longer be the objects of
power, but that they are subjects who constitute a political will of their own – one to
come, and one that is already, in some ways, here. Saying “No!” to political Fatherhood
and the days of post-Soviet oligarchic authoritarian regime is not a negation. It is an
affirmation of a future yet to come. And by saying “No!” these activists are constituting
an entirely new relationship to power, one in which the illegitimate Father and his own
No are no longer authority.

“No!” can be understood as a direct response to the other No – that of the Father.
To keep a position of authority, even if a forceful and violent authority like that of Stalin,
the ruler is still obligated in some sense to maintain himself as an object of desire. Split
into his now perverse (nick)Name, taken away from him, and his still repeated “No”,
constantly iterated and becoming more forceful due to a lack of support, these illegitimate
Fathers are, in Marx’s words, digging their own graves, presenting the very limits of their
authority as I discussed in Chapter 3.

The politics of “No!” do not refuse a future. Rather they demand one. Armenia’s
lack of futurity – as I discussed in Chapter 2 – a kind of aimless wandering through space
and time with no moral guidance (purpose) is one caused by perversion. A symbolic
authority necessitating moral leadership – or a proper Father figure – has ruptured in post-Soviet times through the failure of the government to ensure care for the people of Armenia. But this illegitimate Father – a No without a Name – has produced forms of resistance that not only understand his governance and occupation of authority within symbolic order of Armenianness as illegitimate, but actively disavow it through the proclaiming of “No!” In Armenia, then, the perversions of the nation leading to no future are resisted precisely through the building of another future, one that stands in opposition to the No-of-the-Father. In other words, this “No!” is not outside of politics, but figures a new kind of politics and, further, a new kind of symbolic order. One that does not necessitate a Father at all. While in Chapter 2 I showed how Armenia is lacking a future because of a lack of Father, this claim needs to be understood now in a context that includes new, emerging politics, acts, and futures.

What many of these activists claim and actively work against is precisely the notion of post-hope. This looking back, toward a past, producing presentlessness and lack of future as possibility, has made people passive. Or so I was often told. Activists often claim that the government has been able to become what it has become because of this passivity. What we see in the interviews with Karen and Mkrtich and the other household interviews that I cited there is not so much an undoing or a change of symbolic authority, rather it is an inability to act on anything. While it is true that there are many things that “they wont let us do” as Karen and Mkrtich put it - one of these things that are prohibited being the possibility of survival in Armenia - there is also a drawing away, bleeding dry, of any hope for the future. In short, what these interviewees want
desperately to change in the Armenian context is to bring back hope, or at least the possibility of it.

“No!” as a negation is also, thus, an act of mourning. And in mourning, it negates presentlessness, bringing back hope. On February 19, for example, as the Barev-olution led by Raffi was to have its first formal miting at Liberty Square in the post-election moment, activists had first gathered outside of the Republican Party headquarters to present to them a flower wreath to mourn their death. The miting at Liberty Square was to start at 4 pm. At 3 pm we gathered outside of the Republican Party headquarters, where a small group had prepared the wreath. A few words of mourning were spoken – honoring the death of the Party - and the wreath was left on the front steps of the building’s entrance. Goodbye, dead authority, this act claimed. May you rest in peace (and no longer trouble the living).

Zaruhi Postanjyan, a member of Parliament from the Heritage Party, is known for these kinds of performative acts – making discontent and “No!” a publicly visible spectacle. She became a hero amongst grassroots activists when in October 2013, when Serjik was speaking to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, she took to the floor asking him about his trip to a casino in Europe. There had been various allegations that Serjik had been spending Armenian tax dollars for his own personal enjoyment and there was documentation, according to Postanjyan, that he had spent upwards of hundreds of thousands of dollars at a casino on that particular trip. Serjik denied her public allegations and she was removed from the meeting hall. When she returned to Armenia, however, she was greeted by hundreds of people in Yerevan’s Zvartnots airport.
Postanjyan performed her own act of mourning the Republican Party after the 2015 constitutional referendum. As election polls were closing and the counting had begun – after a day of intense monitoring of the various frauds and inconsistencies in voting regulation at many of Armenia’s polling stations – Postanjyan made a video that was placed on lin.am’s Facebook page. In the video, she carried three bodies – cardboard cutouts wearing suits with cardboard heads, one with Serjik’s face, one with Gagik Harutunyan’s (the President of the RA’s Constitutional Court and former Prime Minister) and one with Tigran Mukuchyan’s (Chairman of the Central Election Commission). She brought all three of them out first, then laid each one out on the street – one by one. When they were all there, side-by-side, she poured gasoline over them and set a match. As the fire started going, she exclaimed “Kpav! [It caught!] Just like that! Burn, you devils!” After the fire was going, the video moves to a few moments later, with fire moving behind her, as she explains the meaning carried in her act: “I, as a citizen of the Republic of Armenia…should have gone to my polling station today and voted. But, because of the illegal conditions in which elections are carried out in this country….I, instead, am fulfilling my obligations to the Republic of Armenia in this way…” She gestures with one hand to the growing fire behind her. “In other words, to burn the scarecrows of Serj Sargsyan, Gagik Harutunyan, and Tigran Mukuchyan….the last Bolshevik, the last chekist (derogatory term for a member of the KGB) and the last representative of the Armenian Republican Party.” With this act, like in previous acts of mourning dead illegitimacy, Postanjyan was not only refusing to participate in the
machinery of falsification, but was putting that whole system to rest, burning bridges to this already-past.

Conclusion

“No!” has come to mean a lot not only in Armenia – in which various movements over the last few years have emerged a politics of negation - but all over the world. From the 2011 ‘Arab Spring,’ in which large populist movements in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria changed the course of authoritarianism in the region – for good and for bad – to the 2013 Gezi Park movement in Turkey, and the 2014 parents’ protests in response to government disappearances of student activists in Mexico – the demands of particulars (as in social and economic issues, laws, policies and actions) have surfaced larger calls for systematic change. In July 2015, the people of Greece chanted “No, no, no!”11, celebrating the landslide victory in a referendum vote against European austerity, this time in support of government and a refusal of supra-governmental organizations, like the European Union.

In the postsocialist world, these movements negate particular histories – especially older traditions of citizen-government relations – with positive claims for something new built through the practices of solidarity that protest demands. In other words, “No!” is, on one hand, a negation, but on the other also a positive call for something else. It is the claim for the end to the present(lessness) and the beginnings of

future possibilities. The act of saying “No!” is a practice of delegitimizing the authority of today, who the nay-sayers position as artifacts of an already-too-old world. Saying “No!” is not only a negative reaction against the way political regimes conduct their business, but the production of new social consciousness. While Maria Lipman (2013), in the context of Russia, has called this the “de-Sovietized” rise of a new “mentality,” I want to be more careful and understand the called-for necessity of something new not as against the “old world” of socialism, but against the now-old world of post-socialism and the rise in oligarchic authority without any paternalist will, or care, for citizenry. The echoes of “No!” can be heard from Hong Kong when the so-called Umbrella Soldiers used umbrellas in defiance of police force in 2014. It can be heard in Hungary, where thousands protested the government-proposed “Internet tax,” which led Prime Minister Viktor Orban to concede defeat, recognizing that his government does not represent “the point of view of the majority.” It can be heard in Pussy Riot’s punk prayer. And, finally, it was heard loudly in Ukraine during the Maidan Revolution of 2014, when protesters responded to now-ousted President Yanukovich’s signing on to a multi-billion dollar agreement with Russia’s Eurasian Union with massive street demonstrations and public unrest. “No!” comes out of exacerbation. It is revolutionary in potential, which is to say that it is invested in redoing, radically altering the stakes carried in political debate.


those who proclaim this powerful “No!” there is no forgiving those who are responsible for the present(lessness), leading to no future. “They all need to be burned, hung!” exclaimed Mkrtich. As such, even for those who have dwelled in the time-space of presentless passivity – like Mkrtich - “No!” forces reawakening. Performatively, symbolically, and sometimes quite literally, “No!”-sayers demand the Death of today’s authority. “No!” is what comes after hope, to respond to Halberstam’s question.
Concluding and Moving Forward in a Brave New World of Disorder

The post-Soviet state is at its end, there is a feeling of change in the air, but their direction [sic] remains unknown.
- Marta Dziewanska, Ekaterina Degot, Ilya Budraitskis (2013: 9)

In the new world disorder, performance, including an ability to embrace change, has become everything….The feeling of crisis is thick in the air, and the emphasis is very much on preservation, not reinvention.
- Bobo Lo (2015: xvii)

In 2015, following a summer of #ElectricYerevan, the “No!” campaigns leading up to the constitutional referendum of that winter, as well as its contentious aftermath, activism did not lend itself to hopelessness nor post-hope. There was a future to make and there was a great deal of negating the present that was in the works. In one of the most aylandak displays of illegitimate authority that had yet taken place in Armenia’s post-Soviet experience, through the theft of the constitution by the Republican Party, activists continued to adamantly contest the elections and this illegitimate future that they refused to allow to become present.

The post-referendum protests led to the detention and prosecution of dozens of activists. Videos recorded on mobile phones of police beatings and group detention of activists began to appear as soon as the referendum had closed on December 6, 2015. On December 31, 2015 - January 1, 2016 New Armenia, an initiative that had sprung out of the “No!” movement and saw as its main mission the realization of an Armenia that respects and abides by the values of democracy, transparency and human rights, had held a gathering in Liberty Square to celebrate the New Year. Although they had informed the authorities of this public gathering ahead of time, and there were only about a dozen of
them present for the celebration, police presence was large. At around 1 am, police, who largely outnumbered the activists gathered, began their raid, arresting several of them, including Gevorg Safaryan, one of the leaders of the movement. This particular arrest has received attention from international organizations like Human Rights Watch, because while many were detained that night and the weeks prior, they were mostly freed pending forthcoming trial. Safaryan’s post-investigation trial is not scheduled until March, but on January 3rd, a local court decided that he would be held in custody until then. This holding in custody is a violation of Armenia’s own laws as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of the United Nations.

Why hold Safaryan? What threat does he pose at this particular moment, for which he cannot be allowed his freedom until his investigation is complete? Most activists within New Armenia and the larger leftist movements taking shape over the last few years question the court’s decision – for which they have applied for a number of claims with international human rights organizations. But in some ways, they also understand this as a victory. In other words, if these activists can be taken so seriously as to be the targets of irrational and violent brutality from the “authorities,” then they must be doing something right. It is their aim, after all, to threaten those who have stolen their country.

On January 5, two men assaulted Suzy Gevorgyan, another activist affiliated with New Armenia who is currently a resident of Russia and who had returned to Armenia to join the movement. They followed her as she walked away from the larger public gathering, threw her to the ground, beat her and kicked her in the head. These two men,
of course, are unquestionably connected by activists to the authorities: many claim they were hired hands of one or more members of the Republican Party. “Neighborhood hooliganism” is what the assault was eventually called. No charges have been pressed and no arrests made in association with the assault. On January 11, Gevorgyan made the following statement:

They still do not understand that it is not going to happen by beatings and massacres. They still do not understand that those beatings will actually eventually hurt them more than it hurts us. On the contrary, I will now continue to struggle, at all costs, because I do not want it to continue to be possible for them to comfortably beat me or anyone else in the street. In regards to the Constitution, we find all of which has happened illegal. In reality, the people have voted No. We are struggling against the results. I have just returned to Armenia from Russia and I will not go back…. I will not leave Armenia and I will not leave Liberty Square. If they think that with beatings they will achieve something, let them carry out these beatings every day…. They are trying to create an environment of fear, but they will see that in this they will not be successful.

This statement produces hope in many ways. Driven by negation, it is a snapshot of what Armenia’s future struggle against illegitimacy will look like: return, “No!” and the building of sustainable forms of being, in the present and into the future. This dissertation has examined the perversions of Armenianness in the present, in its presentlessness, and the ways in which future is being evoked against, and despite of, them. But what will come of Armenianness? Will it survive?

*Nation at Ends and Beginnings*
In the 1980s and early 1990s, nationalism became a hot topic of sorts. On the one hand, those like Benedict Anderson (2006 [1983]) were placing this form within a modern trajectory, claiming that nationalism is a Western form – coming out of European state projects connected to the development of capitalism. Others, especially those within the schools of postcolonial thought like Homi Bhabha (1990) and Edward Said (1995) found nationalisms arising within postcolonial contexts as forms of resistance, with emancipatory goals and articulations of difference in defiance of and in resistance to colonialism and its insistence on modular tyranny. By the late 1990s, however, nationalism was declared a problem of the past, as the globe moved into the age of globalization, transnational flows of capital, and the age of “postnational” sovereignty and space-making (Appadurai 2003). While nation-states have lost their days of glory, nations and nationalism pull the weight of belonging within this new world of similitude, the waning of local sovereignties and the paving of ways for the development of supragovernmental and supranational alliances.

As I have tried to make clear in this dissertation, Armenianness as nation is by no means a form of the nation-state – neither in its modular form, nor its others. Rather, Armenianness is a form of being in continuity with a mythical past that continues to make demands. It is a nation-family in practice experienced in the everyday as love, care, intrusiveness, and a demand to belong. In its elusiveness, the more it is threatened, the more it raises those out from the quiet to speak in its name. While what has preceded this conclusion has dealt with the threats coming from inside the nation – from those who were supposed to be of the nation, failing the nation through their perversions – as I write
these words there are some massive changes underway that bridge these internal perversions with perverse love triangles and forms of impropriety and wrong-doing that trespass on the very boundaries of home – Armenia, the nation.

In 2009 Katherine Verdery and Sharad Chari wrote, “It is time to liberate the Cold War from the ghetto of Soviet area studies and postcolonial thought from the ghetto of Third World and colonial studies. The liberatory path we propose is to jettison our two posts in favor of a single overarching one: the post-Cold War” (29). Post-Cold War studies, or ethnography, would not only investigate the contexts of postsocialism and postcolonialism together, but link them to wider sets of global problems.

Becoming global in Armenia has meant a number of profound changes. In January 2015, Armenia joined the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), while continuing in many ways to fulfill conditions demanded by its relation to the European Union. Bits of Armenian land have been in the process of being sold off to foreign investors. The Armenian government, in the midst of making decisions about economic and political alliance with the EEU as well as the EU, largely based on trade (Mkrtchyan 2009) and visa regulations (Delcour and Wolczuk 2015) have been leading to further anxieties regarding Armenia’s place, yet once again – always again – under the reign of a foreign sovereign. But these transnational, supranational, supragovernmental organizations and the (re)building of Empire are not the end of nation. I hope that what this dissertation has made clear is the way that in the face of threat, nationalism arises rather than ends. Perversion has created another sense of nation, one that in many ways is
although felt to no longer exist returns, again and again, and speaking in the name of the very thing it claims to no longer be able to speak.

Armenianness continues to make demands in spite of socialism, post-socialism, neoliberalism (or, perhaps, feudalism? (Verdery 1996: 204-228)), the failures of the state, and, finally, - now - the rebuilding of postsocialist Empires and the rise of what is seeming more like colonialism now, in the aftermath of Empire. In other words, while Armenians rarely express their socialist experience as one of colonization, this rhetoric is only now being born. While the colonial and the socialist may not have rubbed together very well, “post” is beginning to open up this question. New directions in Armenian studies – as well as postsocialist studies – will have to reckon with the mergings, crossings, refusals and negotiations with postcolonialism. For, what Armenia’s postsocialist experience highlights is the ways in which postcolonial might be more colonial than the colonial. Perhaps, this is what is in store for the age of the “post-Post-Soviet” (Dziewanska, Degot, Budraitskis 2013) and all of the changes to come that are already in the air.

Bobo Lo (2015) argues that the contemporary breakdown in universal ideology and Russia’s insistence on maintaining local and global governance greatly depends on the “geopolitical and civilizational pivot between East and West.” In this new world disorder, with “a global environment more fluid and unpredictable than at any time since the fall of the Berlin Wall” (xvii), there is a tension between actual worlds and worlds of perception, structured by felt crises regarding the perseverance of governance. This perceptual world is built on performance, through which Putin and the Kremlin have been
maintaining a separation from “Western rule” and values through creating logics of an East that are almost solely built on opposition to the West’s (63-65). In the new world disorder’s leitmotif, Lo maintains, are “multiple contradictions: the reassertion of Westphalian concepts of sovereignty in opposition to supranational ideas of global governance; the relative decline of the major powers, alongside the growing weakness of multilateral institutions; unprecedented interconnectedness, but also resurgent nationalism, protectionism, and introspection“ (55). It is in this context of disorder based on anxieties involving the nation within supranational formations of power, that Timothy Snyder has argued that Putin has been forming a brand of Eurasianism that stands against Western global dominance, in which “the discrimination of gays is front and center.”

“It’s an attempt to create a kind of new ideology,” Snyder explains, “whereby Russia can have some moral standing in the world.”

Sexuality is front and center yet again in this new world of disorder. How will it figure into the merging of studies of postsocialism and postcolonialism that will come? What work will the sexual perversions of the Post-Cold War do?

Singing the Nation-State

What is important to remember, across more or less benign situations, is that the national anthem, incidentally unlike the International (or “We shall overcome”), is in principle untranslatable.

- Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (with Butler 2007: 72-73)

---

I started with one iteration of “No!” – the one that rung loudly in the concert hall during a brief beat of silence as Atrhur Meschian sang – as re-narration – the origins of Armenianness into its own end. As you will recall, Meschian was undoing the nation by claiming that its origins myth was never one of victory and survival, but of defeat. Hayk did not win the battle. He lost to Bel, and in doing so, he brought tyranny to Armenia. Armenian authoritarianism, as such, can be re-envisioned. Armenianness can be revised. But that woman in the crowd – our punctum as you will recall – cannot allow this revision. Armenianess will not mean defeat. It will not mean authoritarianism. It will not perverse. But, alas, it seems that it already has.

Can this “No!” and the song itself – a revision of the Name of Hayk and what it represents – be understood as one form of national anthem? *Azad, ankakh Hayasdan* (Free, Independent Armenia), the current anthem, after all, is not singing true to its cause; at least not anymore. And, this will especially be true in a few years’ time considering the fast pace processes of incorporation into the Eurasian Economic Union and concessions to the European Union. Armenianness will have to eventually reckon with translating its myths and its continuities into other forms. Can Armenia continue to survive by revision? Can Armenianness, as this call of “No!” of the nation to its undoings, be translated to and with larger global movements, louder calls of “No!”? And, if so, what happens to the nation? What happens to Armenianness? These are some new directions – in a brave new world of disorder – that may come, and that in some ways will have to come to studies of nation under postsocialism. And with them may open up new forms of perversion, perhaps more liberatory, perhaps just as deafening. Only survival and future will tell.
Appendix

Questions initially prepared by Lucine Talalyan and the author on January 14, 2013:
1. Is the family important for the Armenian nation?
2. If yes, why?
3. What is your family like?
4. How many people are in your family?
5. Does everyone live in this house?
6. Do you own your house or do you pay rent?
7. When did you receive the house/buy the house?
8. How does the Armenian family differ from other nations’?
9. How does your family differ from your parent’s or grandparent’s family?
10. How is the condition of values in Armenia? What is missing from today’s Armenia?
11. How much space is needed for each member of the family so that they can feel comfortable? Is a separate room necessary or not?
12. How much space do you have for people in your family?
13. If you had the opportunity, what would you do to change the future of Armenia? How would you want to change it?

Questions added on February 25, 2013:
1. What is your favorite movie or serial television show?
2. How do you feel about “domestic violence”? Is there such a phenomenon in Armenia?
3. Is having a son important for the Armenian family?
4. Is having a son important for your family?
5. Does a man have the right to hit his wife?
6. If you have a daughter, what kind of man would you want her to marry?


Sexuality no. 6 (3):409-434.


Gevorgyan, Anna and Ani Kochoyan. “Masculinity and Gender-Based Violence in
Armenian Serial TV Shows.” Presentation given at Yerevan State University, July 29, 2014.


Wedel, Janine. 2001. *Collision and Collusion: The Strange Case of Western Aid to*


Biography

Tamar Shirinian is a Ph.D. Candidate in Cultural Anthropology with a certificate in Feminist Studies at Duke University. She received her undergraduate degree from the University of California at Berkeley in Gender and Women’s Studies in 2007 and began graduate work in 2009. Her research interests include Armenianness, queer studies, post-Cold War studies, postsocialism, nationalism, feminism and sovereignty.