Title: "Cooking Pilaf with Words: Intersubjectivity and Feminism in the Armenian *Transnation*"[1]

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ABSTRACT:

Using original oral history research conducted in 2019, this study documents the voices, values, and priorities of feminists in the contemporary Republic of Armenia, revealing how interviewees came to feminist consciousness and how they conceptualized feminism. Interviewees articulated which feminist issues they believed to be most pressing in Armenia, including domestic violence, misogyny and homophobia in the society and the church, LGBTQIA rights, sexual education, and militarism. They expressed hopes and concerns regarding the sequelae of the "Velvet Revolution" of 2018. Interviews were conducted with twenty Armenian women diverse in age and occupation, all of whom self-identified as feminists or were deeply involved in feminist activism. These interviews subvert nationalist claims that feminism is intrinsically Western and antithetical to Armenian tradition, providing instead an alternative narrative of Armenian feminism as emerging syncretically from indigenous cultural elements and Western feminism. I theorize intersubjectivity between researcher and interviewee when both are members of a *transnation*, a nation consisting of those living in the nation-state and those living in permanent diaspora, arguing that there is a web of interconnectedness between researcher and interviewees that complicates the usual insider/outsider oral history relationship. The interview encounter shapes the feminism of both researcher and interviewee.

INTRODUCTION:

"You cannot cook pilaf with words; you need butter and rice."[2] So goes an Armenian proverb that takes as its central metaphor one of the principal dishes of Armenian cuisine. The immateriality of words makes them extraneous to, and maybe even a distraction from, the

fundamental business of feeding the body. And yet, while butter and rice may keep the body alive, words are essential for other central aspects of human experience, giving us the power to name our experience and to tell stories that constitute our realities. How do different versions of that story serve different interests? Is it possible, by listening to what Armenian feminists say about themselves, to find a truer story than the one we might otherwise tell? Lynn Abrams writes that "the control of memory (and therefore history) is the subject of a power struggle between those who wish to claim the right to the 'truth' about the past and those who challenge that interpretation."[3] Here, I will challenge the belief that feminism is antithetical to Armenian culture and not part of Armenian tradition. That belief is widespread in the Armenian *transnation*, a term which, as I explore in greater depth below, refers to a nation wherein both those living in the nation-state and those living in permanent diaspora possess equal status. I have written elsewhere about feminist consciousness in the American Armenian diaspora;[4] this essay focuses on feminist consciousness in the Republic of Armenia. At present, academic research on feminism in Armenia and its diaspora communities is blossoming, and there are new forms of feminist activism on the ground in Armenia, one of which is women's participation in the *Velvet Revolution*, a series of non-violent protests against the twenty-year rule of the Republican Party that took place in April and May of 2018, which I address in greater detail below.[5] Curiosity about how feminist consciousness arises and manifests itself in the Republic of Armenia and a desire to be able to write a narrative of Armenian feminism that would controvert the dominant narrative provided the underlying motivation for this project. I wanted to discover how women in the Republic of Armenia came to feminist consciousness, what they think are the important feminist issues in the Republic, and whether they think feminism is at odds with Armenian identity.

In July of 2019 I spent four weeks in the Republic of Armenia conducting interviews with twenty Armenian feminists. Some of these were working in local or international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) whose missions are to improve the status of women and LGBTQ people; some were working as journalists, educators, artists, or filmmakers; and one group was a cohort of university students. Participants ranged in age from early twenties to sixties. Some identified as queer; all identified as women (I did not ask about nonbinary gender identification, but that would be a fruitful question for future research). In some cases, the interviewees came to my rental apartment; in others, I went to their workplaces. One interview, with a group of student volunteers at the Women's Resource Center, took place in their conference room around a large table. Whenever the interview was conducted at the interviewee's office, they invariably offered me Armenian coffee, which I always accepted. I speak rudimentary Armenian (Western dialect) while the first language of most of the interviewees is Eastern Armenian. Fortunately, most of the interviewees were fluent in English and did not require an interpreter, but in three cases the interviewee did not speak any English. All three of those cases were in group or paired interviews, and one of the other interviewees interpreted for the one(s) who did not speak English. I made audio recordings of the interviews, and the interviews that had sections in Armenian were translated and transcribed for me by one of the interviewees, whose is a teacher of Eastern Armenian to English-speaking people. All other interviews were transcribed by my research assistant. I have assigned pseudonyms to all interviewees in order to protect their privacy.

This was a stand-alone project rather than part of any larger oral history project, and consequently the interviews are not at the present time in any archive. The questions were focused on my research interests and generally did not deviate far from those interests. But in the

course of conducting and writing about my research it became clear to me that I should consider my own relationship to the Armenian women I was interviewing. Hence, this article has a fourfold purpose: to document the voices, values, and priorities of feminists in the contemporary Republic of Armenia; to argue from evidence against the claim, made in multiple corners of the Armenian transnation, that feminism runs counter to Armenian "tradition;" to use oral history to begin to construct a narrative of Armenian feminism more in keeping with the perspectives of Armenian feminists themselves; and to reflect on the way in which the intersubjective currents between me and those I studied can be theorized.

THE RECIPE: THEORIZING INTERSUBJECTIVITY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE *TRANSNATION*

The relationship between *Hayastantsis* (Armenians who live in the Republic of Armenia, the current-day nation-state) and those who live in diaspora is complicated. On the one hand, the homeland/diaspora binary tends to presuppose a hierarchy of authentic identity according to which the Republic of Armenia would be considered the authentic Armenia, both because it currently enjoys national sovereignty and because it is the only part still located on Armenian indigenous lands, while the diaspora communities would be considered less authentic. However, there are several factors in the Armenian situation that make the homeland/diaspora binary more complicated, chief among which is the fact that those who live in diaspora communities outside of the Republic of Armenia are sedentary, without the intention or ability of returning to their ancestral homeland. For many, the ancestral homeland is in eastern Turkey, where in 1915 the Ottoman Turks, who had conquered the Armenian indigenous lands in the fifteenth century, launched a genocide that cleared the land of its Armenian citizens.[6] For the descendants of those survivors, the Republic of Armenia is not *quite* their homeland.[7]

Despite this cleavage, there is much that unites Armenians around the world. Khachig Tölölyan coined the term *transnation* to describe a nation that includes both a nation-state and a collection of sedentary diasporic communities. In Tölölyan's formulation, "the nation-state remains important, but the permanence of dispersion is fully acknowledged and the institutions of connectedness, of which the state is one, become paramount."[8] In the case of the Armenian transnation, it is important to note that, of the approximately nine million Armenians in the world, only about three million live in the current nation-state of Armenia.[9] The concept of transnation does not ascribe greater authenticity to those who reside in the nation-state than to those who live in permanent diaspora. As I am a diasporan Armenian, my relationship to those I interviewed partakes of this complex relationship; I was probably considered more of an insider by my interviewees than I would otherwise have been. Another factor that unites Armenians is our common history of genocide: while our own lived experience may be quite different from one another, Armenians throughout the transnation feel a bond with one another based on the genocide our ancestors suffered and the ongoing denial by Turkey of that genocide. We are conscious that a significant part of the reason our diaspora is so large is that Western Armenians were driven out of their lands. Amy Tooth Murphy observes that in her work as a lesbian researcher interviewing other lesbian women, it was not only the fact that she was an insider, but also that the group is historically marginalized and oppressed, that created a bond of trust in her interviews.[10] A similar bond attaches to the relationship between the Hayastantsi women and me. A final unifying factor is the fact that almost all of my interviewees like me, identify as feminists. All these convergences, what Abrams calls "shared values," made the interviews successful.[11]

BUTTER AND RICE: INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS

The testimonies in this section illustrate the shared values between the Hayastantsi women and me. Because I wanted to construct an alternative story about Armenian feminism, I sought out likely participants through Armenian feminist friends both in the Republic of Armenia and elsewhere in the diaspora, and as a result, most of the participants identified as feminists. I was struck by the commonalities in the range of their stories about becoming feminists, and how much they resemble stories I have heard from American feminists of all ethnicities, including my students. For some, growing up in an intellectual home or having open-minded parents created fertile ground for a feminist consciousness; for others, it was through encountering it in their university studies; for still others, it was engaging in politics or volunteer work. One common experience shared by a number of interviewees was that of growing up in homes where parents did not impose rigid gender rules on the children. For instance, Hreghen grew up in Syria, where she says the prevailing culture, including in the Syrian Armenian community, is very sexist. However, her mother was the main breadwinner in her family, and her aunts were well educated, had careers, and did considerable world travel. This set a tone in the household, where "we never had this 'you're a girl you should do this, you're a boy you should do that,' so between me and my brother we never felt that and still now we—we still laugh if people tell us, 'why is your brother washing the dishes?' or things like that, like very simple things and gender roles that are nothing for us but are huge problem for others."[12]

Knar, who describes herself as having been a tomboy as a child, is originally from Gyumri, which several interviewees told me is the most militaristic region of the Republic of Armenia. She is the second of two sisters and said that her family expected and wanted her to be a boy. Her mother worked and always insisted on having her own money and independence but still believes that Knar's boyfriend needs to give her permission to go out for an evening without

him. Knar's father was proud of having two daughters, but on the other hand, "he would always tell me that 'you're my son'…I just realized there were some things that he wanted to teach. My father would take me and teach me how to paint walls and how [electricity] works….He had no idea about feminism, he has no idea about women in Parliament or gender equality per se, but the way I grew up, I knew that I can do anything, and…he had always been very empowering."[13]

Like Knar, Megheti was born in the provinces and credits her parents for modeling gender equality, although her father died in the war with Azerbaijan when Megheti was one year old. She said that her mother "never stopped me, she's a doctor, she was born in the village but she has freedom in her soul. She says that my father was a very open-minded person, and he wouldn't stop her in any way, but maybe the absence of a husband, of a man in her life, made her be totally emancipated."[14] By the age of thirteen, Megheti's nascent feminism was emerging, fortified by learning about women's rights and children's rights in school. She wrote an award-winning essay about a friend who was being beaten in her family, even though there was no language to name domestic violence in her village. She mused that "I don't know why I wrote about my friend, I just wrote that I thought there should be a 'trust number' a child could call to ask for help….I wrote about childhood which is being destroyed."[15]

Other interviewees, like Manoushag and Aikoun, who were interviewed together, came from families that were not so open-minded. Manoushag says that her father would not allow her to wear pants, and she does not dare to show him her tattoo. She observes that when she was young, families liked it that their daughters went to university, but there was a fashion for college women to get married during college and to give up career aspirations: " 'Oh, our daughter-in-law she's in university, you know,' but they never—almost never allow her to finish. That was the reason I separated from my household."[16] Aikoun agreed with this, adding that while some

women finished their college degrees after getting married, they typically did not work. Instead, the degree was considered like an *ozheet* (dowry).[17] Manoushag and Aikoun both agree that there was and is pressure on young women to marry between the ages of twenty-five and thirty.[18]

Lousaper also grew up in a more conservative family, but she believes it has become more open-minded due to her influence. Her parents taught her she had to be a virgin before marriage and imposed an after-dark curfew on her, but they eased some of these restrictions when they saw that they could not control her. Lousaper believes that inborn temperament determines the capacity for open-mindedness:

> I think I was born like this; I subconsciously brought things with me into this life—the will to be the owner of your life and to be the owner of your body and [not to] let anybody else interrupt your personal life….and I think I am able to change my surroundings and people surrounding me. I always argued with my teachers, with male students in my class because they misbehaved with female students and teachers did nothing to stop it, so I was in constant arguing with everybody who I thought were mistreating others….we had different conversations in my school, even in middle school, about my teachers telling that for example, being gay is bad. "Gays are animals." And so on, so I started arguing with them upon that topic.[19]

Lousaper had an intuitive desire to protect both girls and boys who were bullied in school; by the time she was in high school she began to discover more open-minded friends, and this crystallized during her time at the American University of Armenia and as a result of what she learned on the internet.[20]

Lousaper's university experience was a common one: women who had been developing a nascent feminist consciousness in their youth found their way to feminist studies at university. This was true for Krmouhi, who grew up in the Republic of Georgia in an educated family and came to Armenia in 1965. She said that at university she learned more about relationships between the sexes, which helped form her attitude towards boyfriends and about what to fight for. She read the Russian feminist poets Marina Tsvetaeva and Anna Akhmatova and discovered an Armenian woman poet, Mary Markaryan. She appreciated these poets especially because of "how hard was it for women to be a really intellectual woman….That was really hard process, women who thought different way and had their own independent thinking, rather than communist."[21]

While Krmouhi found her way to a feminist consciousness through her university experience, the younger interviewees had the additional benefit of attending university classes in feminist studies. That was where Hreghen learned the terminology and concepts of feminism in the process of writing an undergraduate thesis on the role of women in families. This work-- and her exposure to feminist professors-- "made me realize about the women in my own family, in my own surroundings, beyond my family like my close friends' mothers and aunts and, and all the struggle that they go through to keep their family to live, to be better people. For me now it drives me more to things that I never thought I could do. So it gives me self-confidence."[22]

Megheti describes her passionate reaction to listening to her first university lecture on feminism. She said to herself:

> 'Oh my god, this is about our lives. This is about my sister's life. This is about my friend's life. Oh my god! I am not gonna to let anybody make me feel like this— never!' And I began changing. I began changing. I never heard about domestic violence—I knew

> that my neighbors were beaten by their husbands but I didn't know that there was a name for that, domestic violence. I began learning, I began interviewing, I began—and then I began writing about it, and then I began doing my own researches in mass media, in everything, in political speeches, I began going deep and deep inside of this topic. And I understood that, 'Oh my god. This is what I want to fight against.'

University experiences were not always feminist-affirming, however. Knar described vividly a moment when her feminist politics gelled at university: an instructor asked for a student to collect final exam papers, and one of the male students insisted that one of the female students had to perform this task. Knar began to argue with the instructor for not challenging the male student's comment. She experienced a wave of anger, "of seeing how it's everywhere, like those little things that we don't usually notice that make up our whole lives, that we know our only worth is to clean the dishes and to cook, and that entitlement got me so angry that from then on I've started understanding what patriarchy means."[23] Knar, who believes that "our body has more consciousness than our mind," felt this anger in her body, which at first frightened her, but she is now learning to channel her anger in non-physical ways.[24] She observes, "I do see now that whatever I do is going to affect a lot of other women, so if I do something that's against the stereotypes it's going to empower other people, so that's very powerful, to understand the force of the power of inspiration."[25]

For those who grew up in neighboring countries, the contrast between gender mores in those countries and in Armenia was notable, and this was true across generational divides. Krmouhi, who immigrated from Georgia to Armenia at the age of fourteen in 1965, said that she did not feel much gender distinction in Georgia but that it was noticeable in Armenia. Soviet-style equality meant doing the same hard physical labor (construction work, for instance) as men,

and she observed that "there is a different masculinity culture in Russia. They are more open to doing things. That was very interesting. And they have also very interesting culture of feminism coming from 1920s, when there was promoted the idea of equality; of course, this equality was only on women but at the same time, you know, they were taking into control the entire society, even how many intercourses, sexual courses should be doing in the week."[26]

Decades after Krmouhi, Syrian-born Hreghen, who came to Armenia in 2012 at the age of seventeen, reports that she had expected Armenia to be less sexist than Syria but found it in some ways to be more so. She described being stared at when she drove a car being told by a boy at her camp that she could not build a fire, and having male university students interrupt a conversation she was having with a male friend to tell him he should not use profanity in front of her. On the other hand, she believes gender mores are becoming less sexist in recent years, due to young people's exposure to Western mores through social and entertainment media that they can access on the internet. As of 2019, she said, it had become normalized for mixed-gender groups of students to go out to cafes or other public places.[27]

Knar observed that the so-called *garmir khuntzor* ("red apple") tradition is still salient in Armenia although it has morphed from an even older sexist practice: "The day after the wedding, they used to show the red sheets. Now the guy's family has to take red apples to the girl's family so that all neighbors and everyone see that the girl is a virgin. They don't show the sheet anymore, you know, we've kind of gotten over that, but the red apple is still very, very important."[28]

Razmouhi and Aikoun were the only two of my interviewees who did not want to claim the label "feminist," but my knowledge of their work in empowering women made me decide to include them in this project. They are both from one of the provincial areas of Armenia where,

Razmouhi says, attitudes about gender are more patriarchal and more rigid than in Yerevan. However, like several of the others, she believes that witnessing her parents' relationship helped her later to notice and reject patriarchal attitudes and structures. Her mother was a kindergarten director and activist, and her father supported her mother's work. Her mother did not compel her to wait on her brother or keep her from going out of the house. Later, in her early thirties,when she was married with children, Razmouhi attended City Council meetings, where, she says, "I saw that women's questions were left out from the agenda, their social problems were not addressed. And the reason was that out of fifteen members all were men… most importantly women did not turn to the council with their questions, because many were ashamed, many did not dare, many did not know about their rights, so many problems were unvoiced. And when women did not turn to men with their questions, naturally men thought there were no problems, no issues because women did not turn to them."[29] What she witnessed persuaded her to enter the political sphere, which she did in 2003: "At that time I decided that I should become a member not only of the local community council but also for the whole *marz* [district]. I was the first who dared to participate. And that was the first time I faced these stereotypes."[30] At this time, Razmouhi's husband left for Russia to find work, eventually abandoning the family, so Razmouhi continued to work and raise her children alone. In 2008, she founded a women's center whose purpose is to empower women in her province, and that works with several constituencies. They teach young women leadership skills, how to defend their rights, and how to find their own place in the world. They also work with battered women and impoverished women, whom they help to develop work skills, such as making handicrafts that are sold to others in the diaspora. The independence this gives their clients can be transformative, as Razmouhi observes about two of her colleagues: "If not for our work they would have to deal

with the life that was imposed on them, in which they were living, because their husbands made them live the life which they did not want to live. Both are powerful girls now, one is married, she is happy in the marriage, and the second is raising her sons herself but she is powerful and she entered politics."[31] Although Razmouhi seemed to have negative associations with the word "feminist," her life's work is feminist in nature and she understands the politics and institutionalization of patriarchal control very well.

Aikoun also grew up in one of the provinces during the war with Azerbaijan in the 1990s and is part of the collective that runs a women's center in that province. She reports that even in such a traditional town, her parents did not impose the rule that the brother controls the sisters' behavior. Her mother, who took on the role of family breadwinner after Aikoun's father had a heart attack when Aikoun was young, understood that she was not a typical Armenian woman—Aikoun does not cook, for instance. She has a degree in mathematics and works long hours, enjoying her job. Like Razmouhi, Aikoun does not necessarily call herself a feminist and professes not to know much about feminism. She states that she just wants women to be treated equally with men.[32]

The Women's Resource Center in Yerevan was another vehicle through which some came more deeply into a feminist consciousness. Araxie, one of the six student volunteers I interviewed, heard about the Women's Resource Center's training program while at university, during a period of struggle to find direction. She observed, "I am just searching something, I am searching myself, I want to find what I am really interested in, what profession I need to choose where I want to be."[33] As she underwent the training she experienced a feminist awakening, realizing that "each of us were discriminated [against], have had an experience of violence in our life, and I just realized that during my whole life, I saw that discrimination, the violence not

directly against me, but against people who were surrounded me, so then I understand that yes, I want to be here as a volunteer, just to be involved in different actions, protests, projects, or whatever."[34]

Several of the students said that their parents do not know much about their work at the Women's Resource Center, because they do not believe their parents will understand; some said that their mothers were supportive of their work but that they have not shared what they do with their fathers. Araxie said that her work at the WRC helped her understand that personal empowerment is important but working for systemic change and collective empowerment even more so: "One more thing that I understand here is fighting for yourself in your own little circle is really important, and is the first important thing that you should do or you can do, but fighting for other girls and women, and fighting for different women, to educate them, to talk with them, to protest for their rights in a different way, women should be together with other women, and this is the power of women I think. This is how we create the power."[35]

The common themes I heard about the conditions for coming to feminist consciousness—growing up in an educated, or at least open-minded family; exposure to feminist ideas through education; the example set by liberated foremothers; the consciousness of not fitting into normative gender; growing up in another country and having a different culture as a point of comparison; being or feeling abandoned or unsupported by men in one's family—are the same kinds of conditions I hear from my students in the West that give rise to their feminist consciousness. As I listened in these sections of the interviews, my subjectivity and that of my interviewees seemed to coincide. However, I am also conscious that, as Katherine Borland writes, researchers "constitute the initial audience for the narratives we collect" and that this "influences the way in which our collaborators will construct their stories."[36] Although I do have

confidence in what I was told, it is possible that, consciously or unconsciously, my interviewees shaped their stories in order to provide me with narratives that they sensed I wanted to hear because, even though I may have been perceived as an insider in the Armenian transnation and a fellow feminist, I nevertheless was marked as different by virtue of my status as researcher.

STIRRING THE POT: WHERE DIFFERENCES EMERGED BETWEEN ME AND MY INTERVIEWEES

The differences between the Hayastantsi women and me seemed most salient when they talked about what they think are the most important feminist priorities for the Republic of Armenia. Although the priorities themselves—domestic violence and trafficking, anti-feminist backlash, the misogyny and homophobia of the Armenian church, homophobia, heterosexism and the lack of sexual education, and the tendency of militarism to reinforce patriarchal attitudes—overlap with the priorities of Western feminists, the specifics of how those issues play out in the Republic of Armenia are markedly different. In these parts of the interviews, our relationship seemed more like one in which interviewees were informing or instructing me. These controversial subjects are also ones about which we might expect women—maybe even feminists—to feel some reticence. Kristina Minister, in theorizing why many North American and British women are unused to public speaking, traces that phenomenon to the rise of the industrial-era domestic sphere,[37] and a similar dynamic may be at work for Armenian women. In addition, there was a silencing regime specific to Armenian culture that predated industrialization: in some nineteenth-century Armenian villages, a new bride went to live in her groom's family's home, where she was forbidden to speak for a period of a year; this period was called *moonch* ("the bride swallowed her tongue.")[38] While this practice has fallen out of use in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there may be traces of it lingering in ideas that women's

voices and perspectives are less valuable than men's. Nevertheless, I hoped that the overtness of my feminist agenda created a structure, an ideological space, in which my interviewees could speak in comparative safety. Each of the following sections documents the way the Hayastantsi women described feminist priorities for Armenia.

Domestic Violence

Several of my interviewees named domestic violence as a significant problem in Armenia. Domestic violence is so normalized that most of the populace does not believe there is any problem. Maneh, the Director of the Women's Support Center, which serves abused women, said that the problem is particularly acute in rural areas, where old Armenian tradition prevails, according to which:

> The oldest son lives with his mother and he is the one responsible to take care of his parents, he brings the bride to the house, sometimes two brothers are in the same house and they bring their brides. And daughter-in-law [is] now considered the property of the husband of his family, so sometimes in the rural areas we see if the girl runs away, if the wife runs away from husband's house to her parental home because she is battered the parents do not accept [her], because it is a shame—now you belong to them.[39]

Even in the more cosmopolitan cities, however, attitudes about domestic violence are permissive. Maneh places blame for this in part on the influence of television, observing, "maybe it's something abstract for you but for example we have thousands of soap operas that promote violence toward women, that show women beaten, cheated, suicidal, abused, this is the standard to see on television and it is watched by eighty percent of population and the reason it is so much

watched and followed is because it is the part of their reality, this is what they say. So this is the bad indicator of what the situation is."[40]

Popular denial about the abuse of women extends to the problem of trafficking. Many Armenians simply do not believe that Armenian women and girls are trafficked. Krmouhi spoke to this, telling me that she witnessed such women herself in Dubai and wanted to find a way to prove the truth of trafficking and prostitution to a disbelieving Armenian public:

> I went from group to group bringing oral stories of women because they were not registered. How they've started. Why they've been sold, through what torture they went. I went to groups of men, through bodyguards and I remember one bodyguard said, 'I will kill that man who did it with women.' I said I want to build consciousness about the issue, so that women's dreams were sold, their lives were sold. When [my] report was published, I remember I was sitting and people were looking at me thinking this woman is taking Western concepts, but seventy percent, eighty percent, were on my side.[41]

Another interviewee who wanted to challenge public skepticism, Lousaper, chose to make her university capstone project one that would dramatize the problem of domestic abuse. She described her activist project thus:

> I lay down on the street in the Republic Square, as the dead body of a woman, twenty-year-old Christine Iskandaryan, who had a six-month-old baby and was killed by her thirty-year-old husband….the story was still fresh and people were still talking about it…. I had artificial skin on me which was like hers and I had bruises all over my body and a pale face, to look dead…. from afar you could think I was naked lying there…and four people were circling me, wearing black and holding posters with other names of

> killed women by their husbands. I laid there for one hour—it was enough for many people to see it and to talk about it….[42]

Lousaper describes mixed reactions to her street performance. Some onlookers expressed concern that she would be getting cold; others said that perhaps the husband was right to kill the wife if she had betrayed him; still others perceived the intended message of her presentation.[43]

Church Misogyny and Homophobia

When asked about the importance of the Armenian church in maintaining patriarchal systems and attitudes, interviewees came up with a range of responses. Knar observed that the church opposes abortion and divorce, and that sex is seen as sinful.[44] Lousaper added, "in Christianity patriarchy is a norm. In [a] traditional Armenian family patriarchy is [the] norm, so the father should be the head of the family and control the female members of the family….It's all connected—[the] father is the god of the family and is the god of society…Traditions pull people back."45 And Maneh spoke to the reach of the church in civil society: "With the previous government the church was very vehemently opposed to [the] domestic violence law, it was very vehemently opposed to women's rights and they promoted on the television that woman should be obedient to men, that is the Christian way."[46]

On the other hand, many Armenians who grew up during the Soviet era describe themselves as atheists, in keeping with Soviet doctrine; Lousaper's parents were among these. Because she was not raised religiously, Lousaper says that the church is not important in her life. "I remember," she said, "when I was little and they took me to church, I used to blow the candles out instead of lighting them."[47] Karoun, the co-director of the Yerevan Women's Resource Center, agrees with the others that the Armenian church plays a role in misogyny and

homophobia, although she thinks it is less active in this sense than the Georgian church. The Armenian church, in her view, is more symbolic and not as powerful as some believe.[48]

LGBTQIA Rights and Sexual Education

There are LGTBQ activists in Yerevan, the most cosmopolitan of Armenian cities. Azadouhi is one of the co-founders of Fem Library—a queer-friendly space in Yerevan, with a library, art projects, activist center, programming space, and "witch corner" (used mainly for reading fortunes in coffee grounds). But they have been hounded out of their collective space more than once when neighbors complained about their presence to their landlord.[49] Haverj gave another example of homophobic intolerance: "[A] couple of years ago, in the Golden Apricot [film festival] there was an LGBT documentary, and for that there was big protest on the streets, and…the whole program was cancelled for having two LGBT films in [the] program."[50] Strategizing about how to combat homophobia in the populace, Krmouhi believes it is essential to educate people and thinks street protests can be counterproductive. She reflected that "in Armenian culture you had better educate [the] population, bring them professional knowledge [about] what is gender equality, rather than go and stand with slogans and posters. It is not accepted. You should understand how these people are used through generations to understand. We often speak about knowledge that helped Armenia to survive. Why don't we build knowledge? The men in the government you know, they are very open."[51]

The students at the Women's Resource Center agreed that there is significant lack of knowledge about gender and sexuality among young Armenians. Hreghen said:

> We were just a few weeks back talking with classmates that we have about how dating culture doesn't exist in Armenia and people don't date before getting married, and that's

> where the whole consent things happen sometimes, like the guy rapes the girl or leaves her or just sleeps with her and leaves her and shames her and things like that. So I think … we need sexual education, because a lot of people don't know how their bodies work, and—and for women especially that's even more important because the girls don't know about contraception and then they get pregnant and they are shamed and sometimes they die and they are beaten to death… they didn't know basic stuff about ovulation, about why do you have your period, about how your body works.[52]

Lousaper mentioned that consciousness is shifting, due to the fact that there is now a *brnutyan dzayn* (#MeToo) phenomenon, following the rise of that movement in the West.[53]

Militarism

The nexus between militarism, nationalism, and misogyny has been well explored by feminist scholars.[54] Maneh noted that the previous regime (before the "Velvet Revolution") followed a militaristic philosophy attributed to a national hero named Nzhdeh, whose views they adopted selectively. This philosophy, she said, "is very militaristic, it is for the nation and women in this picture is viewed as a mother of heroes bearer of soldiers," and she expressed relief that the ideology was no longer followed.[55] However, Karoun observed that war tends to resurrect patriarchal militarism. She said, "this is soldier, this is his wife, mother, protector of children…and here on the frontline you see this very violent, militarized, masculine type of macho man, fighter. I think it's very interesting that war and conflict and genocide, they just reproduce and kind of fixate these—these roles once again."[56] Krmouhi believes that militarism, and most recently the Karabagh war of the 1990s, is used to silence dissent about women's

rights. She objects to young women who "speak about domestic violence without going back to the roots….Why are these men also violent? What happened? These men have been in the war, they have been never rehabilitated, they've never received psychological assistance. They came where? To their families back, and [they] put the power on these women, on the families."[57]

The Velvet Revolution

One final topic of discussion that highlighted for me my difference from my interviewees was that of the so-called "Velvet Revolution" of May 2018, which was still fresh in the minds of my interview subjects. Young people took to the streets to protest corruption in the government, and after ten days of non-violent protest, which included making *khorovatz* (shish-kebab) and dancing traditional folk dances, the president stepped down. A new government was installed, which led many of my participants to be more hopeful about prospects for gender equality, especially because the new government appointed a few high-ranking women, at least one of whom was said to be pro-feminist. The younger cohort of my interviewees tended both to have more hope and to feel that change should be happening more quickly. Older interviewees, who were in leadership roles and understood that change is often incremental, were also hopeful but perhaps more realistic. As Karoun put it, "I would say ninety percent probably [are] very honest, very devoted people that came into power. There will be disappointments —corruption— there is no way to get rid of it completely, I'm not that naive to think that things will change completely—but also I think we're in a great time now, and we as a civil society, should continue our monitoring, our watchdog[ging]."[58] Maneh spoke to the central role feminist women played in the revolution and that it was perhaps the first instance of an organized feminist movement in Armenia. They engaged in acts of civil disobedience, blocking metro station entrances so that the metro could not run; staging a protest against low pay and undeclared work

of women cashiers at the largest supermarket chain, which resulted in the supermarket closing for five days; marching in the streets carrying banners with feminist messages; and blocking streets so that car traffic could not move.[59]

As the Hayastantsi women told me about their priorities for feminism in Armenia, they sometimes asked me whether things are the same in the United States. It became clear that most of them consider the United States to be freer, more feminist, more democratic, and more LGBTQIA-friendly than Armenia. In some instances, I disabused them of these notions. Yes, domestic violence is not normalized in the U.S., but no, it has not been overcome. Yes, there is more acceptance of LGBTQIA people in the U.S., but this varies widely by region. And so forth. As we compared and contrasted issues of concern in our countries, we were cataloging our differences as well as our similarities.

THE SEASONINGS: THE QUESTION OF ARMENIAN FEMINIST INDIGENEITY

I want now to turn to that other central goal of my research, namely, to see if there is a way to argue that feminism is congruent with Armenian identity. The origin of this goal lies in my encounters with postcolonial transnational feminist theory, which offers useful insights about the ways in which feminism may travel across national boundaries, may be taken up in specific locations and moments, and may conflict with nationalist ideologies. Transnational feminism attempts to avoid totalizing or culturally imperialist impulses.[60] Like postcolonial studies, it arose in response to "global shifts in economics and politics; but it is especially attentive to the movements of persons, goods, capital, and cultural forms and meanings with and across spaces marked by national and cultural borders."[61] While Armenia is not a colony of Western powers, it bears many of the qualities of "non-Western" cultures, including living for most of its existence under the dominion of sequential conquering powers. Uma Narayan articulates the way that

feminism is often vilified and denounced as antithetical to non-Western cultural traditions. Echoing Benedict Anderson's concept of national identity as an imagined one, Narayan writes:

> National cultures in many parts of the world seem susceptible to seeing themselves as *unchanging continuities* stretching back into a distant past. This picture tends to reinforce powerfully what I think of as the "Idea of Venerability," making people susceptible to the suggestion that practices and institutions are valuable *merely* by virtue of the fact that they are of long-standing. It is a picture of Nation and Culture that stresses continuities of tradition, (often imagined continuities) over assimilation, adaptation, and change.[62]

This idea of venerability is deployed selectively by nationalists, revealing their political bias more than any real commitment to a culture of continuity. Narayan observes that "feminist political agendas are presumably deemed 'tainted' by their alleged 'origin' in the West. Many of these allegedly 'Authentic Upholders of their Culture' seem to have few personal qualms, however, about using 'Western' technology or buying 'Western' consumer goods."[63] Narayan challenges the claim to authority of such nationalists in India, her country of birth—by what right are they, not she, authorized to decide what is cultural tradition and what is not? Why may not she claim that feminism is indigenous to India, citing as evidence the fact that Indians sent daughters to school long before doing so was customary in the West?

These debates threaten to collapse into simplistic oppositions—West/colonizers/feminist versus non-Western/colonized (by the West)/non-feminist ("traditional"). To avoid such collapse, I follow Susan Stanford Friedman's work on the migration of feminism. She appropriates the concept of "traveling theory," first coined by Edward Said, observing that "feminism seldom arises in purely indigenous forms, but, like culture itself, develops syncretistically [sic] out of a transcultural interaction with others. Feminism's migrancy is 'never

unimpeded,' to echo Said. 'It necessarily involves processes of representation and institutionalization different from those at the point of origin. This complicates any account of the transplantation, transference, circulation, and commerce of theory and ideas.' "[64] The conditions are salutary for the syncretic emergence of feminism in all locations of the Armenian transnation, including the Republic of Armenia. It is worth noting that Armenia's geographic location, on the ancient trade routes between Europe and East Asia, has meant that Armenians have long been exposed to other cultures as travelers and conquerors have passed through their territory.

My interviewees were not all agreed about whether feminism is a Western import. When asked to reflect on whether they think feminism is a creation of the West, or whether there is an indigenous Armenian feminism, interviewees gave mixed responses. Lousaper said unequivocally that she believes feminism to be Western in origin,[65] while others made clear that they borrow heavily from Western feminism in their thinking. Most of them had at least an intuitive understanding that labeling feminism as exclusively Western leaves it vulnerable to nationalist claims that it is anti-Armenian and part of a Western culturally imperialist agenda. Some have responded by working to adapt Western feminism for an Armenian context, like Knar and two university friends, who were planning to write an Armenian version of the book *Goodnight Stories for Rebel Girls.*[66] Others worked on feminist projects more fully indigenous: for instance, one of the founders of the Women's Resource Center made a documentary film about Zabel Yesayan, who has become a symbolic founding foremother of Armenian feminism in the eyes of feminists throughout the transnation.[67]

Karoun has a Ph.D. in sociology and is very conversant with Western feminism. She commented that the feminism broadly known is the Western version, but "that doesn't mean that there [are] no other feminisms, there are no other feminists… it's just we never probably called them feminisms, and we don't know how to frame them as feminists."[68] Karoun observed that terms like "intersectionality" and "postcolonial" may not be relevant to the Armenian context, and she expressed a desire for an Armenian feminism that balances global and local issues. There was, she said, an indigenous Armenian feminism (citing both the nineteenth century Constantinople feminists like Zabel Yesayan and a movement in Tibilisi) but it was interrupted by Soviet ideology, which substituted its own version of a women's movement. Ironically, however, Soviet state feminism was not a robust feminism, as evidenced by Soviet movies: "There was always this very powerful figure of woman…I think it contributed to patriarchy, mainly because of the dual responsibilities that it used to put on women -- you should work, because they were pushing women in the labor market, but at the same time you should continue all these reproductive things and household things, you have to come home and cook, and it contributed to that patriarchy."[69] In the post-Soviet period, Karoun believes that the fact that there is a legacy of Soviet state feminism contributes to the pervasive sense that feminism is not needed in Armenia, and "that's why we don't value feminism, that's why we think, these feminists are just.….getting grants and making noise, there is no violence, in Armenia everybody is equal, we don't have these problems. It's because their mothers, their grandmothers never fought for what we have now."[70]

Indeed, much of the antifeminist backlash my interviewees reported is framed as resistance to Western cultural imperialism. Hovanoush says that widespread mistrust of NGOs has affected her father's attitudes: "The most part of us….think that the European NGOs have

the goal to destroy our culture, our national values, and my father is very worried about it; and when I said that I'm going to some [NGO] trainings he starts to ask, 'What are you going to talk about there?' and maybe he is worried about that, that I am going to learn some bad things here."[71] Araxie also expressed how misinformation about the Women's Resource Center strained relations between her and her parents: "There are some fake news about Women's Resource Center in general, like we are breaking all the cultural norms, values; Armenians have negative feedback about Women's Resource Center, and my mother is kind of worried, but regarding my father, he doesn't really know what I'm doing."[72]

Suspicion of European NGOs is part of a larger mistrust of the West, actively fueled by the Russian government, whose goal, apparently, is to sow misinformation and discord in post-Soviet states such as Armenia. Krmouhi, who co-founded a pro-democracy NGO, explained that gender equality was of singular importance to the newly independent Armenia of the early 1990s, but that Russian influence politicized the issue by suggesting that gender equality is a Western concept being pushed by billionaire George Soros through his open-society philanthropic projects, which are greeted with suspicion by nationalists. The so-called 'Anti-Gender Campaign' succeeded in excluding gender equality from being included in landmark human rights legislation in Armenia.[73]

Haverj spoke to a tradition of gender-egalitarian principles in Armenian history. She believes that misogyny in Armenia originated with the coming of Muslim occupation and the nationalism engendered thereafter. Looking into Armenian history she observes that "we've never been super patriarchal — it's always been equal; if you look at our epos, female characters they're as strong as male characters."[74] She cites Mkhitar Gosh (1130 -1213), the philosopher of the Armenian Renaissance period, who wrote a legal code that gave women divorce and other

rights;[75] *Sasna Tsrer* (*The Daredevils of Sassoun)* and its heroines;[76] and the nineteenth century folktale "Aregnazan," which has a transgender protagonist. Haverj wants to refute claims that gender-equalitarian principles originated solely in the West while Armenia and other non-Western cultures were lost in a patriarchal and unenlightened past.[77] Maneh acknowledges that some Armenians claim that feminism is against Armenian tradition, but she calls this a false claim. Her response to such people is pointed:

> I will tell them that we live in a global society for its positives and its negatives, a global society means that we accept Gandhi and Gandhi's theories, you know, we were influenced by French Revolution, by Jean- Jacque Rousseau in his theories of education, so there are many, many things, you cannot exclude one. We have people who read Derrida, okay so you cannot distinctly say that no, we are to be Armenian and everything that we do is Armenian, we are living in global society and are influenced by these theories, by these thinkers, by these philosophers, and we cannot live separately from each other.[78]

The fact that Razmouhi and Aikoun do not self-identify as feminists even though they founded and operate the Goris Women's Development Center and are clearly doing feminist work returns us to the question of how we name what we do. Razmouhi and Aikoun may be making a strategic decision to avoid triggering backlash responses to their work, or they may themselves have internalized negative characterizations of feminism. For them, the efficacy of their work is more important than having a feminist consciousness. But for those who have encountered feminism through university study or engagement with Western ideas, consciousness is fundamentally important, because it leads to work and life infused with feminist decisions and actions. Araxie spoke to this eloquently:

> In one word, feminism is a lifestyle for me. Feminism lets me act, helped me to think in a better way, and that is why it is a lifestyle for me, because I'm using feminism at home, at workplace, in the streets, in the meeting with friends, everywhere. Because sexism, discrimination, violence are everywhere, we need to put feminism everywhere. That's why I think that feminism should be the lifestyle for us….feminism is a thing which helps me to be more independent and more strong in my way. You know, this is not only my job, this is not only a topic which I could talk [about] during my trainings or my projects, this is really a thing which I need in my life in general. In the university, in the pubs, in the clubs, everywhere I—we—need feminism. And maybe if one day I want to change my career to be [a] scientist, cultural anthropologist or whatever, I think feminism should be the ground of all these things.[79]

Historic Armenia, which includes the current-day Republic of Armenia, is at the geographical and cultural crossroads of Europe and Asia, and for thousands of years it has been exposed to other cultures through conquest and trade. Armenian culture is dynamic, and the very notion of tradition is problematic—any attempt to pin it down ultimately will collapse when one recognizes that it is always already in flux. Krmouhi told me that she believes each nation has its own unique way of creating feminism, which suggests to me that the story we tell about Armenian feminism can be one that acknowledges the influences both of Western feminism and of an indigenous impulse to gender equality and empowerment, even if that impulse is called by another name.[80] In collecting the perspectives of the Hayastantsi women about this question, I recognize that I was serving two agendas, for, aside from my academic interest in exploring Armenian feminism, I very much wanted to be able to claim a place for feminism in Armenian culture. In my own youth, my feminist and Armenian commitments seemed antithetical, and it

took many years for me to feel that these two subject positions could be integrated in my life; thus, one effect of hearing the testimonies of my interviewees was to help me feel that I could be both an Armenian and a feminist.

BAKING IT IN THE *TONIR* (OVEN): A COLLECTIVE FEMINOGRAPHY

Abrams' central insight about intersubjectivity is that it is constantly in process throughout an encounter between researcher and interviewee, such that the subject position of each is produced out of the interaction between the two.[81] But, as Murphy observes, most of the work that has ensued since Abrams' insight assumes "a linear and hierarchical relationship in which the interviewer is the wielder of power while the interviewee is the potentially exploited," an assumption that fails to attend to other, subtler dynamics.[82] My relationship to that of my interviewees might more accurately be described as a web of interconnectedness, with privilege and power accruing at the nodes where various threads meet. Connection to our indigenous land is one such node: those living in the Republic of Armenia have the privilege of living in a part of our indigenous homeland, among the ancient relics, the apricot trees, and the grapevines. But in terms of freedom and prosperity I have more privilege, as I have a university appointment, comparative wealth, and the protections of what has been, up to now, a highly functional democracy.[83] Language is another node wherein my interviewees have more power, as they speak in our mother tongue while my Armenian is rudimentary.

The outcome of this web of interconnectedness is not so much a set of testimonies of individual lives, although they certainly are that, but more a narrative discourse, comprised of many speech acts. Abrams calls interviews of feminists "feminographies," which "validate

feminist life stories through shared references to practices and common understandings."[84] But it is not only that, through my listening, I am able to affirm the feminist stories of the Hayastantsi women, but also that I too am affirmed—as an Armenian feminist—through listening to them. Indeed, Armenian feminists must speak together if we are to be able to change the consciousness of the larger populace in the transnation. We need more feminist voices from all parts of the Armenian transnation, including the Republic of Armenia, if we are to tell a new story about Armenian feminism, one that characterizes it not as antithetical to, but as part of, Armenian tradition.

ENDNOTES

1. The author gratefully acknowledges the receipt of grants from the National Association for Armenian Studies and Research and the Rhode Island College Faculty Scholarship and Development Committee in support of the research and writing of this article. I am also grateful to the Armenian women who agreed to speak with me and record their voices for this project, to those who interpreted, translated, and transcribed the interviews, to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions, and to the PBJ writing collective.

2. Dora Sakayan, *Armenian Proverbs: A Paremiological Study with an Anthology of 2,5000 Armenian Folk Sayings Selected and Translated into English* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1994), 108.

3. Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010), 159.

4. See Janice Okoomian, "Lentils in the Ashes: Excavating the Fragments of Ancestral Feminism," in *Mother of Invention: How Our Mothers Influenced Us as Feminist Academics and*

Activists, eds. Vanessa Reimer and Sarah Sahagian (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2013), 168-80.

5. For more on the Velvet Revolution, see Laurence Broers and Anna Ohanyan, eds. *Armenia's Velvet Revolution: Authoritarian Decline and Civil Resistance in a Multipolar World*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021). For more on feminism in the contemporary Republic of Armenia, see Tamar Shirinian, "Feminist Pedagogies on the Front Lines: Struggling against a Mine, Struggling against Patriarchy," *Gender & Society* 37, no. 5 (October 2023): 727–49, https://doi.org/10.1177/08912432231185876. Shirinian documents the way in which feminist activists in Armenia used feminist pedagogical techniques when interacting with others in an environmental justice action. See also Gayane Harutyunyan, "Women's Rights Protection Social Movement in the Modern Armenian Society," *Journal of Sociology: Bulletin of Yerevan University* 14, no. 2 (38) (2023): 45–65, https://doi.org/10.46991/BYSU:F/2023.14.2.045. Harutyunyan argues that the women's rights movement that existed in Armenia during the Soviet era became uncoordinated after the collapse of the U.S.S.R., and that what remains are sporadic events of street activism. See also Nelli Sargsyan, "Experience-Sharing as Feminist Praxis: Imagining a Future of Collective Care," *History and Anthropology* 30, no. 1 (2019): 67–90, https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2018.1531287; and Nelli Sargsyan, "'Don't Be Our Daddy': Feminist Labor on the Political Left in Armenia," *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 46, no. 1 (May 2023): 53–66, https://doi.org/10.1111/plar.12515. Sargsyan explores the decentralized work feminist activists in Armenia engage in, as well as their resistance against the "civic patriarchy" in which their male allies on the left are invested.

6. For a definitive history of the Armenian genocide, see Vahakn N. Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus* (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1995).

7. The Republic of Armenia, or "Eastern Armenia," was conquered by the Russian Empire in the early nineteenth century, subsequently becoming part of the Soviet Union until that country's breakup in 1991. The 1915 genocide did not take place there, and Eastern Armenia has been significantly influenced by both the Russian and Georgian cultures. Other parts of the indigenous Armenian lands are now part of Iran and Azerbaijan. It should be noted, though, that some genocide survivors did flee to Eastern Armenia. It is those who live in diasporic communities to whom the Republic of Armenia may not seem like their homeland.

8. Khachig Tölölyan, "Elites and Institutions in the Armenian Transnation," *Diaspora* 9, no.1 (Spring 2000): 107-36, p. 130 n4.

9. "Armenian Population by Country." Wikipedia, accessed March 27, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armenian_population_by_country.

10. Amy Tooth Murphy, "Listening in, Listening Out: Intersubjectivity and the Impact of Insider and Outsider Status in Oral History Interviews," *Oral History* 48, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 37.

11. Abrams, *Oral History Theory,* 11.

12. Hreghen, interview by Janice Dzovinar Okoomian, July 16, 2019, interview 8.

13. Knar, interview by Janice Dzovinar Okoomian, July 16, 2019, interview 9.

14. Megheti, interview by Janice Dzovinar Okoomian, July 11, 2019, interview 3.

15. Megheti, interview.

16. Manoushag, interview by Janice Dzovinar Okoomian, July 20, 2019, interview 12.

17. Aikoun, interview by Janice Dzovinar Okoomian, July 20, 2019, interview 12.

18. Manoushag, interview; Aikoun, interview.

19. Lousaper, interview by Janice Dzovinar Okoomian, July 17, 2019, interview 10.

20. Lousaper, interview.

21. Krmouhi, interview by Janice Dzovinar Okoomian, July 25, 2019, interview 13.

22. Hreghen, interview.

23. Knar, interview.

24. Knar, interview.

25. Knar, interview.

26. Krmouhi, interview.

27. Hreghen, interview.

28. Knar, interview.

29. Razmouhi, interview by Janice Dzovinar Okoomian, July 6, 2019, interview 2.

30. Razmouhi, interview.

31. Razmouhi, interview.

32. Aikoun, interview.

33. Araxie, interview by Janice Dzovinar Okoomian, July 13, 2019, interview 6.

34. Araxie, interview.

35. Araxie, interview.

36. Borland, Katherine, " 'That's Not What I Said': Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research," In *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai. (New York: Routledge, 1991), 64.

37. Kristina Minister, "A Feminist Frame for the Oral History Interview," in Gluck, *Women's Words,* 29.

38. Susie Hoogasian Villa and Mary Kilbourne Matossian, *Armenian Village Life Before 1914* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1982), 92.

39. Maneh, interview by Janice Dzovinar Okoomian, July 6, 2019, interview 1.

40. Maneh, interview.

41. Krmouhi, interview.

42. Lousaper, interview.

43. Lousaper, interview.

44. Knar, interview.

45 Lousaper, interview.

46. Maneh, interview.

47. Lousaper, interview.

48. Karoun, interview by Janice Dzovinar Okoomian, July 18, 2019, interview 11.

49. Azadouhi, interview by Janice Dzovinar Okoomian, July 13, 2019, interview 5.

50. Haverj, interview by Janice Dzovinar Okoomian, July 15, 2019, interview 7.

51. Krmouhi, interview.

52. Hreghen, interview.

53. Lousaper, interview.

54. See for instance, Cynthia Cockburn, "Gender Relations as Causal in Militarization and War: a Feminist Standpoint," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 12, no. 2 (June 2010): 139-57; Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley, CA: Univ of California Press, 2014); and Joanne Nagel, "Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 2 (1998): 242-69.

55. Maneh, interview.

56. Karoun, interview.

57. Krmouhi, interview.

58. Since 2019, the promise of the velvet revolution has soured. Azerbaijan attacked the enclave of Artsakh in 2020, initiated a six-month blockade in March 2023, and in September 2023 finally drove all the Artsakhi Armenians off their land in what human rights groups have referred to as a genocidal campaign. At this writing, Artsakhi Armenians have mostly fled to the Republic of Armenia and Armenians are very much occupied with providing relief and support to the refugees. There are fears that Azerbaijan or Turkey may soon invade the Republic of Armenia. In this context, the desire to rectify gender equity issues, which my interviewees see as central to the health of the nation, is overshadowed by the immediacy of war and dispossession.

59. Maneh, interview.

60. See for instance, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1991); Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *boundary* 2 12, no. 1 (1984): 333-358; Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, eds., *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis, MN: Univ of Minnesota Press, 1994); Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1998); and Amanda Locke Swarr and Richa Nagar, eds., *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010).

61. Leigh Gilmore, "Autobiography's Wounds" in *Just Advocacy? Women's Human Rights, Transnational Feminisms, and the Politics of Representation,* eds. Wendy S. Hesford and Wendy Kozol (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP: 2005), 110.

62. Uma Narayan, "Contesting Cultures: 'Westernization,' Respect for Cultures, and Third-World Feminists," in *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 21. See also Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

63. Narayan, 22.

64. Friedman, 5. See also Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 226.

65. Lousaper, interview.

66. Since the time of our interview, Knar and her colleague have published this book. See Gayane Aghabalyan and Elmira Ayvasyan, *Armenian Wonderwomen,* ed. Katie Holland (self-pub., 2023).

67. Lara Aharonian and Talin Suciyan, *Finding Zabel Yesayan* (Utopiana, 2009), *Vimeo,* 42 min.

68. Karoun, interview.

69. Karoun, interview.

70. Karoun, interview.

71. Hovanoush, interview by Janice Dzovinar Okoomian, July 13, 2019, interview 6.

72. Araxie, interview.

73. Krmouhi, interview.

74. Haverj, interview.

75. See *The Lawcode of Mxit'ar Goš,* trans. Robert W. Thomson (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000).

76. Considered the Armenian national epic, more commonly known as *David of Sassoun* in reference to one of its four sections. Some recent scholars have suggested that the poem repudiates patrilineal systems and upholds the importance of women. See for instance Suren

Zolyan, “The Daredevils of Sassoun: The Deep Structure of the Plot,” *Studia Metrica et Poetica* 1, no. 1 (2014): 55-67.

77. Haverj, interview.

78. Maneh, interview.

79. Araxie, interview.

80. Krmouhi, interview.

81. Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 58.

82. Murphy, “Listening In, Listening Out,” 36.

83. The Republic of Armenia is the most functional democracy in its region; however, having been part of the Soviet Union, Armenians in the Republic have struggled to grow their democracy, fighting significant levels of political and financial corruption. In 2019, it may not yet have been clear to most Armenians that democracy in the United States was also eroding, due to election manipulation and executive overreach. For a fuller discussion of these trends in the U.S., see Vanessa Williamson, “Understanding Democratic Decline in the United States,” *Brookings Institution*, October 17, 2023, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/understanding-democratic-decline-in-the-united-states/.

84. Lynn Abrams, “Talking about Feminism: Reconciling Fragmented Narratives with the Feminist Research Frame,” in *Beyond Women’s Words: Feminisms and the Practices of Oral History in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Katrina Srigley, Stacey Zembrzycki, and Franca Iacovetta (New York: Routledge, 2018), 84.