TAMAR R. SHIRINIAN

Survival of a Perverse Nation

Morality and
Queer Possibility
in Armenia

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BUY

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For Diane

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Acknowledgments

Thinking is a collaborative art, and so too is this book a product of years of thinking and rethinking, layered with various sorts of professional, political, aesthetic, and life-making collaboration. To acknowledge these, I will begin with the obvious collaboration that is clearly visible throughout the book: my work with Lucine Talalyan. Lucine, you became a real partner in this work, always ready to think with me and always willing to invite me to think with you. My thoughts—in their style, aesthetic, and affect—have been deeply shaped by these collaborations. I thank you for embarking with me on much of the research that led to the writing of these pages—literally taking the journeys with me on buses, metros, *marshrutkas*, and by foot—but also for bringing to me the gift of co-creative practice. While many contributed to this book, please know that this is also one of our co-creations.

The research for this ethnographic undertaking would not have been possible without the groups and organizations that invited me to take part in their work, their activities, and their social worlds. These include official nongovernmental organizations at which I interned in order to understand the labor behind transforming social values—Public Information and Need for Knowledge (PINK) and Women's Resource Center (WRC)—as well as the many initiatives and groups that were more organically formed and that invited me to take part in making and remaking worlds—Queering Yerevan Collective, the Redefining March 8 Initiative, and the Armenian Environmental Front. Within and between these groups—the larger rhizomatic formation that I call the grassroots political in Armenia—were many who offered up their time, effort, labor, hospitality, compassion, and joy to make my research, my living, my thinking, and my thriving possible. On no hierarchical scale I express gratitude to Mamikon Hovsepyan, Marine Margaryan, Nvard Margaryan, Kolya Hovhannisyan, Nelli Arakelyan, Lusine Saghumyan, Lara Aharonian, Gohar Shahnazaryan, Elvira Meliksetyan, Shushan Avagyan, Aré Martirossian, Ruzanna Grigoryan, Kara Aghajanyan, Anna Shahnazaryan, Arthur Grigoryan, Arpineh Galfayan, Yuri Manvelyan, Karen Hakobyan, Tigran Amiryan, Ani Baghumyan, and Tsomak Oganezova. Mika Danielyan, who will unfortunately not be able to read

these acknowledgments, was always willing to talk, share his perspective, and provide solidarity for which I will always remember him.

Ethnographic research, as I tell my students, requires that one's whole person enter the encounter. For this to be possible, the field site cannot be separated into another domain—an "out there" separate from what constitutes the ethnographer's own personhood. The "field" becomes a part of how the ethnographer is a person in the world and the context in which she lives. It has been friendship that has made my life in the field as I conducted research for this book—as well as my life far beyond the field and into my everyday "here," back "home"—livable. Deep gratitude is owed to those who engaged with me, not just as friends but as comrades. Ani Petrosyan and Hrach Khachatryan became the reasons I felt I could and should return to Yerevan and made it possible that I had a field site, and that this world would become a part of me, and I part of it. Gratitude is also owed to Lusine Mooradian, Edgar Mkrtichyan, Meri Yeranosyan, and Lilia Khachatryan for opening up to me and allowing me to be open with you; and to Harout Simonyan and Qnar Khudoyan, who are always inspiring. Lala Aslikyan, Zara Harutuinian, Lucine Talalyan, and especially Lusine Sargsyan: you all are my home in many respects (here, there, anywhere), and because of you, coming to Armenia feels like a coming home. I hope that you see the moves I make in this book—and especially in any boldness, fierceness, and willingness to take the risks toward the making of new worlds—as borrowed energy from you.

The intellectual spaces in which the thinking and writing of this book took place have been many, and here I have the space to acknowledge only a few of the most critical. The Duke Department of Cultural Anthropology and the Program in Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies nurtured the very beginnings of the framework and articulation of this book. Robin Wesolowski, Louise Meintjes, Charles Piot, Rebecca Stein, Lorien Olive, Samuel Shearer, Can Evren, Jatin Dua, Jennifer Bowles, and Saikat Maitra were parts of crucial reading and writing groups; the Women's Studies Colloquium provided a home for intellectual exchange and growth; and Alyssa Miller, Yektan Türkyilmaz, Jake Silver, Zach Levine, Rachel Greenspan, Leigh Campoamor, Netta Van Vliet, Cheryl Spinner, Sinan Goknur, and Dwayne Dixon formed a larger constellation of intellectual camaraderie. Special gratitude for my cohort, Layla Brown and Yasmin Cho, for being the academic siblings along the beginnings of this path, and especially to Çağrı Yoltar, my

cohort sister, without whom those beginnings would have brought far, far less joy. Thank you, also, to Ömer Özcan, a part of this intellectual family. While graduate school is often seen as the space for intellectual growth, I trace my intellectual genealogy to my undergraduate experiences at UC Berkeley's Gender and Women's Studies Program, especially to the mentorship of Mel Y. Chen, Paola Bacchetta, and Roshanak Kheshti, who introduced me to theory and taught me how to love it. Many colleagues at Millsaps College supported my work: George Bey, Louwanda Evans, and Veronique Belisle of the Sociology and Anthropology Department; Anne MacMaster of the English Department and my Codirector of Women's and Gender Studies; and the "Writing-in-Progress" group, led by Liz Egan. Millsaps became a home especially because of Sue Carrie Drummond, Betsy Kohut, and Rahel Fischbach. At the University of Tennessee, the writing of this book has been supported by the encouragement of colleagues: Graciela Cabana, De Ann Pendry, Prashanth Kuganathan, Roger Begrich, and especially the late Rebecca Klenk, whose warm welcome I will always remember and cherish.

Beyond the institutional spaces that nurtured my thinking and writing of this book, there were other spaces that were collectively produced and that held me from time to time. Most of the first drafts of the chapters for this book were written under the support and guidance of the Summer 2020 Writing Group (a recurring Zoom link that lasted far beyond its demarcation). Thank you to Nelli Sargsyan, Jason Woerner, and Sertaç Sehlikoglu for that vital space in uncertain times. Gratitude also for the Thinking/Loving/Writing Group, Jessica Eileen Jones and Lindsay Andrews, who provided love and guidance as this book was just becoming an idea. Dilan Yıldırım, thank you for forming the writing group that was always available for camaraderie, and thanks also to everyone in that group. The Armenian "Infidels" group, organized by Veronica Zablotsky, Deanna Cachoian-Schanz, and David Kazanjian, provided breathing room in the midst of pandemic and war, which also coincided with the time that I was drafting the first version of this manuscript. Thank you, also, to Sara Appel, whose insights into my writing and its many layers allowed me to strengthen my voice and my claims and for which this book is certainly more of what I wanted it to be. Elizabeth Ault, thank you for making it all happen and for teaching me how to write a book.

Much of the writing here was presented in talks along the way. Thanks to those who invited me to speak, share, and receive responses

as well as to the institutions that provided the possibility: Kathryn Babayan at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor Center for Armenian Studies; Caitlin Ostrowski at the Mississippi State University Department of Anthropology and Middle East Cultures; Raja Swamy at the University of Tennessee Department of Anthropology; Lucine Talalyan and Tigran Amiryan of the Queering Yerevan Collective; Houri Berberian, Melissa Bilal, and Lerna Ekmekçioğlu at the University of California, Irvine's Center for Armenian Studies; Svetlana Borodina at the Harriman Institute, Columbia University; Baird Campbell with the American Anthropological Association's Committee for the Anthropology of Science, Technology, and Computing; Kathryn David at the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities, Vanderbilt University; and Eviya Hovhannissyan at the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Yerevan.

Support comes in many ways, and just one way is financial. The research for this book was made possible by funding support from Duke University, Millsaps College, and the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

I would like to express deep appreciation to Tomas Matza, Anne Allison, Ara Wilson, Anne-Maria Makhulu, and Frances Hasso, who each, and in very different ways, acted as guides on the journey of writing, publishing, figuring my way around professional spaces and how to be a colleague. I am grateful for how my work continues to bring me into contact with each of you.

I do not know how to thank Diane M. Nelson because I do not have words for what it feels like to see this book to publication knowing that she will not see it. You were the best mentor that I could have wished for, and I hope that you would have seen in this a reflection of your encouragement and your style, your wit, and your care with ideas. Deep gratitude for your guidance and for always being willing to provide shelter and comfort; for the reassurance that brilliance is not necessarily funded, and that funding is never innocent; for the knowledge that being tough is often rooted in fear and anxiety; and for the insight that clarity is sometimes only found in confusion.

Before my first trip to Armenia in 2010, I excitedly called my dad, Moses Shirinian, to tell him the news. "I'm going to Armenia!" I said. "Armenia? Why?" he responded. Later he would tell a friend that he couldn't understand why I would go to a place that he had spent so much energy trying to get out of. A few years later, my dad would come to visit me in Yerevan. He would see old friends and old streets, all of which had been made new by the enormous historical, political, eco-

nomic, social, and cultural transformations over the decades. I was fascinated by his awe as we walked through neighborhoods that carried only traces of what he remembered. While my dad might not have understood why I wanted to go to Armenia—and in some ways this is still true today—the joyful stories he would tell about his youth, about growing up under socialism, passed on to me a nostalgia that I only realized years later. Thus, I thank my dad and his nostalgia for providing much of the impetus for the curiosity behind this book.

I am indebted to my mother, Aida Shirinian, who gave me music as a way of thinking (who helped me understand the purpose of fugue and thus movement beyond and elsewhere), and to my sister, Sose Shirinian, who loves and supports me unconditionally, and who might "look up" to me but for which I certainly look up to her.

Raja Swamy, my life comrade and accomplice, this book and so much more would have never been possible without your support, your celebration, and your unrelenting encouragement. Thank you, every day and forever.

And, finally, Mher, whom I made and birthed as I was also making and birthing this book: you cannot read *yet*, but one day maybe you will read this, and you will see in writing that you gave new perspective, new objective, and new foundation to *why* it is that I write and why futurity matters.

INTRODUCTION

Survival of a Perverse Nation

On the very early morning of May 8, 2012, two young men fire-bombed DIY Pub, a small basement-level bar in central Yerevan, the capital city of post-Soviet Armenia. According to the firebombers, the act was done to protect their nation against homosexuals and Turks, both of whom they considered national enemies. For weeks following the fire-bombing, mainstream news outlets—in print, on television, and online—as well as social media and popular blogs discussed the event and its implications for the Armenian nation. What did it mean that there was a "gay bar" in Yerevan? What did it mean that there were homosexuals in Yerevan? On May 21, just two weeks after the firebombing, when national attention was still fixated on this new public figure of the homosexual, members of the newly founded nationalist organization Hayazn attacked a march called the Diversity March, which had been planned by a coalition of nongovernmental organizations. The organizers of the march saw it as a celebration of ethnic, religious, cultural, and subcultural differences in the city. Members of Hayazn and others who joined the counterprotest claimed it was a "gay parade" whose "faggots" (*gomikner*) had to be stopped. The Diversity March led to hours of clashes be-

tween participants and counterprotesters. While it was mediated by the police, who eventually provided the march's organizers safe harbor in the building of the Yerevan Writer's Union, it was also clear to those participating that most of the police officers sympathized with the counterprotesters. These two events became prominent subjects of discussion. Like the firebombing of DIY, the Diversity March incited its most public discussions *not* around what it meant that these were targeted attacks against a certain group, and *not* around what it meant that these were attacks on difference itself, but rather around the question of what it meant that there was a gay bar, a gay parade, and gay people at all in Armenia's capital city.

By the time I arrived in Yerevan in August 2012, Tsomak Oganezova, one of the owners of DIY Pub, had left the country after she and her sister had received a frightening number of death threats. They were given asylum in Sweden and returned to Armenia only in 2020. The grassroots political world—from which LGBT, feminist, environmental, liberal, progressive, democracy, and leftist as well as right-wing nationalist activists had emerged—had been split in two: those who could tolerate LGBT persons and those who could not. This split had consequences for activism in areas that had seemingly little to do with gender or sexuality: struggles around urban public space, against mining, against European or Russian neo-imperialism, and centered on contentious economic and human rights policies. Mainstream media made homosexuality into a hypervisible mark of Armenia's entry into the postsocialist spatiotemporal landscapes that included the European Union and its "neighborhood," Russia's Eurasian Economic Union, industry's privatization, and the monopolization of critical goods and services by a handful of men. Armenia was changing; it was becoming something other than what it had been—not necessarily since the times of state socialism, but since its very inception as a nation. The figure of the homosexual was placed front and center among these crises and became the cause, the sign, the point of a visible identification of these changes. While these ideas regarding homosexuality as a crisis were largely right-wing concerns, they were also frequently utilized by some members of government and publicized through popular media.

Homosexuality around the world is often framed within traditionalist discourses as a threat to national values.[1] There was something particular in the case of Armenia, however. Often presented not *just* as a threat to national values, homosexuality was claimed to be a threat to the

very possibility of the nation's survival. For many right-wing activists, public officials, and members of the Armenian Apostolic Church, homosexuality threatened to annihilate the Armenian nation. This threat of annihilation is a part of a wider national narrative. If non-Armenian readers of this book know one thing about Armenia, it is probably the Genocide carried out by the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century. While the politics surrounding this event in the post-Soviet Republic of Armenia are complex—and not to be equated with its centrality in political and social discourse in the Armenian Diaspora—it plays a significant role in this ongoing sense that the nation and its survival are constantly under threat. Indeed, the term *survival* has its place in the titles of several monographs about Armenia.[2] Further, there are many articles, exhibitions, short films, and other accounts of Armenia framed through the prism of survival. Armenia, a *pokr azg* (small nation), has reason to harbor not only a "fear of small numbers" (Appadurai 2006) that fuels revanchist discourses of war but a fear of total annihilation. Armenia's history is a history of survival.

The 2012 DIY Pub firebombing and the attack on the Diversity March started a sex panic that continued for years, punctuating postsocialist temporality with heightened emotions centered on threats to the nation's survival. In October 2012, the German Embassy and an EU delegation attempted to screen (in Armenia) the Serbian film *Parada* (Dragojevic 2011), which explores the struggles surrounding the first Gay Pride parade in Belgrade. Right-wing protesters, claiming the film threatened children, were successful in stopping the screenings. In 2013, Armenia's National Assembly passed Law No. 57, "Protection of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Women and Men," which controversially used the term *gender*, transliterated but not translated into Armenian, leading to protests that this was a European attempt to make all Armenians transgender. In 2018, a mob in the village of Shurnukh went after a group of queer youth gathering at a local farm. A few youths were beaten, but it seemed as if the mob had come for a lynching. These events brought the figure of the homosexual into the public eye and produced a powerful rhetoric that circulated widely within popular media: that of sexual perversion, or *aylaserutyun*, which identified sexual and gender transgressions as threats against the nation's survival.

Postsocialism as Constant Crisis

While this sex panic consumed both mainstream and social media, there was another major rhetoric in wide circulation: that of the moral perversion, *aylandakutyun*, of the nation. Within this rhetoric of moral perversion, it was the political-economic elite—the post-Soviet oligarchs and their government henchmen—who had destroyed the possibilities of the nation's everyday life and its reproduction. The oligarchy's greed, corruption, and general immorality, I heard very frequently, was leading to the destruction of the nation. While this narrative homed in on the question of the *moral*—something to which I dedicate much discussion in this book—this framework was undergirded by various political-economic realities. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, through prescription from the World Bank as well as from a whole host of Western capitalist institutions (Wedel 2001), often referred to as the "Washington Consensus," the Armenian government set out to privatize public industry and state assets, leading to deindustrialization and mass liquidation and, as a result, mass unemployment and emigration. Primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003), state capture by the elite, corruption, poverty, unemployment, and other forms of economic violence and crisis had drawn the nation's survival into question. These economic crises also came with political challenges—shootings, terrorist plots, attempted coups, state violence against citizens, and mass uprisings.

Quick privatization was conceived as an economic necessity by the World Bank (Roth-Alexandrowicz 1997) to fix the problems of distribution that came about not only as a result of the breakup of Soviet allocative systems but also as a result of Armenia's war with neighboring Azerbaijan in the midst of the Soviet Union's collapse, which led to a blockade on Armenia for some essential goods, especially petroleum. The war over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh had been an ongoing crisis—a "frozen conflict"—for the Republic, even before independence. The Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), predominantly populated by Armenians, was originally created in 1923 from land that had been under dispute between the Armenian and Azerbaijani Republics prior to their Sovietization. While the region was autonomous in its status and led by the First Secretary of NKAO from the capital city of Stepanakert, it was kept within the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) nonetheless. Major political upheaval surrounding the sta-

tus of the territory did not begin until the 1980s. However, throughout the decades of the Soviet era, Armenians made demands to Moscow to unify the region with the Armenian SSR. Following Mikhail Gorbachev's implementation of glasnost—or openness, meant to democratize the USSR—citizens of the Armenian SSR as well as Armenians in NKAO responded by demanding the unification of NKAO with Armenia. In February 1988, hundreds of thousands of Armenians in NKAO protested. Later that month, they submitted a formal petition to the Supreme Council of the Soviet Union. These demands, established originally on claims for Armenian self-determination, became charged with nationalist sentiment and led to violent clashes between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Most notable was the pogrom against Armenians in the Azerbaijani town of Sumgait, which left more than two hundred Armenians dead in late February 1988 and was followed by an almost total population exchange. After the dismantling of the Soviet Union in 1991, the conflict became a full-fledged war with episodes of mass violence, such as the massacre in the town of Khojaly in 1992, during which more than two hundred Azerbaijanis were killed by Armenian military forces. While Armenia was able to gain control of the NKAO territory—including seven key regions of Azerbaijan—at the time of an official ceasefire in 1994, the reemergence of the armed conflict in 2020 resulted in Azerbaijan taking much of this territory back, leaving Armenian and Russian peacekeeping troops in control of north-central areas and Stepanakert, the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh. In September 2023, after a nine-month blockade and military attack by Azerbaijan, an estimated one hundred thousand Armenians fled the region and the Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh Republic—self-declared as the Republic of Artsakh—was dissolved. For Armenians, this conflict—especially as it started with pogroms—was a continuation of the Genocide, or as Harutyun Marutyan (2007) has noted, its "sequel." It also meant a consistent militarization of everyday life and politics.

Heavy emphasis on militarization, justified by an external enemy's territorial threat, allowed the elite to maintain power and halted the processes of democratization for decades. The protracted war between Armenia and Azerbaijan produced a status quo that pitted democratization against national security (Ghaplanyan 2018), creating an "entrenched authoritarianism" resistant to social change (Ohanyan 2020, 231). Social scientists attuned to questions of gender and sexuality in Armenia, however, point out that along with the lack of resolu-

tion to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the political use of homophobia has also been a major obstacle to social transformation, marking change from the status quo as something dangerous to the nation's survival, and manipulating this fear to foster attachment to the political-economic elite in the country (Shahnazaryan, Aslanova, Badasyan 2016; Anna Nikoghosyan 2016; Beukian 2018). Feelings of national, cultural, and traditional survival as being under threat have been the foundations of an exploitative and violent political-economic status quo.

Survival of a Perverse Nation interrogates the moral discourse of these political-economic crises. I show how systemic, structural, political, and economic problems were taken up as issues of morality—of disintegrating values, a lack of respect for tradition, a declining investment in care for Armenians and Armenia—and as consequences of a missing Father figure for the nation. Here, I should distinguish what I mean by the *moral* so as to not confuse it with the ethical or the political. In this book, my use of the moral refers to tautological authority—what Jacques Lacan has called the "Master's discourse" (Fink 1995). Unlike political or ethical claims, moral claims are not based in reason concerning justice, material benefit for the collective, or struggle toward the betterment of conditions through systemic considerations. In a tautological fashion, moral claims are based in how things are *supposed* to be because that is how they are supposed to be. In Armenia, the focus on morality displaced political-economic discussions—discussions of historical mechanisms—onto questions of an ahistorical, continuous, proper Armenian Symbolic order. Because of the emphasis on morality rather than on political critique when it came to the crises with which the Republic was faced, feelings about the corruption and indecency of the oligarchy were easily manipulated to become feelings about homosexuality's perversion of the nation. While the oligarchy's violations are based in capitalist exploitation, its psychic and discursive uptake as a moral issue (rather than as a political-economic one) allows its violations to collapse into generalized anxieties about social reproduction and thus conflate these anxieties with homosexuality as another kind of violation of proper familial expectations.

I examine what we might call *homophobia* through its very sites and nodes of production, although following various critiques of its common usage and the assumptions that undergird it, I most often refrain from using the term. Gregory Herek (2004), for instance, argues that homophobia is often treated as an individual complex about fear

while it is actually a prejudice supported by a larger heterosexual society that fuels anger, hostility, and disgust toward nonheterosexual persons. Maya Mikdashi and Jasbir K. Puar (2016) have also maintained that homophobia is an inadequate way of expressing a full political picture when there are larger forms of violence present in which sexual intolerance exists (see also Atshan 2020 for a critique of this position). What might be called *homophobia* in Armenia is an incited and inciting rhetoric, part of a concerted effort by right-wing actors to produce a deep fear and anxiety about homosexuality. Some of this anxiety-production is fueled by actual fears of homosexuality—a phenomenon seen as a threat to the family, the nation, and life as it should be governed by proper Armenianness. Much of this anxiety-production, however, as I show in this book, is also fueled by other concerns, some that right-wing nationalists are conscious of and are intentional about and others that are driven by unconscious displacements and condensations.

What does it mean to survive? In what ways is survival dependent on continuity? And what kinds of continuities count if we are naming something (a nation) as the thing that has survived or should survive? How far off can something (a nation) veer from its path of continuity with the past—that time before an event or some phenomenon threatened its survival—for it to still be identified as the same thing as that which came before? What allows for *survival*, and who decides? Is survival— the pull toward continuing and remaining—always conservative? To what degree is the continuing remnant—that which survives—the same as the thing that existed before? Does survival always entail a before and an after; is it, in other words, always marked by an event that splits time? Or can survival be threatened through small, incremental, changes of the everyday, slippage into the unrecognizability of the thing that can now be said not to have survived? These questions are about ontology—fueled by ontological angst regarding a core way of life that is *supposed to be*. Armenia is *supposed to be* proper and is defined by a history of miraculous existence and survival based on its moral strength. Armenia especially owes this survival to a genealogy of valorous national Fathers. I refer to this ontology, based on moral propriety, as Armenia's Symbolic order. In recent years, many Armenians have felt that this moral strength is waning. In the face of visibilized homosexuality, public discourse has placed Armenianness and its survival at an ontological crossroads: if Armenia veers in these sexually perverse (*aylaservatz*) directions, it will no longer be Armenia. The oligarchy, however, has also been im-

plicated in these threats against national survival. Their moral perversion (*aylandakutyun*) has oriented everyday life away from its proper paths, and Armenia, if it follows these improper paths, will also no longer be that which once existed; it will no longer have the strengths of morality, tradition, and familial values with which it has always withstood attempts at its annihilation. This book investigates the entanglements of these threats against the nation's survival. It also, however, speculates on the possibilities and potentials of nonsurvival. Intense focus on the need for the nation to survive has constrained various forms of life, including queer life. *Survival of a Perverse Nation*, thus, investigates the present from which other—perhaps nonnational, or improper—forms of life and world might take flight.

Queering Political Economy and Spatiotemporality

Survival of a Perverse Nation makes two central propositions. The first of these is *perversion as a queer theory of political economy*. I maintain that discourses around national threats having to do with social and cultural deterioration, deviation, or perversion—whether these are sexual or of a larger moral concern affecting the social and biological reproduction of the body politic—have their roots in political and economic crises whether or not these crises are apparent or named. The claim that life-as-we-know-it is turning into something else, becoming other than that which sustains a nation, is a claim about governance, labor, production, consumption, distribution, allocation, exchange, geopolitics, geo-economics, and other factors that we might call *political economy* and see as the basis of *real* material social relations. Political economy, however, for the purposes of this book, should not be taken as strictly economic and political operations and mechanisms. In other words, I do not take political economy as a space detachable from everyday life, as a space limited to formal production, ownership, and distribution. Rather, I hone the intimate, affective, and "feelings" side of how political economy is a site of everyday world-making and take seriously the politics of how production and ownership are *felt* as moral questions and, importantly, how *reproduction*—both social and biological—are at the heart of political economy.

Toward a queer theory of political economy, I am interested in providing analysis that traces social and moral anxieties regarding na-

tional survival and fears of a radically deteriorated future to political-economic realities. By this I mean that queer theory can also become a framework through which to understand political-economic processes. I see the rhetoric of perversion as a social, political, and economic phenomenon, and I make use of it here toward a social theory. This theory of the social, drawing on psychoanalytic conceptualizations of the Symbolic realm (which I discuss below), remains Marxian in its insistence on understanding social relations as intricately and inseparably tied to material production, consumption, distribution, and exchange as well as to *feelings, attachments*, and the *Symbolic meanings* of those processes. Following my interlocutors and their use of the rhetoric(s) of perversion, I suggest that beyond individual psychic pathology and even social pathology, perversion may be an apt way through which to describe capitalism's spatiotemporal processes and its cuts, disturbances, interventions, and violations of and on the social psyche. I read discourses of *aylaserutyun* (sexual perversion) and *aylandakutyun* (moral perversion) as symptomatic of real forms of the perversion of the social, political, and economic material world and, as such, as real threats against survival (of the nation and of life itself) while also, simultaneously, critically interrogating the meanings of sexuality and morality claimed within these rhetorics.

Through ethnographic introspection as well as (at times) through speculation, I refuse the language and discourse of transition and insist on the language of political-economic *transformation*, which remains open-ended. Postsocialist studies hotly debated this question in the late 1980s and into the 1990s. Caroline Humphrey (1991) offered the view that the seeming chaos of the postsocialist world in this period, often taken as an inevitable stage toward market reforms, was rather an indication of the making of feudal structures, as various big men in Russia formed their own suzerainties and took the matter of maintaining order as well as the distribution of necessary goods within provincial locales into their own hands. Where these personal kingdoms ruled, state law did not seem to be operating (and was sometimes not even known by those who occupied seats of authority within governments). Katherine Verdery (1996) extended this line of questioning around whether the end of state socialism was bringing about free market economies and capitalist states. She highlighted the ways in which privatization was often uneven in order to facilitate state control, how agents of privatization also felt compelled to continue forms of allocation that were once the responsibility of the

state, and how "destatizing" and "restatizing" (209) mechanisms—what can also be called "state capture" (Visser and Kalb 2010)—often meant horizontal forms of reciprocity in regard to power, what we might understand as Mafia control. These arguments fed into a larger debate around the language of postsocialism. The use of the term "transition" highlighted the change from socialist institutions to free market institutions and ideologies, often pointing to the violence of "shock therapy" (Verdery 1996; Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Wedel 2001) instituted by Western agencies, but at times also falling into the traps of a teleological "transitology" that assumed that 1989 (for Eastern Europe) was when "market reform" began (as opposed to earlier), and that what was taking place in the 1990s was, indeed, market reform rather than a multifaceted transformation with various and varying phases (for a critique of this work, see Kirn 2017). For these reasons, some scholars chose, instead, to use the term *transformation*—to highlight multiplicity and to critique teleological assumptions about "transition" from socialism to capitalism (Stark and Bruszt 1998; Hörschelmann and Stenning 2008). Ethnography played a key role in these analyses in challenging top-down (Western) perspectives of "rescue"—either through "shock therapy" in which the West saw itself as healer or through "big bang" theories of institutions and history in this part of the world starting anew (the beginning of history) in which the West could see itself as God (Verdery 1996, 205).

I take up *postsocialism* not as a temporal descriptor nor as a region but rather as a naming of a processual worlding that insists on bringing political-economic realities to the forefront. In this sense, the "post" might refer to a time after but not necessarily as a probationary period. As Shannon Woodcock (2011, 65) has argued, taking "post-socialism" as a strictly temporal category marks Central and Eastern Europe, and we might say other postsocialist contexts such as Cuba and China, as waiting for Europe and the United States to bestow upon these regions a recognition of civilization for having finally arrived formally to capitalism. Postsocialism (without the hyphen), critically, can have liberatory potential (Zhang 2008) as an insistence on naming the socialist past, because a part of the contemporary world recalls that other worlds, innovations, values, and ways of life were real and are thus always possible. In this sense, *postsocialism* here should not be taken to mean that socialism is of the past and not part of the future. Indeed, I am committed to studying the fissures, ruptures, and breaks of the political-economic world of socialism into what came after, and especially its intimate re-

alities, toward the possibilities of reimagining socialisms as futures. Furthermore, I use postsocialism and its conceptual embeddedness in political-economic realities not as a statement about the centrality of particular institutions or about the institutional qualities of socialism and what came after—what Tatjana Thelen (2011) has critiqued as the "neo-institutionalism" of Western socialist and postsocialist studies that constructed a form of "area studies" with an exotic other in mind—but as forms of worlding, ideas, possibilities, and potentials. I am interested in desire, subjectivity, intimacy, and political possibility and see these as intricately caught up in the affective realms of political economy—not as a set of institutions but as a set of conditions that make life. A *postsocialist* queer theory calls on us to think about gender, sexuality, and worlding in general as always already entangled with political economy.

By using the language of transformation, I also emphasize that a *transition* to the capitalist mode of production was not and is not inevitable. Regarding Armenia's particular mode of production within this transformation, we might reference capitalism as well as neoliberalization ("capitalism on steroids"). We certainly witness the commodification of labor (Wolf 1982), which comes with the general enclosure of the commons and thus capital's command of labor—the simplest way of defining the capitalist mode of production, in which most Armenians depend on the sale of their labor power for their livelihood. However, much of the wealth being produced among the elite of the nation-state is not produced through the buying and exploiting of labor but through various other forms of exploitation, especially mercantile forms of wealth production like the monopolization of imports (sugar, butter, gasoline, cigarettes, etc.) and selling off what had been looted from the socialist state and from the properties taken after the resettlement of lands during and following the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Neoliberal economic policies have certainly had effects on life in Armenia—with the privatization of once-public services like education and transportation and the stripping away of social services like pensions and the state provision of housing. However, neoliberalization[3] itself has been an incomplete process because of the social demands that have come from post-Soviet citizens used to having economic rights, such as in housing markets (Zavisca 2012), in already-built infrastructures that are communal (Collier 2011), in reproductive healthcare (Rivkin-Fish 2013), and in various other social protections (Petryna 2002). Thus, while I use *capitalism* and *neoliberalization* in this book, I will often also employ the language of *oligar-*

chic capitalism or *oligarchy* to point to these variances and the importance they have in the meanings produced in their everyday effects.

Many of those with whom I spoke while conducting the research leading up to this book did not necessarily find capitalism at fault; rather, the cause they identified as the root of their contemporary life conditions was the particularly aggressive and immoral forms of economic exploitation, especially at the levels of expensive consumption (as a result of monopolies on imports) and unemployment they were experiencing at the hands of and under the reign of the post-Soviet oligarchy. In other words, the colloquial concept of *oligarchy* had somehow become separated from the capitalist mechanisms that made this oligarchy's emergence possible. Underneath these moral complaints, however, I often found sharp critiques of capitalist processes. Thus, while I make use of the colloquial and moral usage here as it was articulated throughout my research, my analysis adds historical and political weight to the category of the oligarchy. The oligarchy was on a continuum with what are today the more acceptable "large businessmen" (*khoshor biznesmen*)—a term that is sometimes even used for the slightly more morally acceptable oligarchs—and the bourgeoisie; in other words, they made up a part of the owner class. While the oligarchy vulgarly showcased their wealth, begotten through exploitation and theft (sometimes also flaunted), the more "respectable" bourgeoisie maintained and continues today to maintain a more humble demeanor. It is critical to point out that the term *oligarchy* in widespread usage in the postsocialist world is also applicable to Western and Euro-American modes of wealth production. In other words, while the billionaires of the West, like Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates, certainly do depend on the surplus value produced by workers to make their wealth, they also very much depend on state capture to provide a hospitable environment for this exploitation, marking them and their affiliates within the state also as an oligarchy. In these ways, while I find it necessary to specify a particular oligarchic mode of capitalism, it might also be fair to say that late capitalism itself functions as an oligarchy, by which I understand political rule by the economic elite and, in the case of Armenia, an elite fraternal horde—a brotherhood of oligarchs and other bosses. As I will discuss throughout this book, this fraternal horde had a psychic and affective force beyond its position as political-economic elite: as brethren to and within the nation, they marked political-economic realities with the personal and intimate feeling of betrayal.

As this work is an ethnography in the postsocialist context, a note on Armenia's geopolitical positioning between East and West is critical. Scholarly discussions about the effects on Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia of this in-betweenness have focused on the effects of being a part of Europe but at its margins (Buelow 2012; Butterfield 2013; Suchland 2018; Shirinian 2017, 2021c); a desire to "return to Europe" (Suchland 2011); and national(ist) self-representations of whiteness (Imre 2015). Some threads of this discussion have centered colonialism and imperialism, claiming that the postsocialist region's alliance is with the "postcolonial" world rather than with the West or Europe. The "colonial" in these readings, however, does not necessarily reference either European powers or the United States as a major imperialist global force (Wood 2003); rather, (Soviet) Russia becomes the imperial metropole (Zhurzhenko 2001). If the West is taken up as an imperial power at all, it is only in abstraction and usually in reference to epistemology rather than to political economy. Madina Tlostanova, Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert, and Redi Koobak (2019) for instance, argue that postsocialist feminists have become the "missing other" of transnational and postcolonial feminism—a result of these critical frameworks' overreliance on Western categories of colonialism and race. While the authors take Russia as the imperial metropole, their claims center postcolonial theory, emanating from the West, rather than the political-economic power of Russia or the United States and Europe. In a retort to this line of reasoning regarding a "missing other" as well as to what constitutes the "Western," Chiara Bonfiglioli and Kristen Ghodsee (2020) point out that the real "missing other" is global socialist feminism, which is erased not only within Western epistemology but also in postsocialist feminisms. Bonfiglioli and Ghodsee argue that the silencing of socialist feminist global solidarity movements is a continuation of Western liberal feminist political agendas, aligned with US hegemony, and not necessarily just their epistemological perspectives. As a result, it is toward this very same agenda that postsocialist feminists reduce the possibilities of socialism to coloniality. In a somewhat similar critical vein Maria Mayerchyk and Olga Plakhotnik (2021) argue that contemporary Ukrainian queer and feminist movements have focused their critiques of colonialism on Russia, creating a nationalism and an uncritical Eurocentrism at the heart of mainstream feminism.

The specters of Russia, Europe, and the United States and claims of colonialism and imperialism are present throughout my ethnography.

These were major components of the politics of sex, gender, and sexuality. As I show, however, these claims were most frequently moral and cultural in nature—established on anxieties about a disintegrating Armenian ontological propriety. The quasi-political sentiment of being an indigenous nation struggling for sovereignty produced an insistence on ontological purity, policing those regarded as transgressors. In this way, claims of "colonialism" (including that of Russia) were not only anti-queer and anti-feminist; but they were also not necessarily anti-colonial in that they provided no critique of actual *material* forms of colonialism, imperialism, or oppression.[4] It is also important to note that the Soviet Union is rarely seen as having been an imperial force in Armenia. Even those who are today pro-Western who might consider Russia's military, economic, political, social, or cultural presence in Armenia (and in Nagorno-Karabakh until September 2023) as imperial or colonial, rarely extend this to the history of the Soviet Union.

Popular media and most of my interlocutors claimed that Armenia was a perverse nation—deviating from family, the Church, and other national values—either because of new, dangerous ideologies like homosexuality or feminism or because of the oligarchy that ruled over Armenians through threats but did not provide the care for the people that is obligatory for proper Armenian leadership (for good Armenian Fathers). I point out, however, that underneath these depoliticized claims are the actual political-economic realities of contemporary oligarchic, capitalist, and neoliberal structures, which Armenia shares with many other nations and political-economic contexts throughout the world. Because of heightened anxieties concerning national survival and an attunement to these anxieties in public discourse through a rhetoric of perversion, readers of this book might find Armenia an ideal case study through which to understand capitalist global free market mechanisms' perversions of life and sociality. In this sense, *Survival of a Perverse Nation* is a queer ethnography that takes as its object of study a perverse political-economic context that highlights the ways in which *social and biological reproduction* and feelings about them are inseparable from *governance and material production* and feelings about them. Furthermore, in dwelling on the ways in which production and reproduction are described as perverse processes in the postsocialist era, I bring sexuality to the center of an analysis of political economy. Material structures of production are affective, emotional, and moral structures. Importantly, they are also structured through sexuality.

While invested in sexuality as a site of social and biological repro-duction, *Survival of a Perverse Nation* is less interested in LGBT identity, life, and practice. Some chapters here (especially chapters 1 and 4) will draw on ethnographic fieldwork among queer Armenians. For the most part, however, this queer ethnography takes what David L. Eng, Jack Halberstam, and Jose Muñoz (2005) describe as a "subjectless" approach to critique. Queer studies has, for a long while already (see, for instance, Cohen 1997), become a field that "disallows any positing of a proper sub-ject *of* or object *for* the field by insisting that queer has no fixed politi-cal referent" (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 2005, 3). Subjectless critique unsettles any proper subject or object of queer analysis, especially as subjects that crop up tend to be based on a white Euro-American mid-dle class understanding of "nonnormative" sexual and gender identity. As such, queer theory has effectively, in Eng and Jasbir K. Puar's words (2020, 4), "provincialized" itself within the global South, taking interest in the geopolitics of sexuality that involves a wide scope for the mech-anisms, crises, possibilities, and politics of what count as subjects and objects of queer analysis (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 2005; Rosenberg and Villarejo 2011; Mikdashi and Puar 2016; Eng and Puar 2020).

Central to these theoretical formations has been the question of political economy, especially as neoliberalism (Duggan 2002) and its ends (Amar 2013), capitalism and global crises (Rosenberg and Villarejo 2011), and convergences between queer and Marxist theory (Floyd 2009; Hennessey 2006) have become principal sites of inquiry to the deploy-ment of *queer* as a concept and conceptual framework. These shifts are also visible in some lines of investigation within postsocialist studies, such as examinations of the intimate effects of privatization and the commodification of life (Stout 2014), and inquiries into the geopoliti-cal and geo-economic entanglements of LGBT politics (Butterfield 2013; Rexhepi 2016, 2017; Ye 2021b). More marginal to these framings, but of critical insight, are the contributions of Marxist theory from the ex-isting socialist and communist worlds, and its interventions in sexual-ity and the human within liberal society (Liu 2012; Popa 2021). *Survival of a Perverse Nation* extends these queer theoretical forays into political economy. I provide a materialist queer analysis from the former Second World—a world that, while currently making up a part of the Global South, has seen modernity in its capitalist as well as socialist forms. I in-vestigate these political-economic realities and histories *queerly*, which is to say that I look for their potentials for rupture and the making of

difference. I also look at them as *queer* in themselves, as deviating from proper moral orders.

Readers may be surprised that this queer ethnography largely avoids the frameworks of normativity and antinormativity and employs, instead, the concept of the proper. In the introduction to a special issue of *differences*, Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson (2015) take apart the notion of the norm, making the case that while normativity and its undoing have been at the heart of queer theory since its inception as a field, the actual relationship between *queer* and *norm* has not been well articulated. While the norm is average and fungible, within queer theory's imaginary it also becomes an unchangeable space, filled with whatever is imagined to be restrictive and exclusive (heterosexuality, cisgender identity, whiteness, etc.). Wiegman and Wilson suggest that the norm might also be thought of as capacious, as it already holds within it the possibilities of difference and opposition and, as an average, is liable to change. The norm, as an average, in postsocialist Armenia is widely felt to be perversion, as the conditions for morality have disintegrated. The notion of the *proper*, thus, allows me to reflect on these feelings of deviation. The proper is an imaginary ontology of an ancient, surviving Armenianness. Improprieties of the present lead the nation (too) far away from this ontological status.

Drawing on and contributing to ongoing discussions about social reproduction within Marxist, feminist, and queer theory (Hennessey 2006; Bhattacharya 2017; Fraser 2016; Sears 2016; Ye 2021a) as part and parcel of production, this book demonstrates the intricate relationship between the production of capital/wealth and the reproduction of children/a next generation and how this relationship is felt deeply within everyday life. How possibilities of production and reproduction *feel* has consequences on the political legitimacy of the ruling elite, especially as this elite, within the context of what I describe as a "nation-family," are taken as intimates. Capitalist oligarchy and the conditions it produces in everyday life are understood as constituting the end of a nation that has survived for millennia, pointing to the antilife and antisocial currents of our current hegemonic global political-economic structures. The rhetoric of perversion is an indictment against global capitalism, expressed in the feelings and affects of local and intimate Armenian everyday life and experience.

The second central argument of this book concerns *the radical spatiotemporal possibilities of moral rupture*. Rather than lamenting the end of

the nation's survival with many of my interlocutors, *Survival of a Perverse Nation* locates radical potential for world-making at these very ends. If many Armenians in the Republic of Armenia in 2012–13 were struck by hopelessness in the face of decades of entrenched social, political, and economic violence—which they articulated as the *aylandakutyun* (moral perversion) of the nation—I argue that this also created a context for the possibilities of radically transforming moral worlds. If the nation could not and would not survive—or, by some estimates, had already not survived—because it was becoming or had become something so different from what made its survival possible, this very set of conditions make conceivable new forms of social relation. One of the main claims within the rhetorics of perversion in popular circulation was that Armenia lacked proper kin relations—and especially a proper Father for the nation (as a proper leader) and proper fathers within households (as men had either become too improper to be fathers or were actually absent—gone off as migrant laborers). I maintain that while these circumstances were mourned as having brought about an end to the nation, they also brought about other possibilities for life and sociality, and especially (as I investigate in chapter 6) potentials for a world without political Fatherhood or patriarchy: a world without Daddy. The perversion of the nation, which threatens its survival, is also a site of great queer spatiotemporal potential.

I offer the conceptual framework of perversion, thus, as a new means of understanding the queer political. V. Spike Peterson (2014) has provocatively suggested that queerness can be an unintended consequence of the global inequality that has created mass migrations, led to the breaking up of households, and challenged familial normalcy. Capitalism's constant disruption of intimate relations and politics of care undo norms, "queering" the family and intimate relations. Here, "queer" is read as nonnormative forms of intimacy and kinship. Natalie Oswin (2019) similarly offers a spatial analysis of how the global city of Singapore, which only very marginally tolerates LGBT persons, also "queers" migrant workers and foreign workers through their non-belonging and the limitations placed on their rights to the city. "Queer" becomes marginalization. My investigation of perverse temporality and spatiality, however, reveals that it might not necessarily be productive to read all deviation or marginalization as queer. Deviation might result from attempts at propriety and even from intense desires for a good, proper, normal life. The undoing of social norms and threats against "the good

life" do not always come from queer imaginaries. The moral ruptures that paved these perverse paths resulted from capitalist and oligarchic modernity's failures, producing spatiotemporal mutations that resulted in (real and imagined) perverse figures like the homosexual or the oligarch. Perversion moves *away* from the *should be* and the *supposed to be*—those sensibilities of time and space that are the basis of the expectations for propriety and national survival—but not necessarily in a way that emancipates.

There is a necessary step between perversion and queerness: the transformational, translational, and affirmational work that activists do. New norms might emerge from mutated political-economic realities and social infrastructures, and thus we might see in capitalism a potential toward queer possibility. If, however, these forms of transformation continue to be seen either as purely negative consequences of moral failure or as depoliticized formations, then new realities, values, and norms remain *resignifications* rather than *asignifying ruptures* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 9) of the proper and thus do not change systems but requalify them. Here, I draw on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's insistence on maintaining an undercurrent of constant disruption to discipline and regimes of order rather than resignifying one regime into another. I thus refuse readings of capitalism's perversion of life as queerness, reserving queerness and queer potential as affective signifiers for active projects that seek to transform worlds rather than as passive mutations and condemnations of political-economic failure. Perversion is the rupture on which queerness may emerge, much like how capitalist contradiction is the rupture on which revolution is made.

The transformational work required to seek the queer potentials of political-economic crisis requires politicization, eschewing tendencies toward the moralization of social or economic issues. In this way, I posit queerness not just as a liberatory sensibility, but—and toward this liberation—as a critical impulse against the moral, the proper, and other forms that insist on the conservation, on the survival, of the status quo that is embedded in violent political, economic, and social mechanisms. Politicization demands affirmational work: not just to negate the world as it is—as an improper life making way for an impossible future and the end of the nation—but to *affirm* desire for what can and may come. It is critical to note, however, that this work of affirmation also requires negativity.[5] It is the end of a social world—the nonsurvival of the nation—that makes possible the queer affirmations of the *otherwise* and the *else-*

where (Povinelli 2012). For queer potential to capitalize on perversion, it must embrace both negativity and affirmation, both the deterioration of worlds and the production of new, possibly radically different worlds.

A Journey through Perversion(s)

This framework of perversion—the entanglements of fears and anxieties regarding sexuality and political economy—emerges from research I conducted in Yerevan from 2012 to 2013. I began this research as an intern at Public Information and Need for Knowledge (PINK), an LGBT advocacy organization, and at the Women's Resource Center (WRC), a feminist organization, both located in Yerevan. There, I worked closely with the staff on ongoing projects, organized workshops with their larger communities, conducted social scientific studies for the organizations, wrote pieces for PINK's e-magazine, and offered my translation skills when needed. PINK and WRC each had their own networks that expanded out into wider social and political worlds. Through my work with these organizations I also met environmental activists, human rights activists, advocates against militarization, and members of organizations working toward governmental transparency and democratization. And I had the opportunity to meet members of the Queering Yerevan Collective (QYC), a group of queer and feminist artists, writers, and translators. I collaborated with QYC on translations and other writings for their blog, on video installation projects with founding member Lucine Talalyan, and in conceptualizing and organizing art exhibits and other "happenings."

In my process of immersion in these spaces, I saw the ways in which the firebombing of DIY Pub and the attack on the Diversity March in May 2012 had complicated the everyday workings of what the policing of gender and sexual propriety looked like. The firebombing was a political and politicized act, which meant that LGBT and feminist activists were no longer just in everyday social negotiation with national sensibilities of what was properly Armenian and what was not; they were now a group directly targeted by fringe organizations, taken up within the popular media through a new rhetoric of sexual perversion that had the figure of the homosexual (that sometimes also included "the feminist") at its center. Prior to these events, which hypervisibly pushed the figure of the homosexual into public consciousness, much of the activities of PINK, WRC, Society Without Violence (which had also participated

in the organization of the Diversity March), and independent activists (who had been outspoken during these events) had gone unnoticed. They had operated largely with the privilege of anonymity that had allowed them to build community and produce queer and feminist discourse and knowledge. Following the May 2012 events, the widespread rhetoric of sexual perversion circulating within everyday discourse and across popular media and social networking sites had jeopardized this anonymity and forced activists to have to think about the ways in which their work would be taken up by this multiplicity of new actors.

There were various contradictions and debates among LGBT advocates and feminists. When, for instance, PINK staff felt the need to "include" lesbians within their campaigns, lesbian feminists felt excluded by the vary narrow frameworks of those campaigns that foreclosed questions of desire and thus were not feminist in their orientations. When, in another instance, some WRC staff members claimed that they were not responsible for standing up for gay rights because they were a women's rights organization, the director had to remind the whole staff that some women were lesbians (Shirinian 2022a). In other moments of conflict and debate, leftist feminist queers disapproved of the consumerist orientation that PINK video campaigns—which featured fancy cars, fancy clothes, and new parking structures that had displaced residents in the city—were taking. Rather than as divergences between LGBT and feminist struggles, we might read these conflicts as between liberalism and more leftist political leanings. Liberal-leaning activists, who tended to be in the mainstream of NGO staff, aimed toward cultural acceptance and tolerance of LGBT people and women's rights, public education, policy change, and the provision of services to affected communities. Leftist-leaning organizers, however, were invested in more radical shifts in political, economic, and cultural structures (Nikoghosyan 2019). Left-leaning queers and feminists insisted on radical structural changes grounded in political economy as well as on imaginaries that would break with cultural demands and expectations firmly rooted in ontological claims of Armenianness. In this way, they were inspired both by socialist-era women driven by an insistence on class-based analyses critical of "bourgeois feminism" (Ghodsee 2018a) and by more recent calls for reimagining sexual liberation and critiques of heteronormativity. Left-leaning queers and feminists were also invested in cultural transformation, bringing to light feminist writers of the past like Shushanik Kurghinyan and Zabel Yesayan. These cultural politics, however, were

not "merely cultural"[6]; they were attempts to draw attention to other ways of being Armenian and to other histories of Armenianness—to the transformation of contemporary life, which also included the redistribution of resources and rights to women.

Public attention focused on homosexuality through the rhetoric of sexual perversion, however, targeted anyone who deviated from the proper, no matter what their political leanings, especially because homosexuality, feminism, and a whole array of related concepts (such as gender and human rights) were perceived as foreign and dangerous movements with the capacity to destroy the nation. We cannot, however, take for granted the fact that these claims of foreignness were based in some actual facts: prominent women's NGOs (the Women's Resource Center, Society Without Violence, the Women's Fund Armenia, and the Armenian Young Women's Association) and LGBT organizations (PINK and the more recently established Right Side NGO) were funded through external granting agencies and foundations. Because they worked on issues that were not only intimate but central to political questions of social reproduction, right-wing nationalists articulated the mission of these organizations as the spread of sexual perversion by Europeans hoping to destroy Armenia from the inside out.

How was this rhetoric of sexual perversion being configured, and what were its precise logics? To explore these questions, I spent time in some spaces frequented by right-wing nationalists and conducted focused interviews with people who identified as *azgaynakan* (nationalist) or *hayrenaser* (patriotic). Because of the role of national liberation discourse in Armenia, especially as a result of nationalist political ideology coming from the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), a democratic socialist party founded in the late nineteenth century, it is difficult to place the ideologies of nationalism on the same left-to-right spectrum that came out of French revolutionary politics and that continues to make sense today in the context of liberalism. There are various forms of nationalism in Armenia: some liberal, some illiberal, some pro-Europe, some pro-Russia. In this book "right-wing nationalism" will refer to illiberal ideologies opposed to European political orientations in the country (although with more diversity in regard to their positions toward Russia) that are also socially conservative regarding feminism and queerness.

Spending time with right-wing nationalists was a risky endeavor. I—as a queer, pierced, and tattooed feminist—was one of their targets. This

research, however, was valuable to activists at PINK and at WRC who were well-known by right-wing nationalists and who thus had little access to them. My identity as a conspirator with LGBT and feminist groups would also become apparent to right-wing nationalists over time, jeopardizing the possibilities of my continuing this work. For instance, my appearance at the DIY trial almost a year after the firebombing—showing up with well-known human rights activists and advocates of DIY Pub—served to "out" me as on the side of queers and feminists. Furthermore, as I began to publish portions of my research, and as my articles made their rounds among right-wing nationalists, I realized that my name had become too well-known to garner their trust and openness. This work was risky in another way, as it also jeopardized my trust among some leftist and progressive activists, something I had to negotiate. One friend found it disturbing that I was going to nationalist bars and pubs. That I was willing to hear them out meant, for her, that I believed they had "legitimate" opinions and that I was justifying their ideas as ideas. This research, however, gave some depth to my understandings of "sexual perversion" as a discourse and how it was tied up in various other political, economic, social, and (mytho-)historical concerns.

Another question that arose as I was conducting this research was how Yerevantsis, or residents of Yerevan, the largest condensed population in Armenia (at the time officially 1.5 million people out of 2.8 million),[7] felt about the nation. Did Armenians see homosexuality as *the* crisis of the times the way in which right-wing nationalists claimed it was, or how popular media, following this rhetoric, constantly reported it? What were the various assemblages of thought, feeling, and affect surrounding these concerns within the body politic? I began to work with Lucine Talalyan—a visual artist and founding member of QYC, with whom I was already collaborating on a number of different projects—as my research collaborator for a series of household survey interviews. Together, Talalyan and I conducted 150 survey interviews[8] with people in ten different neighborhoods of the city. We chose different neighborhoods for their particular histories, such as when they were built, and the class, education, and employment differences of their residents in accordance with Soviet urban planning schemes. We chose neighborhoods that had been industrial hubs in the Soviet era—such as Shengavit, Gortzaranayin (Factory District), and Yerord Mas—in which people might still live but now with vastly different (or no) opportu-

nities for work in industrial production. We chose neighborhoods that were close to the city's center—such as Komitas or Sasuntsi David—in which members of the intelligentsia had once lived or might still live. We also chose neighborhoods far from the center—such as Charbakh, Erebuni, and Masiv 7—because those neighborhoods would have housed those more marginal to privilege during the Soviet era.[9]

    As a rule, we did not directly ask about homosexuality during these interviews. Talalyan and I discussed this strategy before beginning our surveys. We went into these interviews assuming that most Yerevantsis would not be welcoming to newly visible nonheterosexual identities. Not asking allowed us to gauge how common the notion had become that "sexual perversion" was threatening Armenia's national survival. During these interviews we asked about gender and sexuality, family and nation, and concerns the households faced about their present and future. Only *three* of our 150 interviewees mentioned homosexuality at all. To be clear, this does not mean that everyone else with whom we spoke was entirely open and welcoming toward gendered and sexual practices and identities that strayed from national expectations. It also does not mean that feminism was an accepted political ideology, however defined. It does mean, however, that Yerevantsis writ large did not regard homosexuality or feminism as the major crises facing the nation. The rhetoric of sexual perversion (*aylaserutyun*) emerged only once during this survey. However, it was during these interviews that I discovered the rhetoric of *aylandakutyun*, or the *moral* perversion of the political-economic elite, which was something almost never brought up within popular media.

    The massive disparity between what mattered to the people and what mattered to media led me to take media production more seriously, and as the final leg of this research project, I conducted interviews with journalists who worked across varying platforms of information dissemination. I wanted to understand how the rhetoric of sexual perversion and the figure of the homosexual had come to loom so large in public discourse. What were the routes of this language? What were the reasons for its invention? I interviewed ten journalists and other representatives of the media to get at these questions. Two of these journalists worked for mainstream circulations—sites of information that were not necessarily committed to anti-homosexual activism but that had nonetheless contributed to the publicizing of homosexuality as a national concern. These included *168 News* and the ARF-sponsored *Yerkir Media*. I

also spoke to representatives of circulations that were highly committed to anti-homosexual activism or that were very welcoming of publishing inciting rhetoric around it. These included the editor-in-chief of *Iravunk* newspaper and one of the editors of *BlogNews.am*. And, finally, I spoke to journalists at *Epress, CivilNet,* and *Hetq*, three (less popular) progressive news sites that had not published inciting pieces on homosexuality at all and were more aligned with progressive politics (whether liberal or leftist), including taking LGBT rights seriously.

In talking to right-wing nationalists and other conservative individuals—such as my language instructor Knar or most of my household interviewees—I learned to be a trickster. I did not lie, because that would be a violation of ethical standards in ethnographic research. However, I did often euphemize my interests and topics of study in a way that would be more palatable to some subjects. With right-wing nationalists as well as with interviewees in the household surveys, I often said I was doing research on the role of the family in contemporary Armenian life. While this was true, it also omitted mentioning the role that (homo)sexuality played in my research interests. At times, especially among younger people I would meet, I would reveal what I *was* actually studying and often, following their reaction, realized I should never bring it up again if I wanted to maintain a relationship with them. This was also the case with Knar, who provided me language instruction for two summers and with whom I maintained ties for years following. Only once after my initial disclosure to her did my research interests ever come up again. I also often manipulated my appearance. For the household interviews, I made sure to remove my nose ring before knocking on anyone's door. I conducted these interviews when the weather was cold, and thus wearing a coat or jacket and pants allowed me to cover up my tattoos. In interviewing right-wing activists and journalists (in June and July), however, this was less possible. I tried to cover up, but I was still outed as a *different.* In this book I will use the term *different*, as a noun, to capture the ways in which the "We" of the nation, the "self," came undone by various improper modes of looking, behaving, practicing, and existing. A singular sense of a proper Armenia, in other words, was threatened by those who might belong (were not national Others) but existed improperly. Unlike the term *Other*, my use of *different* as a noun gets at the anxieties regarding the makeup of the self. My being a different—because of my tattoos, my nose piercing, my queerness, my feminism—had an impact on how my interviewees responded to me. In not avoiding those people

who might see me, as a queer feminist, as lacking humanity, or as being a scourge on society, I also learned to listen, humanize, and analyze in new ways. Freud (1989a, 319) referred to psychoanalysis as a process of translation that could locate the "sense" of symptoms that seemed entirely irrational or unreasonable. Similarly, I began this research having an inkling that there was a sense behind right-wing claims that seemed entirely unhinged, and that conservative attachments to proper Armenian "tradition" could be mined for their larger claims and their political possibilities. I found that sense in the links between sexual and moral perversion.

Ethnographic research also led me to the social analyses of particular texts. Talalyan's and my interviews with members of households across Yerevan also included discussions of favorite films. In chapter 1, I provide a reading of one of the films that was commonly brought up as a family or personal favorite: *Hayrik* [Father] (Malyan 1972). Other texts—such as songs, a myth, an epic poem, and a fairytale—emerged from everyday conversations, happenstance, and political events. I discuss these texts within the contexts in which they became ethnographically relevant. It is the particular context that gives each of these texts their importance. Some are very common and well-known (like the myth of the giant Hayk, the first Armenian). Some are very rare and likely unheard of for most (such as the satirical Tale of Little Gender-Boycott that circulated through a blog post). Some are directly named in political events (such as the epic poem of *Sasna Tzrer* during a hostage crisis in 2016). And some are used here by me as hermeneutical devices, such as the film *Hayrik* or the origin myth of Armenia about the giant Hayk. Each of these is relevant because it speaks to a set of affects, emotions, and conditions from which its discussion or indirect indexing arose. In this sense, my reading of these texts should also be taken to be specific to the particular context of my ethnographic analysis—that is, in relation to the structure of perversion.

Perversion(s)

The terms *aylaserutyun* (այլասերություն) and *aylandakutyun* (այլանդակություն) and their relations to the ways in which I use the term *perversion* in this book are complex and deserve some attention. *Aylaserutyun* is composed of the prefix *ayl*, which means "other than" or "different," and *ser*, rooted in the term meaning to generate, *seril*. The word thus literally

means degeneration. I translate *aylaserutyun* as "perversion" in English because of resonances with the English meanings and connotations of the term. "Perversion" in English can be defined as "the action of turning aside from what is true or right; the diversion of something from its original and proper course, state, or meaning; corruption, distortion." But it is most often used to refer to "sexual behavior or preference that is different from the norm; *spec*. that which is considered to be unacceptable or socially threatening, or to constitute mental illness" ("perversion" (n.), *Oxford English Dictionary*), meanings popularized especially through psychoanalysis and sexology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While *aylaserutyun* might refer to any kind of moral, physical, or biological degeneration or degeneracy, in its contemporary colloquial use in Armenia, it almost always smuggles in attention to sexuality and connotations of the sexual. To refer to an act or behavior as *aylaserutyun*, or in its expression as an adjective (as *aylaservatz*), is to condemn it as sexually immoral. It is important, however, to note the particular differences in meanings within English and Armenian to get at some of the other connotations within the language of *aylaserutyun*. The *Armenian Language New Dictionary* (Der Khachadourian 1992b), a Western Armenian dictionary, defines *aylaserutyun* as "alienation from national (*azgayin*) features; removal from the resilience of national morality's strengthening; weakening." Furthermore, the *Explanatory Dictionary of Modern Armenian* defines *aylaserel*, the verb form of the noun *aylaserutyun*, as "to distort morality, to make ugly, to corrupt" and to "move toward a decline in morality, to make immoral" (Aghayan 1976). *Aylaserum*, a noun that refers to the thing that happens in *aylaserutyun*, is also defined by the same dictionary (Aghayan 1976) in biological terms, as "degeneration" or "existence in unfavorable conditions that have consequences on an animal or plant organism's properties, passed from generation to generation." The term, in all these uses, connotes or denotes something gone awry, something not what or where it is supposed to be, something distorted, corrupted, made improper—especially in regard to social and biological life and reproduction, including that of the nation.

The term *aylandakutyun* also carries connotations of the sexual but remains firmly grounded in divergence from what is good and proper. The *Armenian Language New Dictionary* (Der Khachadourian 1992s) defines *aylandakutyun* as "ugliness, clumsiness/grotesqueness, out of the ordinary," and the adjective *aylandakoren*, perversely, as "with ug-

liness, monstrously, absurdly, out of the ordinary." Colloquially in Armenia during the time I conducted research, the use of the term was often derogatory and connoted not just strangeness but impropriety; in other words, not just difference, but difference that was wrong, immoral, and dangerous to the body politic. Differences and eccentricities in behaviors and practices were commonly construed as dangerous. As I will discuss in chapter 2, this would include not only LGBT people but also feminists, those belonging to an emo subculture, punks, and religious minorities. Difference from what is proper Armenianness in Armenia is a dangerous path, for it opens up possibilities for Armenia to no longer be Armenia, threatening the nation's future survival.

Thus, while *aylandakutyun* has a less direct connection to the notion of perversion in the English language, I translate it here as "perversion" for three main reasons. First, the eccentricities and difference implied by the notion of *aylandakutyun* bring to the forefront the emphasis that Armenianness places on propriety and the dangers of swerving or deviating from what is expected, from what is proper, which maps on to the ways in which sexual perversion threatens the intactness of the Armenian family, the nation, the Church, and the institutions that are believed to allow the nation to survive. Both *aylaserutyun* and *aylandakutyun*, thus, imply dangerous deviations. Second, *aylandakutyun* is intimately connected to *aylaserutyun* in that the terms are sometimes used interchangeably when referring to the political-economic elite's sexual improprieties, especially as these improprieties are tied to their *excesses* and thus what I read as *surplus jouissance* in chapter 3. The excessive appetites of the political-economic elite for power, wealth, violence, brutality, food, and ostentatious display as well as for (perverse) sex makes them perverse, and largely morally improper. In other words, their excesses—which include sexual excess and extend beyond it—are akin to the excesses of what I call the figure of the homosexual, the imaginary character who threatens to put the nation on a perverse path through his (usually a male figuration) excess pleasure and lack of reproduction. And, finally, *aylandakutyun* (moral corruption) of the body politic itself (as a result of the elite's perversions, in a trickle-down effect, as I will discuss in chapter 5), is akin to sexual perversion. Improper forms of life and living—young men and women remaining unmarried because of a lack of jobs and the ability to sustain families; children being raised without fathers who are abroad, working as migrant laborers; men becoming

alcoholics; families experiencing domestic violence and abuse, and so on—lead to the corrupt social reproduction of the body politic.

These meanings of perversion share facets of how "perversion" is defined within psychoanalytic thought, even as this differs greatly within psychoanalytic literature, especially between the meanings given to the idea by Freud and those given to the idea by Lacan. While the meanings of perversion that I develop in this book are not entirely dependent on either of these frameworks explicitly, they share with them some threads. For Freud, perversion was the movement of the subject away from proper object choice or "normal sexual aim." Perversions are either "(a) anatomical transgressions of the bodily regions destined for the sexual union, or (b) a lingering at the intermediary relations to the sexual object which should normally be rapidly passed on the way to the definite sexual aim" (Freud 1910, 14). Included within this notion of perversion is also sexual inversion, in which the whole of the object (belonging to the same sex) deviates from a normal sexual aim.[10] In my use here, perverse sexualities, desires, and behaviors are those that deviate from what is held to be proper social and biological reproduction: homosexuality; feminism; gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender identity; being an LGBT activist or in solidarity with LGBT activism; women smoking or drinking in public; any form of dress or aesthetic that differs from expectations of proper femininity and masculinity, including dressing emo or punk; women with tattoos; men with long hair; young unmarried persons, especially but not only women, moving out of their father's home; and so on.

Lacan's conceptualization of perversion, unlike Freud's, homes in not on the sexual aim of the subject but rather on a structure of the psyche in which there is an inverted effect of fantasy (Lacan 1998, 185).[11] My discussion of perversion in this book draws partially on Lacanian understandings of the perverse psychic structure, especially on its primary aspect having to do with the inadequacy of the paternal function. Without the paternal function in play, the subject does not undergo (symbolic) castration, and thus he expresses excess enjoyment (Swales 2012). *Survival of a Perverse Nation* traces two perverse figures: the homosexual and the oligarch. Both of these figures are marked by excess—the oligarch's excessive wealth, power, and enjoyment, and the homosexual's excessive (and unreproductive) pleasure. Furthermore, both of these figures are perverse—whether *aylaservatz* (sexually perverse) or *aylandakvatz* (more generally morally perverse)—because of their deviance and violation of

Armenian Symbolic authority. These figures do not abide by the Symbolic authority's Law of the Father, a moral order put in place within the very mythological beginnings of Armenianness (as I take up in chapter 1) and, as such, they undermine the survival of the nation. Thus, there are overlaps between what I describe as *aylaserutyun* and *aylandakutyun* as structures and as processes of Symbolic transgression and the Lacanian perverse. It is important to note, however, that while my discussion of perversion in this book maps fairly well onto Freudian and Lacanian readings of perversion, it is largely invested in tracing the colloquial feelings about *aylaserutyun* and *aylandakutyun* in Armenia.

The Ends of Symbolic Authority and Imaginary Potential

In 2010, during my first visit to Armenia, I was enrolled in a language course to learn to read and write (as well as to speak, considering that I had not spoken the Armenian language since I was about six and that when I did speak, it was the Western dialect, a bit different from the Eastern dialect spoken in the modern Republic). My language instructor, Knar (who also comes up from time to time in this book as someone from whom I learned a lot more about the context of the nation-state than its verbal language), had me do an assignment in which I had to write a paragraph about the family. In response to the prompt, I had written about radical feminist theories of marriage as the site of women's oppression. This upset Knar greatly. "Armenians have survived Genocide. They have survived the rule of many empires. They have survived without their own government. They have survived as a Christian nation amongst Muslims. And how has all of this been possible?" she asked. At this, I decided there was no convincing her to get on board with radical feminist theory, so I just looked back at her and asked, "How?" "With the family. With our Armenian traditions. With our language. Because we have had strong fathers who have protected these traditions. With our morality. Armenia would have been annihilated centuries ago if it were not for the strength of our family and our traditions," Knar insisted. She was not alone. During the rest of my visit that summer, I heard these narratives many times over by others, and I would continue to learn about the family's centrality in Armenianness.

Family is not just an important facet of daily life practice but also an ideological container of the nation's very possibility of survival. The

question of the political in the various iterations of Armenia since the Genocide have centered questions of national survival and, importantly, the family as the repository of that survival. A look at the history of Armenian feminism is instructive here. A feminist movement has rarely existed within Armenia's modern history and does not currently exist within the Republic of Armenia. As Armine Ishkanian (2008) has argued, feminism is seen as standing against the traditional family, and Armenian women have historically held onto that family as critical for national survival. Unique in this history is the women's movement following the Genocide and World War I in Allied-occupied Constantinople. As Lerna Ekmekçioğlu (2016) argues, there were a combination of factors that made this feminist movement possible, and yet, the family was central. A National Revival movement in the immediate aftermath of the Genocide placed emphasis on women's work to rebirth and nurture back into existence a nation. While much of this feminine work was domestic, much of it also extended into public work in nursing, lobbying, teaching, and gathering financial contributions. This, Ekmekçioğlu maintains, emboldened women to demand various public and political rights while maintaining the importance of women's domestic duties. Thus, while inspired by the French liberal tradition, Armenian feminists made clear that they did not stand against a woman's role in the family through domestic work, although they believed that too much of this for women was wasteful to the nation. Furthermore, these Armenian feminists were more committed to national revival and survival than to the woman's cause when these two concerns were in contradiction. Threats to social reproduction—whether through genocide or neoliberalization—bolstered protective feelings around the institution of family and "traditional" gender relations.

Because feelings about kinship and the moral orders on which they are established are so central to understanding anxieties about the nation's survival and threats posed against it, Jacques Lacan's notion of the Symbolic order (1997, 2013) becomes an apt framework through which to understand the particular configuration of sovereignty,[12] intimacy, and political legitimacy I explore in this book. There are two notions of family that are critical to conceptualizations of Armenianness, and a principal agent in both is the Father. The Father is the leader of the household (*endanik*, those who live under one roof) as well as of what I call the nation-family[13] (*azg*, the extended family or tribe), the practice

of the Armenian nation as an extended family in which private expectations seep into public demands. The concepts of Symbolic order, and Symbolic authority to which it is fastened, allow me to get at the personal, intimate, and affective dimensions of this power and authority.[14] Lacan's framework of Symbolic authority, which I find within the position of the Father as it stands in the context of Armenianness as Symbolic order, allows me to analyze moral assertions and axioms (especially those of survival), anxieties, fears, and identifications with power, with attention to the ambiguities and psychic tensions that define relations to the Father as sovereign power. While the Church—and especially the Armenian Apostolic Church—also holds a privileged position within the narrative of the nation's survival (as well as within the post-Soviet state, which I discuss in chapter 5), this position still functions within the Symbolic order and makes up one iteration of the Father. Though the Name-of-the-Father is a function of Lacan's Symbolic order, it is always also plural: the Names-of-the-Father. The Father is not a person, nor any one particular feeling, but the function of the superego (Lacan 2013)—what I am here calling the proper.

Psychoanalytic theory has long been used to understand the workings of sovereign power and its ideology (Freud 1961; Žižek 1989; Kaganovsky 2008; Borneman 2004; Shirinian 2020a). "What is the psychic form that power takes?" asks Judith Butler (1997b, 2), highlighting the necessity of understanding not only power but its relation to the psychic dimension that subjection forms. Power's psychic form, I suggest, is what we might call legitimacy. To be subjected, in other words, is to legitimate power by becoming its subject, by internalizing (or, in Foucauldian conceptualizations, externalizing, on the body) its validity. But, just as importantly, the psychic form that power takes can also produce power as illegitimate. Within psychoanalytic parlance, we might call these senses of legitimacy "identification," which Freud described as making possible an intimate link between the "suppressed classes with the class who rules and exploits them," which is also coupled with an emotional attachment to "masters" (Freud 1961). Psychic life and intimate connections are essential to the maintenance of sovereign power. and it is also—through the Symbolic order as the Name- and the No-of-the-Father in Lacanian thought—where I locate fissures in political legitimacy. The Father's Name, as such, is the site of Symbolic identification; it is always coupled with the No, the authority and power that

upholds that identification with castrating power and potential. As their practices, behavior, and lack of care for the Armenian people violates Armenianness (as the Symbolic order), however, the oligarchic horde's position within Armenia's Symbolic order only precariously wields the Name while maintaining the authority of the No. This has, I argue, led to a fragmentation of their ability to maintain hegemony and a sense of "law and order" in Armenia, seen as the very epitome of violators of the Father's Law (the Name- and the No-of-the-Father).

Symbolic order and its authority are not the whole of the self, of consciousness, or of the possibilities of imagination, creativity, and action. There is always a gap of representation—something within the subject, some reality, some knowledge that is not entirely symbolized (Moore 2007). As Henrietta Moore (2007) has provocatively suggested, a psychoanalytic anthropology can make sense of how agency, imagination, and resistance might be limited and constrained by the "social imaginary" but are not closed off by this imaginary, which we might otherwise understand as the Symbolic order. Fantasy, which constitutes the outside of this order, offers anthropological investigations of political intervention tools with which to understand how new worlds and new world orders are actively desired, imagined, and brought into being. *Survival of a Perverse Nation* is interested in, but also politically committed to, locating the cracks and fissures from which new sexual, gendered, intimate, political, and economic realities might take flight. Each chapter locates how dimensions of the rhetorics of perversion point to and highlight these spaces and sites—how, in other words, anxieties concerning the breakdown of Armenianness as Symbolic order make room for imagining and fantasizing outside the constraints of that order, toward more liberatory, queer, and, perhaps, fantastic worlds.

What Is to Come

Each of the following chapters of this book takes up a different aspect, site, or figure of perversion. While some chapters focus more exclusively on one or the other form (*aylaserutyun* or *aylandakutyun*), each chapter articulates the relationship that these two forms have with one another. In tracing perversion throughout these chapters, I also trace the ways in which queer possibility and potential bubble up at these various sites. In chapter 1, "From National Survival to National Perversion," I trace the history of the 2012 sex panic through popular histories and mythologies

of Armenianness, demonstrating the ways in which the proper social and biological reproduction of the nation was felt to have been located in strong, heroic father figures and their moral leadership. I draw links between contemporary notions of propriety surrounding Armenianness and the mythical first Armenian, the giant warrior Hayk. Providing a mytho-poetic reading of the nation's and Republic's history, which combines elements of myth with speculative readings of historical developments, I show how the 1991 independence of the Republic from the Soviet Union produced a new ruling elite with an uncanny resemblance to the mythical Father Hayk, but in morally deviant form, threatening the nation's proper social reproduction. The chapter sets the scene for how the postsocialist period became a rupture in the nation's millennia-long survival, paving the path toward perversion and, thus, national annihilation.

The two chapters that follow each take up one of the figures of perversion that inform the book's central argument. In chapter 2, "The Figure of the Homosexual," I explore the production and cultivation of the rhetoric of *aylaserutyun* (sexual perversion). I draw on a 2013 sex panic about *gender* and perverse futures imagined by the right wing that the figure of the homosexual threatened to make real. Through interview material with journalists and right-wing nationalists as well as with the three (of 150) members of households surveyed across Yerevan who pointed to concerns about homosexuality as a problem for the nation, I also show how this figure of sexual perversion (the homosexual) emerged as a displacement for other political-economic crises. As a figure imagined to be unproductive and unreproductive, the homosexual stood as the subject/object of the felt impossibilities of national reproduction—a conflation of widespread concerns about labor migration, mass emigration, and low fertility rates. This investigation highlights how political-economic perversions, deviations, and violations are cast as sexual in nature and that feelings about sexuality and sexual morality are inextricable from material conditions and demands.

In chapter 3, "The Names-of-the-Fathers," the oligarch becomes my main figure of analysis. I trace popular feelings about the political-economic elite through their nicknames. I examine these nicknames, which often combine a shortened diminutive version of their first names (marking them as intimate figures) with another name that points to their brutality and criminality (marking them as brutal sovereigns to be feared), through speculatively narrating the material and intimate

connections these elite figures claim over localized spaces and neighborhoods. These "nicks"—cuts in the name of local sovereigns whom we might understand as political Fathers—bifurcate these figures, producing them as the Name-and the No-of-the-Father, but one in which their brutality (their wielding of the Father's No) is separated from identification (the Name). This bifurcation through nicknames produces oligarchs and other members of the governing elite as both rulers and as illegitimates, making them the illegitimate Fathers of the nation. The chapter continues to weave together the threads between sexual perversion and moral perversion by exploring the ways in which the figure of the oligarch is imagined as a sexual degenerate. I also explore the possibilities of queer futures that might emerge through the perversity of present conditions.

Although space and time are never separable, chapters 3 and 4 each take up space and time, respectively, and somewhat separately (although still in relation to one another), in order to home in on the workings of perversion within each. Chapter 4, "Wandering Yerevan," is primarily concerned with the question of postsocialism's perverse spatiality. I show how the transformations brought on by the end of state socialism changed the spatial configurations of the city of Yerevan, creating fragmentations (through privatization and organized abandonment to capital's speculation) formed around private wealth rather than centered on public human needs. Exploring the discontinuities in the construction plans that disorient and reorient leisurely strolls (wandering) through the city, the scenes of abandonment in residential and factory zones, and the changing landscapes and meanings of parks and other public spaces, I reflect on the feelings and experiences of perverse space that bring the contexts of sexual perversions (*aylaserutyun*) and larger moral deviations (*aylandakutyun*) into conversation with one another. I examine public parks that are made proper (and governed by the Law of the Father) through the investment of capital as well as spaces abandoned by state and private capital that leave spaces of wild growth amenable to queer life. My analysis of postsocialist space highlights how, against the backdrop of socialist centralized plans, capitalism can be understood as lacking in coherent or intelligible ideology, pointing to the emptiness in promises of capitalist development and official nationalist narratives of state and Church. Capitalist development, in other words, is a mechanism that perverts life and its possibilities.

Following these reflections on postsocialist space, chapter 5, "An Improper Present," focuses on postsocialist temporality by analyzing various common negations of life and existence: "There is no Armenia," "There are no Armenian families," "There is no government," and others. I situate these negations within larger discussions of the present in which dilapidated residential buildings and homes, as well as the conditions of families residing in them, are described as "ruins." I show how a time-space of negation points to a feeling that the present is too improper—too unintelligible within ontological understandings of Armenianness, its time, and its movement—to be considered a present, producing a feeling that the present is not a livable time but a time in which nothing feels possible. I produce an ethnographically informed theory of postsocialist spatiotemporality as deviation from the proper reproduction of life and its conditions. Within this context of feeling the present as having perverted temporal propriety, however, there also emerge possibilities of radical change and radical hope, figuring new gendered and sexual possibilities for a future-in-the-making that we might understand as queer desires cropping up from unexpected places.

Postsocialist time and space—felt as ruins of the present and as a time of impossibility leading to no future—were a difficult construction from which to activate the political. Negations of the present and the future, based in dire material conditions and reigned over by an illegitimate horde, had left many Armenians feeling hopeless and thus unwilling to act. This hopelessness, as a negative and negating affect, however, could at times be translated and transformed into affirmations of the present and of radically different futures. Chapter 6, "The Politics of 'No!'" follows grassroots activists and the movements that they cultivated from 2012 to 2013. The politics of "No!" that were expressed through these movements affirm worlds to come through the negation of the world as it is. I also show how the politics of "No!" transformed larger political feelings in the country, especially through the 2013 post-presidential elections, which wavered and then eventually fractured—splits brought on by ambiguous feelings about replacing one political Father, a Daddy, with another. The politics of "No!"—a response to the illegitimate Father's No—imaginatively make future worlds in a liminal present, opening up new future horizons. Most importantly in Armenia, the politics of "No!" have been making way for a future without a political Daddy,

a radical alternative to a millennia-long surviving nation with a strong Father to lead it.

I hope readers find in these pages glimpses of hope, thresholds to new material and affective orders, and portals that may lead to radically different life-worlds, even if these are tucked in places that seem hopelessly driven toward the making of the unlivable. I hope that readers speculate with me.

Notes

Introduction

1   See, for instance, Rofel 2007; Hoad 2007; Gopinath 2005; Dave 2012; Baer 2009; Essig 1999; Rao 2020; Atshan 2020.

2   Some are about the genocide itself—such as *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (Miller and Miller 1999), *Surviving the Forgotten Armenian Genocide* (Chorbadjian 2015), and *Verapratsner [Survivors]* (Armenakyan 2015)—but some are also not necessarily about the genocide, but rather a longer history of Armenia that precedes genocide—such as *Armenia: The Survival of a Nation* (Walker 1980) and *Roman Armenia: A Study in Survival* (Boyajian 2019). *Armenia: Portraits of Survival and Hope* (Miller and Miller 2003) examines Armenia's survival in the postsocialist era—a survival that had to traverse economic collapse, war with neighboring Azerbaijan over the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, and massive loss.

3   Don Kalb (2012) calls on us to think about "actually existing neoliberalism," which would seriously account for global capitalist crisis (with attention to its local dimensions) rather than a "a reigning policy paradigm or a state calculus" that anthropologists have been naming as "neoliberalism." This tendency reduces various interconnected issues like the financialization of Western capitalism, China's new role in production, the increase in numbers of workers in the world and its consequences for urbanization, migration, and competition, all within the "eclipse of Western hegemony," to one "state calculus": neoliberalism. Instead, Kalb argues, anthropologists should be more precise about the relationship between capitalism and the capitalist world system and neoliberalism.

4   For a comprehensive critique of how postcolonial theory leaves out criticism of capitalist structures see Chibber 2013.

5   Perversion as a rhetoric, intricately linked to queer futurity, calls on us to think about the inherent relationality between queer theory's orientations toward both negativity (Edelman 2004; Bersani and Phillips 2008; Love 2009; Ahmed 2010; Cvetkovich 2012; Halberstam 2011) and affirmation (Muñoz 2009; Freeman 2010; Nash 2019; Dean 2009; Johnson 2001; Cohen 1997).

6   See the exchange between Judith Butler (1997a) and Nancy Fraser (1997).

7   Worldometer, "Armenian Population (Live)," accessed June 16, 2022, https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/armenia-population/.

8   We did not devise any rubric for a representable sample of Yerevantsis, and the door-to-door solicitation did not necessarily produce a randomized full sample either. Most of these interviews were conducted during the late morning to early afternoon on weekdays, which meant that we were largely talking to people who did not work during those hours, most of whom were unemployed or elderly. We did, however, talk to some who did work but who worked different hours (in the service industry, for instance) or whom we caught on days off, either on weekends or sometimes on weekdays. Because we were asking about the family and because we were both women, men thought it more appropriate for us to talk to women in the household. Most of our interviewees, thus, were women. However, even when we were directly engaging women in these discussions, men in the household (husbands, fathers, fathers-in-law, or sons) would often interrupt and chime in. Some of our interviews were also with men.

9   I would learn, however, that neighborhood distribution in the post-Soviet era only sometimes corresponded to how urban space was organized in the Soviet era. Some of those living in these neighborhoods continued living in the housing that was allocated to them in the Soviet era, but their social status had changed either because they were no longer working in the industry in which they worked in the Soviet era, or because the home was now being occupied by a son or daughter who was involved in another line of work. Many had also sold the homes that were originally allocated to them. Some of those with whom we spoke were renting—usually either because they had relocated to Yerevan from one of Armenia's other cities or regions or from Nagorno-Karabakh, or because they were young couples who had moved out to be on their own. The social and financial status of the inhabitants of all the neighborhoods that we surveyed was diverse.

10   In defining perversion in this way, however, Freud made room for the fact that "normal" sexuality often included within it deviant acts and fantasies that, if developed, would be construed as perversions. The kiss, for instance, which "has among the most civilized nations received a sexual value" is not "the union of the genitals in the characteristic act of copulation" or how Freud defines the "normal" adult sexual aim (1910, 14). Freud also comes close to declaring romantic love a perversion when he points out that the sexual aim rarely ever stops at the genitals but tends to place an overvaluation on the whole of the sexual object—including psychologically, leading to a weakening of judgment (15). In other words, love is for the whole of the chosen object and not just for his or her genitals, which is what defines and limits "normal sexual aim."

It is in this openness of Freud to admitting the close relationship between "normal" and deviant or perverse sexualities that we might also find in Freud a queer theory of the body and of sexuality (Bersani 1986).

11   The perverse subject sees himself as an object of the other's jouissance rather than a subject with desire of his own. The perverse subject, according to Lacan, has undergone alienation, meaning that his (the pervert is often a male within Lacanian case studies [Swales 2012]) psychic processes have been split into conscious and unconscious and the father, or some Other who represents an authority over the figure of mother, has prohibited jouissance with the mother. The subject, however, has not undergone separation, meaning that the mother has not symbolized her desire outside of the subject allowing for the subject to come into his own desire. Because this separation has not occurred, the paternal function—what we might call the No-of-the-Father—has not formed, and thus the subject comes to firmly identify himself with the Other's jouissance, unable to desire on his own and seeing only himself as the object of the Other's jouissance.

12   One could make sense of discussions of life, care, and sovereign power—the assemblage of complaint against the oligarchic regime of Armenia—through the frameworks of biopolitics, necropolitics, and a postsocialist neoliberal state of exception. Power as shaped by life's forceful management could be evinced from the state's and the body politic's pronatalist discourse, which demanded that bodies be disciplined into soldiers and the producers of soldiers. This management was highly gendered, as rates of sex selective abortion—in which female fetuses are selected out of the population—in Armenia are some of the highest in the world (second only to China and Azerbaijan). UNFPA reports that in 2013, there were 114 boys born for every 100 girls born in Armenia. That number is 118 in China and 116 in Azerbaijan (UNFPA 2013). This management of life is also often mismanaged; the breakdown of the paternalist state by suzerainties of oligarchic power among a newly emergent post-Soviet fraternal horde has meant that life (as it was once known, as it was once happening) now looked like something other than life. This not-life life was often likened to a death-in-life—such as for taxi drivers to whom I spoke who complained about eighteen-hour workdays every day, which meant that they never saw their families and never had time to enjoy anything that might be likened to life.

13   I have written elsewhere (Shirinian 2018c) about the concept of *azg,* which means both nation as well as extended family or tribe in the Armenian language (Abrahamian 2006). At the end of the nineteenth century, as Armenian nationalist political parties began to form in what was then the Ottoman and Russian Empires, *azg* was chosen to capture the new modern idea of the nation. In other words, for Armenians, a

sense of identity that captures the "imagined community" (Anderson 2006) that brings all members of the ethnic marker together is that of a mutuality of being (Sahlins 2013) with intimate expectations. I argue that contrary to many contemporary analyses of the nation as *metaphorized* into family, Armenia is *practiced* as one, which is made apparent from the perspective of queer and other "genealogically perverse" bodies and their experiences of intimate demands.

14 It is with consistency to Freud's theorization of the father (and father surrogates) as forming the superego that Lacan conceptualized the notion of the Other and the Names-of-the-Father. The Other, or the cause of desire, functions through the Father or the Names-of-the-Father. This Other is both an object of fear as well as identification and love (Lacan 2013). The Names- and the No-of-the-Father, in other words, establish the superego and a moral order. For Freud, the notion of the superego was largely a personal one, tied to the very relationships and personal history of a particular subject. In other words, for Freud, the social and history as categories in psychoanalysis matter only in so far as they are of the particular analysand—and as Avery Gordon (2008, 57) has pointed out, he denied the very social contexts (especially those involving women patients) in which his ideas were developed. Lacan, however, extends these understandings of the social and of history when he brings semiology into psychoanalysis, which brings the subject not only into a particular personal social history (relation to mother, to father, etc.) but to language itself as with a history.

Chapter 1. From National Survival to National Perversion

1 Arthur Meschian, "'Aha ev Verch' [That's it], Arthur Meschian (Nov. '09)," YouTube, accessed January 2, 2010, https://www.youtube.com /watch?v=qTzZa-Va7qc.

2 It is not, however, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) argues, possible for there to be a complete disconnect between what happened and what is said to have happened. The past is, as Arjun Appadurai (1981) suggests, always debatable on the grounds of authority, continuity, depth, and interconnectedness, making it a scarce resource rather than limitless.

3 As Ann Cvetkovich (2012, 4) has suggested, "feelings" have a "vernacular quality" that allows exploration of the political that we come to know through experience. An exploration of feelings, furthermore, goes deeper than political discussions that often "operate at such a high level of abstraction that [they] fail to address the lived experience of . . . systemic transformations" (12) and thus have the capacity to get at the weight of the political on the mundane and the everyday.