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A Life of Otherness: Identity Negotiation, Family Relationships, and Community Experiences among LGBQ Armenians in Los Angeles

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A Life of Otherness:
Identity Negotiation, Family Relations, and Community Experiences among LGBQ Armenians in Los Angeles

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

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in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures

by

Rosie Vartyter Aroush

2018

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

A Life of Otherness:

Identity Negotiation, Family Relations, and Community Experiences

among LGBQ Armenians in Los Angeles

by

Rosie Vartyter Aroush

Doctor of Philosophy in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Peter S. Cowe, Co-Chair

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Diaspora as a permanent phenomenon and Los Angeles as host to one of the largest and most heterogeneous Armenian diasporic communities provide a fascinating backdrop for an expansive illustration of identity negotiation, family relations, and community networks. Identity as a marker cannot be compartmentalized; parts of oneself are not divided into segments, but rather experienced as a complete whole made up of many ingredients. What happens when people are not encouraged to accept their personal identity in all its diversity? What choices are made when one ingredient of their identity conflicts with another? This study discusses the struggles endured and strategies employed by Los Angeles lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) Armenians in negotiating and reconciling their multiple identities by constantly

privileging then covering one over the other. The research indicates that LGBQ Armenians use distinct disclosure strategies in approaching coming out with their family and community members, not only to belong in these heteronormative spaces, but also to maintain coexisting relationships. Furthermore, this study explores the impact of ethnic-based institutions and the influence of family values and cultural norms on the coming out process and on their experiences as LGBQ Armenians. This dissertation employs qualitative research methods and is based on a series of interviews with LGBQ Armenian adults aged 21-51 from Los Angeles, consisting of questions relating to their ethnic and sexual identity, family experiences, and community involvement. Interviews are transcribed following customary research and transcription conventions. The transcripts are analyzed using qualitative techniques with an issue-focused thematic analysis approach.

The dissertation of Rosie Vartyter Aroush is approved.

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2018

DEDICATION

For you. Yes, *you.*

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This dissertation focuses on the ethnic factors of Armenian culture that influence the role of the family and the impact of the community on the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) Armenians living in Los Angeles. This study investigates the impact ethnic-based organizations[1] in the Los Angeles diasporic community have on LGBQ Armenians. Furthermore, it examines the influence of traditional family values and cultural norms on the coming out process. This research also explores the struggles endured and strategies employed by LGBQ Armenians in identifying as lesbian/gay/bisexual/queer *and* Armenian. The growing field of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) research has in the past two decades studied various ethnic minority groups, however, LGBTQ Armenians have not been directly addressed by scholars in Armenian Studies or LGBTQ Studies. This dissertation explores the current research gap concerning the experiences of LGBQ Armenians living in the diasporic community of Los Angeles.

- Significance of the Study

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the experiences of LGBQ Armenians in the diasporic community of Los Angeles on the basis of the family, the ethnic & queer community, and the negotiation of their identities. This study is significant on many levels. It will introduce LGBQ research into the Armenian Studies arena and therefore contribute to the overall progress

[1] Armenian and LGBTQ Armenian organizations.

of the field by providing a collective and communal history to set the basis for further gender and sexuality research. It will serve as a catalyst to further the exploration of this topic in the interdisciplinary field of both Armenian Studies and LGBTQ Studies. Furthermore, the complicating factors of the Armenian Genocide presented can be used by researchers interested in studying ethnic groups with similar histories thereby expanding discourse on LGBTQ matters. Moreover, this dissertation will offer a new discourse when approaching Armenian sociological research with the inclusion of underlying gender and sexuality themes. It highlights both the unique and parallel features of the LGBQ Armenian context for research among similar ethnic and diasporic groups. Additionally, it paves the way for Armenian marriage and family, gender, identity, community, diaspora, and nationalism research to include LGBTQ Armenians in their subject groups in order to offer comprehensive results. Ultimately, the bridging of these fields will eliminate the current research gap and create a framework for further research combining the fields of Sociology, Gender Studies, American Studies, Diaspora Studies, LGBTQ Studies, and Armenian Studies.

- The Armenian Diasporic Community in Los Angeles

Economic crises, political instabilities, religious persecutions, massacres, deportations, along with pursuit of foreign trade and educational opportunities have led to the creation of modern Armenian diasporic communities around the world (Dekmejian 1997). The current estimation of Armenians worldwide is eight to eleven million, of which less than three million reside in Armenia. The largest Armenian population outside of Armenia is in neighboring Russia with an estimated two million Armenians. The second largest Armenian diasporic community is in the United States with an estimation ranging from 475,000 – 1.3 million people, with the majority of the community in Los Angeles County (Kossakian 2013). Tololyan (2000) defines

diaspora as "all people who are dispersed for whatever reason and live away from the homeland of their ancestors" (2) and argues that diaspora is a permanent phenomenon, and although distinct, these post-Genocide diasporic communities share a commitment to rebuilding institutions similar to the ones that existed in previously well-established diasporic communities. These diasporic institutions are supposed to address local needs, while also retaining explicitly transnational agendas, seek to encourage shared values, discourses, ideologies, and practices, and act as vehicles for the reproduction of the Armenian identity (Tololyan, 2000)[2].

There have been three major waves of Armenian immigration to the United States. The first was a result of the Hamidian massacres (1894-1896) and the Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman Empire (1915-1923) when 15,000 Armenians fled to the Americas. Once immigration began, the movement grew annually and by the outbreak of World War II 67,000 Armenians had migrated to the U.S. and Canada. The majority of these immigrants settled on the East Coast, and some in Fresno, California (Mirak 1997). The second wave of immigration began under the Displaced Persons Act of 1948 with the arrival of a few thousand Armenians, followed by 8,500 Armenians displaced by the Arab-Israeli conflict in Palestine. When the U.S. Immigration Act of 1965 ended the discriminatory quota system, larger numbers of Armenians from Egypt, Turkey, Lebanon, and Iran immigrated to the U.S. escaping civil upheaval and war in their host countries (Mirak 1997). Between 1975 to the 1990's Armenians immigrated to the U.S. to escape the Lebanese Civil War and the Iranian Revolution. The Armenians migrating in the 1960s settled in suburban ethnic neighborhoods which started the Armenian settlements in California, primarily in the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles County. After 1970 smaller groups of Armenians annually left Soviet Armenia for the U.S. The numbers increased even more in the

[2] These findings are not applicable to the modern Russian diasporic community.

1980s as a result of political crises and the 1988 earthquake, and the benefits from American refugee legislation and Soviet easing of immigration restrictions (Mirak 1997). The third (and continuing) wave of immigration over the past three decades has been due to difficult living conditions in Armenia and in diasporic host societies (Yeghiazaryan, Avanesian, & Shahnazaryan 2003). The majority of these Armenian immigrants has settled in the West Coast, primarily in Los Angeles County, in hopes for better economic opportunities (Karapetian 2014).

- Methodology
    - Research Questions

This dissertation explores the influence the family has on the coming out process of LGBQ Armenians, including the family's reaction, rejection, progress, and acceptance. What family values and cultural norms impact their experiences? Will LGBQ Armenians express a desire to couple with Armenians? Does this facilitate the process of acceptance with their families? Conversely, does being with non-Armenians add an extra component to reconcile with the family? Furthermore, this study will analyze what approaches are used when negotiating sexual identities with their families. What strategies minimize the risk of rejection from families? How do these experiences differ between genders? Do participants cover to pass as straight in certain familial and communal situations?

This study explores strategies employed by LGBQ Armenians in identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer *and* Armenian, and the integration and negotiation of these various identities in their lives. Where American society tends to be more individualistic and Armenian ethnic identity more collectivistic, what effect does this have on the experiences of LGBQ Armenians in L.A.? What role do the family, history, and community play in the negotiation of these

identities? What role does gender play in these negotiations? Is there a linked fate with one's identity and their cultural heritage?

Furthermore, this dissertation examines the participation of LGBQ Armenians in ethnic-based social, political, and queer organizations. It also distinguishes the impact the ethnic community has on their experiences and their identity formation. How close is their connection to the Los Angeles Armenian community? Are they members of any Armenian organizations? Are they members of any LGBTQ organizations? Do these organizations facilitate or hinder the production of their negotiated identities?

- Participants

Participants are adults, ages 21-51, who identify as both L/G/B/Q/ *and* Armenian, and are from various cities across Greater Los Angeles. With this age group it was possible to observe their wide range of experiences and generational differences. A call for research participants was circulated both through personal contacts in the Armenian community and through the Gay and Lesbian Armenian Society (GALAS) - an Armenian LGBTQ organization in Los Angeles. 12 interviews were conducted with 7 of the participants being men & 5 women. 9 of the 12 were born in the United States and 7 of those 9 were born in Los Angeles, CA. The two not born in California moved to Los Angeles at ages 3 and 5. The 3 born outside of the United States moved to Los Angeles at ages 1, 13, and 16. Their detailed demographic information will not be shared for confidentiality reasons, however, their ethnic subgroups included 5 different host/home cultures, such as Lebanon, Iran, Armenia, and others. Their ages at time of interviews were 21, 22, 23, 25, 29, 30, 31, 34, 40, 45, 46, 51. They identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer – though the research call also asked for transgender participants, no volunteers were found for this study.

- Data Collection

The primary source of data for this dissertation was through the collection of audio-recorded interviews throughout 2015-2016. The IRB determined that participants did not need to sign a consent form to prevent their names from being identified during any part of this study. Instead participants provided an oral agreement to take part in the study and to be audio-recorded. The interview protocol consisted of approximately 50 open-ended questions relating to their ethnic and sexual identities, childhood and family histories, and community experiences. All interviews were conducted in English with participants sometimes speaking in Armenian when describing certain events, phrases, or ideas.[3] Interviews ranged from 1-4 hours and were held at private offices at UCLA, participants' homes, and other private spaces. This deep ethnography provided the opportunity to generate trends specific to their stories. The long length of time of interviews is a major strength of this research and narrators' words have a substantial presence in this work. If not absolutely need be, participant quotes are not truncated or paraphrased, because there is research value in representing the authenticity and details of their experiences. Since this is the first study to explore these subjects, it was imperative to include the nuances of their stories. Additionally, community observations were made between 2015-2018 by attending community functions organized by diasporic ethnic-based organizations as well as events and meetings held by GALAS.

- Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed following customary research and transcription conventions. The transcripts were analyzed using qualitative techniques (Saldaña 2013; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland 2006) with an issue-focused thematic analysis approach (Weiss 1994).

[3] Author has advanced knowledge of the Armenian language, therefore participants were able to code-switch during interviews when need be.

The coding schema was based on references to significant themes generated within the study and the data went through multiple cycles of coding.

- Theoretical Framework

Contemporary feminist and queer theory scholarship increasingly presents race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and other sociopolitical and cultural categories as interconnected and argues that these forms of systematic classifications should be studied in relation to one another (Choo & Ferree 2010). Scholars have conceptualized these forms of stratifications as a "matrix of domination" (Collins 2000) or "complex inequality" (McCall 2005), and have defined the concept as "intersectional" (Crenshaw 1991), "integrative" (Glenn 1999), or as a "race-class gender" approach (Pascale 2007). The theory of intersectionality is the systematic study of the ways in which differences such as race, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity and other sociopolitical and cultural categories frequently reinforce each other and do not act independently of one another (Crenshaw 1991). Intersectionality implies that social categories are fluid and ever-changing. Even the experiences of women in close social proximity are divided by race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, gender identity, class, and other categories. The same can be said of groups constructed in connection to others, where no group or identity stands alone (Collins 2000). Furthermore, intersectionality is also defined as "the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality, [and] has emerged as the primary theoretical tool designed to combat feminist hierarchy, hegemony, and exclusivity" (Nash 2008, 2). When sexual identities are formed on the basis of and without the questioning of heterosexism, they become manipulated within the aforementioned vectors as distinctive systems of oppression (Collins 2004).

Feminist theories do not necessarily capture in entirety the experiences of lesbians, much less, lesbians from various ethnicities (Asencio, 2009). Contemporary understandings of feminist standpoint theory provide the recognition of the challenges in investigating possible commonalities within the various positions of women's experiences in society (Asencio 2009). Standpoint theory uses marginalized lives as the starting point for the basis of research questions and concepts, and interpretation of findings, by moving away from the traditional practice of simply studying neglected groups (Harding 2004; Wood 2005).

Queer theory as a distinct methodological approach in the study of gender and sexuality seeks to highlight operations of heteronormativity. Research implementing multilingual and multicultural hybridity may facilitate the common themes in the foundation of both queer and intersectionality theories (Fotopoulou 2012). Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz (2005) call for a renewed queer studies that views sexuality as intersectional and not superfluous to other modes of difference. Recent queer scholarship has produced a significant body of work on theories of race, problems of transnationalism, on issues of diaspora and immigration, questions of citizenship and national belonging, among others. Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz (2005) argue that collectively the fields of queer of color critique and queer diasporas have reconceptualized critical race theory and postcolonial studies sparsely placing sexuality across domestic and diasporic landscapes. Thus, by denaturalizing origin narratives such as home and nation, queer diasporas, "investigates what might be gained politically by reconceptualizing diaspora not in conventional terms of ethnic dispersion, filiation, and biological traceability, but rather in terms of queerness, affiliation, and social contingency" (Eng 2003, 4). Consequently, emerging as a theoretical concept, queer diaspora provides "new methods of contesting traditional family and kinship structures—of reorganizing national and transnational communities based not on origin,

filiation, and genetics but on destination, affiliation, and the assumption of a common set of social practices or political commitments" (Eng 2003, 4). These theoretical approaches are instrumental in the analyses of the queer experience of LGBQ Armenians of Los Angeles. The methodological approach of queer diasporas "declines the normative impulse to recuperate lost origins, to recapture the mother or motherland, and to valorize dominant notions of social belonging and racial exclusion that the nation-state would seek to naturalize and legitimate through the inherited logics of kinship, blood, and identity" (Eng 2010, 13). Rather, this theoretical approach contests the pervading rhetoric that situates "queer" and "diaspora" as dependent on "heterosexuality" and "nation" (Gopinath 2005). Instead of focusing on the origins, continuities, and commonalities of diaspora, queer diasporas, as a methodological tool, highlights the break, discontinuities, and differences (Eng, 2010). This dissertation will also consider how these narratives are the product of intersecting patterns of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, since intersectionality scholarship is strengthened by the examination of intersectionality from multidisciplinary perspectives (Bowleg 2008).

- Chapter Breakdown

Chapter II, *Identity*, presents the previous literature on various LGBTQ ethnicities regarding the negotiation of their multiple identities and includes research on the ethnic identity of Armenian-Americans. Research findings are indicated and discussed: on self-identifying ethnically, nationally, and sexually, on the Armenian Genocide as an identity marker, on negotiating identities, on gender performativity, on shame culture, and a discussion incorporating the theoretical framework for this chapter.

Chapter III, *Family*, examines previous LGBTQ research involving the component of the family unit: the influences of traditional family values, the role of the family in the coming out

process, family relationships post-disclosure, the impacts of silencing within the familial network, along with an overview of the Armenian family. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section demonstrates the research findings on the structure, expectations, and traditions observed in the family of origin. The second section presents the participants' coming out stories and discusses the implications of their experiences by indicating the role of the family pre-, during, and post-disclosure. Finally, the third section introduces LGBQ Armenian families and depicts the components of Armenianness that are now incorporated in their families, which result, through a theoretical discussion, in new perspectives of Armenianness.

Chapter IV, *Community,* explores a review of the literature concerning the impact of the ethnic community, and social & political organizations on LGBTQ ethnic groups, in addition to investigating their relationships with these communities and organizations. This chapter discusses the significance of the Armenian diasporic community as well as the benefits of GALAS for the LGBQ Armenians in this study. It investigates the relationship LGBQ Armenians have with their communities of origin and the relationship LGBQ Armenian families have with said community. Furthermore, it demonstrates the invisibility of LGBQ peoples, their efforts towards activism, the pressures of covering, and approaches to individual's needs, or lack thereof, in a collectivistic culture. This chapter concludes with a discussion of queer diaspora as a theory when applied to a diaspora that is queer at its core.

Chapter V, *Conclusion,* presents participants' perspectives on the future of LGBTQ Armenians. It reviews and summarizes the research findings by evaluating the implication of the results and depicting an overall picture, and it provides recommendations for future research.

- Writing Note

Throughout the dissertation the symbols [M] and [W] are used to indicate the narrator's gender: [M] for men, and [W] for women. Participants were not given pseudonyms, as doing so would link each quote to said person and create the potential for recognition. Any identifying factors, such as names of schools, colleges, universities, siblings, and city names were replaced with the representing noun, such as (university) or (brother), etc. Additionally, any necessary demographic information, such as age and ethnic subgroup, were indicated prior to the quote when applicable, and otherwise omitted to maintain narrators' confidentiality. Moreover, bolded sentences convey author's statements or questions during interviews and the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) transliteration system is used for Armenian words.

For the purposes of this dissertation, the term community refers to the ethnic-based community in the Los Angeles Armenian diaspora, and the term institution refers to Armenian schools, organizations, and churches.

Additionally, none of these findings are meant to be generalizable. The research is not a representation of all Armenians, Armenian families, or Armenian communities in Los Angeles – nor of all LGBQ Armenians. They are significant trends and nuances that are applicable to most LGBQ Armenians in very diverse Armenian families and in an increasingly heterogeneous diasporic community.

CHAPTER II

IDENTITY

Introduction

Being women together was not enough. We were different.
Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different.
Being Black together was not enough. We were different.
Being Black women together was not enough. We were different.
Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different.

Each of us had our own needs and pursuits, and many different alliances. Self-preservation warned some of us that we could not afford to settle for one easy definition, one narrow individuation of self. At the Bag, at Hunter College, uptown in Harlem, at the library, there was a piece of the real me bound in each place, and growing.

It was a while before we came to realize that our place was the very house of difference rather the security of any one particular difference. (And often, we were cowards in our learning.) It was years before we learned to use the strength that daily surviving can bring, years before we learned fear does not have to incapacitate, and that we could appreciate each other on terms not necessarily our own.

- *Audre Lorde*[4]

Diaspora as a permanent phenomenon and Los Angeles County as host to one of the largest Armenian diasporic communities provide the backdrop for this illustration on identity negotiation. Identity is complex and fluid, changing and adapting over time, with components not always in harmony. Identity cannot be compartmentalized; parts of oneself are not divided into segments, but rather experienced as a complete whole made up of many ingredients (Maalouf 2012). What happens when someone is not encouraged to accept their identity in all its diversity? What choices are made when one ingredient of their identity conflicts with another? This chapter discusses the struggles endured and strategies employed by Los Angeles LGBQ [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer] Armenians in negotiating and attempting to

[4] *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, 1982.

reconcile their multiple identities by constantly privileging then covering one over the other. Moreover, it explores the research findings on self-identifying ethnically and sexually, Genocide as an identity marker, the negotiation of identities, gender performance, and shame culture. It concludes with a discussion incorporating intersectionality as a methodological tool to assess the implication of the findings.

Literature Review

John D'Emilio (1993) states that gay identity has not always existed and is rather a product of history, specifically as a byproduct of Capitalism during the period of industrialization in the 20th century. He argues that gay identity first emerged with the rise of wage labor in industrializing cities in the U.S., since this provided gays and lesbians the financial means for an independent sexual lifestyle. Increased ability of movement, leaving rural existences and severing family ties, helped create metropolitan enclaves of gay and lesbian life. The presentation of one's identity displays characteristics about their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, parental status, social class, and various other identity markers. Identities are fashioned by drawing on cultures with pre-existing associations of certain behaviors, places, and things (Seidman 2002). Self-identities are altered (components added or subtracted) and choices are made on which identity or identities become(s) a core part and which will be secondary at various points in a person's life. However, all identities are not so easily chosen or managed, social pressure may dictate which identities should be core ones (Seidman 2002). During what Seidman (2002) considers the closet era between 1950 and 1980 in U.S. society[5], some closeted individuals downplayed their homosexuality as an identity by defining it as a secondary part of

[5] The literature reviews and the research findings of this dissertation have shown the existence of closet eras still prevalent in minority communities in the United States.

themselves since it was publicly considered a deviant identity, "something akin to a peculiar appetite or an unusual sexual impulse. Yet for some individuals the sheer magnitude of energy and focus spent managing this stigmatized identity, and the fact that avoiding suspicion and exposure sometimes shaped a whole way of life, meant that homosexuality functioned as a sort of hidden core identity" (Seidman 2002, p. 10). Regarding core identities, the perception that LGBT Black people are less authentically Black because of their sexualities stems from the notion that either Black people cannot be homosexual or those who were are not authentically Black: "if authentic Black people (according to the legacy of scientific racism) are heterosexual, then LGBT Black people are less authentically Black because they engage in allegedly "White" sexual practices." (Collins 2005, 106).

Most scholarly work overlooks how LGBT people might negotiate their sexual identity with other competing identities (Ocampo 2013). More recent work regarding LGBT persons' sense of self has depicted the notion of coexisting identities of self with other identities and social statuses, such as ethnicity, class, gender, and generation. Identities are not fixed, rather coherence is maintained while change is negotiated. LGBT men and women are constantly negotiating their various identities by privileging then denying one over the other as a way of challenging different types of oppression (Oswald 2002). Socioeconomic status, gender performance, race/color, and geographic locations are factors of influence in identity negotiation (Asencio 2009). The women in Asencio's study could not find a place where their multiple identities could be equally accepted. The only identities that could co-exist were that of being both women and Puerto Rican, since both had become master identities. The Puerto Rican gay men in her study consider themselves to be gender conforming within the scope of acceptable masculinities, and even further criticizing gender nonconforming gay men and distancing

themselves from those they identify as effeminate (Asencio 2011). They regard gender nonconforming men to be disrespectful, lacking in social advancement, marginalized, and associated with overt homosexuality. Social ridicule and punishment from families and communities are consequences for gender nonconforming men. Therefore, the importance of masculinity is internalized and ingrained with the belief that it brings with it social respect and advancement.

More findings suggest that LGBT African Americans are less likely than their White counterparts to be openly gay or entirely out of the closet partly due to the multiplicity of identities (Collins 2005). Similarly, US born gay Latino men negotiate their masculinity, among American mainstream values, their immigrant family, and the mainstream gay community (Ocampo 2012). Latino men possess a stronger sense of ethnic identity than sexual identity, because their gendered and racialized comprehension of gay identity did not coincide with their ethnic background. Furthermore, masculine-looking partners were stated as a preference when choosing partners because this helped participants maintain their relationships with their immigrant family members. These men constructed a nuanced masculinity that allowed them to alleviate the contradictions they faced as racial minorities born in the US, as gay sons of immigrant families, and as nonwhite in predominantly White gay social worlds (Ocampo 2012).

Ajrouch (2000) states, "an ethnic identity must be viewed as processual—not static. It is dynamic and results from the individual's interaction with others of the same social group(s). Recent scholarship proposes that ethnic identity should be seen as one that is negotiated (Erdmans, 1995; Nagel, 1994)." Furthermore, she writes, "the negotiation of ethnic identity arises as individuals take characteristics from various cultural "tool kits" (Swidler 1986) and create evolving definitions through their interactions with others. Hence, the proposition that

definitions and delineation of racial and ethnic identities are constantly changing (Omi & Winant, 1994) derives in part from the instances of negotiated identities through social relations" (2000, 449). Few studies exist which demonstrate the case of those immigrants who are categorized as "white" in the United States but choose not to define themselves by the mainstream society. As Ajrouch (2004) demonstrates in her examination of the children of Lebanese and Palestinian immigrants, they choose to describe themselves as ethnically and racially distinct from the dominant society. She states, "the emergence of this "white" category is significant in that it (1) underscores the fact that these adolescents view America as a pluralistic society, not as one big pot into which all peoples melt, and (2) demonstrates that they view the dominant society with some apprehension" (380). Furthermore, "the children of immigrants in this study invoke racial categories to define who they are not, suggesting that race is a pervasive influence on their understanding of identity and will likely influence their interactions with the dominant society. Individuals who have Middle Eastern backgrounds are labeled "white" on U.S. Census forms, yet the discussions elicited from the adolescents suggest that they do not see themselves as "white"" (380). Among the second generation, symbols of femininity are the most striking characteristic differentiating whites from Arab Americans. For these adolescents, the boundaries that signify ethnic identity "draw heavily on articulations about appropriate feminine behavior" (380). For Arab American girls and women, being American is equated with "a girl who is morally suspect" and their awareness of both this perception and the weight of maintaining good reputations induced them to refrain from identifying too closely with being American (382).

Previous research on the topic of Armenian identity has for the most part centered on the issues of identity retention and the processes of assimilation. Little if any research has been conducted on the role of gender or sexual identity in the construction of an Armenian identity. Jendian (2008) and Bakalian (1993) assert that assimilation and ethnicity co-exist, in that people of Armenian descent in America are assimilating while having continued pride in their ethnic heritage. He depicts three different types of identity: social identity (i.e. how respondents report identity to others), personal identity (i.e. how they think of their identity to themselves), and collective identity (i.e. whether respondents consider themselves as members of the ethnic group). His findings suggest that with each passing generation, language suffers the most, but the connection with Armenian friends, relatives, and professionals persists across generations, as does the strong sense of family. Jendian found that identification as a member of the ethnic group changed over time, and that the factors believed to define Armenian identity varied depending on generations. Those in the first generation rank highly the preservation of the Armenian language, whereas those in the third and fourth generations rank highly identifying with Armenian people. He concludes that parents, consciously and subconsciously, directly impact the transmission of ethnic identity to the next generation, and the main forms of ethnic identity retention in the later generations are based on ethnic self-identification, consumption of Armenian food, religious identity, and Armenian friends and professional networks. This ethnic self-identification by the more recent generations is the factor most prevalent in this research, especially considering how Armenians in the later generations choose specifically and voluntarily which aspects to identify with being Armenian (Bakalian 1993).

Findings

- On Self-Identifying, Ethnically

"You have to go to what kind of school?" they would ask.
"Armenian," I would say, waiting for the inevitable interrogation.
"What's that?"
"That's what I am. The same way you're Irish. I'm Armenian."
"Arabian?"
"No, ARMENIAN."
"So, where is–?"
"Armenia. It's near Russia."
"How come I never heard of it?"
"Because it's part of the Soviet Union."
"So, you're a Commie?"
"No."
"Are you Catholic?"
"No."
"What religion are you?"
"Armenian Apostolic."
"Is that Jewish?" …
"No, it's Christian," I retorted.
"But you're not Catholic?"
"No."
"Are you sure?"
"Yes," I sighed.

And hence the polarity of existence began, as I became accustomed to being misunderstood, explanations barely helping my case. A typical cross-cultural American experience… the feeling of never fully being yourself, in both the predominantly white world and in the traditional ethnic community of your family.

- *Nancy Agabian*[6]

Armenian ethnicity is not connected with birth within the border. The primary transmission of Armenianness[7] is by blood. With the result that in the Armenian case, family and ethnic identity are deeply interconnected. Armenianness is passed down through generations by blood ties and is not a nationality based on citizenship within the borders of the Republic of Armenia. The uniqueness of the Los Angeles Armenian community is in its sub-ethnic component. Subethnicity refers to the existence of ethnic groups within an ethnic group

[6] *Me as Her Again*, 2008.
[7] Armenianness: being, feeling, & doing Armenian.

(Bozorgmehr, Der-Martirosian, & Sabagh 1990). These ethnic subgroups come into existence when there is an influx of an ethnic group from different countries of origin into a new location. Though they share the same ethnic background, each subgroup has a different host culture. Armenians in Los Angeles have ethnic counterparts of different national origins such as Armenia, Iran, Lebanon, Turkey, and various other countries. Each generation and subgroup defines their Armenian and American identities in differing forms, for example, Iranian-Armenian, Lebanese-Armenian, Armenian-American, Armenian, American, American-Armenian, etc. (Karapetian 2014). The participants in this study primarily identified as Armenian, some expanded by mentioning their host countries, for example, "I'm Armenian from Iran", or "I'm Armenian and my parents are from Lebanon", or "Lebanese-Armenian-American." Or, if one parent wasn't Armenian, then identifying as "Part Armenian, part (other ethnicity)." In none of the instances in this research did the participants add the hyphenated American when initially asked. In other words, no one identified as Armenian-American, nor did they identify as American, even though they were all either born in the United States or were U.S. Citizens. One participant who initially identified as Armenian, explained the change in his self-identification after temporarily moving to Armenia: M "When I moved to Armenia, I was treated like a foreigner. They saw me as an American. I was like, "but I'm Armenian!" So I became Armenian-American. Then I came back [to Los Angeles] and everyone treated me like a foreigner here again. I kept trying to push Armenian-American, that I'm *American*-Armenian, like I kept having issues with that. Now, I'm an American with Armenian heritage." Being abroad and marked as an American, incorporated the American into his identity, therefore, he had a different relationship with his ethnic identity than the rest of the participants. Furthermore, living in Armenia exposed him to Armenians from Armenia and made him realize the difference

between his Armenianness and theirs: M "I love my heritage. I love my history, but I'm an American through and through. I lived there. I've seen it. I am not that. And I know this. But it's OK if you want to be, but don't make me be one." Seeing an Armenian from Armenia, reaffirmed him that he *is* Armenian-American. Growing up in Los Angeles, in an Armenian-insulated society, moving to Armenia, then moving back to Los Angeles, further impacted his identity crisis. He couldn't relate to people who grew up in America, even though he did, he was treated as a foreigner both in Armenia and after moving back to Los Angeles, leaving him to wonder "Do I belong anywhere?" For some Los Angeles Armenians, identifying as Armenian reflects the identity that's reproduced in their particular diasporic experience, therefore not feeling the need to include the implied hyphenated American. As in, "I'm Armenian, just like the rest of the Los Angeles Armenians are Armenian," and not necessarily with a direct linkage to the motherland of Armenia, especially for those whose immediate families are not from Armenia *and* for those whose idea of home is Los Angeles.

- The Non-White Identifying Whites

Though I could reject my [Armenian] identity by making fun of it and by refusing to learn the language, and I could embrace the white world by following all the rules and excelling at American school, I would still look different to everyone in Walpole, I would still have the label of my last name, and I would still come to learn that my grandmother's stories were never acknowledged.

- *Nancy Agabian*[8]

[8] *Me as Her Again*, 2008.

CITIZENSHIP FOR ARMENIANS.

Circuit Court Declines to Bar Them on Government's Plea.

BOSTON, Dec. 24.—In admitting four Armenians to citizenship Judge Lowell, in the United States Circuit Court today, said that Western Asiatics have become so mixed with Europeans during the past twenty-five centuries that it is impossible to tell whether they are white or should come under the statutes excluding the inhabitants of that part of the world and applied usually to the yellow race. Judge Lowell also held that Congress may amend the statutes to provide more specifically what persons may admitted to citizenship. Until that is done and the definition of a white person clearly set forth, the Circuit Court will not deny citizenship to aliens on account of color.

The case came up on the granting of final citizenship papers to Jacob Halladjian, Mekerdich Ekenskjian, Avak Nouradian, and Basar Bayentz. The Government objected to the granting of the papers on behalf of the Department of Commerce and Labor, on the ground that these Armenians were Asiatics, and not free white persons. In his decision Judge Lowell stated that the Government attempted to classify Asiatics, having already made no objection to Hebrews.

"If aboriginal peoples of Asia are excluded it is hard to find a loophole for the admission of Hebrews," he said.

The New York Times
Published: December 25, 1909

[9]

Figure 1: New York Times Piece

This 1909 court ruling classified Armenians as white and granted them U.S. citizenship. Though in terms of skin tone, not all Armenians are actually white or light skinned, categorically they are still considered white in the U.S. In terms of self-categorization, most Armenians don't

[9] Image via The New York Times archive. Retrieved from: https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1909/12/25/101752700.pdf

consider themselves white. This is a newer trend among newer generations with the influence of multiculturalism, since in the early part of the 20th century Armenians did regard themselves as white. The representation of participants' outward identity can be attributed to their attendance in private Armenian schools and participation in organizations, and primarily to the tendency of the Armenian community to discourage assimilation. Their allegiance to their Armenian identity comes with their dis-allegiance to an American identity. Though not mentioned in their initial responses about their ethnic identity, when asked if they identify as being American in a separate question, narrators said:

> M Being American means not thinking about any of this shit... It means not having to worry about your own fucking ethnic lineage and your heritage and being able to make good decisions for society in the absence of this existential threat to your entire identity and family and nation and tribe and village… I always worry about how I come across when I meet non-Armenians as an Armenian. Always… I always worry about, will they like me or will I come across as entitled, as privileged, as snobbish, as arrogant, rude Armenian? Because there's so much bad press for Armenians, in Glendale especially. So I think being an American is being simple but not shallow… Americans have the luxury of being present in a way that Armenians never are. Armenians always have one foot stuck in the sand in 1915[10]… So being an American is basically– I think it's a privilege… But it's also an obligation to make something for yourself. To be responsible for your own well-being in a way that other countries look at and scoff at. Because for the world's richest country, it should be much easier to live a better life. So, being an Armenian is being able to educate people. But being an American is also being able to learn, but not getting bogged down in it.

> M It means I consume and am lucky to take advantage of the world at my fingertips, fortunately and unfortunately. And it means not thinking too much about where this mug came from or my shirt. It means that I don't have to boil my water and so many– I don't know, that the roads are always going to be clean and the electricity is not going to go out. So it's pretty amazing.

In characterizing what it means to be American, participants attribute qualities of capitalism, economic and political stability, and freedom from identity crises. Most participants did not identify as American, or Armenian-American, and being American did not hold nearly as much

[10] Referring to the Armenian Genocide of 1915.

value as being Armenian. One participant said that his family didn't want him to be an American because that would be a bad influence on him, further solidifying the looming fear of assimilation and fear of Others, with American being an Other[11]. Regardless of their direct admission of influence by American culture, politics, and beliefs, it is evident that in fact these participants are Armenian-American. One of the interviewees made the direct connection:

> M What is American is, for me, the power to– Look, I grew up with Armenian, and all that stuff, but bilingual, bicultural. I grew up with American television. I grew up with MTV generation. I'm *Queer as Folk*, *Will & Grace*, *The Brady Bunch*. I grew up in American pop culture. My mentality is, for the most part, American. My customs of hospitality, and generosity, and social structures are more Armenian, but the freedom of expression, and my thinking process, and my obsession with Madonna[12]– it's all American… I'm American. I'm American-educated–everything.

Other participants, however, despite mentioning the impact of American shows and the influence of icons like Ellen DeGeneres, did not identify as American and stated that being American didn't mean much to them.

Ajrouch (2000, 2004, 2007) demonstrates, for the 2nd generation Arab-American immigrants in her studies, white refers not to themselves, but rather describes those Americans who belong to the mainstream American society. Arab-Americans along with Armenian-Americans choose not to associate "white" and "American" to their ethnic identities because they see whites and Americans as others: those who are not like them. Though some participants

[11] The term Other is used in this dissertation to mean any non-Armenian peoples, concepts, and ideologies.

[12] Madonna, American singer/songwriter known as the Queen of Pop, is seen as one of the greatest gay icons, due to her uninhibited expression of sexuality and support for gay rights and activism, especially at a time when straight allies were few and far between. She promoted transgender imagery in her art work and helped bring queer sensibility into mainstream American culture. Most notably, during the AIDS crisis, as her gay friends & artists died one by one, Madonna was among the first to take a public stance and be vocal in her support for the LBGTQ community, in part with her 1991 documentary film *Madonna: Truth or Dare*, directed by Armenian-American director Alek Keshishian - which remained the highest-grossing documentary of all time until *Bowling for Columbine* surpassed it in 2002 (Karpel 2012).

in this study made a distinction between "white" and "American" by identifying as American, but not white.

> M That's a tough one. This one's so hard. Ok, yes. I'm an American. There are things about me, things that I believe, ways that I view things that we can probably attribute to being born in America and having gone to school in America. But it depends on where we are, who I'm speaking to, what language I'm using. When I'm with Armenians, we don't call ourselves Americans, we just don't, that's a fact, especially when we're speaking Armenian… Contextually, I could say, "ես Ամերիկահայ եմ[13]", but the "հայ[14]" is still there, I'm an Armenian-American but we don't call ourselves Americans, that term, that identity, that label is for a White person in America… I'm definitely an American for sure, but when the code switches from English to Armenian, especially when we're talking, we don't refer to ourselves as Ամերիկացի, we're not Ամերիկացի, Ամերիկացի[15] is a White American.

> M I identify as Armenian. I actually identify as a person of color as well. I do not identify as white, and I don't even put white on census data and stuff. Because it was like I idolized white people in a sense, and that was because of a lot of reasons – because of assimilation; because of homophobia in Armenians; and American white people being more accepting – American white people in (LA city) being more accepting. But at the same time, I already knew in high school that white people didn't really consider me one of them. Not straight up discrimination; but the white friends I had – we just drifted apart. We'd be close for a minute and then drift apart, and that was a pretty consistent pattern.

Participants made a distinction in how they identify depending on who is asking the question. For example, if a non-Armenian asks, they simply say "I'm Armenian", however, if an Armenian asks, then they provide a more detailed response that includes their subethnicity, such as "I'm Lebanese-Armenian." Finally, participants also mentioned identifying as American when in foreign countries, where they say a variation of, "I'm Armenian from America, but my parents are from Lebanon." Armenians in this study don't feel the need to embrace whiteness, or the privilege that comes from being labeled white, because they don't believe they are *not* privileged as is – the privilege isn't in belonging to the dominant society, it's in being Armenian. Due to

[13] *Jɛs amɛrigahaj ɛm*: I'm American-Armenian.
[14] *Haj*: Armenian – "I'm American-Armenian, but the Armenian is still there."
[15] *Amɛrigatsʰi*: American.

their strong sense of pride in being Armenian, they don't find any extra benefits by labelling themselves white. Unlike Ajrouch's findings, if anything, for these participants identifying as white implies associating themselves with an Otherness[16], and is not a preferred social identity, regardless of whether they were 1.5 or 2nd generation immigrants. Moreover, by not embracing whiteness, Armenians do not feel that they are foregoing access to dominant American society, because of their ability to pass as either white or American when need be. Even though they are of a minority status in Los Angeles, their privileged sense of ethnic Armenian identity, and the insularity of the diasporic community, or as one participant referred to it "the bubble" they grow up in, reinforces their sense that they are in no way inferior. The resistance to identifying as American is attributed to the implication of assimilation to the majority group. While not outwardly expressing claims to whiteness or Americanness, participants stated appreciating certain American values such as individual rights, civil order, and freedom of speech, at the same time expressing their growing dissatisfaction with American politics, and Los Angeles city traffic. Interestingly, regardless of their detachment from their American identities, the participants' thoughts and opinions on various matters are very clearly influenced by American values, lifestyle, and pop culture.

- On Genocide as an Identity Marker

There are a lot of dead Armenians. there are more Armenians dead than living. I suppose you could say that at any given moment in time there are more dead members than living members in any ethnic group but it's different for Armenians because Armenians are aware that they have dead people attached to them. The dead Armenians died from genocide and massacres and earthquakes and religious wars. The living Armenians carry these dead Armenians around in guilt and shame and anger-crafted bags. The bags emit an odor that, when detected by living Armenians, creates a voice in their inner ear that rants like this: "People are out to get you, people want to take your values and ideas away and you better hold on to them tight because I died for you and you are responsible for my death pain. You just better survive, I don't care how you do it, I don't care if you have no love in your life, if you are miserable and hate everybody,

[16] The term Otherness is used in this dissertation to mean anything outside of the confines of Armenianness.

even your parents and children and brothers and sisters. If you don't survive with your values intact then you will be a disgrace to us." This voice makes the Armenians so defensive that they wear blue and white glass evil eyes to ward off badness, as opposed to carrying good luck charms to attract hope or goodness. As you can see, Armenians are negative, hurt, and broken people. I know I am generalizing. I know I have anger towards Armenians. But don't blame me. The bags of the dead are making me do it. I have to be angry so that I can survive. I am Armenian. See how aware I am of my dead Armenians.

- *Nancy Agabian*[17]

LGBQ Armenians express sentiments of pride in strongly identifying as Armenian, associating attributes to the Armenian culture of its uniqueness, being family-oriented and having its own language. The participants mention some of the typical identity markers, such as Armenian art, music, dance, food, history, family, language, however, in addition to these, it was significant that they also mentioned the Armenian Genocide[18] as an identity marker. One participant stated,

> M What that means is that's the kind of world that I was born into, and the language that I grew up speaking, and pains that I was given beyond my– the wounds of the Genocide… And all this obligation that I have to maintain it. That's not something that I'm ever going to– even if I abandoned it, and even if I didn't embrace it, it's a part of my past and it's a part of who I am in a way that will never change. I find myself feeling the need to defend it, and the identification with it as I grow older.
>
> I went to a private Armenian school. The Genocide has been an overwhelming part of my upbringing and my education. It's a huge part of my identity and I don't think that's by choice, I think it's because of the role it plays in our community, and it's really at the center of my Armenian identity. All of my Armenianness revolves around this thing that happened 100 years ago, and I feel like most people, especially if they went to private Armenian schools, it's at the center of everything that happens.

Those participants who expressed that the Genocide was a major influence and component of their Armenian identity, also stated that this influence came from their attendance in Armenian

[17] "Ghosts and Bags," 1997.
[18] From 1915-1924 the Ottoman Turkish government was responsible for the systematic deportation and annihilation of over 1.5 million Armenians.

schools and not just from their families. If anything, they were the ones who brought that influence home with them, having been indoctrinated in school. One interviewee stated,

> M My parents actually were very much so into Turkish TV shows. It was a thing to have the Turkish satellite in Iran, and I would just absolutely hate it, I would go to my room and cry about it, because they were watching it. On April 24th each year, I remember I would say, "no Turkish today" or "for a week". Or, the night before April 24th, I wouldn't listen to any music, I would kind of mourn.

Thus signifying the cultural impact of the Genocide on the individual, and highlighting that the collective trauma that is passed down generationally isn't necessarily always and mainly through familial connections of survivor stories, but rather through institutional and communal networks as well. In terms of how the Genocide has affected their sexual identity, one participant said:

> M When I hear or read reasons from Armenians who are against homosexuality, against LGBTQ people or identity, or people who don't want to hear those things, the Genocide comes up! And it makes me want to pull my hair out. They say, "Our ancestors were slaughtered and now you're disrespecting them and you're disrespecting our honor and our nation by doing these disgusting shameful things." Like, "Shame on you." You know? "We were killed because we were Christian, we were killed because we were Armenian and you're here doing all your – being gay is un-Christian like, un-Armenian"… "How dare you? How dare you use something like the Genocide, that we all experienced, my grandfather survived the Genocide, just because I'm gay doesn't mean that – I don't feel that, I don't experience it the way that other straight Armenians do, but how dare you use this horrible, this tragedy that we've all gone through against me to say that I'm a bad person or I'm a bad Armenian?" And it's like, we've learned nothing from the Genocide. And it's so ironic, because the Genocide is such a big part of education and what we're learning in our schools, but they're not teaching us why Genocide happens, how Genocide happens. How do you make a society in a culture that allows Genocide to take place? They don't teach you those things, and it's like, "You're spewing the same kind of hate and intolerance, the same horrible, horrible things about gay people."

The role the Genocide plays in his sexual identity is indicative of the reasons there's tension toward LGBTQ Armenians in Armenian society, such as the need for a homogeneous and heteronormative nation, procreation, and the allegiance to Christianity, even if that adherence is in a culturally religious sense. The Genocide is too sensitive of a topic for Armenians to use against him as a divisive factor towards his sexual identity. There's already guilt felt for being

gay, to then compound the Genocide as a tool for further shaming is unbearable for some LGBQ Armenians.

- On Self-Identifying, Sexually

Participants identified as either lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or queer. Those identifying as lesbian and bisexual were women, however, both women and men identified as gay and queer. There was a generational divide, with the younger interviewees more likely to both identify as queer and use it as an umbrella term, and the older interviewees more likely to both identify as gay and use it as an umbrella term, regardless of gender. Additionally, those under 35 would discuss the fluidity of sexuality, while the older age bracket had more of a "at this point in my life, there is no gray area" approach to identifying sexually and preferred to define it within less fluid boundaries.

- On Negotiating Identities

I really didn't think it was right to be a lesbian, otherwise I would be one.

- *Nancy Agabian*[19]

Little if any research has been conducted on the role of gender or sexual identity in the construction of an Armenian identity. Additionally, most scholarly work has overlooked how LGBTQ people might negotiate their sexual identity with other competing identities (Ocampo 2013). More recent work regarding LGBTQ persons' sense of self has depicted the notion of coexisting identities of self with other identities and social statuses, such as ethnicity, class, gender, and generation. The findings have indicated that LGBTQ people are constantly negotiating their various identities by privileging then denying one over the other as a way of challenging different types of oppression (Oswald 2002). One participant conveyed:

[19] *Me as Her Again*, 2008.

> M I think it trumps it. I think it – I think it retards it. I think it totally is an obstacle to my sexual identity. Because my Armenian identity was passed down to me from my parents and my community. And those two factors, parents and community, didn't give me enough healthy resources to perform my sexuality. They gave me all the resources I needed to perform my Armenianness. But I was never told, I was never given resources on how to perform my sexuality. And for some people it comes naturally… How does it factor into my sexual identity? It totally occludes it… I think being gay is hard… For me, it's not just sexual identity. It's your romantic life. It's your personal life. And I think one of the transitions I've begun making lately is you have to stop thinking about it as like partnering with a gay guy. You're just partnering, period… But when it comes to gay people, we talk about, "oh, your sexuality." It's like, "no, that's your heteronormative positionality."
>
> W You live two lives. I lived two lives for a long time with my first girlfriend, because I lived my family life - Armenian, I'm Armenian, I'm here, this, that, and then I'm out [of the house], and I'm me, like, who I am... I totally lived a double life. With my second girlfriend, it was easier, she came to our house so that was a little bit of a blend[20], but yeah, double life, totally. So, no, you can't have both.

Over and over participants expressed how their ethnic and sexual identities were separate entities, without any balancing of the two. In family situations, there was no place for their sexuality, and the consequence of living two separate lives leaves participants with feelings of resentment towards Armenians[21].

In relation to the emphasis of sex on sexuality, when asked about the relationship between her ethnic and sexual identity, one participant said, W "They don't go together at all. It's like asking if sex and Armenians go together (laughs). It's a social taboo." They are seen as separate ingredients that don't blend together, therefore creating an ongoing struggle to resist privileging one over the other. They have all had to sacrifice part of either their queer identity or Armenian identity since these components are not in harmony with one another. One respondent said, M "especially in a place like Los Angeles, Armenians can pass as White, so it's really easy to just cling to the whiteness of everything." Another respondent said, M "Why struggle? Why

[20] Even though her girlfriend was present for family events, she was passing as a platonic friend.
[21] These themes are further explored in the following chapters.

deal with our families, with our friends, with these organizations? When I can go and create my own life in West Hollywood, away from all these people, where I'm safe and happy." Ultimately, if they choose not to "cling to the whiteness of everything" (implying assimilation into the American mainstream culture, which all of the participants chose not to) their only option is to live a double life, where they live openly with their significant others and accepting loved ones, while adhering solely to their ethnic identity with family and community members.

In the negotiation of prioritizing identities, participants, though resisting privileging one over the other, stated:

> M I learned that whatever sense of cognitive proximity or kind of like closeness that I imagined that I had with Armenians is not there. It's a figment of my imagination… What I wanted to say was my gay identity, as a gay male takes precedence over my Armenian identity. But that's just not true. Like, it's– I don't even know how to measure it and compare one with the other, but I know it's just not. My Armenianness is more salient than my sexual identity.

> M I think my Armenian identity overshadows all of my other identities, even my gay identity because being Armenian is the first thing that I knew about myself. Even though I'm at a point where I'm trying to bridge my gay identity with my Armenian identity, my Armenian identity, it's like a fist, and it's so there (*points to head)* and even at times when I don't want it to be there, I can't.

Echoing these participants, Moore (2011) finds, "the majority of Black lesbians born before 1975 have a sense of themselves as Black that was formed before they accepted a gay sexuality" (18), and the Latino gay men in Ocampo's (2012) study possess a stronger sense of ethnic identity than sexual identity. Conversely, those LGBQ Armenians who adhered more to their sexual identities were doing so because of their resentment towards Armenians – being rejected by Armenians makes them favor and prioritize their gay identities, because they have a sense of camaraderie in their sexual identity peers that is non-existent in their ethnic identity group. As a consequence, in describing what being Armenian means to them, LGBQ Armenians struggle with their connection to their Armenianness because of the isolation caused by their queerness.

This is the case until the two have reconciled with one another, as demonstrated by the following forty year old participant:

> M They're two very important parts of my identity that coexist, and I'm a little arrogant, actually, about it. If I'm in the Armenian community, or at an Armenian event, or whatever, I don't have a sign– a Post-it on my forehead that says I'm gay, but I'm very like, "Հայ եմ եւ gay եմ[22]. I'm Armenian, and I'm gay. So what?" You know what I mean? They're both very important aspects of my identity, and, thank God, they coexist with one another. And it took me a while to get there… I joined GALAS, and I made a social circle of Armenian gay friends. I've made sure that those two have meshed, at a time when I couldn't really find any other Armenian circles. I made sure I blended the two. I'm like, "I'm gay? Well there must be other gay Armenians that I could socialize with, and build relationships with, friendships." And then, gradually, over the last 15 years, we're living in a world where այլեւս[23] people are like, "Whatever. Ok, Gay է, ի՞նչ ընեմ[24]" I don't think people care as much… But I kind of meshed the two worlds, and those two parts of my identity together by joining GALAS, by having Armenian boyfriends. It wasn't limited to just Armenian, but I've done it.

LGBQ Armenians cannot have a positive relationship with their Armenianness until it's in coexistence with their queerness, because it's the Armenian identity that's blocking their path to their authentic selves. Organizations like GALAS, as well as meeting other LGBTQ Armenians, have helped some of these participants be true to both their ethnic identity and sexual identity.

> M That intersection of Armenianness and queerness is really vital to my Armenian identity… Because otherwise I just have my own personal history with Armenianness as homophobia, and dealing with that, and being scared, and being just uncomfortable, and not being able to be myself. So, the queerness is vital to being Armenian. I would not say necessarily the other way around. And I think finding the Gay and Lesbian Armenian Society was super fucking helpful, and marching at Pride with them was really helpful – being able to meet a lot of them.

Another interviewee stated, "I'm very Armenian, and I love being Armenian, but I don't feel like I belong with this community. I don't feel welcomed, and I don't feel comfortable. You can't live being in this community because there are so many cultural and social forces that are trying

[22] *Haj ɛm jev* gay *ɛm:* I'm Armenian and I'm gay.
[23] *Ajlɛvəs:* from here on out (in this context).
[24] Gay *ɛ, intʃʰ ənɛm?:* He's gay, what do you want me to do?

to shape you and mold you and keep you in this box. We can be Armenian and also be lots of other things." They tend to not feel welcomed because the cultural and social forces shaping and molding Armenians do not encourage inclusivity of Otherness. Rather, they promote heteronormativity and define nonconforming sexualities as Other. Participants express a strong desire to open the "box" and make Armenian inclusive of Other identities (Other here not meaning *ուրիշ*[25], but rather all non-typical identities) where LGBQ Armenians will no longer have to sacrifice a part of themselves to be their whole selves. When asked how one respondent goes about being both gay and Armenian, he said, by "resisting it all the time. I'm resisting letting go of either one. I'm not trying to balance it. I'm resisting compromising certain things about my Armenianness and compromising certain things about my gayness or queerness just to be presentable. Why can't I be full queer and full Armenian at the same time?" Their need is to bridge the multiple elements of their identity to no longer have to defend their Armenianness and have access to the same privileges as non-queer Armenians. For LGBQ Armenians, being Armenian negatively affects their sexual identity for the most part of their early lives, primarily because their ethnic and sexual identities do not associate with each other and reconciling the ethnic with the sexual comes with great difficulty. When Armenians start embodying their queer identities, they approach this course with previously formed salient identities based on ethnicity, gender, and other categorizations, which are shaped by social, cultural, and historical forces, as was the case with the Black lesbians in Moore's study (2011).

- Gender Performance

We've finally learned that it's okay to be gay, but we're still not sure that it's okay to look and act gay. The sexual orientation thing is fine with us; it's that gender thing that still makes us uncomfortable…We went on to have this great discussion about the challenges many gay men have conforming to masculine gender stereotypes. It turned out that even the buffest guys had

[25] *Urif*: different.

been teased at school or had to butch it up at work, and all of them were embarrassed to admit publicly that sometimes they played catcher instead of pitcher in the boudoir… Gender was like a second closet that they hadn't come out of… Gender is where people learn to hate us. Boys learn early on that if they don't grit their teeth like Clint Eastwood and hulk around like Vin Diesel, they'll be attacked or humiliated. They learn to hate anything in themselves that might be considered the slightest bit feminine… No father wants a sissy for a son; no mother wants a dyke for a daughter… If you scratch homophobia, that is what you get – the prejudice that gay men are necessarily unmanly and lesbian women are inadequately feminine… And if you scratch sexism, you also get gender. Not only does our society show astonishing fear and loathing around issues of vulnerability and femininity, but in a male-centered culture, woman as other will always be the "genderqueer."

- *Riki Wilchins*[26]

Seidman (2002) argues that managing gender has been and is still the core manager of sexual identity for both men and women, however, through different means due to the social privileges of men and masculinity. For men, displaying conventional signs of masculinity awards social authority and privilege, however, for women, even though conventional signs of femininity grant a status of normal and straight, it still positions women as subordinate to men. Though women may be able to appropriate masculine behaviors to confer that authority, for lesbians this puts them at risk for exposure of their sexual identities. Men don't have this issue since claiming masculinity rewards them both the status of men and the presumption of straightness. On the other hand, when lesbians claim the same privileges associated with masculinity, they are seen as gender rebels, risk being stigmatized and losing social status (Seidman 2002). LGBQ Armenian men and women discussed social and familial instances where they were pressured to perform their presupposed masculinity or femininity.

> M So when I kind of came out to myself, it was like a big awakening… I was like, well, now this means that I can buy clothes that I want… So I went shopping, and I got an orange cardigan. Now, I just think it's ugly, but back then, I was excited about it, and I would wear it. And my grandma would question it so much, and just like, "oh, careful when you're wearing that orange cardigan outside." And my dad would say, "Why would you wear an orange cardigan?" Or – I bought a red pair of Tom's, and that – "red shoes

[26] "Time for Gender Rights," 2004.

> for men, hmm"… Over the years, there have been a lot of evolutions to my look, like last year I started experimenting with a lot of gender neutral clothing items. Like I have a kimono… When I'm not home, and I'm at (university) I would feel comfortable wearing that and just going out. But then at home, I don't. Even at home, I don't feel like doing it. More flowy styles, so a lot of fashion choices that are not typical and I get a lot of shit for it. It's unfortunate, because I really want to try wearing a long skirt, but I don't know if I can.

Additionally, the narrator discussed two other instances where the lack of performance of masculinity brought him at odds with his parents. The first was when he started plucking his eyebrows, and the second was his choice to wear earrings. In both instances, he faced resistance from his family specifically because "men who do their eyebrows are considered gay" so why would he want to perform these acts that would make people associate gayness with him? Signs of femininity performed by men are perceived as interchangeable with homosexuality among Armenians[27]. The following are the accounts of the women:

> W Dude, it's been hard, not only sexuality but gender identity too. Like I remember, girls I've talked to, majority of my lesbian friends, they have the same experience, they wore their dad's clothes. I remember I was home one day and I was like 8 years old and put my dad's clothes on and hat, and I remember my mom being on the phone with her friend and saying "look at my daughter, she's wearing my husband's clothes" and I was like, "oh that is..." I could hear the weirdness in her voice... and then my grandma, my dad's mom, always used to say "you should have been born a boy, you should have been born a boy" always, always "(name) should have been born a boy" always, because I was a tomboy, I was playing basketball, I was sports, I was getting dirty, I wasn't like... You know... She would buy me dresses and I wouldn't want to wear them and she would always say "տղա պետք է ծնվեիր"[28], really rude.

> W I tend to dress a little bit more feminine, or try to, at home because that's what my mom expects. But (at university), I don't care. I can wear whatever the fuck I want… One time we were shopping and I said, "oh, this is cute" and it's from the guy's section and my mom goes, "մէ քիչ feminine եղի "[29]… Or one time I bought clothes from the men's section. She made me return them… I think expectations of femininity are just something that I've struggled with a lot. My mom always says, "Why don't you wear dresses?" I'm like, "I don't like it. I'm not going to wear a dress." I told her I'm not going to wear heels to graduation and I think she had a heart attack. I told her I'm not going to

[27] Findings from undergraduate research, "The Queer Armenians: A Study of the Experiences of Gay Armenian Men in Los Angeles" by Erik Adamian under the guidance of Rosie Vartyter Aroush.
[28] *Tʁa bɛtkʰ ɛ dznvɛjir:* you should have been born a boy.
[29] *Mɛ kʰitʃʰ* feminine *jɛʁi:* be a little feminine.

> wear a dress to my brother's wedding and she also had a heart attack again… I told her that instead of wearing a dress to – even both probably, I'm like "I'm going to wear a jumpsuit or something or high-waisted pants or something." She's very skeptical of it… I feel like I'm going to end up in heels. I'm so stressed out.

Pressures of performing femininity and gender conforming are evident in participants' relationships with their families, though none of the participants complied with the gender binary and they challenged these norms by gender bending. Unlike GBQ men, LBQ women's gender performance or non-conformance is not associated with homosexuality. The presumptions between men's performance of femininity and gayness is not mirrored with women's performance of masculinity and homosexuality. Though both men and women struggled with gender representation, the issue of questioned sexuality based on gender performance is specific to the gay men's experience. Somewhat particular to the Armenian case, since it is not customary for Armenian children to move out prior to marriage, university and college environments become their spaces of freedom. This explains the participants' mentions of two different clothing habits one for the home space and the other for the university.

- On Shame Culture

Our fear and compromise of our freedom, liberty, and identity reaches far back, well before the Genocide. When LGBT Armenians claim their existence, the resistance from the broader Armenian community stems from centuries of needing to assimilate and avoid being a target. It shows up in every household that is more preoccupied with what their Armenian friends, family, and neighbors think or will say than with their own genuine thoughts, interests or motivations. We live in fear of not fitting the mold that has been deemed acceptable by our community's patriarchs and matriarchs.

- Lousine Shamamian[30]

Cultural contexts of collectivist models of shame greatly differ from those of individualistic countries. Individualistic nations, such as the United States, emphasize

[30] "ARPA Film Festival Gives Platform to LGBT Voices in Armenian Filmmaking," 2017.

independent concepts of self, while countries with collectivistic cultures promote interdependent individuals. In the latter form, individuals view themselves in terms of their connection with others, and therefore both external and internal influences are equally significant (Markus & Kutyima 1991; Triandis 1995). Though previous literature makes a distinction between the emotions and cultural significances of guilt and shame, studies have shown that in many collectivist cultures the differences associated with the two are not as apparent. Since people do not view themselves as distinct from their relationships with others, there is less emphasis on the internal component of the self which would provide a distinction between shame and guilt (Wong & Tsai 2007). As is the case with Armenians, research on Chinese parents has found shaming techniques used as a tool in educational strategies (Fung 1999; Fung & Chen 2001; Fung, Lieber, & Leung 2003), thus children understand and are aware of the gravity of the phrase "ամօթ է[31]" – "it is shameful" from an early age. Armenian parents reprimand their children by referring to an act as shameful in order to prevent said behavior. This method is applied to both minor episodes and more serious transgressions. For example, a child throwing a tantrum in a grocery store and a teenager breaking curfew will face the same "it's shameful" lecture by parents. Shame plays a salient role among Armenians, as with other collectivistic cultures. In this way, Armenian shame promotes fear, conforms to established norms, and controls acts of Otherness.

LGBQ Armenians from a very young age are dealing with both the collectivistic shame culture and sexual shame. Halberstam (2005) states, "Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and others who have written so eloquently about gay shame, posit an early childhood experience of sexual shame that has to be reclaimed, reinterpreted, and resituated by a queer adult who, armed with a

[31] *Amɔtʰ ɛ:* It's shameful.

theoretical language about his or her sexuality, can transform past experiences with abjection, isolation, and rejection into legibility, community, and love." For Armenians, reclaiming and reinterpreting sexual shame, transforming past rejections and isolations into community and love, is not enough, due to the additional component of belonging to a shame culture. Their struggle is in reconciling both manifestations of shame. In this constant struggle of negotiating their identities, they expressed feelings of shame and guilt,

> M I definitely have felt shame because of my gay identity. Shame is a huge part of Armenian culture whether you're gay or straight. If you grew up in an Armenian speaking home, the phrase "ամօթ"[32] is engrained in your brain. It's a fundamental part of our vocabulary. And even though, again, no one has ever explicitly said, "being gay is shameful" you just know, because our culture is so masculine, generally, very patriarchal. I can't think of anything that's more shameful than being gay in our culture. We can talk about interracial marriages or interfaith marriages, which depending on your family can be pretty shameful. But a gay relationship, having sex with someone of the same sex, getting married, living with someone, I can't think of anything more shameful in our culture. You could kill someone, be a murderer, and it wouldn't bring that type of shame to your family… That was my fear – What are people going to say about me? What are my friends going to say? What is everyone in the community going to say about me if they find out? Like, what's my family going to do? … As Armenians, we're so worried about what other people think.

> W I feel ashamed. You're ashamed of your sexuality, you feel dirty, you start feeling homophobic almost. I'm very ashamed, which I shouldn't be because I'm not ashamed of my sexuality, but I'm ashamed because I feel their shame on me. You feel ամօթ[33], but it's so not ամօթ [34], it's a part of life.

In many collectivistic cultures, concern with shame is one of the main factors regulating social behavior (Fessler 2004). In a culture highlighted by overarching concerns with others', specifically other Armenians', actual or imagined assessments, LGBQ Armenians' feelings of shame and guilt are shaped by the fear of what people are going to think and say.

> M You don't experience shame on your own, you experience shame from other people. People assign shame to you. When I was trying to get away from this community, I was

[32] *Amɔtʰ:* shame.
[33] *Amɔtʰ:* shame.
[34] *Amɔtʰ:* shame.

> trying to get away from that shame, because when I'm not around this community, I don't feel that shame.
>
> M I still feel like I do [feel shame], every day, every moment… It's so deeply engrained that no matter what you're trying to do, there is still that level of shame… You feel this guilt… In Armenian culture, honestly, things are so narrow, the ways of living are so narrow that a girl can feel ամօթ[35] for the rest of her life for having lost her virginity before marriage. It's very easy to feel ashamed in our culture.

Though shame is internalized, it stems from others assigning that shame on to the individual, leaving LGBQ Armenians with an unpleasant standard of living within the community. Participants even negotiated shame, one said, M "In high school, I had this balance in my head of me being attracted to guys on one side and then all the things that I do that people see positively on the other. And is that going to outweigh me being attracted to guys? And so it came to a point where I was like, "Yeah, I have a million things on this side" and so it better (sighs) outbalance that." Participants were predisposed and, in a sense, prepared to experience gay shame. Even if their parents and community did not give them the resources to perform their sexualities, they did pass down the motions to experience sexual shame, since from a very young age their behaviors were regulated by assigning shame as a rearing tool.

Sexual shame as well as shame culture can both be overcome and dissociated from one's own identity with maturity and self-awareness: M "Prior to coming out to myself, yes. The minute, the day I sat with my family and told them that I'm gay, I had already resolved all that bullshit, internally. I was strong enough, and secure enough with who I was. I had accepted it. And I sat with them, and I'm like, "This is what it is." I'm like, "I'm not proud. Are you proud to be straight? It is what it is. I'm gay. Վերջացաւ[36]." So yeah, there's no shame. Whatsoever."

[35] *Amɔtʰ:* shame.
[36] *Vɛrtʃʰatsʰav:* End of story (in this context).

Even though shame was a major component for all participants, those above the age of 35 admitted to no longer feeling shame for their sexual identities. Once bestowed with the ability to reconcile their contested identities, neither sexual nor cultural shame had any remaining power.

Discussion

Employing intersectionality into the analysis of this research data, it is evident that LGBQ Armenians' identities are interconnected and should be studied in relation to forms of systematic classifications – the ones in consideration for this research were ethnicity, subethnicity, gender, sexuality. The research shows how these differences and categories reinforce each other and do not act independently of one another (Crenshaw 1991). For example, none of their contested identities, whether they be ethnic (Armenian) & national (American), or ethnic (Armenian) & sexual (LGBQ), were in the process of reconciliation independently, rather they were negotiated within each other's realms. Just as this chapter argues that identities are neither fixed nor always in harmony, intersectionality implies that these social categories are also fluid, complex, and ever-changing (Collins 2000). Even the experiences of these LGBQ Armenians, though sharing many similarities, were divided by class distinctions[37], subethnic variations[38], religion[39], gender[40], and even in their relations with their sexual identities as a whole, highlighting the trajectories of their identities and the diversity within the Los Angeles Armenian diasporic community.

These findings support the view of intersectionality as the primary theoretical tool designed to combat hegemony and exclusivity (Nash 2008). Because LGBQ Armenians' sexual

[37] Class distinctions are referred to in the *Family* chapter under the analysis for education expectations of families of origin and LGBQ families.
[38] Armenians from different home and host countries or first and second diasporas.
[39] Though all the participants admit to being culturally religious, the Armenian church is not monolithic.
[40] Variations highlighted in the *Gender Performance* section.

identities were initially formed on the basis of and without questioning heterosexism, they are manipulated and negotiated within these systems of oppression (Collins 2004).

Conclusion

'What of Art?' she asked.
'It is a malady.'
'Love?'
'An illusion.'
'Religion?'
'The fashionable substitute for Belief.'
'You are a sceptic.'
'Never! Scepticism is the beginning of Faith.'
'What are you?'
'To define is to limit.'

- Oscar Wilde[41]

A central theme in this chapter has been the negotiation of conflicting identities, both between ethnic (Armenian) and national (American) identities, as well as between ethnic (Armenian) and sexual (LGBQ) identities. Findings have indicated that Armenians, for the most part, view "American" and "white" as labels that conflict with their first identity – Armenian. In a culture where promotion and maintenance of ethnic heritage is highly encouraged and valued, Armenians do not identify as American because Americans are deemed an Other, an օտար[42], even when they are citizens of the United States, and thus have American nationality. Despite their initial ethnic self-identification, it is very apparent that American mainstream culture as well as American individual liberties have greatly influenced participants' life perspectives and attitudes. Furthermore, the Armenian Genocide plays a salient factor in the negotiation of their Armenianness. Regarding the reconciling of their ethnic and sexual identities, LGBQ Armenians

[41] *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1891.
[42] *ɔdar:* term meaning "strange" or "foreign," but used colloquially to refer to non-Armenians.

were in a constant state of resisting prioritizing one identity over the other, while simultaneously feeling the need to gender conform, perform masculine/feminine, and cover in Armenian spaces. In this process of negotiation, they are in fact *re*-constructing their identities – they are creating a new Armenian identity and *Othering* the mainstream. Furthermore, a byproduct of the collectivist nature of Armenian culture is its shame culture. For LGBQ Armenians struggling with both the collectivistic shame culture and sexual shame is an early childhood experience which is reinterpreted in the process of negotiating and strategizing with the means of reconciling their ethnic and sexual identities. There's a persistence, despite competing and contested identities, to have the sense of belonging to one nation, whether or not that nation is spatially bound (Panossian 1998). Despite their struggles with shame, LGBQ Armenians with strong allegiances to their ethnic identity tend to remain in the Armenian community, either in the open and on the outskirts, or by existing without queer visibility. LGBQ Armenians reject the limitations bound by the definitions currently outlining the components of Armenianness.

CHAPTER III

FAMILY

Introduction

I was struck now with how incestuous the Armenians from those little villages were and wondered if their insularity made them especially suspicious of outsiders and their unfamiliar ways. I thought that Armenians in the U.S. had divided themselves into Malatyatsis, Kharpertsis, Sepastatsis, and Whatevertsis, associating with one another if they were from the same area not just out of familiarity, but because they were probably the only survivors from their neighborhood left. They took whatever family they could get.

- *Nancy Agabian*[43]

This quote illustrates some points that depict the backdrop of Armenian families in Los Angeles. It highlights the tendency for some Armenians to be suspicions of Others, both conceptual and tangible, and provides insight into how this setting affects those who are living on the border of simultaneously being both an insider & outsider. This chapter presents the emerging trends from the research findings about the Armenian family structure & upbringing; Armenian traditions observed in the family of origin; and the role of the Armenian Genocide. It follows with a section dedicated to coming out stories and discusses the following: the role of the Armenian language in coming out, sex, and sexuality; familial relationships pre- and post-disclosure (including siblings and extended family); therapy experiences; family of origin's relationship with significant others; and the reasons for antipathy towards LGBTQ people. Then, it introduces LGBQ Armenian Families and their new perspectives on Armenianness and concludes with a discussion incorporating theoretical frameworks, such as applying queer diaspora theory to analyze new methods of contesting traditional family and kinship structures (Eng 2003).

[43] *Me as Her Again*, 2008.

Literature Review

Responses to disclosure of sexuality from family members vary depending on the families' cultural values and understanding of homosexuality in their ethnic communities (Akerlund et al. 2000; Hom 1994; Tremble et al. 1989). LGBT research has indicated that many family members have adapted and continue to maintain relationships with their gay and lesbian kin, however, gay and lesbian adults still struggle with questions of belonging in their family of origin. Further research validates that gay and lesbian adults are inhibited to disclosing their identity due to fear of being rejected by their parents (Ben-Ari 1995; D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pikington 1998; Hom 1994; Newman & Muzzonigro 1993; Savin-Williams 1998; Waldner-Haugrud & Magruder 1996). Review of the literature suggests that LGBT people want to be accepted by their families, but heterosexist prejudices along with the family's expectations of heteronormative identities interfere with and hinder this process. Passing as straight fosters the invisibility of gays and lesbian which in turn "helped normalize heterosexuality, fueled homophobia, and supported heterosexism as a system of power" (Collins 2005, 94). Furthermore, "because closets are highly individualized, situated within families, and distributed across the segregated spaces of racial, ethnic, and class neighborhoods, and because sexual identity is typically negotiated later than social identities of gender, race, and class, LGBT people often believe that they are alone," suffering in silence in private and hidden domestic spaces (Collins 2005, 94).

Family research has been approached in a multitude of ways: resilience within the family (Oswald 2002b), heterosexism in family rituals (Oswald 2000; Crichlow 2004), negotiating sexual identities with families of origin (Crichlow 2004; Acosta 2010), relationship with families of origin (Patterson 2000; Oswald 2002a; Crichlow 2004; Pearlman 2005; Acosta 2011;), gender

(Asencio 2009; 2011), and representations of "good" daughters and sons (Chung, Oswald, & Wiley 2006). Resilience within the family comes with inclusion. Families of origin for whom culture, traditions, and values are important could be more resilient when they positively incorporate their LGBT family members (Oswald 2002b). More than any other social setting, social events involving the family, such as weddings, are the forum where LGBT people are expected to conform and adapt their identities so that they can be included (Oswald 2000). The primary reason for this is because it involves the greater family network and doing otherwise has the potential to damage the family reputation. Thus, LGBT people are faced with defining and redefining their true selves and are involved in a constant interplay of visible and invisible representation in order to please their families and communities of origin (Oswald 2000; 2002a). Similarly, in her exploration of 1st and 2nd generation lesbian, bisexual, and queer Latinas, Acosta found that her participants' decision to disclose their sexual identities affects the relationships they have with their families (2010). She found three distinct interaction strategies. First, postdisclosure, the family attempts to erase it by using control and manipulation tactics, a form of rejection without disownment. Families who used this strategy were the cause of insecurities for the participants who often questioned their sexuality, their roles as daughters, and their commitment to their families. Second, the participants chose not to disclose their sexuality and remain complicit with family members by pretending their relationships are platonic friendships, in this case participants stated that family members were silently aware of the reality. Families use this strategy to save face and avoid shame in their communities since their daughters would not be openly displaying their sexualities. The participants themselves expressed not wanting to bring shame and stressed the importance of maintaining familial honor. The women engaging in this strategy believed that their families knew and accepted their relationships as long as they

were kept discreet, despite never having openly discussed their same-sex relationships. Alternatively, in order to minimize rejection, women would pretend to be in relationships with men. In the third strategy, postdisclosure, the family members clearly reject and separate the sexual nonconformity from family life, forcing participants to live in two non-coexisting worlds. Despite this, these women do not give up on their families rather they rationalize their actions because a strong sense of family is central to their happiness (Acosta 2010).

In the Armenian family structure, the needs of the family take precedence over the individual's needs. Maintaining a strong sense of family honor is important, and children are discouraged from bringing shame upon the family (Miller & Miller 1993). Similarly in a case study of his life, Teles, a gay Navajo man, felt that overt disclosure to his family would be regarded as disrespectful and immature. Proper conduct would be to maintain group harmony and minimize one's differences for the overall benefit of the group's. (Oswald 2002b; Waller & McAllen-Walker 2001). Scholars have also proposed alternatives to the standard coming out process by indicating the existence of non-linear phases. Silence is not simply viewed as repressive, but it can also indicate the power intrinsic in leaving certain details unmentioned. Verbal communications of sexual identity can interfere with the quest for visibility, because even when the communication has been made, invisibility occurs. These silences can be a strategy allowing movement in and out of visibility creating a flexible environment that permits the maintenance of familial relationships. In the pursuit of visibility, in-between spaces are built across race, class, and gender (Acosta 2011). Conducting oneself gender appropriately, staying in close proximity to the home, and maintaining a good girl reputation were all important ideals included in the upbringing of Puerto Rican women who tend to be socialized in the household, community, and society differently than men (Asencio 2009). In contrast, the messages Puerto

Rican men received growing up provide a clear distinction between their roles and responsibilities, such as men's work belonging outside the home. Furthermore, any friendships with women were associated with femininity, and therefore labeled as being either effeminate or homosexual (Asencio 2011).

Other researchers have looked at the negotiation of queer identities in relation to families of origin (Chung, Oswald, Wiley 2006; Pearlman 2005; Acosta 2010). For example, Chung, Oswald, and Wiley (2006) found that lesbian and bisexual women in the U.S. with Korean heritage have distinct ways of being queer Korean American daughters and these variations depend on their interpretation of cultural and familial contexts. The 1.5 generation participants were embedded within their families and ethnic enclaves which led them to remain largely closeted. In comparison, second generation women were more likely to challenge cultural traditions and heteronormative pressures by expecting and pursuing familial acceptance. Additionally, gay and lesbian children of immigrants have to deal with how their sexual minority identity negatively affects their family's reputation in the greater ethnic community (Hom 1994). Research among Filipino and Latino gay men indicates that most immigrant parents thought about sexuality for the first time after experiencing their child's coming out process (Ocampo 2013). Immigrant family members' beliefs on homosexuality reflect the views of their home society. Sexual identity can interject and be the cause of moral dilemma with immigrant parents, which in turn can sabotage co-ethnic belonging. Siblings who were supportive assisted with the process of shedding the parents' deep-seated stereotypes and prejudices towards homosexuality and repaired the relationship between the parents and their sons (Ocampo 2013). An important theme found in Acosta's (2013) research is that parents of lesbian, bisexual, and queer Latinas, even if comfortable with their daughters' alternative sexualities, expressed concerns when these

daughters entered into interracial relationships. Moreover, the sense of loss postdisclosure from mothers with their lesbian daughters is connected to fears of rejection and potential assault of their daughters (Pearlman 2005).

An Armenian family with strong biases against homosexuality expects their gay family members to opt to live in secrecy due to pressures of preserving the family honor and desires to avoid conflict (Dagirmanjian 2005). In the traditional, pre-Genocide family several generations often lived under the same roof, often within one room. Marriages were arranged, with the new bride living with the husband's family and expected to cater to the eldest female of that household (Miller & Miller 1993). Often, the bride and the groom met for the first time at the betrothal. The marriages were arranged to benefit the society as a whole and there was a significant age gap between the man and woman. The division of functions in the household was based on age and sex: the senior male member of the family was the head of the household, responsible for maintaining the family honor by disciplining the extended family members. He had the power to disinherit and expel disobedient offspring. The everyday operations of the household were administered by the wife of the family head. She also had the responsibility of child-rearing and often had more power with the children than either of their parents. If there were quarrels in the household, she would settle and work to prevent them. She had the greatest influence when it came to decisions involving the marriage of a daughter. The household division of labor was gendered with the girls taking on household chores and the boys assigned outdoor tasks (Villa & Matossian 1982). In the post-Genocide family structure, with the alarmingly high number of deaths of the Armenian male population, their widows took on the role of the family elder (Bakalian 1993).

Being a product of genocide, procreation is viewed as an integral part of the continued existence of Armenians, specifically the maintenance of the family. Thus, homosexuality may be deemed as a threat to the culture's advancement. There is a moral pressure that is derived from the way the Genocide is communicated within the family (Agabian 2008). Agabian explains the tendency she senses in the Armenian community towards conformity, elaborating that since there were few Armenians, any divergence from the traditions of the family and the church, such as marrying non-Armenians or being gay, was seen as "disunity threatening the survival of the entire culture" (2008, 148). Agabian argues that the denial of the Armenian Genocide has intensified the pressures of straying from the norm. Similarly, the pro-family stance within African American communities works against LGBT African American because, "homosexuality could be defined as an internal threat to the integrity of the nuclear family…Gay men and lesbians have been depicted as threats to Black families, primarily due to the erroneous belief that gay, lesbian, and bisexual African Americans neither want nor have children or that they are not already part of family networks" (Collins 2005, 108). In both the Armenian and African American case, these assumptions validate only one family form, leaving out single-parent families, divorced families, and certainly LGBTQ families.

In observing how gender and a shared ethnic history influence family legacies across generations, Manoogian et. al (2007) found an increased commitment among ethnic mothers to maintain family togetherness and ethnic identity for future generations (Collins 1994;1997) because of the Armenian Genocide and how it continues to influence families over time (Bakalian 1993; Totten 2005). These women prioritized keeping family members close because of their responsibility to parents' memories and commitment to ethnic survival. Due to the patriarchal structure, they were expected to preserve and pass on legacies as not doing so would

risk family and cultural disapproval and abandonment of duty to their ethnic identities. Some women, however, rejected these responsibilities and identified as American over Armenian, expressed regret or guilt *and* relief in not having to preserve a culture with painful heritage.

Findings on Family of Origin

In the absence of research on the contemporary structure of the Armenian family in the diaspora, the following five sections (Family Structure, Education Expectations, Significant Other Expectations, Armenian Traditions, Role of Genocide) cover the findings on the makeup of participants' families of origin. These findings are significant for several reasons. First, they paint the backdrop for the understanding of the occurrences in LGBQ Armenians' coming out experiences with their families. Second, they contextualize the relationship between parent and child and depict the role of certain familial expectations on the individual's life choices. Third, these sections clarify the cultural references made in their experiences as LGBQ peoples with their Armenian families. Finally, these sections allow for further analysis when discussing LGBQ Armenian families and their approach in structuring families of their own in the final section of this chapter.

- **Family Structure**

W*e were raised by crazy people (laughs). I think that generation was– I think they did their best, but they just did whatever. It was basically on emotion. There was no method to any madness. It was just whatever they felt at that moment they did. It wasn't much very structured in my house. I'm not saying all houses. My parents are divorced, so I saw a lot of not getting along when I was younger… But at the same time I was loved a lot. They loved me both. I never questioned whether my parents loved me… So, that, I had growing up… but it wasn't whatever you consider normal in my –… But, they did do their best, but there was no education on it. Now, it's everywhere. There's parenting classes. "It's my way or the highway." That's how it was… I'm telling you. It was based on emotions. They felt good? They're going to parent good that day.*

The stereotypical traditional Armenian family structure is challenged by this research with the introduction of single-mother families, divorced families, and LGBQ Armenian

families; illustrating the nuances and complexities at play as well as the necessity for inclusion when discussing Armenian familial structures. The research findings indicate that though Armenians are aware of the typical Armenian family structure, theirs were, in fact, atypical in many aspects. One participant expressed that having a stay at home dad was "weird and liberal" with his mom being the breadwinner and having a master's degree. Another participant stated that her father did not do any of the disciplining while her mother was in control and the primary decision maker, making sure to emphasize that this was similar to "most Armenian families". Typical familial structures explained were fathers who, preoccupied with work, were absent in the daily lives of the children, and the distance created by the formality between parent & child allowed little to no room for discussion & mutually agreed upon decision making – W "Growing up, I had a very traditional parent-child relationship with my parents where I won't say anything to them and they won't say anything to me (laughs)." At the same time, a participant expressed,

> M With a lot of the Armenians that I grew up with– friends– when you're adults, you start talking, and reflecting on how your upbringing was. And it's very foreign to me, because I find that communication and expressing love is such a big issue in Armenian families, just from looking at my friends. But I came from a very loving and very expressive– if we had to say, "Fuck off," we would. If we had to hug each other, and cry, and love each other, and whatever, we would. I grew up in a very loving– despite the fact that my parents were divorced, I grew up in a very loving and balanced atmosphere. And my dad wasn't necessarily very strict, but my dad– even for an Armenian dad, and a divorced dad, he's very expressive with his love, and– which is very bizarre to me. In public, "I love my son." It was very weird, but that's how I grew up. Not very strict, but very balanced, I would say."

The characteristics attributed to typical Armenian parents are strictness, emotional reservedness, and uncommunicativeness, though as indicated above with the narrator's surprise to his father's loving and expressive nature, there are exceptions to these systems of behavior.

Regarding approaches to parenting, parents tended to be more lenient with their sons than their daughters in terms of curfews and social privileges. Daughters faced more resistance when

going out with friends, spending the night at friend's houses, and taking trips – indicating the presence of gendered parenting in these families. However, ultimately, irrelevant to gender, parents' approach to parenting is halted and shifted in focus when sexual identity enters the equation.

> M Yeah, they're pretty strict with curfews and stuff. And they try to be kind of – they try to talk to us about certain things. With other things, it's more just like, "do what we're telling you to do." And then again, with me being gay and coming out to them when I was a teenager, that kind of changed the dynamic we had for sure. Because then they were spending a lot of their parenting time freaking out about me being gay. So that definitely affected it. But before that, yeah – strict curfew. They didn't really let me – I remember when I was in middle school, they wouldn't let me do sleepovers at American friends' houses. They just thought it was really weird. They were really paranoid about it. So they were kind of strict, but then I turned 18. And then my last couple of years of high school, I just kind of started to do whatever I wanted; sort of with just face the consequences, and just get into arguments with them later. I wouldn't really listen to them.

The parents had a strict system of rules in place with curfews and limited social privileges, but with the introduction of their son's sexual identity, parents, unknowledgeable and rife with fear, abandon these systems which they deem no longer suitable in this crisis situation and parenting now becomes about – "stop being gay." In this scenario, parents view sexual identity as their child's deviant behavior and approach the issue in the same manner as any disobedience – apply stricter regulations in order for the child to stop the bad behavior, otherwise face the consequences for breaking the rules. Similarly, even the most open-minded and progressive Armenian parents' views were hindered and taken steps backwards when sexuality, never a consideration prior to, became a family reality. Participants were asked where their families stood socially and politically on the conservative–liberal spectrum to understand where the larger political context influences people's behaviors and how even political leanings have limitations in their views of non-traditional behaviors. Parents were either conservative on all spectrums, or were liberal politically while conservative in their social views, in terms of racism, sexuality, and

gender. Across the board, even if parents had liberal tendencies socially, sexuality and gender were never in the equation. These were issues that even the most liberal Armenian parents drew the line and had difficulty accepting because of its level of taboo in Armenian society.

- **Education Expectations**

"Coming out was nothing in comparison to putting academics before everything else."

- Michael Barakiva[44]

In the young adult novel *One Man Guy* by Michael Barakiva, fourteen-year-old Armenian-American Alek Khederian of New Jersey, had been agonizing over coming out to his parents for weeks. When he finally does, much to his surprise, after a brief moment of his parents' rather nonchalant reaction and acceptance, the conversation shifts to disciplining him over his absences at school and missed assignments, leading Alek to realize that he should not have been surprised, his parents were behaving exactly as should be expected – "coming out was nothing in comparison to putting academics before everything else." The novel is optimistic, but is also dealing with 3rd & 4th generation Armenian-Americans on the East Coast, who are presumably more acculturated, unlike the families in this study. Nonetheless, it draws on Armenian cultural facets that can be universally appreciated, as the synopsis says, "Alek Khederian should have guessed something was wrong when his parents took him to a restaurant. Everyone knows that Armenians never eat out. Why bother, when their home cooking is far superior to anything 'these Americans' could come up with? Between bouts of interrogating the waitress and criticizing the menu, Alek's parents announce that he'll be attending summer school in order to bring up his grades." By providing glimpses into Armenian-American culture, the novel spotlights the high value Armenian-American families place on education.

[44] *One Man Guy*, 2014.

All but one participant stated that attaining an education beyond high school was an unspoken expectation: W "It was never a question. It was just expected."; M "It was never really said like you have to go to college, but there was no other option in my mind, there was no other option available."; M "There was no sort of, 'oh, are you going to go to college?' It was more like, 'which college are you going to go to?'… It was already implanted. It wasn't like I graduated high school and I was like, 'I don't know what to do with my life.'"; M "There was an assumption that you're going to go to college and then after college, you're going to go to grad school… So, I didn't realize that until midway through grad school [that], 'Oh wait. I did not make this decision. But, I'm here.'" Though participants were never explicitly and directly told to gain a higher education, they knew it was expected of them. One participant stated that the situation with her family was different. Because of financial difficulties, education could not be prioritized, and she had to start working at age fourteen to help contribute to the bills. However, she eventually put herself through college and received a Bachelor of Arts degree. This drive can be attributed to her environment, though she did not get the push from home, she was still influenced by her attendance and participation in Armenian schools and organizations like Homenetmen[45]. Since she does make it a point to indicate that her family was different than her peers', therefore she followed suit with the community of Armenians in her surrounding pursuing academic goals. Research shows nearly all immigrant groups value education more than native-born Americans. In a study on ethnic identification among 2nd generation Armenian-American youth in Los Angeles by way of membership in ethnic community based organizations, research shows that by participating in Armenian community organizations,

[45] Homenetmen (HMEM) is an athletic and scouting organization affiliated with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF).

Armenian working-class youth converge with middle-class co-ethnic peers in the forms of cultural capital which is advantageous to their socioeconomic upward mobility. Immigrant parents value the preservation of ethnic heritage and the mechanisms in which they rely on to achieve that aim, such as membership in Armenian organizations, result in having positive educational consequences for those Armenians, making them unanticipated gains (Khachikian 2018). Even if higher education achievements were not the ultimate goal, valuing ethnic heritage and actions towards the culture's promotion resulted in educational gains.

Another participant states how her family greatly valued education and was very pleased with her academic achievements, but she marks how her family's approach was different because they didn't follow the traditional sense of pressuring their children towards certain careers with their education. There is a direct link between education and career path for Armenian parents. While academia preaches that your major does not necessarily equate your career, many Armenian parents do not comprehend or agree with this concept.

> In the choice of educational specializations and career goals, for example, Armenian college students appear to favor the applied professions rather than abstract theoretical subjects, music, the arts, literature, and advanced fields of research in the social and behavior sciences. While the traditional Armenian emphasis on education has persisted, the quest for knowledge for its own sake has given way to pragmatic goal-oriented education. These factors may have blunted the potential for creativity and hindered the emergence of a "world-class" Armenian intelligentsia of writers, scientists, musicians, and scholars (Dekmejian 2004, 439).

Following Dekmejian's assessments, this research shows that the three most common professions encouraged within Armenian families are doctor, lawyer, and engineer. Participants were highly encouraged and sometimes pressured to follow these paths while simultaneously being discouraged from the Social Sciences, Arts, Humanities, and other similar fields. However, there seems to be an increasing trend of Armenian college student pursuing advanced fields of research in the social and behavior sciences. If participants wished to pursue these fields, they

coped with their parents discouragement by persuading the parents that the decision would be both economically sound and prestigious in choice because they would be obtaining doctoral degrees in those subjects.

> M Very high expectations – high and specific. They definitely wanted me to go into some STEM[46] thing. Yeah, my brother's a pharmacist. They wanted me to do that or doctor, or whatever else. And I decided to go into Social Sciences, which they're not thrilled about. But at the same time, they're still like – "well, get your PhD"… It's about the money. They just want to make sure I'm making a lot of money. Which is like – with a PhD in (Social Science field), I don't know. I still might not be making– (laughs).

> M In terms of there was an assumption that you're going to go to college and then after college, you're going to go to grad school. And that was just an assumption, and so I didn't realize that until midway through grad school. I was like, "Oh wait, I did not make this decision, but I'm here."**…** I'm getting paid and it's nice-ish… Growing up, I didn't realize that that was the expectation, but it was definitely "to get a decent paying job and to not struggle, you should go to grad school"… it's like, an undergrad education is not enough because everyone does that. And so— In high school it's, "you're going to go to either UCLA, CSUN or Valley College or Pierce College." And then you choose which one you're going to go to. It's not like you could go to barber school or any—I don't know, go travel for a year. Go to Armenia… And then in college, you could do what you liked. To a certain extent. I would never do Gender Studies or Sociology. I don't know—yeah, there are certain majors that would be like, "Why are you doing that?" Like Spanish Studies… [Explaining to others] was the main—that's the reason they would ask. It's, "What is linguistics?" Or, "What—?" It's easy to say math and just like, "Oh, yeah, math." People know math, but—yeah.

The reason Armenian parents follow the "doctor, lawyer, engineer" directive is because they know those are successful and well-known careers in the United States. They are increasingly becoming aware that doctoral degrees are respected and have potential for success. However, with atypical academic and career goals, parents struggle with both understanding the interests in these fields *and* explaining their child's choice to friends and relatives – highlighting the culture's overarching concerns with others', specifically other Armenians', actual or imagined assessments.

[46] STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math.

In the following figure, the data shows the parents' education backgrounds, the participants' education levels, and the family's expectations towards education. There is no direct correlation between parents' education levels and the children's, nor is there any direct correlation between the parents' expectations for education and their own education levels. There is, however, a relationship between the parents' expectations and the children's educational achievements. Despite the parents own educational backgrounds, they had high expectations for their children. Education was highly valued whether they only had high school diplomas, dropped out of elementary school, or had masters' and doctoral degrees. Furthermore, even though the two participants with PhDs came from families with their fathers having higher education, one a master's degree the other a doctorate, at the same time, there were participants with parents having no more than a high school degree or having dropped out at 4th grade, who received bachelors and masters' degrees.

	Mother	Father	Self	Expectations
1	High School	High School	Some College	W "Not to me, specifically, to my brother, yeah. I think they realize now the importance of education. I think they're coming more with the times now and they see people with higher education get better jobs… They're a lot more education oriented now than they were."
2	AA	AA	BA	M "I think there was an unspoken expectation that I would go to college for sure. It was never really said like you have to go to college, but there was no other option in my mind, there was no other option available other than, "Well, once I graduate high school, the next thing that I have to do, or that's expected of me, even if it was never explicitly said, was to go to college." But after my bachelor's degree, there's no more expectations to continue. It was just, "get that degree."
3	AA	High School	BA	M "It has changed over the years, so in the beginning, it was very corporate packaging of (name, last name) into this person that we want him to be. And my dad never really had a say in it because he trusted my mom with her opinions on my education. So my mom took control of it and… it's kind of like she trained me to be a proper woman from 1700s, like a Jane Austen type of a thing, "Oh, you need to play piano, you need to draw, you need to do all these things, but you also need to live up to all these masculine things, like be a doctor" – not that that's necessarily masculine, but from their perspective. But also in a way, "Oh these are all fun, but you need to do something with your life that is substantial, and you're going to make a lot of money." Basically package me to be either an engineer or a doctor. It's so funny, I don't know why those two… [The arts were] never really actually encouraged, because everything that was encouraged was the academia… And then I told them, I'm like, "I want to do English," and [my mom] was very supportive… my dad was just kind of like, "So, what's going to happen?" And I had to obviously package it to them in a way that they would buy it, so it's like, "Oh, I'm going to get my PhD, so I'm still going to be a doctor, but not a medical doctor." That's really important for them, degrees."
4	BA	MA	MA Student	W "Just to get [an education]… Just to do well… It was definitely encouraged. [College was expected] and I feel like master's is probably going to be expected too just because my brother did… But I don't feel that pressure about grad school."
5	BA	MA	PhD Candidate	M "So I don't remember that they were ever communicated to me explicitly. Nobody ever told me that you have to go get a bachelor's degree or a master's degree or a PhD. I remember education was always passively and indirectly revered. It was always– it was just assumed. It was kind of like getting married. That you would just– it's so cliché… The assumption always was that if my parents went to college, of course I would go to college… But, yeah, I guess those are the academic expectations that were placed on me by family. It was kind of passively expected I would just do it."
6	Some college	Unknown	AA	M "Of course. Of course education… It was always, "College, college, college" right? Always "Go to school, go to school, go to school. You're going to go to college."
7	Some college	BA	BA	M "There was no sort of, "Oh, are you going to go to college?" It was more like, "Which college are you going to go to?" My mom– it was very important for her for us to go to a private Armenian school, because she felt like we would be more nurtured than in a bigger environment. And plus, she wanted us to learn how to read and write Armenian, and wanted us to know the history. And she wanted us to have Armenian friends, and grow up sort of in a circle of life-long friends, which we have. So, Education, high school and elementary, yes… And then, like I said, it was like, "Which college are you going to, and what are you going to become?" But it wasn't like, "Oh, You have to go to college." It was like, "Which college?"– it was already implanted. It wasn't like I graduated high school and I was like, "I don't know what to do with my life."
8	High School	High School	MA	W "Regarding education, they really valued education a lot. They were very pleased with me because I was a good student growing up. It was always assumed that I would go to college. My mother, in her own way, did continuing education when she came here. So, education has been important in our family but it's never been "you have to become a lawyer," not that kind of traditional sense. So I was, I never had that, the typical, directive to become a career person… Yeah, so you'll get a PhD but the point is that we all need to eat (laughs)."
9	High School	High School Dropout	BA	W "In my house it was different, because my dad was a gambler, so we lost our house and my mom had to work when we were growing up… When I started working at 14, I was bringing home the check and I was helping with the mortgage. So, the education was a backburner. "You need to work now. The education, we can't do it." So, I put myself through school, through college. Yeah. My parents didn't help me out with that… Education wasn't important to them, because it was more important to pay for the bills."
10	High School	4th Grade	MA	W "Definitely that I had to attend college. That was just– it was never a question. It was just expected."
11	BA	PhD	PhD	M "In terms of there was an assumption that you're going to go to college and then after college, you're going to go to grad school. And that was just an assumption, and so I didn't realize that until midway through grad school. I was like, "Oh wait, I did not make this decision, but I'm here."**…** I'm getting paid and it's nice-ish… Growing up, I didn't realize that that was the expectation, but it was definitely "to get a decent paying job and to not struggle, you should go to grad school."… It's like, an undergrad education is not enough because everyone does that. And so in high school it's, "You're going to go to either UCLA, CSUN or Valley College or Pierce College." And then you choose which one you're going to go to. It's not like you could go to barber school or any– I don't know, go travel for a year. Go to Armenia… And then in college, you could do what you liked. To a certain extent. I would never do Gender Studies or Sociology. I don't know– yeah, there are certain majors that would be like, "Why are you doing that?"
12	MA	AA	MA Student	M "Very high expectations – high and specific. They definitely wanted me to go into some STEM thing. Yeah, my brother's a pharmacist. They wanted me to do that or doctor, or whatever else. And I decided to go into Social Sciences, which they're not thrilled about. But at the same time, they're still like – "Well, get your PhD."… It's about the money. They just want to make sure I'm making a lot of money. Which is like – with a PhD in (Social Science field), I don't know. I still might not be making– (laughs)."

Figure 2: Education Expectations

- **Significant Other Expectations**

"Producing grandchildren is one of the most fundamental of all Armenian responsibilities. It's more important than celebrating Remembrance Day or boycotting Turkish restaurants."

- Michael Barakiva[47]

Barakiva once again sheds light into Armenian diasporic culture by indicating that as significant as Genocide commemoration and boycotting Turkish goods may be for the community, an even greater value is placed on producing grandchildren, specifically Armenian grandchildren. Participants discussed this expectation that was set by their parents as well as the assumptions made regarding sex, dating, and marriage.

Grandchildren

> W Never about sex, never about relationships, but the expectation was we knew we had to get married and have kids and have a family. I mean, that's just the way it was.

> M So, marriage of course was big. One of the issues with me coming out was marriage. "Why?" And another thing was my cousins were like, "We should all marry Armenians. By you being a homosexual, you are letting your younger cousins know that they could marry non-Armenian guys." I'm like, "Yeah, they could. It's their fucking prerogative" and that would anger them so much. Oh my God… They went everywhere with it. They used every fucking arsenal in the fucking book but that was one of the things, right? And then my mom's like, "grandchildren". I'm like "I don't want to fucking make babies. Are you kidding me? With my brother's (mental health condition) and my dad was obviously a sociopath of some sort."

Dating

> M Yeah, I mean I think it was always pretty explicit – marry an Armenian woman one day, and I'm not going to leave the house until I marry a woman… I think it was a pretty direct thing. There wasn't even– I don't think that there was a lot of beating around the bush. And then after I came out, there was even more of it almost. It was more aggressive and in a way, just still trying to hold onto the values and traditions.

Օտարներ[48]*: Non-Armenians & Non-Christians*

[47] *One Man Guy,* 2014.
[48] *Ɔdar*: term meaning strange or foreign but used colloquially to refer to non-Armenians, such as in this case meaning "all my non-Armenian friends."

W No discussion of sex. As far as marriage went… there was never a pressure to, "What are you doing? Get married." … I would say [there was] always [an expectation of marrying an Armenian] … We grew up so much with that indoctrination that there was never a new discussion at like 17, you can't– I mean, even as children, we weren't allowed to have Persian friends. In my street (in Iran), my neighbors, I would see them outside but [we] can't go in each other's houses. No fraternization like that. And you know, everything– we were just totally, totally surrounded by Armenian life.
Even after you moved to the U.S.?
Yes, I would say, yeah. I would say like 90% of my life. So, there was no discussion whether I'm Armenian or not.

W Well, obviously they expected me to have a boyfriend and they still do have those expectations of me. I'm sure in the back of their mind, I'm going to marry a man… They never talked about it. I think because I liked boys, although I had feelings for girls, but that was like the hidden part of me. I knew they expected me to, they wanted me to have a boyfriend. But, the expectation was also like, "marry an Armenian"… especially because my sister married a non-Armenian and when her husband came around my dad couldn't handle it. It was bad… but now they're not like that. She broke the mold. At first, I remember my dad making a statement: "I'd rather my daughter marry the worst Armenian than [someone from] any other race." And I remember saying, "well, okay, so, that means you don't care how we're treated, it's just a racial thing." … But I knew it was ignorance so I didn't take it seriously… But it turns out that they fell in love with my sister's husband… He was part of the family, it didn't even matter anymore… He embraced our culture, he was so good to our parents, that like there was no way of not loving him… But even till this day they're so much happier when my siblings bring an Armenian home, which is sad, but I get it, it's like old school mentality.

W In terms of sex, I feel like maybe once, only because she freaked out. I told her about my first kiss and she freaked out. I was like mom, calm down…She was just so shocked for some reason… She was like oh, there's a difference between kissing and sex. I said, "Yeah! I know! I know, mom!" Then – I don't know. She was like, "Oh, there's a time for everything". I'm like mom "I'm not getting married. I'm not having sex. I just kissed this guy. Calm down." I'm like – "I immediately regret telling you this". That's probably why I wouldn't tell her even if I – that's probably why (my sister) hasn't told her that she's been dating someone for three years… I feel like [my dad] was definitely like, "you have to marry an Armenian, but after you finish school, then you'll marry an Armenian" kind of thing. My mom would be like "Yeah, I really want you to marry an Armenian. First, պարսկահայ[49], but then if not, any Armenian's fine. And then anyone I guess". Then she'll like – oh, this is the worst part… "but not a black guy." Oh God! It was going okay until you said that.

M My dad is super whatever, but "Armenian's great. If it's not, it's who you love." My mom was a lot more like, "Oh, Armenian, Armenian, Armenian." And my parents aren't really racist… I don't know, though, if I brought a non-Christian, it may have been an

[49] *Barsgahaj:* Literally "Persian-Armenian," but means an "Armenian from Iran."

> issue, not that I come from a very religious family… But they get along really well with my husband, because my parents both speak French, and we're French-educated in Lebanon. There's a kinship that they feel, like, "OK, he's not Armenian, but he's French." Like, my sister is engaged to an Armenian guy, but my mom's complaining about certain things that she's seeing in him. And she's like, "(husband) might not be Armenian, but"– She goes, "If I had to choose, I would choose your husband"… And then, there's Armenian backgrounds. The background that he comes from is not the same background as my mom, so she's like, "They might be Armenian, but I don't really have much in common to talk to them about."

There are two levels of prejudice at hand, the first being the parents disapproval of any non-Armenian. Participants express growing up with immediate *and* extended family members setting rules and restrictions regarding race, where dating blacks specifically was vocally communicated. While other ethnicities, though they may never have been specifically listed, were also out of the question, but on varying degrees of severity. This also applies to any non-Christians, even if Armenians can be considered culturally Christian, dating Muslims or Jewish people is catastrophic for the family and community. Historically, having been subservient to Muslim regimes in the past and having a generally more pro-Western stance during the 18th-19th centuries, and being subject to the Armenian Genocide and its continual denial, Armenians are unaccepting of their children marrying Muslims. Additionally, Armenians from the Middle East having been rivals in trade from the 17th century onwards with Jewish people, and in more modern times having been engaged in civil wars and unrest with Israelis are unaccepting of these couplings as well. The second is subethnic racism: *not all Armenians are created equal*[50]. Armenians in this case prefer Armenians of their own kind, those who share a specific diasporic host (or home) culture prior to American immigration. In the final quote, the participant's family had more in common with a French person due to Lebanon being under French Mandate for more than two decades, than with an Armenian from a different country, even if that country was

[50] Personal communication with Lynnette Hartenian, Los Angeles born Armenain community member, August 30, 2017.

Armenia. Another participant whose parents are from Lebanon expressed his parents' preference for him to date a Western Armenian. Not only are there restrictions in dating applied for an Armenian but also the *kind* of Armenian – the kind who shares the same subethnicity. The following examples depict participants' realization of expectations *after* violating those expectations:

> My mom and dad were both part of the hippie generation. And when [my mom] was growing up in Tehran like in the '60s and '70s, it was like San Francisco or London in terms of sexual liberation for women and men… My mom was always very candid with me and my sister to the point of like oversharing about boyfriends and her first engagement… Their attitude was always very kind of free and liberal and progressive… I mean it was definitely a surprise to them when I came out to them. I didn't realize that they had expectations of me, um – so, let me backtrack. Not that I didn't realize that they had expectations, but I didn't learn about the expectations until I came out. Um. They were never voiced to me. They were passively expected. They also never told me that– I mean I don't do drugs. But they also never told me, "We don't expect you to use heroin and marijuana"– but if I came home and I used it, or – and something came up, like – then I would learn, like, "No, no, these are not right." So, kind of the same way with marriage and family and relationships… I mean I never talked to my parents about relationships because I wasn't personally thinking about them at a level that I was comfortable discussing with somebody else… With my sister, it came up. One of the expectations was that she would not move out until she was married. But it was never really enforced. One of their other expectations – my mom actually – well, my sister's first boyfriend who she got engaged to was not Armenian. And my dad was OK with it, and my mom was not. So, it basically wasn't until my sister started dating somebody who wasn't Armenian, and it wasn't until she "violated the norm," quote-unquote, the expected norm, that it became a norm. Or that we recognized it was an expectation. So, that's how you know you don't do it.

Participants realize the norms when they or a sibling violate them. For example, it wasn't until her brother married a non-Armenian that another participant realized what a major taboo that was in her family and that "you can't marry an օտար[51]." She further explained that it was never stressed that the person she date or marry has to be of the opposite sex because it was such a given.

[51] *ɔdar*: term meaning "strange" or "foreign," but used colloquially to refer to non-Armenians, such as in this case meaning "you can't marry a non-Armenian."

Parents' preference for an Armenian significant other for their children still applies after LGBQ Armenians come out. Those parents who had overcome their issues with their children's sexuality at time of interview and were ready to discuss their children's dating lives now retract to their usual parenting style and expect their children to couple with Armenians. One participant says: M "My mom was like, 'So you're going to marry an Armenian man, right?' And I'm like, 'Noo? (laughs) not necessarily.' And, that was a big issue. Like 'Seriously? Is that your issue?'" Once again stressing the importance of marriage and Armenianness in Armenian families. Despite parents' expectations, participants stated not having those limitations for themselves. Most stated having no preference and even those who preferred their significant others be Armenian, still did not have any qualms about marrying non-Armenians: M "It's important. But it's not a requirement. It's important for me. But it's not a deal-breaker. It can't be at this point. It can't be. Like, Jesus." The reason he feels it cannot be a deal-breaker is because it's difficult to first find LGBQ Armenians, then find *out* LGBQ Armenians, and finally to expect those Armenians to have healthy relationships with their sexual identities and to have resolved the insecurities and issues that come from being LGBQ, is a huge demand. One participant called finding another gay Armenian that he would be compatible with a "wild goose chase." The shared cultural component and the benefits of understanding do not work in their favor in this regard. Additionally, some narrators stated that dating an Armenian would feel like dating a cousin, because in their minds, being gay is seen as so foreign from Armenian, that it compartmentalized Armenian with the familial. Conversely, another obstacle in dating Armenians was the assumption that since both people would presumably still not have disclosed their sexualities, the relationship would have to be purely about sex. In this case, LGBQ Armenians would not have the means to date publicly due to fear of being seen and outted.

Moreover, with the likelihood that they still live with their parents, they would not have any space for their relationship in private either.

- **Armenian Traditions**

Among immigrants, the parameters and meaning of an ethnic identity begin with the culture, traditions, and practices that are maintained from the homeland. The children of immigrants—the second generation—become the carriers through which the home-land ways are either transmitted or lost. The second generation becomes the critical point from which to examine the processes of ethnic identity formation and acculturation. They are the first of their family to spend the majority of their life, if not all, in America. Issues of identity, language, economic mobility, ethnic community, and intermarriage become fundamental areas of adaptation for the second generation.

- *Kristine Ajrouch*[52]

Participants were asked to share what Armenian traditions, if any, were observed in their families, and all named holidays. Even though in Armenia, they continue to celebrate old pagan traditions country-wide, they are not as celebrated in the diasporic community in Los Angeles. However, participants do express how Christian holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, are major familial events, and thus culturally traditional events. In terms of religion, Armenians are predominantly Eastern Orthodox and members of the Armenian Apostolic Church and celebrate Christmas on January 6th. In the investigation of the role of religion in families and children's upbringing, the conclusion is that Armenians tend to be culturally religious, usually going to church for holidays, primarily for Christmas and Easter, weddings, baptisms, and funerals[53]. Several participants expressed their families not being religious or church-going unless it was for the previously mentioned events: W "Going to church for the Armenian holidays– as a family, that's the one that stands out the most about being Armenian is going to the Armenian Christmas

[52] "Place, Age, and Culture: Community Living and Ethnic Identity among Lebanese American Adolescents," 2000.
[53] Christianity was also a means historically for Armenians to differentiate themselves as western from nearby eastern cultures.

and Easter and all that." Those were the two major holidays, in terms of traditions, that were listed for attending church. One participant stated that his father would go to church sometimes by himself, though it was not for religious purposes, but rather where he would go to see his friends and community members since he was a member of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF)[54]. The church, in this case, acting more as a community center since it was affiliated with the ARF[55]. Participants expressed never praying before meals or at nights, and recollected that the times God was mentioned in the house was under the auspices of reprimanding: *don't do that or God will punish you.* Regarding baptism, which all families did, one participant said, "so that just seemed like you get registered as an Armenian" further echoing the sentiments of the rest of the participants about religion as cultural and symbolic, and not functional. One participant expressed how he definitely celebrated Armenian traditions in his family: M "Not religious, but cultural… I mean, we got together for Easter and Christmas and had Armenian food…" cementing how these religious events are seen as mainly cultural. Furthermore, many participants expressed the incorporation of Armenian food as a traditional component of these cultural events. One participant shared having lots of Armenian food next to the turkey for Thanksgiving dinner – where the dishes are predominantly Armenian but the obligatory turkey is at the center to commemorate Thanksgiving.

For Armenians, both in Armenia and diasporic host countries, New Year's Eve is traditionally celebrated with family. For Armenians in Los Angeles, Christmas is celebrated in various ways. Some celebrate Christmas and New Year's Eve together, some celebrate on the

[54] The ARF is a political party founded in Tbilisi, modern day Georgia, and largely functions in Los Angeles as a mainstream ethnic-based community organization, with its politics playing a major role in its organizational activities. The party has branches operating in the Republic of Armenia and various other countries.

[55] The *Community* chapter provides a detailed investigation into the connection between these institutions and organizations.

25th, 31st, and the 6th, some never celebrate on the 25th, some only celebrate on the 31st (which includes opening Christmas gifts that day as well), and some never celebrate on the 6th. For most, it's a matter of convenience (in terms of days off work), for some it's a matter of maintaining traditions and highlighting the importance of celebrating New Year's Eve with family on the 31st and Christmas on the 6th, and so forth.

Impact of Immigration and Assimilation on Holiday Celebrations

> M I used to look forward to [the holidays in Iran], and here, when we came here it was an instant change, because my uncle and his family were not so much into Armenian traditions, they still did Easter and Armenian Christmas, but nothing else basically. My uncle moved here in the '70s, so did my aunt. It's not the same here, honestly, I've tried kind of reviving those traditions, but they don't have the same appeal that they used to in Iran, not even the mystical appeal that I always liked, I always found them nice. No, it's really different.
>
> W Of course, like holidays, we have to do it the Armenian way. Ամերիկացի ե՞նք[56], like you know, we did everything Armenian. What is the Armenian way? Well, I mean be with family, you have to be with family. My mom does New Year's very special, that's her thing. It's the biggest holiday for her… In Armenia, it's like their Christmas, so like you go to people's houses after they came to your house and this goes on for like a week. So it's kind of big and in America it's not that big, like, it's fun when you're young you go party, but it's more like family for my parents so it's kind of been a struggle. Like, "mom I want to go to this party", "oh you're not going to be here for New Years?" You know so it's like... I feel guilty when I'm not, and when I was in relationships, I wasn't always there[57]… It's sad, you know? Because I know it's a big deal for them so it's always been a struggle, always been a struggle... It's family...
>
> M Well, we did Easter. We'd have the eggs and everything. And then with the lavash, which I still do to this day because I fucking love tarragon and lavash and eggs. That we did. And then we'd – I mean to be honest, we didn't really. I think there was – I think it was kind of different with me being the American and growing up in America. And I think they wanted to help assimilate me. I don't know. And then we were very – my mom's side of the family is in Moscow. And my dad's side of the family is in L.A. in the Valley. But their side of the family has always been – very toxic relationships happening, and someone's constantly fighting with someone else. And so we never – I really don't know my cousins well at all… so I think that that was a part of why I didn't get a whole

[56] *Amɛrigatsʰi ɛnkʰ*: Are we American?
[57] Having to keep her relationships hidden from her family, she was absent from family holidays when she couldn't bring her significant other with her.

> lot of that traditional stuff. I just really didn't have a relationship with my family, and I didn't really seek Armenian friendships either.

With Armenian traditions and cultural components being so closely linked to families, immigration from Armenian and from one diasporic community to another has a major impact. The first participant implies how his family in Los Angeles was more assimilated than his family (and the community he had) in Iran, therefore traditions and holidays were never the same in Los Angeles. The second participant highlights the importance of family in these Armenian traditions, and indicates the struggles she endured during the holidays when spending them with significant others instead, while at the same time contrasting not celebrating as, "what are we? American?" To her, not continuing these traditions implies assimilation into the majority American culture. While, for the third participant, even though his parents also immigrated from Armenia, they encouraged his assimilation, because "Armenians from Armenia represent the only subgroup transitioning from a majority status to a minority one… Armenians from Armenia have led a very unmarked Armenian existence, without experiencing, much less acknowledging impending concerns of ethnic or linguistic assimilation" (Karapetian 2014). Therefore, in his situation, assimilation could imply re-transitioning from minority to majority status. The main difference between the two participants was the former's attendance at an Armenian private school her whole life, which traditionally discourages assimilation, while he attended public American schools. Another important note from the third participant's statement is the tendency for Armenians to have big families and extended families and he, having a small family, didn't have the likelihood of participating in those traditions so closely tied with bigger family celebrations.

Atypical yet typical traditions & cultural components

The components and examples listed thus far are conventionally investigated to describe an ethnic group's cultures and traditions, the following are atypical traditions typically found in Armenian culture.

> M I mean, what's an Armenian tradition? Did my mom and grandmother make չորեկ[58] for Easter? Yes. It's tradition. What is tradition? Tradition–I don't know. We weren't church-going, I'll tell you that much. Tradition? … We had a big family. My grandparents' cousins, their cousins–I grew up with third cousins. That whole family–even though my immediate family ruptured because of the divorce, I did grow up with extended family and cousins. All my օտար[59] friends, or my husband [say]– "God, how many cousins do you have?" , "Listen, man, I grew up with my third cousins, my second cousins, even–" It's very normal for me. That–to me, that family sort of tradition is a very Armenian traditional– all the big, extended dynasty. We were in touch with everybody, my grandparents' first cousins and their kids. That was the life… My mom wanted us exposed to Armenian art, and history, and whatever. I did grow up with that, I guess, but I don't know what Armenian tradition is, and I can't even explain it to you. I guess, Armenian tradition, for me, is family. It's hospitality. It's a lot of food (laughs) you know? And it's– I did grow up, just like most Armenians, with everything ամօթ[60]. Those traditions are alive as well. And they're from my grandparents, from my parents, from whatever. Yeah, I did grow up with tradition, but it wasn't like what another Armenian's traditions might be, if that makes any sense… I think it's just family, and eating, and– (laughs) hospitality, yeah. When your օտար[61] friend comes over, and all the food comes out, they're like, "What's going on?" And that stuff gets transferred from generation to generation. My husband will be like, "What the fuck is going on?" And I'm like, "You don't understand. We have people coming over, I'm not going to put a bag of Doritos. It's not my culture. I have to put everything I have on the table; whether they eat it or not is their decision." But that's it. That's the way I've been raised… Instead of one kind of food you make for dinner, you do at least four or five kinds of things. So that there's– so that's tradition, for me. That's my Armenian upbringing, and I'm proud of it, God damn it (laughs)… Or you bring it out– or you don't even ask; you just put it on the table anyways, and then you say, "Aren't you going to have some?" And then, they say, "No," and you're like, "Are you sure you're not going to have some?" and they– but you put it on the table. An Armenian wouldn't even ask you, "Would you like dessert?" They just fucking put it in front of you, like, "Eat this. Or look at it, at least."

The narrator's vivid struggle to define and describe traditions leads to very interesting insights into Armenian culture: the extended family operating as the immediate, shame as tradition, the

[58] *Tʃʰɔrɛg:* pastry traditionally made during Easter.
[59] *ɔdar*: term meaning strange or foreign but used colloquially to refer to non-Armenians, such as in this case meaning "all my non-Armenian friends."
[60] *Amɔtʰ*: shame. Referring to the Armenian shame culture.
[61] *ɔdar*: non-Armenian.

detailed description of Armenian hospitality, and the prominence of food. Further "atypical" traditions explained were an Armenian mother's propensity for cleanliness: M "My mom's also a typical OCD Armenian mom. No matter what, it's not clean to her standards. Never. And so, it's like, 'ասիկայ,[62] it's not clean.' 'Why don't you do it, then?'" A common Armenian joke is cleaning the house before the cleaners arrive, one to reach utmost cleanliness status, and two to avoid shame, "What will the cleaners say if they see your clothes all over the place?" Saving face is a constant preoccupation in Armenian shame culture. Another facet of Armenian hospitality mentioned is fighting over who pays. Participants also expressed this as a cultural component, one that is not typical but is very culturally Armenian for them – In any given situation (restaurant, grocery store, clothing store, etc.), it is very common to find Armenians arguing over who's going to pay for that meal or item. The examples listed in this section are atypical typical characteristics of Armenian culture, though they are not the only ones as evidenced by the following description, W "We're very family oriented, we're there for each other, warm, and I feel pretty safe in my culture minus that–[63] Like, seriously, meet an Armenian at the end of the world and I'd feel like we know each other, you know what I mean? And that's cool. That's something rare, I think. We relate to each other in a weird way. So, I value that." Her sentiments are arguably influenced from a quote famous among diasporic Armenians by prominent Armenian-American author, William Saroyan in his short story, "The Armenian & the Armenian" (1936):

> In the city of Rostov I passed a beer parlor late at night and saw a waiter in a white coat who was surely an Armenian, so I went in and said in our language, How are you, God destroy your house, how are you? I don't know how I could tell he was an Armenian, but I could. It is not the dark complexion alone, nor the curve of nose, nor the thickness and abundance of hair, nor is it even the way the

[62] *Asiga:* this.
[63] Referring to her struggles with her sexuality and ethnic identity.

living eye is set within the head. There are many with the right complexion and the right curve of nose and the same kind of hair and eyes, but these are not Armenian. Our tribe is a remarkable one, and I was on my way to Armenia. Well, I am sorry. I am deeply sorry that Armenia is nowhere. It is mournful to me that there is no Armenia.

There is a small area of land in Asia Minor that is called Armenia, but it is not so. It is not Armenia. It is a place. There are plains and mountains and rivers and lakes and cities in this place, and it is all fine, it is all no less fine than all the other places in the world, but it is not Armenia. There are only Armenians, and these inhabit the earth, not Armenia, since there is no Armenia, gentlemen, there is no America and there is no England, and no France, and no Italy, there is only the earth, gentlemen.

So I went into the little Russian beer parlor to greet a countryman, an alien in a foreign land.

Vy, he said with that deliberate intonation of surprise which makes our language and our way of speech so full of comedy. You?

Meaning of course I, a stranger. My clothes, for instance. My hat, my shoes, and perhaps even the small reflection of America in my face.

How did you find this place?

Thief, I said with affection, I have been walking. What is your city? Where were you born? (In Armenian, Where did you enter the world?)

Moush, he said. Where are you going? What are you doing here? You are an American. I can tell from your clothes.

Moush. I love that city. I can love a place I have never seen, a place that no longer exists, whose inhabitants have been killed. It is the city my father sometimes visited as a young man.

Jesus, it was good to see this black Armenian from Moush. You have no idea how good it is for an Armenian to run into an Armenian in some far place of the world. And a guy in a beer parlor, at that. A place where men drink. Who cares about the rotten quality of the beer? Who cares about the flies? Who, for that matter, cares about the dictatorship? It is simply impossible to change some things.

Vy, he said. Vy (slowly, with deliberate joy) vy. And you speak the language. It is amazing that you have not forgotten.

And he brought two glasses of the lousy Russian beer.

> And the Armenian gestures, meaning so much. The slapping of the knee and roaring with laughter. The cursing. The subtle mockery of the world and its big ideas. The word in Armenian, the glance, the gesture, the smile, and through these things the swift rebirth of the race, timeless and again strong, though years have passed, though cities have been destroyed, fathers and brothers and sons killed, places forgotten, dreams violated, living hearts blackened with hate.
>
> I should like to see any power of the world destroy this race, this small tribe of unimportant people, whose history is ended, whose wars have all been fought and lost, whose structures have crumbled, whose literature is unread, whose music is unheard, whose prayers are no longer uttered.
>
> Go ahead, destroy this race. Let us say that it is again 1915. There is war in the world. Destroy Armenia. See if you can do it. Send them from their homes into the desert. Let them have neither bread nor water. Burn their houses and their churches. See if they will not live again. See if they will not laugh again. See if the race will not live again when two of them meet in a beer parlor, twenty years after, and laugh, and speak in their tongue. Go ahead, see if you can do anything about it. See if you can stop them from mocking the big ideas of the world, you sons of bitches, a couple of Armenians talking in the world, go ahead and try to destroy them.

The final paragraphs are institutionally used to promote Armenian culture in the diasporic community of Los Angeles and have been misquoted for years with nationalistic undertones (Mamigonian 2017). Therefore, an Armenian from LA, having attended Armenian schools or joined Armenian organizations, would have been exposed to those misquotations. That aside, from his description of recognizing an Armenian without being able to explain why, to the joy he feels in finding another Armenian, to the Armenian gestures he lists, he is describing these "atypical" notions of Armenian cultural characteristics. Ultimately, while it is difficult to define and limit Armenian traditions, narrators provided several significant insights into Armenian culture in which family was the prevailing constant agreed by all, further evidencing the devastation of family disapproval for LGBQ Armenians.

- **Role of Genocide**

How, if at all, do you think that the Armenian Genocide has influenced your upbringing/family?

M *I mean that's hard to answer, because I don't want to say no. Because I know that the Armenian Genocide has influenced every single Armenian person.*

There were varying degrees of impact from the Armenian Genocide in these families. An apparent reason is the subethnic component of the families. The quote above is from a participant whose parents are from Armenia, and whether or not his ancestors were killed during the Genocide, Armenians from Armenia, having been under Soviet rule for over seven decades and having endured the further complications associated with the war of Nagorno-Karabagh (1992-1994), were not allowed to discuss national themes and have had to struggle through and endure extreme social, economic, and political burdens. As a result, the experiences from these traumatic events have a more recent impact on their families. Similarly, Armenians from Lebanon having been directly impacted from the Lebanese Civil War, M "didn't really talk about the Genocide specifically, the stories that I heard growing up were all about Lebanon, all about the life in Beirut, and you know, the nostalgia for Lebanon and their home and their lives there that were all lost to the civil war." Moreover, not all the participants were direct descendants of Genocide survivors. For example, Armenians from Iran tend to have been inhabitants of the country for several centuries, M "nobody in my family was ever a descendent of a Genocide survivor. Both sides of my parents' family have been in Iran for 500 years… But the Genocide as a political act, and – I don't really – it was always – Genocide was always a story. It was never an event for me. It was always like a – it was like a… obligation." Evidently, both participants had been indirectly impacted by the Genocide, thus, explaining the "obligation" the second participant felt, and the countless hours the first participant spent talking about the Genocide with his therapist: M "I have this incessant need to talk about the Genocide with everyone that I meet, every non-Armenian, I can't not talk about it… Oh my God, my therapist, I see my therapist once an hour every week, we talk about the Genocide almost every single time,"

regarding the impact the Genocide has had on the diasporic community and his struggles with his sexual identity. Though the Genocide did not play a major role in his family life, it did in his school life. By attending an Armenian private school,[64] the Genocide had been engrained, as was the case with many other participants – W "[it influenced my upbringing] a lot, because it was such a big deal at school. They had us march every year for April 24th and go to the demonstrations and stuff. [It was talked about in the family too], because my dad's mom was orphaned… in that sense, it was talked about." Even when participants had direct connections to the Genocide, they still highlighted the impact the schools had, W "Yes. Of course it was [talked about]. Plus, I went to an Armenian school. But, it was talked about. I know the story about my great grandparents… I heard stories from my dad's mom… It was a big thing about what the Turks did and the march every year and it's April. It was a horrible thing and it wasn't like, oh, I only heard this at school." Moreover, another participant from Iran credited one of the diasporic community organizations, W "I'd say maybe the first 20 years of my life, it was a huge thing. At home, though, I would say, probably not as much… most of whatever has been instilled in me was through organizations like Homenetmen[65], and stuff like that rather than at home… And my family, obviously, we've been in generations in Iran so we don't have a firsthand knowledge."

On the other hand, narrators who were descendants of Genocide survivors described the transgenerational trauma that they perceived within their families, such as the paranoia and fear of others, the insistence of closing window blinds and locking doors, the need to feel protected,

[64] The *Community* chapter provides a detailed investigation into the connection between these institutions and organizations, however, the significance in this case is the schools the participants attended were closely affiliated with the ARF, which contributes to the finding of Genocide as an identity marker discussed in the previous chapter.

[65] Homenetmen [HMEM] is an Armenian scouting and athletic organization affiliated with the ARF.

not wanting to be the center of attention, and the aversion to interacting with Turkish people or purchasing Turkish goods and products.

> M I sometimes look at people's family trees and see how far back it goes and I'm jealous. I don't have that. My family tree doesn't go very far. People talk about 300, 400, 500 or something, I'm like "yeah man, I'm not…" I know where we came from but, I know my grandparent's parents and that's about it. They're just gone and it feels weird and um… definitely Genocide is why people are so about marrying Armenians. I think that plays a huge role in the whole "stay Armenian."

> M I think, collectively, as a people, we're all fucked up because of the Genocide… So, in my family, my one grandfather experienced it, he lost his father. And then my great-grandparents were the ones that actually went through the Genocide. I do think that my grandparents were fucked up because their grandparents were fucked up… my great-grandparents lived the trauma of losing people (and) my grandparents were raised probably with a lot of post-traumatic disorder, and crazy shit. You can't help it if you've lost your parents, or your siblings, or your loved ones, your cousins, so violently, and then, again, was displaced to a different foreign country. Of course it's going to affect you. It was a weird thing… I do think that people were fucked up when they arrived in places like Lebanon, or Syria, or whatever. And there is a lot of psychological post-traumatic disorder that gets transferred from one generation to another… I know my grandparents on my mom's side, my grandpa and his siblings, all ended up fighting, for bullshit, and money, and this, that. My grandmother was married off at sixteen, in Aleppo, against her will. There was a lot of weird shit that went down. And so, by the time my parents were born in the '50s, they probably didn't even understand why certain things in the family were the way they were, or attribute them to the Genocide.

These participants provide glimpses into the contemporary effects of the Genocide on Armenian diasporic families and demonstrate the presence of the Genocide in their familial lives, while highlighting the impact of institutions and organizations in passing down the history, and at times even the trauma. Ultimately, to reference the first participant, the Armenian Genocide has influenced and directly and indirectly impacted practically every single Armenian person, each to various degrees, under different circumstances, and with a different valorization, even if they were not direct descendants of Genocide survivors.

Findings on Coming Out

Thus by inexorable degrees does the love that dare not speak its name build walls instead, till a house is nothing but closets.

- *Paul Monette*[66]

Coming out of the closet refers to LGBTQ people's disclosure of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Research participants came out to themselves first, then to those with whom they felt most comfortable. The pattern is their closest friends first, then family members, if that. Coming out is not an event that takes place once. LGBTQ people face coming out every time they are in new situations because they are often presumed to be heterosexual or cisgender. Coming out is often associated with feelings of liberation, though it would be unfair to undermine the state of anxiety experienced during the process. The act of coming out does not immediately rid feelings of shame and guilt or ameliorate decades of internalized homophobia. By being in the closet, individuals consciously act to conceal their true selves from those that matter most in their lives. They are often isolated from other LGBTQ people, believing there are no others like them, having no sense of social belonging, and ultimately are forced to either live deceitfully or a double life (Seidman 2002). Therefore, Seidman argues that being in the closet results in suffering systematic harm, because LGBTQ people lack basic rights and access to opportunities and social benefits, are being denied respect and social belonging, and often forfeit the possibilities of love and companionship that allow for personal happiness (2002).The closet, a condition of social oppression, exists as a response to a heteronormative society which works not only to promote heterosexuality but also by demonizing homosexuality. A byproduct of the closet is passing [as straight] and/or covering,[67] which is not a simple act and one that requires methodological processing. Passing is not just a response for denial or to suppression. Closeted

[66] *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story*, 1992.
[67] Covering is the process of "toning down" one's stigmatized identity in order to fit in (Moore 2010a).

individuals closely monitor their speech, mannerisms, and behavior in order to avoid suspicion (Seidman 2002).

Review of scholarship suggests that Armenians are more likely to be closeted than their Black, White, Latino/a counterparts. Previous research has found distinct disclosure strategies used in approaching coming out with families. Some LGBQ Armenians choose not to disclose their sexuality and remain complicit with family members by pretending their relationships are platonic friendships. In these cases participants expressed that family members were silently aware of the reality. Families use this strategy to save face and avoid shame in their communities since their children would not be openly displaying their sexualities (Acosta 2010). Similar to lesbian, bisexual, and queer Latinas, participants expressed not wanting to bring shame and stressed the importance of maintaining familial honor. Those engaging in this strategy believed that their families knew and accepted their relationships as long as they were kept discreet, despite never having openly discussed their same-sex relationships (Acosta 2010). LGBQ Armenians came out to family members in various stages: some immediately after coming out to themselves and close friends, some who came out to parents years after coming out to self and friends, and others who have yet to come out to their families though they lead queer lives. Additionally, some did not have the agency of coming out themselves, in some instances participants were outed by siblings or by their parents reading their private journals.

The following passages are participants' coming out stories. Though these stories are isolated and analyzed in separate sections within this chapter, it is very significant and necessary to have a section demonstrating their coming out stories in whole and chronologically for an in-depth understanding of the familial relationships and to provide visibility to the nuances and backgrounds of their experiences.

- **Coming Out Stories**

Age: Mid 20's,
Gender: Man
Sexuality: Queer

So I first came out– well kind of came out to my brother… He found porn on the computer, yeah. And then he freaked out, and he told my parents. So he kind of outed me directly.
How old were you?
I was 15… but it wasn't just a conversation. It was– I mean, I still deal with it. My dad still once in a while will ask– is everything normal? Normal meaning– oh, are you straight still? Basically what happened in the beginning was– it was a couple of really tumultuous weeks– a couple of really, really hard weeks on all of us for sure. But definitely on me as well. It was just them pleading and just freaking out about me and pleading for me to be OK and normal… And there was a lot of begging and pleading for me to be straight. There was a lot of crying and stuff. I remember my mom said something like– if I ever see you on a street with another man, I'll kill both of you– in tears, on her knees. Yeah, so it was very intense. And I think that there was definitely a lack of language and a lack of knowing how to talk about it. They absolutely have no idea how to talk about it, and they felt very alone. I know that they felt very alone. They were ashamed to tell other parts of my family and stuff. So they didn't really have anyone to talk to about it. Yeah. And then I went back in the closet. I was like, "Oh I'm straight now." I wanted to do film at the time. They were like, "We'll buy you a camera if you'll be straight." Of course I was like, "OK. Yeah, right, sweet" (laughs). Yeah, and then so I was basically going back into the closet and constantly– but they were constantly on edge and constantly talking to me. I want to say up to a couple years after that– up through high school– was just constantly– if we ever saw something on the news about gay rights, they just expressed their disgust. If we ever saw an effeminate man on the street, they expressed their disgust. And with my brother, he turned around. And he's still low key homophobic, but he tries and he's accepting of it. I'm doing air quotes again– he's "accepting" quote unquote. But yeah, so definitely through high school, it was just keeping it concealed and just hiding it– hiding my identity. And then in high school, I came out to them again. No, after high school, in college. I was 18. I came out to them again, and they kicked me out of the house. And this happened twice within– it was one three-month period I was kicked out of the house. And then I went back and told them I'm straight again [to come home].
Where did you go when they kicked you out?
With some friends I had. It was an older man who I had slept with, and his partner. And they were kind enough to let me stay there, which was a very odd situation for sure. That was an odd situation because their relationship was on the fritz, and I had hooked up with one of them. So it was kind of an odd, tense situation in the beginning. But I think the partner– he got to know me a bit better, and he liked me more. So that was three months. I moved back, and then not long after that, they kicked me out again. And it was involving– and I think it was kind of one of those things where I had an argument with them– a really bad nasty argument. And then I was like, "Well guess what mom and dad? I'm gay. Fuck you." It was kind of one of those things. So then it was another six months that they kicked me out of the house again, and I was staying with those friends again. And then I went back again. I went back to the house again and went back in the closet. And then during those six months, I started to smoke a lot of weed, especially around

the time when I turned 18. I was smoking a lot of weed, doing other drugs– doing harder drugs. I was doing a lot of ecstasy at the time, and then drinking a little bit, too. But the drinking wasn't as much of an issue. That became an issue when I became 21.

When you weren't living at home, were you still in touch with your parents?

Not really. It got kind of nasty. I tried to blackmail them. I tried to tell them that I would out myself to my extended family, and I tried to get some money off of them. Because I was poor as fuck. But no, other than that– other than hostile and being really nasty, no, we didn't really have contact.

Age: Early 30's
Gender: Man
Sexuality: Gay

So then my dad took me aside when I had just turned 19 and I hadn't prepared anything, but I was like, "I'm confident enough to be like, 'Yeah, I'm attracted to guys.'" I'd gone to therapy and I had talked to my mom's cousin and all these people online. And I'm like, "Yeah, this is here to stay, this is– there is no changing this."

Did you say "gay"?

No, I didn't say gay at all. I said I'm attracted to guys. And all of this is in Armenian. Yeah, this is all in Armenian. Yeah, I said I'm attracted to guys, I didn't– I wasn't comfortable saying gay, because that was putting a label on it and I don't know if I had said I'm gay out loud by then. So yeah, so I came– I mean, I told my dad and of course, my dad told my mom and so that was not good. So basically– he's very cerebral and logical and he's very social justice-y and so he tried to be supportive. I mean, he was like, "OK." So I guess a backstory– two of their high school friends died of AIDS, and they went to an Armenian school in (country). And so two out of, I don't know, thirty were I guess together or– yeah, they had– so that had left a fairly– so basically, my mom's reaction was, like "You– I mean, are you sure? Because you're going to die of AIDS." so it was, "Yeah, you can't tell anyone. You should try dating girls and don't–" So my dad's reaction was, "Well, if you ever do date a guy or any– if you have a boyfriend ever, I guess I could meet him at a bar in another city somewhere where no one would see us, where there are no Armenians." And so they were mostly sad and scared of what the family's reactions might be and what the community's reaction's going to be because they're very involved. And every single person in my family's involved in some organization, and so it's like, God forbid. And so I guess my mom was fairly depressed about it and we didn't talk about it after that for a few years. So– but yeah, that was 12 years ago now, so a lot of time has passed. But yeah, that was their– I guess that was me telling them.

What happened was the year after I told [my parents], I slowly started coming out to my friends. So a cousin here, a friend there, and then– and at the same time, I started interacting with gay guys in college and going out and exploring and figuring out what I like. And so it became a game of who have I told, who have I not told, and the most annoying game was who am I not supposed to tell so that they won't tell anyone. And, "I told this person, so I should tell that person so they won't feel bad." And then– so it was just this– it almost was like I'm planning an Armenian wedding and I'm feeling bad that I'm inviting people and not inviting people (laughs). Because I– when I listen to any of my girlfriends now who are planning weddings or their parents are planning weddings, it's like, "Why is all this happening? Why is everyone going

through this stuff?" They're like, "They invited us, so we have to invite them." And then we invite them. So– and then telling people, yeah. So after a year, I guess, of bottling it up and being cautious of who I tell it, I broke out of that and was like, "OK, whoever knows knows. I don't care. Whoever knows knows. Whoever cares and is negative, then I guess I don't need them in my life." Or, "They could come to me and talk," and whatever. So I stopped coming out to people, basically, and if it came up, it came up. Yeah, so after that, the only indication that I was gay was there was something about Prop 8 that was circulating so I sent a mass email to the entire family being like, "Hey, Prop 8 is bad and here's why." And whatever, or– yeah, I mean, I did a dance marathon at (university) that was for pediatric AIDS. I don't know if anyone would connect that to me being gay, but whatever. So– I mean, I didn't– I wasn't waving the gay flag in front of their face and getting the rainbow tattoo on my forehead or whatever, but I wasn't restricting myself.

Age: Early 50's
Gender: Woman
Sexuality: Lesbian

And then definitely through middle school and high school I knew at that point for sure. I didn't come out to anybody, it would be– the first person that I came out to was the person that I got into a relationship with. And then after that, I told my very close Armenian friends.

How old were you at that point?

21, I was old, because I was hiding it the whole entire time. Well, I couldn't tell anybody and I was hiding it. And then when I met someone that I thought this is someone I could be with, or might be interested. So yeah, I was 21 and then maybe a couple years later I told my very close friends. My best friend at that time I told… Surprisingly, she was very accepting of it. It was really hard to tell her, because she's very religious and that's a big deal to her. So it was really hard to tell her, but she was fine with it. So– and then my mom –I think I was 25 or 26 when I finally told her, which was really, really hard too.

Was your mom the first person you told in your family?

Yeah, and she didn't take it well at all… I was a terrible child at that time. Because I had this secret life, I was not home often at all. So I'd either not come home at all that night and not show up 'til the morning or whatever and my parents had no idea where I was when I was doing it. And I think, finally, my mom just had it and one morning she came into my bedroom and was like, "What's going on with you?" And then that's when I told her. She came to me and was like– and it was really hard to tell her and of course, she reacted very badly. She thought I was brainwashed and, "This can't be true." And, "this is horrible, you can't do this. I want you to–" I think that's when she told me to leave the house. She wanted me to leave the house, give her the car keys– she basically kicked me out of the house and so– at that time, I called my– the person I was with and she came and picked me up. It was a horrible time. So I stayed with her for a few days, I called my best friend, I told her this happened. I'm not– God, I don't remember if she tried talking to my mom or something, but eventually she let me back in the house. But she was just– "You can't do this, I'm going to tell– I'm going to go tell (boss) at your work." She started threatening me. "I'm going to go tell the other (workers) at your (job). You can't do this, you have to change. We have to go see a therapist." She forced me to go and I agreed to go because I knew that the therapist is not going to– So I said, "OK." So we went and that's exactly what happened. The therapist was more trying to explain *to her* the situation and how she should be

more accepting of it… Oh, actually, you know what happened? I think at that time I think I felt so bad for her I told her that I would not see other– date anyone and now I'm remembering. I told her that I would stop doing that. And so basically, I– that's what I told her. I told her I wouldn't do it, and so she thought I didn't see those women anymore. So I went back to being into the closet and I told her I wouldn't do it.

But you were still – ?

Oh, I continued, yeah. I just hid it from her again. And we didn't talk about it until later. Then when (wife) came around and it got more serious and then (wife) and I moved out together and got an apartment over here. I was 30 at this point, so we went four or five years, yeah, with her not knowing.

And that was the first time you brought it up again with your mom?

Yeah. In the beginning, she– when I started hanging around her a lot, I think she even asked me and I was like, "No, no, we're just friends." I was hiding it and hiding it, but then when it got serious and we were like– we wanted to move out, then I had to tell her and she was not happy again. So she again disowned me and we didn't talk for years.

At this point, what was going on with your dad and siblings?

My dad was clueless and we were just hiding it from him. I know my mom would– this was devastating to her. She– I would come home sometimes and I'd see her just bawling in tears. I know this was really, really hard for her. Crying, crying, depressed. Later I found out that she talked to her mom about it, my grandma… And surprisingly, my grandma was trying to convince *her* that it's OK. I think my grandma was a big support for her. But she still– she was just– she didn't come around and I didn't tell any other family members. So it kind of sucked for her because she couldn't talk to anybody. Yeah, and I didn't tell my siblings. Yeah, and I was not home a lot– at all. I was not around at that point. I'd go to work and then I'd go out and be with my friends– and sleeping [at friend's place] and hardly ever come home.

Did everyone find out when (wife) came into the picture?

That's when everyone started finding out, yeah, more seriously. And other people started realizing before my own family members. Like most people in (the community) knew already and my sister was either in denial or I don't know what, but she didn't. So I finally– it– I think somebody told her husband and then he ended up telling her. And so she wrote me this letter and I wrote her a letter back and it was really bad. She felt– I don't think she was necessarily mad– against being gay, but she was mad that I had kept it from her and not told her. That's the part that was harder for her, I think, back then.

I never really had to come out and tell anybody. It's like everybody just saw me with her and they knew of me. And I'm sure people talked and rumors and this and that, so when I started bringing her around and bringing her to family things then people were like, "Oh ok, it is true." But I never really had to tell anybody, it was just, everyone assumed that it was. That's kind of how it happened, so I– in a way– assumed that, "OK, my siblings know too," but I think they were just in denial. So yeah, and then that's when my siblings – that's when (wife) came around and that's how. I never really told them, either. It was just assuming.

Age: Mid 40's
Gender: Woman
Sexuality: Gay

I'll tell you who I came out to first and then how I came out to the family? OK. I came out– as a little girl I didn't not have– there were crushes on boys, but I also liked girls, but not in that sexual way, because I was little. I didn't know what that was. I just knew I always liked being around and I– a lot of times it was just my best friend. So not in that sense, I'm not saying, but then when I got older and then the hormones came it was like "I like this girl, but why do I like her like that? Why am I thinking about her like that?" And ,"What is that?" Holding her hand. It's not anything sexual, because my mind didn't– my mind didn't know how to go there. I wouldn't know what to do. So I would say I kind of came out to myself first. It was when I realized that these are actual feelings at 14. And then, I told my best friend who's still my very best friend now and we still keep in touch. I just sent her a text today saying, "We have to get together."; at 16 or 15.

Was she Armenian?

Yeah. In high school. In high school. Yeah. I told her at the back church steps. We both had a secret to tell each other. So I told her I had to tell her something and I was very shameful and I thought I was going to lose my friends and my– people are going to kill me and I can't believe this. It's so bad. I just thought, "Oh my God. It's the end of the world." And I told her. She's like, "So?", so it was great. And I just remember when she said genuinely like, "It doesn't change who you are," I knew I was going to be OK at the end of my life. So that's who I came out to first. And then, years went on and I was in a relationship with another woman who was older actually and that was another thing. "Oh my God. This person's older." And I came out to– I ended up not being with this person and then dating boys and actually being with boys, so I've been with a man. I've probably been with more men than women, which isn't much, which isn't many, but it was always because that was the right thing to do, because I'm not that way. I cannot be that way. My family's never going to accept it. Why am I wasting this life of trying to be something that I was never, no one's going to ever accept? Then I met (wife) and none of that mattered. Nothing mattered. I was twenty something. I was 23, 24 and I just knew. I didn't– at that point I didn't even care to be with a man for the reasons, the wrong reasons. I just– I didn't care. I just– It was like that's when my life started, when I fell in love with her instantly and I knew. Nothing mattered, where things would have mattered before didn't matter and that's when I came out to my mom. But, I didn't come out to my mom in the way that I wanted to. It just– it wasn't planned. She– my mom knew that (wife) was gay. Yeah. She knew (wife) was gay, because she was with another woman. She knew that couple people in (community organization) were and she was worried that they were going to influence me, but she had no idea that I was feeling this 10 years prior, because I hid it. So one– it was one day where I was on the phone. I was at (wife)'s house when we were going to Vegas and my mom said, "Why are you hanging out with her so much?" And I said, "What do you mean?" Then I thought to myself, "Oh my God. She's going to ask the question.", and she did and I said, "Yeah. I am." She said, "Are you– ", she said, "(name), are you gay?" She goes, "Are you with her? Are you sleeping with her?" And I said– no. She didn't say sleeping. She said, "Are you gay? Are you with her?" I said, "Yes." But I wish I didn't say it like that, because I was defiantly saying this and that was it. And then, it took a couple years for my mom to come around and then she did. She came around a year– not even a year later and she had us over for dinner. She didn't care. She was like, "It is what it is.", but she reacted like, "Oh my God. There's no one in our family. You're in a cult. This is you being brainwashed." Now, she can care less… I have the regret of I wish I would have told my mom in a nicer way, but I didn't have that type of relationship with my mom, because I was always hiding. So you can't be someone who's always hiding and then all of a

sudden say, "Hey, there's something I need to tell you." Because I wasn't close like that with her for this reason. So… Anyway, that's the gist of the coming out.

Age: Mid 40's
Gender: Woman
Sexuality: Gay

My coming out was – I was in college, I was questioning. It was a very difficult time for me. I wasn't quite sure what I was doing. So, I had a lot of writing in diaries and a lot of, soul searching. All of these I kept close to my bed. My mom read those and found out on her own. So I was sort of thrust out. My sister confronted me. So, I never really actually came out myself…My mom found out.

She told your sister then your sister…?

Correct. Because my sister has been my, the middle man sort of between me and my parents most of my life. So, then I had a discussion with my sister and that's how it went. The person I ended up with was a friend of mine so– and my parents always knew her. So it was– it happened quite organically so they never felt like they hated her. [Because I was coming out] with someone they knew.

And this person is Armenian?

Yes, from Scouts[68]. So yeah, I never had a chance to actually sit down and worry about whether I should come out. I was (laughs) I was having– I was displaying very, very weird behavior. I, in retrospect, to my parents, I developed a couple of very intense relationships with a couple of girls back when I was 21 or 22 and they were very strong crushes, they were straight, I wasn't. And so I was very overly catering to them, that for them it was so strange, why would I do all of these things for them? So they were– And they were correct to question because who does that unless you have bigger motivations? And so, they sensed something. And when my mom read my diaries and stuff, it became very obvious what was happening. So, they were concerned. There was a lot of concern.

How old were you?

It started when I was 21 but I was myself questioning for good three or four years, until when everything kind of came together at 25… They weren't OK with any of it for a long time, but they were able to tolerate the situation because of who I was with.

Age: Early 40's
Gender: Man
Sexuality: Gay

By age 26, I met this guy who happened to be Armenian, and was my first boyfriend. And I came out with him, in the relationship of a year. So, the Armenian thing is important to me, because what happened was I thought I was the only gay Armenian out there. And then, I was on one of these gay chats– chatrooms, back then– 2001, 15 years ago– and I was talking to this guy, and that was the way I started, sort of in these chatrooms, where it was safe. I didn't start frequenting gay bars, and whatever. But– I was still like, "That's never going to happen, but I have one life to live, let me mess around a little bit, before I get married to a woman." I started

[68] Armenian scouting organization, part of Homenetmen [HMEM].

going to gay chatrooms, and this guy and I were talking. He's like, "I'm Armenian. You're Armenian, as well? Wow!" And he was cute. And so, we met, and we fell mad over– crazy in love with one another. But when I met him, I was like, "I'm bisexual. This is just an experience for me," and blah blah blah, and whatever. But halfway in the relationship, then I was like, "Fuck that." I fell madly in love with him, and we were together for a year. Ended up traumatically, but– And then, I came out to my family in 2004. Three years later… I went through a phase in that three years that I was coming out to myself where I lost a lot of weight. All of a sudden, I was wearing clothes that were a little more– I wouldn't say flamboyant, but tighter T-shirts. I was skinny, and I thought I was the big hot shit. So, they saw a big change. And then, again, I come from a liberal family, so what happened was I guess my brother started hunching certain things, OK? And I remember something was on TV– a gay-related whatever– and my brother's like, "Fucking faggots." And I'm like– I just looked at him. And I think he said it to get a reaction from me, OK? And I just looked at him, and I don't remember– I don't think I said anything back, but– so anyways, I was like, "Whatever." And I started to understand that OK, that's not normal, even from my brother's mouth. Something's going on, and they're testing for reactions. And because we're a close family– for three years, I was like, "I'm going to sleep at this one's house. Oh, I'm going to sleep at that one's house." I was living at home. I think they were like, "What the fuck is going on?" I'm sorry if I'm talking about "fuck, fuck, fuck." I'm just being very natural with you. And then, there were other random comments, and I'm like, OK, ասոնք[69] reaction կ՛ուզեն կոր[70], you know? So, I remember– I don't remember exactly what happened. We were at dinner with my dad, and again, my brother made some comment, like– I don't remember what it was, but it alluded to the fact that I'm gay. But he didn't straight-out say it. And I turned around, because I'm known to have a temper every now and then… I turned around, and I'm like, "What the fuck"– in front of my dad, I go, "What the fuck are you alluding to?" And I said, "If you have balls, you'll ask straight out what you want to know." I said, "In the meantime," I said, "Let's not play this bullshit." And my dad's like, "What's going on? Ի՞նչ կ՛ըլլաք կոր[71] This, that." Then, I'm like, "Bye." I go to the bathroom, and cooled off, and this– and come back, and nothing was said. Then, it was like the subject changed, but my dad was just, "դեռ չհասկցայ"[72] I'm like, "(brother)ը հասկցաւ[73] OK?" So, I think a couple days after that, I'm like, "You know what?"– Oh! And then, my brother called one of my best friends from high school that I'd come out to, because he knows I'm close to her. And to my cousin– our mutual cousin. The same cousin who invited my boyfriend to her wedding, by the way. Anyways, my brother calls these two, and says, "Guys, I have a feeling my brother's gay. And I have a feeling you guys know. I don't know what to do. Tell me, whatever." And they were both like, "We're not going to say yeah or no. It's not our place. But you need to talk to your brother." Then, they called me. They're like, "Bitch, he called (funny voice). He's on it. You need to talk to him. We weren't going to lie and say no, and we didn't say yes, either, but us saying 'Go talk to your brother'– is pretty much saying, 'Yes, you're warm, and you need to go talk to your brother.'" Bottom line is, I called my brother, or texted him, or whatever, and said, "I want to take you and mom out to dinner." And I said, "I think you're not stupid, and I think you know what the subject is going to be." And I said, "I just want to prep you, and I don't have to say it. I

[69] *Asɔnkʰ:* these [people].
[70] *Guzɛn gɔr:* they want – These [people] want [a reaction].
[71] *Intʃʰ gəlakʰ gɔr:* what's happening to you [all]?
[72] *Tʰer tʃʰhasgutsʰa:* I still didn't understand.
[73] *Hasgutsʰav:* [he] understood.

think we both know what I'm talking about." And I said– he goes, "OK. Sure." And so, he prepped my mom and dad. Actually, [my brother] played a very important role. He prepared them. Long before any of this, he told my mom and dad. He goes, "I just want you guys to brace yourselves, because I have a very strong feeling that (name) is gay. And I feel like he's going to come out, and I suppose you guys need to prepare." And my dad was like– my dad's like, "to be honest with you, I've been suspicious, because he's a decent-looking guy, and he's never had a girlfriend, and we are noticing some changes in his behavior, and his overall looks, and whatever." And by that time, it was like– *Will & Grace* was on TV, and they weren't as naïve. When I– at that point, my– both my brother and my dad, when I came out to them, were like– it was a very Armenian sort of response, in a way, but they were like, "Fuck what anybody has to say about you being gay. We have your back." You know what I mean? Which was great. My brother was like, "Whatever, dude. I'll fuck anybody up if they say anything about you,"– my younger brother. I'm like, "Thanks, bro." And my dad, too– he's like, "Քաք թող ուտէ ով որ problem ունի"[74] and stuff. They took it well. I think– and we joke, now. My dad will be like– we did stupid– I come from a different family, dude. I'm telling you, we're silly. It's like, my dad will be like, "աղջիկս, oh, կը ներես[75], (name)," as a joke, or whatever. But it's not in the– it's done as a joke, but not in a– and we'll all start laughing. You know what I mean? I'm like, "Dad, you're such an էշ[76]," or whatever. We're on that level of, "Ha ha ha, whatever." And then– but my dad was really cool. He called me, all proud of himself– and it was a touching moment– but he's in (finance)… And I guess it was the whole gay marriage thing coming up, or whatever, and a lot of people were in the board meeting, talking. Nothing negative, or whatever. And he chimes in and goes, "You know what? Maybe a lot of you don't know, but my son's gay," and he goes, "I am so happy that my son could now get married in this country." And he called me, so proud, "ասանկ ըսի"[77]. I'm like, "Good. That's so cool, Dad."

Up until my mid-20s, I was closeted to myself, as well, although I knew I was gay. And– I always knew that I was gay, from an early age, but I suppressed it, because I didn't want to disappoint my mother. And I don't blame her for it, but it was like, "Oh, What's the community going to think? They're going to think, 'Oh, poor thing. She's already divorced. Failed marriage. Now, her son is gay,'" and blah blah blah– all this bullshit. And so, it took me a while to actually come out to myself, and then come out to my family. That being said, I wasn't in any major relations with girls, but there were a couple of sort of interests, and what-not. You know, I think parents– I think they were suspicious, even as a child, that I might be gay, but because I waited so long, and I didn't come out to them– And I had a girl that I was interested in, in Greece, who I thought would be the only girl that could potentially get me out of the gay thing, and settle down, and have a family. Anyway, long story short, when I did come out to them at age twenty– I want to say seven-ish, [27ish] probably– my mom cried. And she's like, "I always thought that you weren't, although I had my doubts. But then you led me to believe that you weren't, and I always thought that you would be walking down the aisle with a woman, and having kids." And I turned it around as a joke. I'm like, "I'm still going to maybe walk down the aisle, hopefully, except I'll be the one wearing the dress," as a joke. And she's like, "ապուշ[78]" "You better not be." It took

[74] *kʰakʰ tʰɔʁ udɛ ɔv vɔr* problem *uni:* whoever has a problem can eat shit.
[75] *Aʁtʃʰigəs, ɔh, gə nɛrɛs:* my daughter, oh, forgive me.
[76] *ɛsh:* donkey, ass.
[77] *Asang əsi:* this is what I said.
[78] *Abuʃ*: stupid, idiot.

a while for my mom to process the fact that, "OK. So, (name) is gay, and he's not going to marry a woman, and he's not going to–" It took her about a good year, I would say, to process the fact that, "(name) is not going to get married, and have that family and lifestyle." And she– and once she processed it, then she was like, "What hurt me most," she said, "was the fact that you kept it from me all this time." And I said– and because we're so close, then I was like, "Mom, because I didn't want to disappoint you. And I didn't want you– I didn't think that you'd be the parent that was going to be like, "I have no son," thing. "I'm disowning you." I knew that that wouldn't be the case. I wasn't fearful of rejection; I was fearful of breaking your heart and disappointing what you probably envisioned for me from the days where I was a baby, crawling." You know what I mean? I said, "It wasn't fear of rejection; it was not wanting to hurt you." And I think she understood, later on. And I said– plus, I said, "I needed to come to terms with it on my own, and be OK with it, because I suppressed it for so long. And I needed to be stronger, for me to be able to sit down with you and be like, "This is what it is, guys. Take it or leave it. This is what makes me happy, and this– and ultimately, what you want for your kids is happiness. And I'm telling you, I'm being happy, and I'm being genuine with myself, as opposed to marrying a woman, and lusting after men, and having children with this woman, and living a double life is not even fair for the woman." I said, "If you want your son to be happy and genuine, then you guys– this is it." And, she got it. And she was very cool, and she was like, "Look, I know there's a lot of drugs, and AIDS, and all this shit. And just promise me you're not going to be unsafe." And I go, "Mom, it's your upbringing. You didn't raise a whore." Of course not. There's– I shouldn't say that, but I go, "It's your upbringing. I'm not going to have unprotected sex and do drugs. Whether I'm gay or straight, it's not in my makeup." That was that. My dad– then, my mom is like– oh, all the gays come over, and so she's now the big– all my friends love her, because she's always been very cool and liberal. But once she processed that I was gay, she's like, "Awesome." She embraced all my gay friends, especially my gay Armenian friends. And she adores my husband. She flew out for my wedding. And so, that's my mom. And then, my dad processed it, in the beginning, much easier than my mom did, believe it or not. But I had a boyfriend at the time, or maybe a– right around that time, and my dad's wife kept saying, "Let's go out to dinner, the four of us." I was like, "Yes," and I would follow up, and it wasn't happening. And then finally, one day, she's like, "Your dad's totally OK with you being gay, but he's not ready to see you with your boyfriend yet." I'm like, "No problem. Whenever he's ready, give me a call." Because I've never believed in shoving shit down people's throats. Whenever they're processed and ready. And I tell all my gay friends, "When you guys are coming out to your family or loved ones, it's not about dumping it on them and being like, 'Later. Deal with it.'" You need to help them process it. It all depends, see, there's different circumstances– for example, there's a situation where your parents find out that you're gay, and you're not even ready to come out, or deal with it with them. And then, there's the, "OK. Let's sit down, Mom and Dad. I have to talk to you guys." But when you want to sit down and talk to them, it's not about you completely. It's not about you dumping shit on them, and being like, "Uff. I'm done. Let them fucking deal with it. It's their issue." No! You need to help them, especially if they come from a different culture and a different school of thought. You need to kind of hold their hand and understand they're not– that– (pause) And it's selfish, on our part, in my opinion. It's like, it's not just telling them and saying, "Hi. Goodbye. Deal with it." You need– (pause) There's a lot of ignorance in a lot of Armenian families, especially, where they think, "Does that mean that you like to dress up as a woman? Does that mean that you're a pedophile? Does that mean"– there's a lot of ignorance. You know what I'm saying? And not that there's something

wrong with wanting to dress up like a woman, if that's your deal, but you need to explain to them. For example, with my father, I'm like, "OK. But what's the issue?" I said, "When he's ready, let me know." She goes, "OK." I think it was visualizing his son sexually with the guy who's next to him. I think it was– he thought that my boyfriend at the time was very possibly typical feminine and flamboyant. And it was like, "I can't probably sit through a whole hour dinner and be like, 'Oh my God, so tell me about yourself'" (*feminine voice*). That's what he was thinking, because of how we're portrayed on television, or whatever– in media, and stuff. So, what happened was my cousin got married and said– this was around that time– I'm talking back in '04, '05, '06– and my cousin was like, "I want you to bring your boyfriend," because we had socialized, and she really liked him. And I did, and my dad met him at that wedding. And my boyfriend at the time was 6'3", buff, who looks more masculine than my own father, probably, physically, and wasn't particularly effeminate, or anything like that. And my dad comes up to me– he goes, "I really liked your boyfriend. Not what I was envisioning." I'm like– Yeah, I said, "Dad, Not everybody's what you expect from a typical gay person whatever." And so, he was good after that.

Do you think your boyfriend's masculine appearance played a role?

Yes. But we, as kids, are trained to turn on the masculinity when we have to, and to turn it on or off when we have to. [I read] this interesting book- It's a book written by a gay psychologist or psychiatrist– I'm not sure– and it explains a lot of the shame that we grow up with, and the lack of acceptance, growing up, and how we sort of alter our behavior pretty much so that we get accepted. The whole bottom line is fear of rejection, fear of whatever's effeminate. And so, it explains a lot of the superficial sort of attributes that we, as gay men, develop, growing up. It masks some of the other issues. And so, it's like, "If I was never accepted, then let me be known for being rich and having the most exquisite taste. Let me have the best gym body." You know what I mean? "Let me have the best designer" because it's a way of acceptance. Anyways, we're getting all over the place. Basically, to answer your question, that's my experience with my mom and dad. And they're both very happy that, at age 40, I'm married, now, to an amazing guy. I'm settled. And ultimately, they just want their kids to be settled, and have a good companion, so that when they're not here, one day, they know that I have somebody next to me that I'm aging with, and that we love each other, and we're there for each other… And then, gradually–the coming out process, for me, was very selective in who I wanted to say what to, and at what point. When I felt comfortable with that person being able to grasp it, and develop it, and understand it, I would come out to them. But what happened was, ultimately, when I came out to my parents and my brother– I've never come out to somebody and somebody said, "That's fucking gross. I don't accept you." I've never ever had a homophobic response to me coming out to anybody.

Age: Early 30's
Gender: Man
Sexuality: Gay

I came out when I was 19 to hurt my brother's feelings. I knew I was gay forever but I was in denial. I used to pray to God to not make me gay. I was suicidal for a while. I remember sitting in the bathtub with my dad's scissors. I wanted to cut myself but I didn't because I didn't want to hurt my sister or my mom. But I was kind of teetering on like "I think I'm gay, I think I'm bi- da da da". And I told a coworker who I had gotten close to that I think I might be bisexual. And she's like, "Well, do you like boys?" I'm like, "Yes." She's like, "Do you like girls?" I'm like,

"No." She's like, "Then you're gay." I'm like, "OK, I'm gay." But I was sitting at home and my brother and I had stopped hanging out. He'd gotten mean to me and his friends were assholes and my brother hated my taste of music. And he's treating me like shit so we just weren't talking. He still complained that we don't hang out anymore, we don't talk anymore. "What's up?" like, I'm sitting at home, it's my birthday, and I'm sad because I have no friends. I have no one to hang out with. And I'm just like "my life sucks." And my brother– we were watching something on TV and I struck a conversation with my brother and my brother and I start talking, debating this topic on fucking science or whatever. And my brother goes, "You know what? Just shut up. Shut up." And I go, "You're such a fucking hypocrite. You say we don't talk anymore but when we talk–" He's like, "You know why? Because when you start talking you sound like a faggot." We start fighting, which leads into this whole thing of like, "You're my brother, I love you, when you get cut, I get cut, yada, yada, yada," at which point I had my feelings hurt because– and so I say, "That's not true. You don't love me. I am a faggot." He goes, "What?" I'm like, "That's right bitch, I'm a faggot." I sob. He storms out. And he comes back, to punch me, hours later – to punch me. He stops. He punches me a few days later. But…He starts crying and he goes– and we get into this whole thing about like– and he goes, "You know when I said, you get cut when I get cut, that means when you get fucked in the ass, I get fucked in the ass" (laughs). I was like, "I don't think it works that way" (funny voice). I was like, "Don't tell mom. Please don't tell mom." I go to work. I come back at night. There's a plume of smoke in my house. My mom is sitting there like this with her cigarette… She goes, "նստի[79]." And it was weeks and weeks of fights – I wasn't allowed to talk to my sister because I would make her into a lesbian… My brother moved out of the room because my brother and I shared a room and my mom and sister shared a room. My brother moved out of the room because he was afraid I would look at him. My mother said she was going to take me to an exorcist, psychotherapist, priest, and others… but she hadn't graduated yet. So, I couldn't move out at this point. If I came home an hour late from work, she'd say "Where were you?" Big deals, big fights. I'm like "I'm a– yeah, I support you. I support you financially. And I'm keeping this family afloat. Why are you treating me like shit?" That was the big thing.

Before you came out, was your mom strict about being late?

She was. She was controlling. She was controlling but not in a horrible way.

And like, my sister once– I wasn't allowed to talk to her so I snuck into her room and she was sleeping. I was watching her sleep because I'm overly dramatic. And she wakes up and I go, "Hi." She goes, "What the fuck is going on?"

How old was she?

Well, I was 19, so she was 14. I was like, "I can't tell you." She goes, "Are you gay?" I go– and she goes, "Oh my God, I'm just kidding." I'm like, "No, I'm gay." She goes, "OK. Now everything makes sense." She gave me a hug, she gives me a kiss. She goes, "I love you." I go, "I love you too." She goes back to sleep. Like, it was so easy with her. She's like, "duh." Like, seriously! Like, duh! She said it. She regretted it that she didn't want to hurt my feelings. And then when I said "Yeah," she goes, "OK, good." It just worked. It just worked. It was perfect. It was the easiest coming out. She's the one who said "Are you gay?" I'm like, "Yeah." So we talked in secret after that.

[79] Nsti: sit [down].

So, I wait for my mom to graduate. The moment she got a job, I left, which felt like a huge abandonment. Maybe it was, yeah. But, sorry, I couldn't live like that. You know what I mean? It was just so– just stopped talking to me in general. But it was– anytime we did talk it was a fight. It was just, it was awful. Um, my brother slept on the couch all the time. My brother stopped talking to me all together. My mom talked to me but… it was never good. My brother, I felt abandoned by my brother. And yes, I know they felt like it was a betrayal, me moving out. Now they know in hindsight that it was the best thing I could have done, because otherwise we wouldn't have a relationship. My mother realized she wasn't ready to lose a child. That's why she said "I want to have–" she called me and said "I want to have a relationship with you but I can't deal with the gay stuff so let's– can we not talk about that?" Done. We have a relationship, just no gay stuff. Done. Until one day she came up and said, "I'm ready to hear about your dating life." And I said, "What can I say? boys are stupid." Um, my brother though– and look, I had friends. I had Armenian friends, from my– because of my brother's friends but they all stopped talking to me and my brother stopped. I didn't talk to him for years. I would come over and wouldn't talk to him. For years, he just ignored me. And I was so hurt by that. I still– it's fucked up because I'm– I felt abandoned by him completely.

Age: Late 20's
Gender: Man
Sexuality: Gay

Who did you come out to first?
When I first came out to myself, it was probably a week before my birthday. So right before 21. Around 21. And then, um, yeah. All around that time. Who did I first come out to? Um. I want to say (name), who's that guy that I was like head over heels in love with. And I was in college. Who's also gay. And who had moved out from the L.A. area to go to college. And who was like– "Oh my God, it can be done." Um. I think I came out to him first. So funny. There was a time when all this stuff was so important to me that I memorized it. I was like, "Oh, I know who I first came out to, I know how it happened…" But I first came out I think to my friend who was also a gay Armenian male. Second generation. He was supportive. Nobody was unsupportive. There was nobody who was not supportive. I guess it's a self-selective thing. I don't think I came out to anybody [who wouldn't have been supportive] but I also don't think that I knew anybody or that I knew anybody who I was interested in coming out to who would be [unsupportive]… I probably [came out to] more female [friends] because of my – that's how my friends – friendship networks are skewed. Skewed more towards female friends… So when I came out… On the weekend I went back home and I told mom and dad, "I have to talk to you," and I, um, came out to them like a week after I came out to myself… I came home for the weekend, kind of dropped the bomb… I learned that they were actually more conservative than I would've given them credit for. They were just withholding it because they– like an example of that was when I came out– one of the first things I think he asked was, "Have you told anybody?" And I was like, "Well yeah." Like, you know. Um. And he was like, "Well, you know, you don't need to do that." I was like, "Um." But he wasn't– I mean they were never hostile. Ever. They were never hostile. My mom was a little angry. Like my mom resented it I think a little bit. But they were traditional in the sense that people will talk and people will gossip and people will badmouth you and people will use it against you. So, there was a little bit of fear and there was a little bit of discomfort. Not– there was a lot of discomfort. I think it was emotionally a lot harder on my dad

than he ever told me. My mom told me after he passed away, which was really odd because I would've expected that they would've been able to talk to me about it. But because I had moved out of the house to go to (university), I was living on campus, and then I was away for the entire summer for (travel abroad). And then I was (travelling). And so I came out when– in the Fall of when I moved out to (university). And then, it was never really talked about. I – I just, I moved back. So yeah, it's all kind of intertwined. Like dad getting sick and he passed away after I graduated. Me coming out, him getting sick… So, he lived two years after I came out. But those two years were kind of like– I mean I wouldn't– I wouldn't do things differently if I got a chance. I had to come out to them. It was like a very deceptive– I– to me, the notion of being gay and being out and not having your parents know. Like I could never… And I never got the impression from either of them that coming out would be unsafe. In any way. Like I know that no matter what happened, coming out to them was the right thing to do because they would never do anything that would jeopardize my relationship with them. But I learned way after the fact that it– dad took it very, very, very, very– he saw it as a moral failure on his part as a father. That like he wasn't around enough. Like he– he's like, "Oh, maybe I should've–" he told my mom things like, "I should've taken him fishing." Homeboy never fished. Like he never went fishing. He spoke with his coworkers at work or something. I don't know what happened. But he spent a lot of time with me, and he was always a great father. Like for his ability, like the fact that he worked so much out of the house to make ends meet. But he was still always great. Like he taught me so many things about crafts and how to do things with wood and like how to fix the breaks on your car. You know, typical dad stuff. He still did a lot of great things… He actually, one of the things he asked me when I came out was, "Do you– Are you like a top or a bottom?" And this was before I even knew the answer for myself because I hadn't been doing anything. But, um, the reason– And he asked because he was very concerned for my well-being. Because he had a coworker who had been beat up because, um, his coworker was much older, came from a different generation. Much older than I. But he said how at closing one day at work, like his coworker's partner came to pick him up and he saw how abusive they were. And he knew that the other guy was like the top or whatever. And like his coworker was the bottom. And yeah, he, because he saw that, before he even met the partner, he noticed some days his coworker would arrive to work bruised or battered, or like beat up or whatever. And he was very submissive and would not stand up for himself, and he didn't want me to be that way. And his expectation was that, "Oh, you know, if you're gay and if you're a bottom, then that's how you are." And so, that's why he asked.

How did you answer?

I– um, I don't think I answered. I think my sister interjected. My sister just was like, totally defensive. Like, that's none of your business or whatever. So, I didn't realize that that's why he asked the way he asked in the interaction, like when we were talking. I learned that that's how– why he was asking way after… Yeah, when I came out… I was like, all right, "I need to have a talk with you guys". It was Friday night. I sat them both down. Like, I actually went about it in such a serious, like, executive business way that they thought that I had cancer. Because I started off talking about it like, "OK, I need to talk to you about something". I actually brought it up in the context of– I started the entire conversation off by telling them that I was not going to get married. I was not going to have kids. I was not going to have a family... I was not going to have, you know, wife, kids, family, da-da-da, marriage, wedding. And they all thought that I had some kind of a reproductive dysfunction. Like, my mom's like, "we thought you went to the doctor and you got diagnosed with like infertility or something. Like, that's why you're not going to

have it." And so then, because for me it was a very serious topic. That's why. And I wasn't trying to be dramatic. I was just really gripped by the severity and this, like, seriousness of the subject matter. But then I just told them– I don't remember. I don't remember. I think it's like– No, I don't remember. Oh, I think I beat around the bush until they were both like, well, it sounds like what you're saying is this… To be very honest, I think it's repressed. It was such a severely difficult conversation to have that I probably repressed it somehow. I mean I remember it was a very– like that entire week before I did it, at school when I was at my apartment when I was on campus, when I was in class, when I was with friends… That entire time– I can't verbalize the gravity that this topic occupied– with which it occupied my mind and my consciousness, that entire week. Like, it was front and center. At the forefront of my mind – my thinking. All my thoughts were– I went from never thinking about being gay or addressing my sexuality to completely going full-blown, "OK, I have to come out to Mom and Dad, I have to tell everybody." Whereas in the meanwhile, I had friends who had been secretly dating guys and who had had a gay support system and gay– I went from never thinking about being gay because it was such an obvious taboo. Like, it was never acceptable growing up. I never even seriously thought about it all through high school. I knew the attraction was there, but I never, ever acted on it. Um. And so it went from– you know, that's where the personality comes in, I think. Because at the same time I had friends who were wearing makeup to school and whose parents had kicked them out of the house or they had gone– caught having sex with guys, places where they shouldn't be doing things. And I remember thinking like, "OK, crazy, psycho." Like pathological, because it was so, so much conflict. There was so much conflict, you know? And I never even thought about addressing it until college. I never even thought about– I was so sheltered from my own inherent right to be happy with somebody. Be it a guy or a girl. I felt like– I wasn't thinking. I was just thinking of school. Like, my 20s– the time when people are like having sex and like being partner– you know, boyfriend and girlfriend, I was not doing that. I was thinking, "OK, school. How do I do in school?" That was my priority. Um. So I didn't really start thinking about that stuff until college. And then once I did, I was like, all right, if you're gay and your parents don't know, [then] you're not gay… I had friends who were like– I was like, "How could you do that?" Like for me it was a cowar– "Don't be a fucking coward." It was like, I couldn't– I couldn't live with my– I couldn't live with that part of it. And the funny thing is, if you had asked me a week prior to that realization, I would've not had any idea. I would've had no– it was almost biological. It was like the switch went off in my head and I just went from– I mean I didn't not like gay people before. I just probably had no moral or ethical kind of opinion on whether or not people should be coming out. I mean I probably didn't think about it. And as soon as I realized, "OK, yeah, you are gay, you are entitled to call yourself that. That's OK. You have these privilege–" Like it's an inherent, human right that nobody ever communicated to me… So, I had this one really good friend, who I was head over heels in love with. Also Armenian and also gay. Whose partner is not Armenian. Who was gay for a very long time before I was. All throughout college. He went to school outside of L.A. But I wasn't out to him. And I wasn't out. I wasn't out, period. And I just kind of like, passively quietly fascinated by his ability to be so comfortable with his own sexuality when I was in college. Because even up until a week before I came out, I was talking about girls. You know? That's how closeted I– I mean I was so personally closeted. But at the same time, I always knew that I was attracted to guys sexually. And I just never reconciled that kind of duality or that kind of inconsistency… But once I realized that I was going to come out, not telling my parents was– I mean for me it was like testing yourself. It was like, "OK, well, if you're out, are you out to your parents? If

you're not out to your parents, you're not gay." Because it was kind of like, "you have to stand up for it and you have to talk about it, and you have to be able to defend it." Otherwise it's not real. It's like you're hiding something. And my dad put me to that test when I came out, he was like, "Well, how do you know if you're gay if you haven't been with a woman?" And that was the first time we ever actually talked about– my partnership or whatever. It was like, "Well, have you had a sex with a woman? Have you been with a woman?" And now that I think about it, I don't know how we talked about this, because he didn't– he wouldn't have that kind of a conversation with me in English. But when I think about the Armenian words he used, I don't know what they were… My sister was eavesdropping. She was busy in her room "working," quote-unquote. But she was literally on the side of the hallway… I think my sister said something like, "Well, have you ever been with a man? How do you know you're not gay?" You know, like my sister. So, that was that. So, my family got over it, I guess, eventually.

Age: Early 20's
Gender: Woman
Sexuality: Queer

When did you come out?
It's been about– I think it's actually been four months to the dot.
Who did you come out to first?
My best friend.
Armenian?
No, she wasn't.
How was that experience?
It was good. It was– what's the word I'm looking for? It was liberating. I had thought about it for a while because I've been thinking about all this stuff in my head and I just really need someone to talk to, and then yeah, I came out to my best friend.
Who else did you come out to?
So first I came out to my best friend. And then I came out to my sister.
How was that experience?
It was good. Both of them were not very surprised. They were just like "OK". Actually a lot of my friends weren't surprised. They were like, "Yeah, makes sense" kind of thing. It was good. So my sister and I– we have a very interesting relationship. It's like we're super close but then if we know a topic might be a little uncomfortable we almost don't talk about it too much. If we have to, we will. It's just– and it wasn't super uncomfortable, which I thought was cool because I thought it was going to be. It was cool. She was asking me questions and yeah. I was like, "That's it?" I'm like, "Are you surprised?" She goes, "There are more surprising things you could tell me". I'm like "OK". Then when I came out to my friend she was just like, "I knew it". I was like "Oh God."… And then when I talked to them after about it again they were kind of like– they were kind of worried because they're like, "I don't know if I reacted okay. I don't know what I'm supposed to say. Did I say the right things? Did I–" … And then one of my Armenian friends– she's one of the only Armenians that I talk to at (university), she actually does identify as LGBT as well so she was super– she's someone– it's good to– she gets it. She's been someone that I can really talk to because she kind of gets it a little bit more than other people. Just my queer friends in general it's been a little bit more– it's just been comforting to have them to talk to.

Have you come out to your mom or brother?
Not yet. I don't know… In terms of family it's just my sister. A lot of my good friends know just because I'm slowly becoming more comfortable just talking about it. My friends are really all chill so it's not that many people I guess but it's a decent amount of people.
Why haven't you come out to your mom? Or your brother?
I feel like my brother wouldn't really – he'll be like "OK, whatever." He wouldn't really care. He'd be like, "Oh, your life is your life"… My mom– I think about this a lot also– I don't know how she would react and that scares me a lot because it could literally go either way… I just really don't know how she would react because I love– my mom is probably the most important person in my life and she's just been through so much and she just does so much for me that I don't ever want to do something else that might add onto her like, her like– I don't know. And I hate how this is potentially a burden... I hate that. But also it's like– I don't know. But yeah, I do try to test the waters with her.
Has she made comments?
I know she voted no on Prop 8. I was pretty young. I think my dad voted no also. I think he was around still. Yeah 2008. Yeah, I think he voted no as well. Then I'll bring up stuff like what happened in Armenia a few months ago[80]. I bring that up and she'll be like that's ridiculous kind of thing or she'd be like– but then sometimes she'll say something that's kind of like– she'll be like, "they don't bother me so let them do them…" That's just– it's better than nothing I guess but then also it's like, "You're okay with them as long as they don't bother you?"… I'll bring up stuff like that or I'll– not even just about that but just about other stuff in general. I'll be like "Mom, the difference between sex and gender…" I'll try to talk to her about that. She'll get it one day and then completely forget about it the next… Yeah I just try to keep it as less awkward as possible. I don't know. Yeah I really don't know how she would react at all. The thing is I really think she would take it better than the rest of my family. I really, really do, which is interesting because she is the oldest one from her side. But, I don't know. Hopefully one day… But I feel like I wouldn't until I was really serious with someone and I'd have to tell her.
Anything else you want to share about coming out?
Yeah so it was very liberating and then after– I guess it was also difficult. The weeks after that I did have a lot of mental health issues because of it. I was very– a lot of anxiety and just. It was– I don't know. It was something– I've struggled with it a lot, almost more than before I was out. Yeah it's an, "Oh, fuck" thing… I guess one thing that I have experienced a lot in the last four months is a lot of self-doubt and just having to try to figure out the label, whatever and I'm just like– and it's very up and down always emotionally and all that other stuff. And it's been so much more difficult than I thought it would be. But then also I have some other times where I'm like, no this is– I finally am actually myself. I don't know… And it's also like– [the] process of it. It scared me because I always think about how this process would have been so much more difficult if I was at home and it probably wouldn't have happened if I was living at home… It just feels shitty that my– I just still don't feel comfortable telling my best friends. And I have people at (university) who I'm not as close to– my best friends who know and then my best friends who are like– they just– they're very apathetic, sometimes super problematic people, but I still love them, but I don't know how they would take it or react, or they'd say some stupid shit… I feel like when I'm just in my head it's a lot scarier than said out loud. It's so scary in my head and it shouldn't be! When I'm just thinking in my head there's a lot more what ifs. I really just– I don't– I really don't know how my mom would ever– I don't know. We watch *Grey's*

[80] Referring to the firebombing of DIY. See: Footnote 109.

Anatomy and she'll ask the question all the time, "Oh, is she lesbian too?" about the lesbians, like, "Is she a lesbian now?" I'll be like, "Yeah. Okay."

I remember in high school making myself not think the way that I did… I would try not– I would not let myself think about not heterosexual things. Yeah and even– I was just as an individual I was like, "Yeah, I'm down for gay marriage. I'm okay with it. If I was gay, I would totally come out" (laughs). I was queer the whole time and I didn't come out, so what was I thinking?

Age: Early 20's
Gender: Man
Sexuality: Gay

I first came out to myself when I was 18 years old, right out of high school. I had a girlfriend, and I was in a very unhappy relationship and it completely sucked, and not for the reasons that she was a certain way or I was a certain way, but because she would want to have sex and I would just be like, "not today" (laughs). So, after that was done, I had– in high school, I basically developed a lot of intense feelings towards my male best friend, Armenian, straight, questionably straight (laughs). And we didn't do anything that counts as anything, but I was definitely super in love with him and infatuated with him but I didn't put a name or label on it, although whenever watching porn, I would just go to gay porn, but I didn't put any labels on myself, not consciously, because I just didn't think about it… But then after that, I was reborn, I always say, but it has this strange religious connotation to it too, because I was a strict religious person as hypocritical as they can be, and I would do everything but then I would repent my sins. But whenever I was trying to come to terms with my own sexuality… Basically– I started watching *Glee*, and for the first time, I was seeing these characters that are gay, that looked really cute, dressed really cute, were interested in music, in arts, in fashion, and all of these things, which I was interested in, but I never acted on it. And *Glee* has this– although homonormative, but very good picture of how it's okay to be gay, basically. And I was like, "You know what?" I was praying one night, and I was just like, "There is nothing, there is no secrets between you and me, God. You know I tried being with women. I tried doing everything that I could, but I just can't." And at the time, it was just kind of like, "You made me this way, so deal with it, kind of" (laughs). And that was really enough for me to come out to myself, so I came out to myself. And then the orange cardigan situation[81], and it was a wonderful time in my life, honestly, so amazing, and even though I was completely aware of the fact that, if anybody else knows about this, it's not going to look pretty, it was still amazing. So I don't know. That has always made me wonder if this secretiveness around being queer has a lot to do with being queer. Once everything is out there, it's like it doesn't feel as exciting. It's just kind of like, "OK, now my life is public discussion, and I don't like that either." So anyway– So, I came out to myself, and not a long time later, but a couple months later, I told one of my friends about it. And I would always open with the feelings that I had towards my best friend in high school, and I told her because I

[81] *The Orange Cardigan Story:* So, when I kind of came out to myself, it was like a big awakening, and very big like, "oh, I'm reborn" or whatever. It felt like that, and I kind of – I was like, well, now this means that I can buy clothes that I want… So, I went shopping, and I got an orange cardigan. Now, I just think it's ugly, but back then, I was excited about it, and I would wear it. And my grandma would question it so much, and just like, "oh, careful when you're wearing that orange cardigan outside." And my dad would say, "Why would you wear an orange cardigan?"

just wanted somebody to know. I wanted to see how people would react, and to be honest, it was like something– It gave me an edge in a way (laughs). I also really wanted to talk about it, in an honest way, like this is what I felt towards him. And if you had any misconceptions in high school, just setting things straight right now, like this is why. So I started– So I came out to her, and then I didn't really come out to anyone– and it was a completely positive experience, and I should mention that she, in high school, she was a very progressive person and I always thought she's a lesbian, but she claims that she's not and that's what we're going to go with. Yeah, it was a very positive experience. And then I started being friends with the guy that I was in love with in high school again, and this time around, I kind of suggested like, so, this may be what I'm dealing with. And he was very supportive too, and he was like, "I kind of assumed so." And then he outed me to my perhaps most homophobic friend. So I told him how it's really hard to deal with all of this. And he went to that friend, thinking that this is a decent human being, and he's like "Yo, so (name) is saying this, we should be supportive." And he did not take it well at the time, I think, because he came to me later and he told me, "Can I tell you something?" I'm like, "Yeah." He's like, "(name) was saying this thing about you, and I don't know. He lies a lot, so he's probably lying, but seriously?" And I'm like, "What is he saying?" And he said, "That he thinks that you're gay." And I'm like, "Oh that's so ridiculous." And in my mind, all I'm thinking is that, "Oh, this person outed me. Fuck. I shouldn't have told him." And it wasn't like a year later when I talked to (friend) again, and he told me, "This is what I was trying to do for you." And I'm like, "Grr, too late." But anyway, so I came out to a bunch of friends, eventually everybody. Well, not everybody, still not everybody. Everybody that counts knows now… Mostly female, but that's because I have only female friends really, and their boyfriends know, with whom I'm also friends with. And yeah, it's strange, because a lot of them are just like– a lot of them either try to make awkward dude/bro jokes, that sometimes translate into very homophobic things, but it's like, "OK. Efforts." And then some of them are completely progressive, and they're like, whatever. And I think it came to a point that I just stopped really monitoring who knows and who doesn't know. And that point didn't come until a year and half ago, when I was dating my first boyfriend, so the friend of a family friend of mine, this is explaining very well how Armenians are connected with each other. So, a friend of a family friend of mine went through my Instagram followers. She apparently went through all of them because she found this person, who she assumed was my boyfriend, I guess. She went on his profile, and on his profile, he had pictures of us kissing and stuff, his profile wasn't private. Mine was always private but I never posted anything and I didn't let him tag me in pictures. And once I posted a selfie and he commented something saying, "I'm so lucky" with like a heart, and immediately after I saw that, I just erased it. And then I told him, "What are you doing!?" At the time I was so stupid, and he was like, "I'm so sorry," and stuff like that. I'm like, "You don't need to be sorry, but like it sucks." It still sucks with my current boyfriend, too. But anyway, so she saw those pictures then she told my family friend… And I'm like, "Fuck my life is over"... I'm like, OK, the first priority is to call my family friend, because, family. And I called her and I hadn't talked to her in like a long time and it was really awkward, and I was like, "Hey, so, I believe you've seen dadadada" and she's like, "uh huh…" And I'm like, "Well, I'm not out to my family so I would really appreciate it if you kept it a secret." And she's like, "Do you think I'm dumb? I'm not going to go tell my mom, and she's not going to go tell your mom." I'm like, "OK, just making sure."… And then to my parents and my family I was– my mom found my journal three years ago. This was a year after high school, I was already in college, and somehow I discovered the joys of journaling. And it was really therapeutic, especially because I couldn't

tell anybody about what I was feeling. So I started writing down in this journal about *everything*, literally, that I felt, that I had done with people. But for some reason, even when I was writing the journal, I decided – From the beginning, I decided I'm not going to put down any names in it. It was completely anonymous, everything anonymous… So I got a call from [my mom]. She's like, "What are you doing? Come home." I go home and my mom is only home. My dad's not home and I go to her bedroom and she has my journal in her hands. And I'm like, "Oh God." She's like, "What is this?" I'm like, "Oh, it's a journal." And she's like, "OK, what are the things that are written in here?" And she looks like she's just cried for hours. And she's like, "What's going on?" I'm like, "Well, I have a lot of gay friends in choir, and I'm an English major, and I like writing stories, so they just tell me their stories and I write them down for them." I don't know how I came up with that (laughs), but I'm like it's going to work because it's anonymous. And she's like, "You're just saying that so I'm not going to kill myself." And I'm like, "No, I swear, it's true." She's like, "You swear on my life?" And I'm like, "Yes I do." And from that point on, basically swearing lost its touch too. It really did. Because up till that point, I wouldn't swear, but I swore, and yeah. She was like, "Are you and (name) in a relationship?" And I'm like, "No, mom! What are you saying?" And it was really funny because in high school she would always come up to me like whenever we would hang out and stuff, she'd come up to me and be like, "Is he gay?" and I'm like, "No, mom." And she's like, "Are you sure?" But anyways, so that happened. And then, um, she was like, "Why? You're such a handsome young man. You can have any girl you want. Why are you doing this to yourself? Don't. That's just something we can't deal with. Our religious beliefs don't allow us to deal with it either. So, don't." And I'm like, "OK, whatever, you're being irrelevant." Then she told my dad, and my dad later came to me and he was like, "Mom told me about this, why are you doing this? And I'm like, "Well, the civil rights movement was mostly about African Americans, and now, there's a lot of things happening with gay people, and gay marriage, so I want to do something good." Again, another lie I made it into a whole social issues type of a thing. And he's like, "OK, and so like why is it that people are gay?" and I'm like, at the time, I just grabbed on to a piece of information that I had seen a day before, on YouTube or something, and I gave him some kind of abstract weird explanation about how hormones sometimes don't work out or whatever, like some kind of biological stuff that was probably not accurate. And he's like, "OK, so update me with your research every couple of months" and I'm like "OK, I will" I've never done that. He's never asked. So, that was that. And then since that day on, basically, after that day it was right before my second year in college started. And I was so traumatized on so many levels when that happened, because I felt like whatever progress I had made with myself was just pushed back in the closet. And I was just like I can't deal with this. I need to be doing something about it. So when the school year started, I went to the counselor, and I talked to them about transferring… So I kind of did the application on my own, without even telling [my parents] that I'm doing an application, and a few days before, I'm like, "I'm submitting my applications by the way for universities." And they're like, "What?!" I'm like, "Yeah, I'm done, so I'm just going to go. And I'm dorming." And that was a big deal because in Armenian families, you're not supposed to dorm, for some reason. It's really weird how Americans deal with this and how our parents deal with this like, "Oh my God!"

When I came to (university), it was a majority, like basically everybody was not Armenian that I was associating with, so I didn't hide it from them at all, my sexuality. Like I didn't announce it, but whenever they would ask, I'd be like, "Oh yeah, I'm gay, actually." And it was a very

liberating experience for me. And for the first time, I was like, "Whoa I don't live at home, I can actually date people now without secrets and all of that." So I went on [a dating app], and I met my boyfriend… So, from that point on, I haven't had any coming out experiences, except for this summer, when I decided to tell my mom, actually tell her. It was this summer, and I was home, and I was obviously with my boyfriend that I'm currently with, and um, I hate being at home. I hate living at home. It's horrible. It was the summer that I moved back after not having lived with them for two years, and being completely out of the country for three months while studying abroad. And so here, I came back and it was like a month or a month and a half through my stay at home. And I was just so irritated and my parents started talking to me about some thing, some issue, stupidest thing, and it just blew up in a big argument. And, she was like, "Since the day you've gone to (university) you have lost your connection with us, and it's just sad, and I–" and all of those things, "and I would like to be in your life." And I'm like, "Well if you don't communicate my language, I don't know how you're going to be in my life."… And then my dad left at some point, on a good note, he was just like "OK, I'm going to go." So it was just me and my mom, and I'm like, "It's not my moving to (university) that has put a dent between us mom. It's something that happened a couple years ago when you read my journal. Remember, you read my journal?" And she's like, "What?" and I'm like, "You know what I'm talking about." And she's like, "OK?" And I'm like, "Well that was true. Everything that I wrote in there was true. That was about me, not about everybody else. It was about me." She was kind of dumbfounded for a second, and then she started kind of tearing up, and crying, and like "Why?!" And I'm like, "I don't know why, I just know that that's how it is, and I don't know what to really tell you, except for I've–" And she's like "What happened to you?" And I'm like, "What do you mean?" And after a few minutes, I understood that she was basically building off of the cliché dialogue of "gay men are gay because they were raped as kids." You know how that thing is going on? You know how there's all this pseudoscience about why LGBT people are the way that they are? … Anyway, so I was like, "Nothing happened to me." And she's like, "Why? You can't." And I'm like, "Yes, I can." And she's like, "Are you seeing anybody?" And I didn't say anything. I said, "No," because I thought, "one by one." But at this point, I'm like I should have said it. I haven't still. So, I was like, "No I'm not seeing anybody, but this is how it is." And she's like– there was some talk about like, "Why didn't you say anything about it?" But not in a good way. Like, so, "What have you been up to all this time?" kind of, and I'm like, "I just didn't say anything, because I didn't know if you were still going to love me." And she's like, "What do you mean? You're my son, of course I'm going to love you." And I'm like, "I don't know, it didn't seem like it." And she's like, "No one can know because–" and the most significant part of this was that I basically circled around the whole thing without mentioning the word "gay" and it was like, "I am", "Oh, you are?", "Yes I am", "Oh, why?", "Because I don't know." And it was very just like– I don't know. And, "No one can know about this, because they're going to laugh at me. They're going to laugh at you. And I will kill them if they laugh at you." And I'm like, "I'm not telling anybody mom, but I wanted to share it with you, because you're my mom." She cried some more, and she was like, "My heart–" this doesn't really translate into English, but she's like, "սիրտս մեծ ա[82]" And like, "I can love a great deal." And then I realized what had just happened, and I'm like, "OK. I'm going to go." She's like "OK." So I left, and I went to my best friend's, and I didn't go to my boyfriend, and precisely one of the biggest reasons why I didn't go to my boyfriend is because he's White. Because he's not

[82] *Sirtəs mɛdz a:* my heart is big.

Armenian, he doesn't understand how it is, he wouldn't know what to say to me... For example, if I went to (friend) and she is a cultural minority, racial minority, and she would probably give me a better answer or a better response, and she did. Whereas like, if you tell a white person, it's kind of like– Well, to be honest, it's very hard to find white guys who are in the closet nowadays. Especially my age. [My boyfriend] has been wonderful and super understanding, but like understanding for the sake of "I love you so I'm going to understand it." Not actually understanding what it's like. I had a much more blown up argument with my ex-boyfriend about this, when he was kind of like, "Why aren't you coming out to your parents?" And I was listing all these reasons. And to him, it was all bullshit. And he had an Indian roommate, who was not gay, and he caught him and he was like, "(name), you have no idea what it's like. You don't know how to– you haven't been in the same position, you're White and it's different, so whenever he says it's different, it's different. Not as an excuse of I don't want to try for this, but there are so many different layers of so many different disappointments and so many different coming outs and everything else."[83] And it's like, argh– So, I went to my friend, and they were like "here, here." (laughs) They're like, "We're very proud of you. We didn't see this coming at all, you have made the biggest change in your life that you can." And I'm like, "You think so? It doesn't feel like it." They're like, "Yeah, you have." And I'm like, "OK." But I hadn't. Because I went home, they were sleeping, and I just really needed some kind of reassurance from my mom that things are still OK. But they were sleeping, and the next morning, I woke up, and they were all gone. They came home midday and it was their wedding anniversary, so nice gift, I guess (laughs). But everything was completely fine again. It's not fine, as in superficially fine. Like completely ignored, neglected the issue that we're talking about. "So, mom, what does this mean? If I bring my boyfriend home, are you going to be okay with it? What if I told you I'm going to a gay club tonight? Are you going to be okay with that? If I watch Caitlyn Jenner's documentary[84], are you going to be okay with that? Because you were not okay with it until yesterday." So, yeah. And since that day on, there has not been a single mention. Anything.

Do you know if she told your dad?

I don't know. All of my friends are like, she probably told your dad. But it's like, he was way too normal. I don't know. But then again it's because it's my dad, and he doesn't talk much, there's a chance, but I don't know. So in those ways, coming out hasn't made any impact on my life.[85] I still don't talk about (name) as my boyfriend, I'm still private.

Age: Early 20's
Gender: Man
Sexuality: Gay

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[83] The narrator felt more comfortable turning to a straight person of an ethnic minority than a gay person, in this case his boyfriend, of a majority group. Therefore, for LGBQ Armenians, a straight Armenian friend can be a better person to turn to for family issues than non-Armenian majority group LGBTQ members, who will not understand the cultural references that are at play. This topic is further discussed in the *Therapy Experiences* section.

[84] Referring to *I Am Cait*, a documentary series chronicling the life of Caitlyn Jenner, a television personality and retired Olympian, after her gender transition.

[85] Until the parents acknowledge their sexual identities, participants do not feel complete in their coming out, because they end up still living double lives.

I first began coming out when I was 17, um, towards the end of high school. So just before graduation, I started telling a couple of really close friends that I trusted.

Were they Armenian?

Yes.

From School?

Yes… Girls, no guys. In high school, my closest friends were girls and I hung out almost exclusively with girls. I was friendly with all of the guys, but they weren't, I wasn't close with any males… It was good. I remember I came out to 4 people, like, before graduation, I remember who they are, all of them were positive conversations… Some of them were not surprised, um, they had their suspicions or they thought about it before. I remember the first time I ever told anyone that I was gay, I was having an anxiety attack. I was watching *The Real World*, and there was a person in the house who was gay and he was struggling with coming out to his mom, and at that point I was almost 18, I had never spoken to anyone about this and I guess watching that triggered something in me and I started having an anxiety attack and I was like, "I have to tell someone." So I called my friend at like midnight, I woke her up, and then I was like, "I have to, tomorrow, I'm going to tell you something." And she was like, "You woke me up to tell me that you're going to tell me something tomorrow? No, you're going to tell me now" (laughs). So I told her over the phone, in the dark, I remember, in my bedroom. Um, and just like– it just– it was just like… I told her and I think I felt some relief, but I remember being so anxious, like so scared, because even though it felt good to tell someone, someone knew now, and there's no real guarantee that it's going to stay, that that person was going to keep it to themselves. And so I was really nervous and anxious, I skipped school the next day. I was like, "I don't want to be in school in case she told someone else or people magically know." So, I had a car, so I dropped my brother off and I just left (laughs). And then, yeah, I came out to 3 other people before graduation and all sort of like planned how I was going to do it. Um, they all went well.

And then I came to (university) and I was, coming out was so new to me, I'd never, it was all so new, I didn't know how to do it– I didn't– I would feel like I was so awkward the first couple of times at university, trying to communicate to people that I'm gay or it's like, "How do I communicate it? When is a good time? You know, do I make a joke out of it? Do I say it? Do I make it this serious conversation?" I was meeting kids who had been out for years and were so comfortable in their own skin and confident in who they were, and I was like, "Fuck, I'm so behind." And there are so many things that I need to learn about myself and that I just– no one had ever taught me those things, those things don't exist where I come from. Those conversations never happened where I came from so it was all so new to me. So it's like, I always say that, like my first year, year and a half, I was figuring it out, like, how, you know, what is being gay mean to me? Where does it fit into my life? How important is it? Um, and then by the end like junior/senior year I was fine, and I could casually mention that I'm gay in a conversation, and it's not a big deal. And then also I realized in an atmosphere like this, no one cares, and I'm like, "Wow, this is so crazy!"

So, I came out to my dad in July, a couple of months ago. I'm doing it, I did it. I always joked that I was going to wait to come out to my dad until the rest of my Armenian family was dead. It's not just the immediate home, it's the grandma, the aunts, oh God… It's like, and, I've heard other gay Armenians say that. Like, I'm just like, "They don't need to know, let them die…" That's what I would always, that was the joke. It was a joke, but also not really a joke, there was

some truth to it. Um, and I would also say that the day I came out to my dad would be the day I tell him about my tattoo, just get it all out and done, if you're going to be upset, really upset, let's just get it all out. Even though we've never talked about sexuality, I knew that being gay was a *big*– not a good thing, but I told him because I am getting more and more involved in LGBTQ issues within the community… Many people knew before my dad and it was sort of like a debate that I had to have, you know, I think I could have kept it from him for a really long time… But it was just a question of, "Do I want him to find out from me or from someone else? Do I want to get a phone call from my dad one day out of nowhere where I have no control over the conversation or the situation? And he's freaking out and asking me if I'm gay?"… I also just– because I feel so passionate about these issues, and I have so much energy, and I really want to bring all of these things out of the closet, in the community in general, and bring them out into the line and put them on the table, and make everyone face them, and make everyone start having a conversation about these things, I didn't want to lie. I didn't want to constantly have to lie about what I was doing, where I was going, who I was hanging out with. Even things like posting on Facebook, I was friends with two of my Armenian aunts on Facebook and every time I post something, even if it's not LGBT related, I always have to check the privacy settings because I just don't want them to know. And at one point, in college, I would post something and one of my uncles would comment on everything, but he was also really nosy and wanted to, like, argue with me, and I was like, "No, no, no, no, I don't want to do this." So, block. I didn't want to do that anymore, I didn't want anything to stop me, I didn't want to have to hit these little road blocks that things that would slow me down. So I was just like, I just need to tell him, get it done, so I can move forward and not have anything holding me back. So, I did it. And also, I also wouldn't have felt good, you know, advocating for LGBTQ people and advocating LGBTQ issues if I was still in the closet. Because I think visibility in our community is a *huge* issue. There's no visibility for LGBTQ people, there are lots of people in the closet who are too scared to come out and if I'm going to try and create spaces or environments in our community where people can be out and open, I have to be out. I have to sort of set the bar, set the standard. It just wouldn't have felt right. It's also like, if I'm having this conversation with someone who's in the closet, they could just say, "Well you're not out, so why…? So, I came out to my dad in July. My dad is pretty assimilated into American culture. He listens to country music. He's a right-wing Republican. So yeah, I just told him, and I was a lot more confident than I thought I was going to be. I didn't cry, I thought I was going to cry the whole time. But I walked in, I wasn't nervous, but I just said it. I was like, "I want to tell you something, I want you to hear it from me and not from someone else, because you're eventually going to find out, I can't keep it from you forever." And I was just like "պապ[86], I'm gay." And he freaked out. He was like, "What?! How did this happen?" I was shocked by that question, I was like, "Oh, you're really ignorant." Like "You really don't know anything about this stuff." I was like, "What do you mean how did this happen? It didn't happen per se, like it wasn't something that happened and then (name) was straight before and then he became gay." And then the conversation was so interesting, he was asking me questions and it was really revealing that the educational gap and also the generational, it really highlighted how big that gap is, he asked me, "Is your brother gay?" and I was like, "No, just because one sibling is gay doesn't mean the other one's gay," "Do you think maybe me and your mom divorcing caused this?" I was like, "No, պապ[87], social science research has proven–" I told him, I was like, "Divorced parents don't make a person gay, having

[86] *bab* – dad.
[87] *bab* – dad.

an absent father doesn't make a person gay, having an overbearing mother doesn't make a person gay, being sexually abused does not make a person gay, they've disproven all of those myths." And he was like, "Really?" And I was like, "Yes, պապ[88], they teach these things, I learned these things in school." And then he also said, he was like, "Well, maybe if we had known when you were younger we could have taken you to someone to change you." And I was like "No! No, պապ[89], you can't change this. You can't change a person's sexuality, and like people kill themselves, people take their little children– take their own lives, because of those types of things that they're parents put them through." And he was like, "Really? You can't change this?", and I was like, "No, պապ[90], these things don't change, and I was like, "Can you change your sexuality? Do you think you can?"… And so, it was kind of anti-climactic, I thought that it was going to bring us closer, because me and my dad aren't very close to begin with, at all, and in the conversation, I asked him, I was like, "պապ[91], what do you really know about me? like OK, now you know this about me, but you really don't know a lot about me, if I'm being completely honest," and I asked him, "Can you describe (own name)? can you tell someone else who (own name) is? What type of person he is? What he likes? What his interests are? His personality? Can you do that for me?" and he was like, "Well, you had that job at (company name), so that's what you did, that was your job" and I was like, "Seriously? That's it? That's all you got? That I'm defined by my job? Well so, I'm no longer at that job anymore, so you really don't know anything" (laughs). And I actually went and I don't know why I did it, I guess it was one of my tactics or my strategies, I had printed out my resume and I had it in my pocket in case it went really bad, I could have thrown it in his face and been like, "if being gay cancels out all of this, and if you can't be proud of me and all the things I've done and accomplished on my own, because I'm gay, then I don't know what to tell you." I took it out, I was like, "պապ[92], do you know about all the things that I've done? Do you know all the work that I've done? And the things that I've been interested in? The things I've done on campus?" And it's like, "no you don't, here it is on this piece of paper that I send to strangers" (laughs). And so, it was anti-climactic, it didn't bring us any closer, and the sort of– the conclusion for him was, "I need to process this." That's what he said, "I need to digest this." He said, "I don't like it, if it were up to me, you'd be straight, I'd wish you were straight, but you're my son, and I love you regardless." And so, I was like, "Um. OK." And then the last, the two times I saw him after that were awkward, I can tell that he was uncomfortable. Oh, I remember what I wanted to say– we were having this conversation, and I told him like, "This is who I am, I can't change this. You can't change this. No one can change this. We live in a different world now, things are changing. If I wanted to– if I was that person, I could go live a perfectly happy comfortable life and not have to deal with anything if I just moved to West Hollywood[93] and lived there for the rest of my life. Perfect. Fine. Everything will be fucking dandy." And then he said, we were talking about just my life in general, and he was like, and the way he said it though, he said it with this attitude and it made me so mad, "Well, it's your life, right?" And I was like, "That's right, it is my fucking life. It is my life. You can't do anything about it, it's my life, not yours." And I remember, the

[88] *bab* – dad.
[89] *bab* – dad.
[90] *bab* – dad.
[91] *bab* – dad.
[92] *bab* – dad.
[93] A city in Los Angeles frequented by LGBTQ people and popular for its LGBTQ bars, restaurants, and shops.

way he said it just pissed me off so much. He's saying it like he's trying to hurt me. He's saying it like, "You're bad, what you're doing with your life is wrong." Like, "Ugh, fuck you" (sighs).[94] So it was really awkward, he was awkward after I came out to him, and I was awkward, and I think also I was a little, I was still feeling rebellious and I wanted, I kind of liked the awkwardness, and I reveled in it, because I drew strength from the fact that I was making my dad uncomfortable, that I had made him uncomfortable. And also that he didn't have the power over me that he had when I was a child, and that I'm an adult now and I can be who I want to be and be who I am, and there's nothing you can do about it. And then we didn't talk for like two months. He usually calls me and my brother. He always calls us to check in, it wasn't happening. He was calling my brother, he wasn't calling me. And then I got concerned, so I called him, and then I saw him maybe two weeks ago and it was fine, it was pretty normal, so it was like, "OK, whatever." So that's that. I mean I don't know. It is what it is. So for now, it's fine… It's so weird! … How do we talk about these things with our parents? Like, I don't- it's so a-, it's kind of awkward.

Age: Mid 30's
Gender: Woman
Sexuality: Bisexual/Lesbian

There was never a day where I was like, "I'm going to come out, this is my day." I never had that. It was slowly coming out to different people at different points based on comfort level. There was no, like, "Oh my God today is national coming out day so I'm going to come out." There's no... and I still haven't actually exposed my full self to my family.

Who did you come out to first?

The first person was a girl I had a crush on. I was super nervous she was comfortable with her sexuality, I was younger… She was a lesbian. I was 21, I think. Yeah, I was 21, and so she was super comfortable with it. She'd had girlfriends. I was like finally figuring out, "OK, like this might be OK, I might be able to live." (laughs) You know? Because there were days where I had to kill myself, "I can't, I can't be gay." You know? So... I remember telling her, "OK, like, I have to tell you something and it was really hard, but to her it was like "Oh, that's it?" (laughs) I'm like, "OK, you made me feel stupid." But that was such a big deal and such a weight off my shoulders to tell another human being. You know? And I remember just pacing back and forth, "OK, I have to tell you something, I have to tell you something." … I was older, but I was confused. But I felt like I was old enough to already accept that. But most people now– dude, kids in high school are so different. There's no way I could have come out in high school, like, no way.

Have you come out to any of your friends?

Yes.

Are any of them Armenian?

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[94] When Armenian parents use phrases like, "it's your life, do what you want," in the tone the participant describes, it is not a genuine sentiment. It usually means the opposite, as a threat for the child to understand that it is not *their* life and they *should not* do what they want, because of the implications of shame from these actions – a component of the collectivistic nature of Armenian culture and families. This is not generalizable, but a necessary cultural background to understand the participant's frustration when his father stated, "well, it's your life, right?"

Yes. I came out to my Armenian friends, close friends I have. (Friend), I came out to her right when I came out to myself– after I had my first girlfriend. That's when I told her, because that's when I was like, "OK, this is my best friend, I have to tell her." I was 22. It was good, I felt super comfortable, because she's very liberal. So to her, it wasn't a big deal, you know? She's like super accepting and loving, and you know, so it was totally easy.

Have you come out to any of your family members?

Um, not like, formally, but actual, like, coming out and they know it – my sisters and that's it.

Did you ever have a moment where you told them?

Well, I had my first girlfriend, it was hard, it was the hardest experience ever. That whole experience. It was me being gay for the first time. It's because, a lot of problems, like, in my family, in my life, with my siblings, with everybody. I would wake up, in my bed, like when I started thinking about it, "I have to kill myself, there's no way like, if I tell my parents, there's no way, like, there's no way. It's out of the question." So it was very scary. What happened was I met this girl at work, we liked each other, I was 20, I was so young, it probably wasn't the best relationship to get into, but that's how you learn. So, at that point, me and my mom had a really good relationship, we were super close, I was still living with them obviously[95]. Um, we had a great relationship in my head. So, I decided "dumb dumb (name)," I decided, "OK, I'm going to introduce my girlfriend to my mom." Thinking my mom is all accepting of anything I do. So, I went to where my mom worked, it was very casual, it was like one day we were just hanging out and I went to where my mom was working. And I was like, "Oh mom, hey, I'm just stopping by and here's my friend. Do you want to meet my friend?" And it was just like introducing, right? And so everything went fine, she was nice and everything. But, then, um, the next day, I had picked her up from work and so we're on the freeway and I remember her telling me, "You can't hang out with that girl anymore," and she said, "you can't hang out with her because my boss noticed that she, like, suspects she's gay and she's going to turn you gay, so you can't hang out with her anymore." I'm like, "Mom." So, at that point, it clicked "My mom is not cool. We don't have the relationship I thought we had." And so, boom. Like, it all switched over to denial. I was like, "What are you talking about? She's just a friend." Because I was afraid. It was a horrible– it was the worst experience ever. And so, and then, me and my mom drifted because of that. So, she was like, because we worked together, she threatened to go to my workplace and tell her off and like she was so afraid that this person, because she looked very lesbian, like you could see it, she was kind of masculine. So, she was afraid her little 22 year old daughter is going to be influenced by this person and be gay. So I get it, I get the fear. But, it caused a lot of problems, you know? And um, and then, I had cut my hair short, and so that was like another trigger. And so, like, all these things started happening and I was only 22-23. It was rough and I remember having to hide then after that. It was like I'm going out with my *friends*… I would say I'm going out with my *friend*, because my mom is loving enough to where she softened up, so I was like mom, I'm going out with my *friend.* She already knew what I was, so this was like two years later, maybe, you know. But my dad, I remember my dad talking a lot of crap, like, but he didn't know, but he knew… So, my mom like kind of softened up and she knew when I was going out and at times like we would have parties and there was Armenian food, and I'd be like, "Mom, let me take some food to my friend." And she would pack it, so I already knew, like, because she's loving enough, but she can't accept it. So, it's like this thing, like, she's in denial, but you know, it's this weird, weird thing with my mom that she still has. So, that was hard, because it's like,

[95] Participant was 20 years old and "obviously" living with her parents – demonstrating the uncommon nature of Armenian children moving out of the family home.

me and my mom, it separated us for so long. Like, that was like four and a half years where she knows what I was doing – I'm going on vacation, I would take trips, New Year's, who was I with? And they're not a part of it… [Coming out] is terrifying. I think it's just my mom scared me. I think if my mom had accepted it, I wouldn't care about anybody in the world, because who cares about the stranger that's going to go tell my mom? My mom knows, my mom's cool, but, yeah that didn't happen so it fucked everything up.

These stories show the varied methods in LGBQ Armenians' disclosure strategies: some follow the traditional coming out path of disclosing their sexual identity; some stay in hiding for years and live dual lives; some are so traumatized from the initial attempts of disclosure that they have yet to re-come out; and some negotiate their invisible queer status to have access to the family. In the final method, though it is not the ideal or the preferred, not coming out gives them the opportunity to have their partners at familial gatherings as long as it's not made visible and their identities are not stated or discussed. These testimonies run parallel with scholars who have proposed alternatives to the standard coming out process by indicating the existence of non-linear phases. Silence is not simply viewed as repressive, but it can also indicate the power intrinsic in leaving certain details unmentioned (Acosta 2011). One participant in her mid 30s had yet to come out to her parents and her girlfriends had been passing as platonic friends, because to her, verbal communications of sexual identity would interfere with the quest for visibility, since in some cases, even when the communication has been made, invisibility occurs (Acosta 2011). That is, even when LGBQ Armenians vocalize their sexual identities with their families, these identities are still largely ignored and never mentioned by parents again. Therefore, silence is used a strategy by LGBQ Armenians and sexually nonconforming Latinas to allow movement in and out of visibility and create a flexible environment that permits the maintenance of familial relationships (Acosta 2011).

Another major theme that participants mentioned was the tendency for Armenians to not move out of the family of origin house until marriage. The following two passages from Nancy Agabian's 2008 memoir, *Me as Her Again*, provide insight into this tradition:

> Throughout college I had been plotting my mode of escape from my family, which required defying a longstanding Agabian tradition of adult children living with their parents: my three never-married aunts rooming with Grammy, and closer to home, my older brother Leo cramped out in his childhood bedroom (7).

> "You live here too?" Mira was twenty-six and wore sleek dresses, heels and pearls; she worked in PR at one of the studios. I was surprised she still lived with her parents, that she would be subject to an arrangement that belonged to the realm of previous Armenian generations, totally old-fashioned, not to mention soul crushing. Mira seemed at one with herself though, unlike my older brother who still lived at home, four years after graduating from college (98-99).

How does the cultural and familial tradition of Armenians not moving out impact queer experiences? Armenian families rely on extended kin networks, thus LGBQ Armenians who faced discrimination by their immediate families post coming out were also separated from these networks. Therefore, reluctance to come out to family members comes with the fear of losing both economic and emotional support. The fact that it is still uncommon for Armenian children to move out before marriage leaves queer Armenians without a space for sexual freedom, to perform their sexuality, or to have any relationship with their sexual identity. The narrative of moving to urban locations for that freedom does not apply to LGBQ Los Angeles Armenians and further limits the options that exist.[96]

Those met with positive family reinforcements have healthier relationships with their ethnic and sexual identities and have the courage to participate in community events and activism. Conversely, those met with negative interactions are more likely to be insecure about

[96] The *Community* chapter discusses in further detail the impact of moving out to attend universities for those participants of the younger generation whose parents permitted them to. However, since they would come home for the weekends, they do not experience the full extent of this freedom for their queerness.

their sexual identity, have resentment towards their ethnic identity, and are reluctant to join with the community. Being disowned by family left some participants homeless, and where they temporarily resided was not always a safe space, physically or mentally. In one instance, a participant, 16 years old at the time, had only one place to go – a former lover's house – who was much older in age and residing with his current partner. Being forced into that living situation immediately following a tumultuous family encounter was unhealthy. Lack of family support impacts their mental health; participants oftentimes suffered from depression while others turned to drugs and alcohol to cope.

- **Language in Coming Out, Sex, & Sexuality**

"What is it about Armenians that makes them so uptight about sex?"
"Yeah, why do we have to act like Armenians are the only people on earth who don't have a sexuality?" a boy sitting next to her said.

- *Nancy Agabian*[97]

Eventually I would come to see that it wasn't the crime of homosex so much as sex itself that had so overwhelmed my mother.

- *Paul Monette*[98]

With participants being 1.5 & 2nd generation immigrants and their parents 1st generation, the primary language used within the household was Armenian, therefore, children were forced to talk about sexuality in Armenian, when sex was never even a topic discussed within the family. Research among Filipino and Latino gay men indicates that most immigrant parents thought about sexuality for the first time after experiencing their child's coming out process (Ocampo 2013). In the case with Armenians, most parents publicly encountered matters of *sex* for the first time after experiencing their child's coming out process, that is, it was the first time

[97] *Me as Her Again*, 2008.
[98] *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story*, 1992.

the topic of sex had been approached, since the vast majority of Armenian parents do not talk about sex with their children:

> M But my mom is so– um, old-world. Her husband kept her on such a tight leash that *I* had to give my mom a sex talk. I had to teach my mom about drugs. *I* did that. And it was weird but it was like by that point in our lives, we had been through so much together that it was like whatever… She thought sex was terrible, like when she got angry at my brother because she found a condom in his wallet. And I was like, "Bitch, be happy he's using a condom." Though he wasn't. He just bought it to try it on. It was like we're just kids but, you know? (laughs)… Well, being gay and being thrusted into a culture shock at 13 and being raised in a way that gays are awful and this and that. And it's like I was so lost for so long. And then I realized being a girl is fucking hard. (My sister) came to me and she's like "oh my boyfriend and I tried having sex but it didn't fit". And I was like "Wait! Didn't I say come to me before you try?" So I took her to Planned Parenthood, got her condoms and birth control and talked to her about what consent is and how you need to make sure you give it and just because they buy you dinner doesn't mean that it's OK", shit like that. And then I said, "Don't tell mom." Two days later she goes to my mom. "Mom, I'm having sex with my boyfriend. There's nothing wrong with it and (name) got me birth control." Mom calls me and goes, "Why are you making my daughter into a whore!?". But the weird thing was when I was talking to my mom about this, after she was done yelling at me because she was already very disapproving of my lifestyle. She was like, "I don't even understand what the big deal is. Sex isn't even good." And I was like, "Listen, I don't know what kind of life you've had in that department, but sex is amazing. It's one of the best things that as humans we have. Love and sex is [the] reason why we call it making love because it's kind of in the same realm and it's amazing." And I'm like, "Some men are so selfish and they barge in and they use you and they leave." And she goes, "That's your dad". And I was like, "Oh, fucking Aye man. Fucking Aye."

In this instant, the participant discussed safe sex practices with his sister, as evidently his mother had not with him and had no plans to with his sister. His story points out the direct connection between the fear that a discussion of safe sex will lead to promiscuous behavior. Parents are assuming that by talking about sex they're giving the green light towards promiscuity, and it's this fear of children's promiscuity that prevents parents from addressing the topic in any means. Another reason simply being that sex is taboo in Armenian society, therefore, it's not familial practice to discuss such matters[99]. When asked about the relationship between her ethnic and

[99] This study does not make the assumption that American society is not conservative about sex, the focus is simply on Armenian matters based on research data.

sexual identity, one participant said, W "They don't go together at all. It's like asking if sex and Armenians go together (laughs). It's a social taboo." If, as she states, sex and Armenians are mutually exclusive, how and where does sexuality fit within this space?

> M I hadn't experienced anything with any guy yet, so I just kind of – I got Grindr. I got the app, and I met someone, and we had sex like on the second date or something like that. And unprotected sex, and then two weeks later – and I kept seeing him. We started dating. And two weeks later, he decided to talk to me about HIV. And I'm like, "Are you trying to tell me something?" and at this point, by the way, because there was zero talks about STDs or anything sex related in my family, especially gay sex, or in schools too – Everybody's talking about how in their health class, they've learned about it, I'm like, "I didn't." I don't know. So, yeah, he started talking about it and I'm like, "What the?" And he's like, "No, no, no, I don't have it. I'm just saying that you should be careful, like the way we had sex two weeks ago, unprotected, that was not very safe." And I'm like, "Is it actually a thing?" Like, I never thought that I would be getting it. But then, now, suddenly I was in the risk of getting it, so that set off basically– from that point on, until I transferred to university, it was like nine months, and those nine months were very difficult times for me, because, in a matter of five months, I got tested six times, and I was fine, every single time, but I just kept going back and going back, and not even having had sex. It was also my first time that I was experiencing something medical without my family. I wasn't going to tell my mom, and I had friends– the friend that I came out to, who came with me, and the guy that I was dating at the time came with me once. He got tested, and eventually, I broke off that relationship because I was just like, "It's too much right now." And, um, yeah. Those were times that I really would have appreciated if my mom was like, "You're fine." Even that. But that didn't happen.

Most Armenians schools do not offer sex education classes. When not discussed at home or school, Armenian youth learn about sex from each other, their environments, and social worlds. In the same way they learn about sexuality from media and online resources, whether queer or straight, sex education is attained from external outlets, with parents operating on the belief that their children are not sexually active until marriage. What is evident in the previous quote is the extent of isolation experienced by Armenians in terms of sexual matters. Though parents are present for most medical appointments, for 1.5 and 2nd generation Armenian youth, annual gynecology visits or STI checks are conducted outside of the family realm, further impacting the loneliness of the LGBQ Armenian experience. Additionally, the language to communicate these

topics with is not readily available, or one of common practice in Armenian. First, even though the vocabulary does exist, Armenians are not exposed with terms related to sex and sexuality while growing up – the terminology is deemed very technical. This, in turn, creates an environment where sex and sexuality only exist in the English language domain. Second, because of the taboo, Armenians feel more comfortable communicating about sex and sexuality in English, not only because it's the primary language domain where sex and sexuality exists, but also because of the lack of association of Armenianness with sex and sexuality. For the queer experience, language plays a significant role in their coming out. Since the primary language used within the household was Armenian, the following narratives depict the various nuances in the participants' approaches to communicating about their sexualities with their parents.

> M So yeah, they didn't really have a word for it. They never really referred to it by a word. And they believe that it's an American thing, and it's an American– I don't know– construct or whatever… It was very intense. And I think that there was definitely a lack of language and a lack of knowing how to talk about it.

> M I didn't say gay at all. I said I'm attracted to guys. And all of this is in Armenian. Yeah, this is all in Armenian. Yeah, I said I'm attracted to guys, I didn't—I wasn't comfortable saying gay, because that was putting a label on it and I don't know if I had said I'm gay out loud by then… I told my dad and of course, my dad told my mom and so that was not good.
> **Did she use the word gay?**
> She did, but the conversations are in Armenian. So it would've been like "gay բանով[100] okay եմ[101]"[102] probably. "մի մտահոգուիր… ուրախ եմ որ ուրախ ես"[103] or something like that, yeah.

> **When you came out to your parents, did you speak in English?**
> M Yes, I did. I said, "Gay եմ."[104] Yes. Because it's so much easier. Can you imagine, "միասեռական?"[105] you know? It's so scientific… It depends on– I think everybody

[100] *Pʰanɔv*: with the thing.
[101] *ɛm*: am.
[102] "I'm okay with the gay thing."
[103] *Mi mdahɔkʰvir… uraχ ɛm vɔr uraχ ɛs:* "Don't worry… I'm happy you're happy."
[104] *ɛm*: am – "I'm gay."
[105] *Miasɛragan:* homosexual.

knows "gay." Even in Հայաստան[106], they know what "gay" is– the word. I doubt anybody will be like: "ես միասեռական եմ, մայրիկ եւ հայրիկ."[107]

M And now that I think about it, I don't know how we talked about this. Because [my dad] didn't – he wouldn't have that kind of a conversation with me in English. But when I think about the Armenian words he used, I don't know what they were.

M Their side is happening in Armenian, my side is happening in both kind of. But mostly in Armenian, because a lot of these ideas about being progressive and about having different attitudes when you're young don't translate into Armenian for some reason.

M Not even being gay, I mean just talk about sexuality, we don't talk about sexuality, those things are bad, they are so ամօթ[108], we don't even have the words to talk about those things, and even just to think about sex, sexuality, in Armenian– if I tried to tell you about sex, talk to you about sex, about body parts, about things that people do in bed– I don't even know how to talk about those things in Armenian. So, those two because of the conservative nature of our culture, they're really far away from each other. They don't really factor into one another, they sort of exist separately and not even as a gay person, I feel like this would probably apply to straight people as well when it comes to our sexualities in general, we don't talk about sex. You're supposed to be a virgin. My Armenian identity doesn't factor– those two are completely separate from each other. There's no language to talk about it, there's no conceptual framework in my mind to think about it, it's all in English. It's almost not even associated, it's almost like we're all asexual, because we don't, they're so taboo. Whereas I can sit and talk about sex in detail about lots of things in English but am I talking about those things as an Armenian? I don't think so. I'm switching modes into the American, the kid that was born here, a sex crazed culture, and also for people my age who are probably tend to be more sex positive, definitely more sex positive than our parents… How do you begin to explain to someone I'm sexually attracted to men? Me, (own name), like how do I begin? Because it's very simple, it's quite simple, when I'm with a man, I have an erection. When I'm with a woman, there's no erection. But we have to say those words for my parents to understand and that's – you have to talk about sex to talk about your identity.

The language functionality itself is promoting the taboo and the shame surrounding sex and sexuality. LGBQ Armenians tend to identify their sexualities to their parents by speaking in Armenian while applying the sexual identity terms in English, and most popularly "gay" is used as the umbrella term for both men and women. Alternatively, any variances of preference

[106] *Hajasdan*: Armenia.
[107] *Jes miasɛragan ɛm, majrig jɛv hajrig:* "I'm a homosexual, mother and father."
[108] *Amɔtʰ*: shame.

towards the same gender is explained, and in some unfortunate cases LGBQ Armenians have to identify themselves by derogatory homophobic terms, because that is the only way to make the connection to their parents about their sexualities. Moreover, LGBQ Armenians are forced to have a sex conversation with their parents at time of disclosure – W "Imagine you tell your parents you're a lesbian, all they probably think about is the sex – that you have sex with a woman," an inconvenience not present among non-LGBQ identifying Armenians. For example, a participant stated, M "[my dad] actually, one of the things he asked me when I came out was "do you– are you like a top or a bottom?" And this was before I even knew the answer for myself because I hadn't been doing anything." The conversation immediately shifted to sexual acts, when the child was not even sexually active. He was not experienced enough to have the answer or be ready to discuss these matters with his parents, although when is one ever ready to discuss sexual positions with their parents? Unfortunately, some LGBQ Armenians are forced to when they come out to family members. And, this occurrence is not only with parents, in one instance a participant expressed having to legitimize her sexual identity when her friend asked her if she'd ever been with a woman when she came out. Experience, or lack thereof, is not an indicator for one's identity and is not necessary to legitimize their attractions. There are obstacles in approaching disclosure which are culturally internalized due to the taboo surrounding sex and sexuality. Participants' inhibitions about coming out, despite fear of rejection and anticipation of reaction, are partly because of the discomfort of having to have the conversation. LGBQ Armenians not only have to come out, they also have to explain what coming out is. In their coming out strategies, they need to consider which language to use, how to phrase their sexualities, and predict which term their parents will most likely know.

- **Multi-Layers of Coming Out**

Coming out is a multi-layered, non-linear process. LGBQ Armenians come out in several phases, the first phases were displayed in the *Coming Out Stories* section of this chapter. They are followed by second, third, and Nth attempts at coming out, both to existing and new audiences. Many of the participants were still in these layers of coming out at the time of interviews. The following narratives depict this process and the progression of their relationships with their families of origin. It's also important to note that participants do not always come out to both parents simultaneously or with the same approach.

> M A few things have happened, I guess. So one thing that happened maybe six years after I came out to them, my mom came up to me and is like, "I'm OK with the gay thing."
> **Did you have a moment like that with your dad?**
> No, I didn't, but my dad sort of made it clear that he's been getting better and OK with it. And he would tell me small things, that he was happy that I was happy and one of the recent ones– I guess it's not so recent. There was the bombing in– the DIY[109]. And so there was conversation and there was meetings about it. And so he was very pro-gay, basically. And he wanted to make sure that the ARF[110] was pro-gay and so he helped out. So he was happy about that, or he told me about it. Yeah, so, small things like that.

> M Still in the works for sure. But there's been some changes. I'm finally completely out to my mom, but she's not happy about it. But I'm completely out to her, which was kind of an odd thing. And my dad has– whenever I go down to visit, he'll find some queer (university name) this; queer (university name) that. He'll find shit. He'll sneak in my car. He'll look through my car, and he'll find some queer publicity or something and have a meltdown and freak out. And I'm like, "Don't worry, I just have it because I do student government. That's why I have it. It's not mine." God, it's like they've found fucking heroine in my car – "It's not mine; it's my friend's!" But yeah, and so when that

[109] DIY, a pub in Yerevan, Armenia was firebombed for being gay-friendly. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) Western US Central Committee issued a statement condemning this as a hate crime. The narrator is referring to the meetings and conversations that led to the decision to issue the statement. For more information, see: http://asbarez.com/103066/arf-central-committee-condemns-hate-crime-in-armenia/, https://armenianweekly.com/2012/05/15/hate-crime-targets-gay-friendly-bar-in-yerevan-mps-bail-out-assailants/, http://www.ianyanmag.com/armenia-support-of-bar-bombing-by-officials-causes-outcry/

[110] The ARF is a political party founded in Tbilisi, modern day Georgia, and largely functions in Los Angeles as a mainstream ethnic-based community organization, with its politics playing a major role in its organizational activities. The party has branches operating in the Republic of Armenia and various other countries.

> happened– and my mom calmed my dad down. And then shortly after that, me and my mom went to visit my brother in (state). And we visit. And, she brought it up. She was like, "So what was up with that publicity?" And she brought it up while I was brushing my teeth, which was like, "What the fuck? I can't even respond right now" (laughs). But she– yeah, she brought it up, and we started talking. But we didn't really– it wasn't really a conversation when I was brushing my teeth. But then we were driving back that day– we were driving back to L.A. And in the car, we had a really in-depth conversation, and I brought it up. I was like, "Look, I want to go back to what you were talking about, and I want to actually respond this time." And we had what I thought was a positive conversation, but it was really just me expressing my feelings. And then her just being kind of quiet, and she was really quiet through the whole thing. But in the end she's like, "But I love you". And she held my hand and she cried a little bit. And then we went to [a] casino. We played on the Ellen DeGeneres slot machine… Like, wow, this is so symbolic! But then this last summer, which was probably a year after we had that conversation– and it wasn't really a conversation. It was me talking and her listening. Her being quiet. And then she was never like, "I love you and I accept you for being gay." But I took it in a positive way. And I think long-term, there's still going to be positive effects of it. But she kind of told me this last summer– she told me that the conversation– she was silent because she was in shock. And that she will never be able to accept it something like that, you know, which was hard. It was hard especially because I had talked to my friends and told my friends the Ellen DeGeneres thing, and I was feeling optimistic about it. But then I heard that from her. But I think– and it's just her own process. I'm sure within the next decade or so (laughs). Hopefully before I turn 30, but we'll see (laughs).

The second narrator had initially come out to his parents when he was 15 and had spent the next several years in the cycle of coming out, getting a negative reaction, and going back into the closet. This account was his latest coming out to his mother, but not his father. At time of interview, he had yet to come out to his father. One mode for resolution in the later phases of coming out for some of the participants is that by being honest they provided their parents with exposure to queerness (both of the identity and the people), which, in turn, gave the parents an understanding and the children the advantage of visibility. Therefore, in some instances, exposure and visibility by way of honesty actually worked in their favor.

> W I lived a very open life. I lived a very honest and open life. After coming out, I hid very little from my parents in terms of my lifestyle. So, you know, I didn't– I'm saying I lived with somebody. I did everything that a normal person does. I worked and school and life and whatever. So, through normalization, I think that's what happened. Of course, my parents didn't know anything about my young life, like how I lived, who I

am– but whatever, what my sexual awakening was, who I loved, what I did– I mean all of these– I don't even know if they ever questioned or not. I'm assuming they found out on their own. I never really– we never had the discussion, "Oh well, how do you have sex?" kind of thing. I never had that discussion with them. Yeah. So anyway, but I think my parents just got used to me being gay.

M Oh, another thing– another interesting thing, when I was hit by the car, I was on my lunch break. And my boss, who I was lovers with for a year… They found out I didn't come back from lunch break, they're like something is wrong. They called around and they found me at the hospital. Then he called my mom, went and picked her up, drove her to the hospital. So my mom has huge– like loves him but doesn't know our history. And will never know our history.

She know he's gay?

Yes. And that was the first– after that she said she was ready to hear about my relationships. So after meeting someone she felt good that I had a person looking out for me. She also realized that gay people could be good people. Because we're heathens apparently and we don't do good things for anybody. It's like, "fucking aye bitch. Turn on some TLC[111]. We give people makeovers all the time."

Normalization was used as a strategy by participants in these multi-layers of coming out to family members in order to disassociate parents' feared Otherness from their lifestyles. Moreover, one participant who had introduced her first girlfriend to her mother, as her "friend", was told the following day to not hang out with her, because her mother suspected that the friend was gay and was worried that she was going to "turn [her daughter] gay." It had been over fifteen years since this incident at time of interview, but she had not tried to come out again, even though she had been in a long term relationship and her girlfriend had been attending family functions by passing as a "friend." In the following quote, at age 35, she expresses the difficulty present in the negotiation of both moving out of the family home and coming out, and the most important familial factors considered in these decisions, such as prioritizing her family's desires over her needs and their health and well-being over her own. Her narrative echoes the sentiments

[111] TV network.

of an Armenian child raised in an individualistic American culture to immigrant parents from a collectivistic host culture.

> **Do you feel like the decisions you make impact your family?**
> W Yes, to a fault. I constantly worry about how I'm going to affect them, like, even, I'm going to move out soon… but I have to do it slowly because I realized only my brother is left there, so it's like okay, I'm going to go stay at my friend's house for 3 nights, so it's like... if it were up to me– but I mean, it'll hurt my mom, and I know they'll miss me… I can't just like cold turkey them. And the whole thing of moving… was me breaking free from those feelings because I feel like my whole life I've lived considering everybody else, and its draining, and I'm at this age and I'm like, "What have I done that I really wanted to do without worrying about?" And I go, "Who's made decisions based on what I think or feel? Nobody"... Like, maybe parents when we were younger and stuff but they don't make decisions based on what I want, but I'm like worried about them... Doing what I want to do, "I still love you guys, but I'm going to do what I want." It's almost like, I love them so much, and I'll still be there, but I see the difference between the American culture, it's like they do whatever they want, they don't see their families for months and they're fine with that. (Girlfriend) wouldn't see her family for 6 months and I'm like, "holy shit! I can't even go a week, I'll miss them." You know? It's different. I'm glad though, because it's like ours is warmer and you know seriously even when she would come to our house, she was like, "Oh my God, it's so warm." She's like, "I love it, you guys are loud and you guys are..." at her house it was just very quiet and you know it's a little bit colder. So, I appreciate that… It's not all about you, it's like a break up, you have to consider– like this is your family, it's hard...
>
> I'm this Armenian girl, like, I'm bringing this stress to them, you know? Like an extra stress in their life. I would have come out to them a long time ago, if I didn't think they were going to flip out and have a heart attack. I don't care how they, they're not going to like be mean to me, it's how they're going to feel, I feel like they're going to feel like they failed, or they're going to feel like, I don't know, something not good. It's not going to be positive… But I mean look, I'm going to be 35, like when? And I feel like you know if I had more support like my relationships might have been better. Like when you're having issues, like you have no one in your family that you want to go to and talk … like when am I going to? It's not fair that they don't know... It's not fair, like I'm hiding a big part of my life, but then I'm like ok, I'm not in a relationship, when I do get into one, maybe at that point it will be appropriate. You know?

Common practice is for LGBQ Armenians to come out or re-come out once they're coupled. They now have someone to both struggle and strategize with. Furthermore, it provides a sense of validity in their identity, albeit unnecessary, the validation is *for the parents* and not for themselves, because they are now in a relationship based on that identity. It becomes a fixed

stature of their lives, which makes it harder for the parents to debate. It makes, for the parents, their identities permanent[112]. In the following case, the narrator recounts her re-coming out a decade after her initial attempt,

> W So I think I was about 35, I hurt my knee and I had to have knee surgery. So I remember having to tell my mom that I was having surgery, so that was weird. That was one of the contacts I had with her, is I called her and I told her that I have to have knee surgery. And then– so she was like, "OK, when is it?" And then she came to the hospital. And luckily, her mom was here at that time. So, they both came, and she brought my dad. So, they came to the hospital, and of course, (girlfriend) was there. So, it was really uncomfortable, it was really weird. And then, at the same time that was happening, we were looking to buy a house. So, we had to move out of our apartment, so we needed somewhere to live, so– oh my God. After all this, so now (girlfriend) 's coming to house. So now we were– well, first, I'd say that she came around because of my knee surgery. So, we started talking and having a relationship again. And then– it was still strained because she wasn't happy with the situation, but she was at least talking to me now and she was trying to be accepting of it and I think my grandma helped her a lot. So, she started coming around a little bit and then when we moved into her house, because we were getting– buying this house, we had to get out of our apartment. There again, it was– she was nice to us, but you could tell still not happy. Until the– when I got pregnant, that was it. Then it completely changed her… I told her we wanted to have kids and that I was trying to get pregnant. So, she knew that whole– she went through the whole process with us. Once I told her that, I guess she realized that this is it and we're going to have a family. So, things just kept getting better and better and then now, she's wonderful. She loves (wife), she loves the kids and she talked about– a few years ago and she would say, "I'm sorry about how I was." She goes, "I just had to learn. I didn't know any better at the time and now I understand." So, she kind of– in little ways apologized for what happened. And I tell her, "It's OK, I understand. It was a hard thing you had to go through." So now, she's great, but really, it took my knee surgery and then it took the getting pregnant.
>
> **How about your dad?**
>
> We never– I never told him, my mom never told him, so I told him that I wanted to have kids and that I had the doctors help me get pregnant. And that's how I had– got kids. And I don't know what he thought 'til this day. He passed away and I – 'til this day, I have no idea what he thought. And then he knew I lived with (wife) and then she got pregnant and had (second kid) and (second kid) called him պապիկ[113] and he heard the kids calling both of us mom, but he never asked. It was just never spoken of. But he was a bright guy, so I'm assuming he knew and he just dealt with it, but never talked about it. Yeah, weird, huh? Yeah, and plus, he had a lot of health issues and he started getting dementia already. The signs. So I don't know if everything was clicking or it was just his denial was so strong or he did know and he didn't care. I have no idea. I still don't know. It's weird.

[112] Permanent used here as an argument against those who say "it's just a phase," and not arguing against the fluidity of sexuality.

[113] *Babig*: Grandpa.

A recurring trend is for parents to accept these sexualities once their nonconforming children have children of their own. Since, in the eyes of the parents, family as a core is once again reemphasized with the continuity to the next generation. Grandchildren reestablish contacts when issues such as these break communication. However, time is the main catalyst towards acceptance. The main difference between the younger and older generations was those in the older generation could not recount their coming out experiences with great detail, they often had trouble remembering, even in which order the events occurred. Meanwhile, those in their 20s and 30s would emotionally vent for hours and were relieved to finally have someone who wanted to listen, primarily because they were in still in the brunt of the coming out stages.

- **Relationships with Family of Origin**

One of the pursuits of this research is depicting the changes, if any, between child and parent relationships during childhood, and then again pre-and post-disclosure. LGBQ Armenians tend to be isolated from their families from an early age, even pre-self-coming out, due to propensities that mark difference. With further development of their identities in the pre-disclosure phase, tensions rise within familial relationships with the child increasingly leading a more private life. Finally, post-disclosure, families, now facing the reality, spend years attempting to repair these relationships. Participants were asked who they felt closest to among their family members, who they turned to if they had a problem, and who had the most influence on the decisions they made. Most participants said they turned to their mother when they were younger for advice, concerns, etc. Of these participants, half said the closest person to them and the person they turn to is still their mother, with the other half saying that they no longer turned to their mother, but rather a sibling, indicating a change in relationship post-disclosure. Interestingly, they were also from the younger generation of interviewees and still in the layers

of coming out. Furthermore, other participants stated that their siblings, and not their mothers, were both the closest people to them from their family and the people they turned to in times of need, with no age or generation distinctions. Additionally, gender of participants did not play a significant role in these nuances.

Participants were divided in half in terms of being closest to their mother and the other half closest to a sibling. No participant mentioned being close to their father, or turning to their father. The one time a participant mentioned a father during these questions was in regards to family members influencing decisions that they made, and he said, M "I almost want to say my dad [had an influence]. That's just because he was, I don't know, allowed to boss me around and stuff," demonstrating how the father figure more often than not is seen as an authoritative figure even in families when the mother is the one in charge. Additionally, one participant stated turning to extended family members, an aunt and uncle, if he had a problem and still does, and another participant expressed now turning to her wife.

Two participants stated not turning to anyone in their family if they had a problem or needed advice, even if they felt very close to their mother. There was an overwhelming feeling of turning to friends because they were dealing with issues that they could not be honest about with family members – W "[I] probably [turned to] my mom, but if it was something that she couldn't know about, my friends," or because they preferred not involving family members in their personal lives – M "if I have a problem, I usually try not to go to family because I don't like family in my business. But if I need to, I'll go to my mom. And I've made the mistake of going to my mom and… by the time she drives from her place to my place I get six phone calls from all my relatives… It's my business and I don't want people in my fucking business. Their patronizing fucking attitudes and shit." Participants also expressed not feeling comfortable

turning to family members or not being able to relate with them because of the divide that had been created due to their sexual identities. Another commonality was the notion of independence among participants. They expressed being rebellious, and not being influenced by or having to rely on others.

> **Who, in your family, had the most influence on the decisions you made?**
> W Nobody. I was always a very stubborn and rebellious person who did exactly what I wanted to do. I can't say that anybody has affected me in the course of my life.
>
> W I would say I discussed everything with my sister. But I've been very independent in making decisions. What school I went to was all entirely up to me. What I studied was completely my decision. I'm not saying that's the best way. I'm saying that I didn't take much advice from anybody. Yeah, so, my sister and I, we're really good friends, we're best friends, but my decisions have been mostly my own for major decisions in life… And with my mother, as a child, I was very, very loving towards her, but then as a teenager and later, I kind of rebelled. I only really repaired my relationship with my mother after - in my late 30s.
>
> M Within my family, it was probably my mom. But even with her, I was always kind of more of an independent problem solver in a sense. My dad would talk about the difference between me and my brother. My brother would basically have him do the entire science project for him and I wouldn't let my dad touch it (laughs). So that was kind of, yeah. And then also being gay – that added a whole other layer of – with that problem, I couldn't really see either– I couldn't really talk to anyone in my family.

LGBQ people are more inclined to be independent, because the heteronormative social standards in which they grow up force them to live in secret for such long durations of their lives that they are naturally forced to be independent. One participant stated turning to Madonna if he had a problem when he was younger, indicating the impact of American pop culture on Armenian gay youth in the late 1980's – early 1990's.[114]

[114] Madonna, American singer/songwriter known as the Queen of Pop, is seen as one of the greatest gay icons, due to her uninhibited expression of sexuality and support for gay rights and activism, especially at a time when straight allies were few and far between. She promoted transgender imagery in her art work and helped bring queer sensibility into mainstream American culture. Most notably, during the AIDS crisis, as her gay friends & artists died one by one, Madonna was among the first to take a public stance and be vocal in her support for the LBGTQ community, in part with her 1991 documentary film *Madonna: Truth or Dare*, directed by Armenian-American director Alek Keshishian.

LGBQ Armenians expressed that despite growing up LGBQ in a straight Armenian family and the conditions endured (and still enduring for some) during pre- and post-disclosure, they had very close ties with their families of origin. If they did not live with them post-disclosure, they visited very often, and those who know have families of their own, describe their children to be very close-knit with their grandparents.

- **Therapy Experiences**

Culturally, it is uncommon for Armenians to seek professional help, or if they do, it is done in private and not discussed with loved ones. Therefore, it was interesting for LGBQ Armenians to unhesitatingly discuss seeking therapy of their own will, or to find their parents forcefully taking them to therapists in hopes that the therapist would indicate their children's wrongdoing. For a community who does not believe in therapy, why do they seek a therapist when they are presented with a queer issue? Since this is seen as a Western issue, their existing Armenian toolkit is not sufficient, therefore they turn to "American" resources. These experiences shed light on the topic of mental health and professional help in the Los Angeles Armenian community by reflecting the views of not only LGBQ Armenians but also their straight Armenian parents.

> M And then I actually talked to a therapist – an Armenian therapist. He was great. He was basically like, look; your issues with your family – so that means that you need to move out of there. And to move out, you need a job. And to get a job, you need a bachelor's degree. So, focus on your education. Transfer to a four-year, which is what I did. At that time, I was dropping out of classes, and I spent four years at my community college. But one year, the full year was W's[115]. I got 20 units of W's, and so I was not doing good with my education at the time. But yeah, I talked to him about it, and that's kind of the perspective he came from. He's like, there's really not a whole lot that you can do. And this is not something that I could solve within myself and miraculously get along with my parents. "You need to get out of the house. It's a toxic house, and you can't– don't be homeless. Just get your education together." And I did. So I moved (to university town) and I've been here since.

[115] Late drop of a course.

How did you find the therapist?
Actually to clarify, I did not seek him out on my own. My parents had me go see him. I think that they thought he was going to do a conversion. But to their chagrin, he was educated (laughs).
Was it a positive experience?
Yeah, it definitely was. And honestly, without him, I don't know what I would have done. And it was simple advice, but it was not stuff that I was considering at the moment.

M In end of middle school beginning of high school, my parents caught me looking at an underwear site, and so they took me to therapy. And that wasn't a good experience. That was a negative experience, I guess. So, the therapist was my kindergarten principal from the Armenian school.
It wasn't a therapist?
I mean, she was a therapist, but it was– I don't know. Basically, the conclusion from that– those conversations were like, "Everyone goes through a puberty phase and they're attracted to everyone." Or, "They're attracted to this and that. And eventually, things settle and you'll be fine." So, "You're normal." But it was in the sense of, "You're normal and you're straight. There's no one that's gay." So, it was like, "OK, that's fine." So, I needed to try things and kiss a girl and then do this and that and– which, yeah, didn't work and I was just more and more depressed.

These participants had two completely different experiences with their Armenian therapists though they were both forced to see them by their parents. The first therapist who saw the patient at an older age, prioritized the concerns of his patient over his clients, the parents. The second therapist said what the parents would like to hear and not what was in the benefit of the child, given that she was the principal of the private school and would usually cater to the parents anyway. The second participant later sought therapy on his own in college after coming out to one his mom's cousins who happened to be a therapist who guided him towards finding a therapist of his own: M "He was very supportive and he's– his main response was, 'You have to figure out a way to merge your Armenian and gay identity together.'… He had exposure and so it made me more confident… So, eventually, every time I came out it was more and more positive." His statement here of the therapist having had exposure explains why some LGBQ Armenians prefer seeing an Armenian therapist. They understand the cultural references and are in a better position to understand the familial troubles caused by these cultural forces.

Furthermore, when GALAS provided free mental health services to LGBTQ Armenians those therapists were Armenian as well.

- **Siblings**

Siblings played both the role of a helper and a hinderer. In some instances, growing up in the U.S. themselves and having adapted to the progressive social climate in Los Angeles, they were very accepting and even aided their siblings by ameliorating the situation between them and their parents. However, some siblings did quite the opposite by outing their LGBQ siblings directly to their parents before the LGBQ siblings were even mentally prepared to have these conversations – in reality, these verbal altercations. Just like the parents, these siblings needed the time to process, were concerned with how to explain to their peers if they were asked, and had to later amend their relationships with their LGBQ siblings.

> W My sister didn't want me to be gay, it was like, "Why?" still till a few months ago, it's like, "Why? I mean you think boys are hot, you can date boys." And it's like up until this year, she's still making comments, and it's not cool. But I get it, I get where they're coming from. So, it doesn't hurt me, but it's a little disrespectful, you know? You're my sister.... But, she made a comment about (my ex-girlfriend) the other day like, "You know she was a part of our family," stuff like that so they love her, but they don't want me to be gay (laughs). You know what I mean? It's a weird...thing… When I went through the break-up, I was alone. I was dealing with it, I couldn't talk to anyone. I was super depressed, and at that point, who do you go to? you know? And the way I came out to my sister. It wasn't even coming out, we went out together. I was having a really bad time, because we had broken up… and I was just like a bitch, because I was in such a bad place, so whatever (she was) saying to me I was snapping, and you know, through the seven years, I've never talked about any relationship issues I've had with her, so like I held everything inside, meanwhile (she) can tell me all about (her) stuff, I've heard about all the relationships, all the sex, all the breakups, and everything... I never felt comfortable. So as far as coming out to (her), (she was) like, "What is wrong with you? Why are you such a bitch?" And I'm like, I just like, in tears, "Listen, you can talk about your guys, OK? I'm going through a break up, OK? You know what? Yeah, me and (name) were together and bla bla bla." And that was the first time I admitted out loud.

> M So I told my brother after that and his reac– so everyone else was positive besides my parents. My brother's reaction was like, "OK, I want to be supportive." But he was younger, he had just started high school. So, he was panicking and worrying that, "Well,

what am I going to say when anyone asks about you? What do I say when my friends ask me?" And I didn't really have an answer to that. I mean, I was like, "Well, whatever you're comfortable with." Or, "You have to live with them." Or, "You have to be in class with them, so you could say no if you want, that's totally fine." But I don't know if I said I'm gay by then, but I don't know, this was probably the summer. But yeah, and he was 15, so I think he was just learning about sexuality– not sexuality, sex…

M [My brother] is superficially accepting of it. But I'm highly involved with the queer community in (university town). And when I talk to my brother about it, I can tell he feels uncomfortable when I'm talking to him about it. And he doesn't really ask questions. He just gives me one-word responses of, "Oh yeah, OK, yeah, cool." And then I actually called him out on that. And I was like, "Dude, you're homophobic." "I'm not. I'm not." "But I know that you don't like it when I talk to you about the queer stuff I do…" And then he apparently– my mom texted me later that night and was like, "Did you call your brother homophobic?" (laughS). I'm like "God, damn it" and this ties back to what I was saying. See, I never went to my parents when I had problems. And my brother– first fucking person– always go and squeal on me. He always did that (laughs). But yeah, and then we never really touched base after that. We're talking [now], we didn't talk for two or three weeks.

W I think being gay affected my relationship with [my sister] because I had– everything was private. Ever since we were young, I never confided her in anything. And so, we weren't close in that way at all. So yeah– with any of my siblings, really, and I think– I'm going to assume the same holds true for everybody else, because they have this private– completely private life. So, it keeps them from being close– Yeah, we weren't close at all like that… So now, my sister's great. We– it took her a while to get over being mad at me for hiding it from her. But I wrote her a letter about how hard it was to tell her and that I assumed she kind of knew, too, because everybody else knew. So gradually, she started coming around and with the kids it was just– yeah, you know how that goes. And then my brothers, too. Once the kids, came into the picture, it all changed. Because it wasn't just me and (wife) and ooh, now it was the kids and the whole family, so it changed everything.

These accounts reiterate previous points made about life in the closet estranging queers from their family members, with siblings just like parents being upset at participants for keeping this part of their lives hidden from them. These three participants' and their siblings' ages span across three decades, and their reactions are paralleled and match the exact pattern of the parents': the siblings needed time to process, were concerned with the fear and worry of what others will say/think/do, and for the most part it was the siblings' first exposure to sexuality from someone close to them.

- **Extended family**

The close-knit dynamic structure of the Armenian family does not stop at the immediate family and often includes grandparents, aunts, uncles, great aunts, great uncles, and cousins – first, second, and third – who play a significant role in their daily lives. So, for LGBQ Armenians, coming out or the consideration of coming out does not stop with the parents but includes the extended family members. This applies not only to the narrators but also reflects the concerns of the parents wanting to keep their children's sexual identities hidden from these extended family members as well as community members.[116]

> M I always joked that I was going to wait to come out to my dad until the rest of my Armenian family was dead. It's not just the immediate home, it's the grandma, the aunts, oh God… it's like, and, I've heard other gay Armenians say that. Like, I'm just like, "They don't need to know, let them die…" That's what I would always, that was the joke. It was a joke, but also not really a joke, there was some truth to it… But apparently, one of my aunts knows. So, I was chatting with my cousin, the 40 year old, who's practically an American, he's really open-minded and awesome[117]… I was like, "Oh you know, I came out to my dad recently." And I had never came out to him, so in that conversation, I was coming out to him by telling him that I came out to my dad. So, that's how I came out to him…. He was like, "to be honest, I've known for a while." … "My mom knows." – my dad's sister, and I was like "What? Really?" I was really excited… He basically said that he kind of told her or was probing her and he said that at first she was like, "No, no way, no way." But he said that she's good, that she's OK… I knew… knowing her, she would be the most understanding just because she's just gushing with love and I just can't imagine her– I can't imagine that changing… So maybe I'll have a conversation with her, I don't know.

> M My mom is very conservative, but I don't think by choice, her dad is super conservative. I love my grandpa but he's super conservative, my grandma is not very conservative. She's definitely, like I always joke to my friends that if I were to come out to one person in my family it would be my grandma. She always had a place for "yes, care about your looks." Like if I went to her house with earrings on and a man bun, she would be like, "Oh you look so good right now!" And like her and my grandpa were the ones who really supported my arts and sent me to painting classes and bought me all the supplies that I literally asked for. So they spoiled me a lot, but my grandpa is very conservative and his family is super conservative.

[116] Further discussed in the *Community* chapter.
[117] The narrator associates being American with open-mindedness and awesomeness, with the implication that there's a stark difference with these traits and being Armenian.

M My uncles know I'm gay but they ask me if I have a girlfriend… [I] came out to [my] cousins, [and the] parents found out from [my] cousins. I don't care. I just didn't care. I said I'm not coming out to the parents… I know if there's ever a wedding and I need to bring a boyfriend, I don't know how that'll go over but I don't think it'll go over well… I will not go. If I have a spouse or a boyfriend even, and there's a wedding and you don't let me bring him, I won't come. Stubborn as a fucking mule. OK then you don't want me there… Being gay is hard, especially in our family. But fucking Aye. My mom now calls [my cousin's husband] her beard and her his green card.
Your mom knows the term beard[118]?
Yeah, my sister taught her.

With the first narrator, his burden with the magnitude of coming out to his family goes beyond the immediate members. Furthermore, it's significant to notice the second narrator's association between caring about one's looks, being stylish, and supporting the arts with characteristics of a person who would also then in turn be gay friendly. And the participant expresses feeling more comfortable with coming out to his grandmother than to his mother because of his grandmother's personality. With the third respondent, the uncle's complete disregard of his sexual identity, his reluctance to come out to aunts and uncles himself, and his fight for equal rights and representation within the family network at social gatherings are all indicators for the significant role the extended family members play in the queer Armenian experience. More than any other social setting, social events involving the family, such as weddings, are the forum where LGBT people are expected to conform and adapt their identities so that they can be included (Oswald 2000). The primary reason for this is because it involves the greater family network and doing otherwise has the potential to damage the family reputation. Thus, LGBT people are faced with defining and redefining their true selves and are involved in a constant interplay of visible and invisible representation in order to please their families and communities of origin (Oswald 2000; 2002a). Participants echoed the sentiments found in Oswald's research on heterosexism

[118]A person who serves to conceal another's sexual orientation. The context in this situation is that he and his mother assume that the cousin is a lesbian and is only marrying the man to seem straight, while the man is marrying her to get a green card.

within family rituals such as weddings. Central to the experience of LGBT people at family weddings was heterosexism. These heterosexist practices contributed to the sense that weddings are filled with social conventions that devalue LGBT people (Oswald 2000). These are not limited to the actual wedding itself, but also contain the gendered events leading up to the wedding, such as bachelor/bachelorette parties and bridal showers, which are to this day still divided by gender with the women the only invitees for bridal showers, and the separation of men and women for bachelor/bachelorette parties. Given the large and lavish nature of Armenian weddings, there's a high number of attendees comprised of all possible familial networks: immediate, extended, relatives, family friends, and social acquaintances regarded as family. The wedding guest list for Armenian weddings in Los Angeles tends to range from 300-600 people[119]. One of the instances of heterosexism and antipathy towards LGBQ Armenians is when those who had been in long term relationships would get invited to Armenian weddings but their significant others would explicitly be left out of the invitation – "you can come, but your significant other is not welcome," because they are uncomfortable with the display of other sexual identities in front of other Armenians. In these cases, LGBQ Armenians will either attend the weddings alone, or as the participant earlier had expressed, the insult factor is too high to attend when their significant others are not given the same respect as their non-LGBTQ identifying peers'. Second, participants expressed unhappily gender conforming by having to dress conventionally male and female:

> W I'm like, "I don't like it. I'm not going to wear a dress." I told [my mom] I'm not going to wear heels to graduation and I think she had a heart attack. I told her I'm not going to wear a dress to my brother's wedding and she also had a heart attack again. I was like "oh God". She was just kind of like, "Are you sure?" She just kind of stared at me because this is at the same time we have my sister going "Mom, I want these heels." … I feel like I'm going to end up in heels. I'm so stressed out.

[119] Other major celebrations of life events, such as engagements, bridal showers, baby showers, baptisms, sweet sixteens, graduations, and so forth, follow the same lavish trends.

LGBQ Armenians agonize over what to wear at these weddings, because they would have to adapt their clothing and in turn adapt their identities to fit in: "what one wears symbolizes who one is; clothing signifies identity" (Oswald, 2000, 357). Third, queer Armenians express not having the same privileges as straight Armenians when it comes to Armenian weddings: they do not have the opportunity to get married in Armenian churches and expressed concern about having low numbers of Armenian family members in attendance for a gay wedding.

> M I see people get married, on social media, all these Armenians, and they have these huge weddings, and it's so beautiful, and even though I understand this, if you will, school of thought about not trying to be heterosexual, there's this school of thought in the LGBT community where we're not trying to be heterosexual couples, I get that. But there's something that makes me really sad to know that I'm not going to have that type of wedding. We don't see gay couples having those types of weddings, you don't see families, Armenian families celebrating those relationships.

Furthermore, during the church ceremony, LGBTQ Armenians, along with feminists and socially conscious Armenians, do not appreciate the sexist contents and focus on procreation within the priests' sermons, or the gender conformity of the entire ritual. Misrepresentation or lack of presentation makes these Armenians feel invalidated. Fourth, when LGBQ Armenians do attend these weddings with their significant others, they either introduce them as their significant others *or* platonic friends to some, specifically elders. Furthermore, they expressed discomfort dancing with their significant others in front of family members, especially during slow dances, because it would give the entire family and friend network, for the first time, a visual representation of their relationships. Though it would validate the significant other's role, sometimes they are not ready for this public step, since they do not want to take the attention away from the bride and

groom and a wedding is the ultimate scene for display in front of the entire Armenian family գերդաստան[120].

- **Family of Origin's Relationship with Significant Others**

This section displays the Armenian cultural factors that play a role both in coming to terms with the decision to introduce parents to significant others and in the interactions between parents and significant others.

> W But then, when my girlfriend came around... I remember she was outside, I tried to come in, and I was going to tell my mom, "I'm going out, my friend's here," again, *friend.* And her first comment was, I'll never forget, "When are you going to bring a boy home?" And I remember being upset, like ruined my day. I was going to go out and have fun with her and it's like, "when are you..." And it's like, "Fuck" (laughs). I can't believe this just happened. It sucks, you know? You think your mom loves you. I mean, I know she does, but I don't know what it is, cultural– It's like what will people think, right? Armenian. That's the thing, it's like what other people think. Who cares? It sticks with you. It affects you, but it bothers you, because they care so much more about what other people think as opposed to how you feel, your own happiness, you know? And so when (girlfriend) came around, I brought her over, and they got along really well. It was cool, it was awesome. But again, I can never tell my mom, "This is my girlfriend, I love her." But she came to holidays, birthdays, everything... And my mom would look at her and "(name), I love you so much." Because I have a neighbor who they just talk shit about the son, they call him the daughter because he's gay, you know? And it's, they're in complete denial. So, I think if I lived in that home it'd be worse, he can't bring a boy home, he can't even bring a boy home, at least I can bring someone home. My mom would kiss (girlfriend) and hug her, show her her garden, it was like a friend coming over, nothing different. So, I appreciate it. It's just hard… My dad even liked her, but my mom made a comment, "You and (name) are like sisters." She said that comment one time, and it's like, "I don't get it, mom, where are you coming from? Don't you get it? I don't bring my boyfriend to Christmas, birthday, Easter..." You know? Was she that naïve? I don't know... Since I feel like, she feels so strongly about it, that I feel like, after all these years if I haven't been able to come out to her, if I do it now, she might have a heart attack. Like it's just not– I feel like I worry about her health. If I were to like– then she would have to accept it, and at this point, she's in denial so it's like I say, "Mom I'm gay. (Name) was my girlfriend for 7 years." Um, she might have heart problems. I don't know. She might have a minor heart attack. Like, I can't, so it's like selfish, almost, to say something. I think I should be more selfish, but it's like my parents, it's not a random person, you know? I can't, I don't know what to expect, I wish I could expect more from

[120] *Kʰɛrtʰasdan:* clan, commonly used to refer to familial networks: the immediate, extended, relatives, family friends, and those social acquaintances regarded as family.

> my mom, I think she has come a long way… I think other Armenian parents would have been, maybe, crazier.

LGBQ Armenians have a very difficult time being selfish when it comes to prioritizing their needs over their families' needs. Because they are raised in a collectivistic culture, having to be individualistic is difficult and hinders their coming out process. The agency and power required to negotiate their identity with their parents is lacking in all spheres of life. This narrator, who has yet to fully disclose her sexual identity to her parents, had involved her girlfriend of several years with her family – they would attend family gatherings and events together, but everyone would pretend they were platonic friends. Even though they were living together and were clearly in a relationship, the parents and extended family members were in denial (whether consciously is up for debate). Because she wasn't out to her parents, and because her girlfriend didn't have that title in front of her parents, she was able to include her at family events without any turmoil by using silence as a strategy to her benefit. They did not display any affection in public, therefore she described the first time her father caught her kissing her girlfriend goodbye as a very traumatizing event. She was not aware her father was there, and when she saw him, she immediately told her girlfriend to leave. She describes being very afraid and crying for the next few hours because her dad was vividly upset. However, after that night, this event was never mentioned or discussed again, presumably because that would require having to be real about the situation at hand by both the parent and the child, which neither was ready to tackle. In all the cases where participants were completely out to their parents and were introducing their significant others for who they actually were, there was no outright discrimination or tumultuous experiences since by that point parents had already had time to process their sexual identities and adapt to the idea of seeing their children in relationships with same-gendered people. The following accounts show those progressions:

How was bringing your boyfriend home?

M It was good. My parents– my family does this weird thing. We set a table. They dictate where everyone sits. Is that like a– I don't know if that's like a Western or Eastern Armenian thing. It's very important where everyone sits. The man of the house sits at the head. The woman sits on this side. It's very– and it's always like they orchestrate everything and they're always like we're trying to sit– "No, no you sit." "Oh my God. Let's just sit down, like seriously. Let's just sit down." I get so frustrated with that. "Hold on, do you want to sit here? Sit here. How about sitting here? I'll sit here." It doesn't matter. It just doesn't matter. And it shows that they care. Whatever. They put an effort in and I was kind of an ass… I expected [my brother] to be an ass and then when he wasn't. I was angry about it for some– I don't understand what it is… I know I didn't need to fight and I made my boyfriend uncomfortable but that relationship was doomed anyway (laughs). But it's still like even now, I look at now, and I know I did this. I did that because I still am– I expect [my brother] to not approve, even though he was still nice to my boyfriend. He was so sweet to my boyfriend. He was… I felt like such an idiot though, like "Sorry, (name of boyfriend)". I was like, "I know I was really nervous about bringing you and I know I started a fight." Whatever the case is. That's the only boyfriend my mother's met. But, before that the issue was he was the first boyfriend I told my mom about. I brought it up the first time.

How long after she said, "no gay stuff"?

Years. And then years after that, I told her about my first boyfriend ten years after I came out. So I said, "I have a boyfriend and it's going well," and I started talking about it. And she does this thing where she's watching TV and she's like– "Oh, you're non responsive. OK"… Try again later. I bring it up again and I go, "Mom, this is actually a picture of my boyfriend." She looks and she goes– she says it in Armenian. She says– to translate it she says, "Looks don't decide what kind of man he is." "Իրա տեսքերը չի ասում ինչ տեսակի մարդ ա."[121] I was like, "You cunt." She's being a bitch. She's being a bitch. And I was like, "OK." I don't say anything about it. I wait two days and then I just lay it on her. I was like, "You bitch!" So, we had a huge fight (laughs). I was like, "You were being a bitch. Own up to it." And she's like, "That's not what I meant." I'm like, "What did you mean?" "I'm just saying be careful." I'm like, "No." She's like, "I just don't want you to get hurt." "What do you know about me? You know nothing about me. You don't ask about my dating life. You don't– like you keep out of it so how could you stand there and give me dating advice when you've never been curious about it before? I'm trying to open up to you. Be perceptive or I won't talk to you about it ever. Don't be a bitch." So we had this huge fight. And then she said, "I want to make it up to you. Bring him over for dinner." So, that's why that happened… My mom doesn't deal well with guilt. Yeah. We had a fight once and she bought me a TV. I was like, "I should fight with you more often." Yeah, it's– she doesn't deal well with guilt…

Did they talk to you about him after?

Yeah, they asked about him.

M So it hadn't happened and I'd had a few boyfriends, but I haven't talked about them or introduced them. But I am dating someone now and so it's been a year and a few months,

[121] *Ira teskʰɛrə tʃʰi asum intʃʰ tɛsagi martʰ a*: his appearance doesn't say what type of person he is.

> and they met him. So they visited (city) six months after we started, and they met him as my boyfriend… It went well. So the language is an issue in terms of he doesn't speak Armenian. They speak English fine, it's just mine and their interaction is always in Armenian. And so whenever we interact in English, either at the family gathering where half of the people are not Armenian or there are very few places where we don't speak Armenian. So this was one of the cases where– yeah, so that was a little weird, but totally fine. They were—they said something I wasn't expecting. They said, "Be careful that he doesn't–" Or, "Be prepared for him leaving you," or "dumping you," or something negative. "We don't want you to go through–" I'm like, "Yeah, that's fine." So, they've been together– they've known each other since kindergarten, my parents, and they were high school sweethearts and whatever. So, they haven't really dated anyone else and so they haven't had– it was, "Yeah, some of our friends have gone– have had girlfriends and they've– it's ended negatively." And I'm like, "Yeah, it happens."… "Why are you going to bring that up?" But it was fine. And then, a few months later, I brought him [to Los Angeles]. And we went to a non-Armenian wedding. And he stayed with me at my parent's, which was huge, yeah. It was really good. Yeah, he liked it and my parents were fine and happy. Yeah, so it's very positive. And I mean, the only mention that they did– they don't talk too much about– we don't– since we don't have long conversations… So, my relationship with my parents has mostly been non-emotional, I would say, on my end. so it's been very superficial and all our phone conversations are max two minutes long but– so we just talk– yeah, I'll let them know about whatever– but my mom sometimes says, "Oh, I made this dish, իրեն տար[122]", or "He would like it." Yeah. So, that's nice.

As discussed previously, 1.5 and 2nd generation Armenian immigrants' language spoken at home is usually Armenian, which causes a language barrier, in this case, when dating non-Armenians. Children have difficulty communicating in general about serious or emotional topics with their parents due to lack of proficiency in higher registers of the Armenian language (Karapetian 2014). Furthermore, the participant expresses frustration with his parents bringing up the potential of a breakup instead of stating a positive comment about their relationship, indicating the hypersensitivity of these topics between parent and child. All these instances and more indicate a lack of closeness or openness with parents, especially when he alludes to them not having "long conversations." LGBQ Armenians feel resentment towards their parents for not knowing about and not seeming interested in their lives, even if they haven't been completely

[122] *Irɛn dar:* take it to him.

honest with them. The isolation caused by keeping secrets most of their lives makes LGBQ Armenians resent their parents for seeming uninterested, yet at the same time both parents and siblings are hurt by all the components of their lives that had been kept hidden from them. Additionally, many participants shared stories of their mothers telling their children to take food or leftovers to their significant others, even when their roles as significant others were not yet fully visible, indicating the strong role of food in the Armenian culture, especially among mothers showing their love through their home-cooking, and in this case, indicating their attempt to be inclusive of their children's significant others. The following are additional accounts depicting progression:

> **How is your wife's relationship with your family and how has it changed over the years?**
> W Well, in the beginning it was hard. Like I said, it was horrible, but it was only with my mom because my mom's the only one who knew. The rest of my family was nice to her because they thought they she was my friend... And then gradually, it took a good– over 10 years for my mom to finally come around.
> **Did (wife) being Armenian play a role?**
> Oh, absolutely! Yes, I think that was huge– if she wasn't, I don't think it– I don't know if they would've ever come around as well as they did. And then we– the donor, we made sure it was Armenian, because I thought– both of us thought that for our parents, if they knew the kids had an Armenian descent, that it would be better for them, too. Honestly, I probably wouldn't have cared so much, but I thought it would be better for our parents. And since it's available, why not? It would be kind of cool. So yeah, we did that, too. We made sure it was an Armenian… We definitely told our parents. "We picked an Armenian, so they're Armenian." So yeah, I think that helped, too. Yeah, I don't know what would've happened. They would've– who knows? … And then actually– after, when I told my mom that we got married, she was hurt that I hadn't told her and invited her. I was like, "Well, mom…"
> **Did you consider telling the parents?**
> We did, but we didn't think that they would– I didn't think she would be OK with it. She'd be like, "What? Married? How could you guys get marr– ?" Because of everything we'd gone through. But later, I think because she was OK with us and we already had the kids, she said, "Oh I wish you told me." But I don't know if– at the time if I told her if she would've. Later, she said she would have but I don't know at the time.
>
> **How is the relationship between your family and your husband?**

> M Շատ լաւ[123]. And my mom and him are very close. My brother and him are very loving. My cousins adore him. And they've fully embraced him– everyone. He's family, and then there's no difference in, "Oh, that's the gay one." They love him like he's family. You know what I mean?

A common narrative is that though participants do not have a preference in dating Armenians over non-Armenians, they either express how their significant others being Armenian made it easier for their parents or that they think if their significant others *were* Armenian it would have made it easier. One participant said, W "I think it would be a lot easier if [my girlfriend] was Armenian, but I think the fact that she was a woman, the race wasn't even an issue. It was like now all they want is for me to marry a man, it doesn't even matter what race." Whereas before her parents had issues with her siblings marrying non-Armenians, now since all they wanted was for her to be with a man, race and ethnicity stopped being a prevalent issue. Participants make distinctions between American and Armenian character traits and indicate the positionality in the significant others being Armenian and non-Armenian: M "With my current boyfriend, I was always thinking, "oh, I'm with (boyfriend's name) now, if I come out– He's really– my mom's going to love him because of how his manners are." So, I guess in my case, it would be like, oh, he's white, but like honestly, his upbringing is much more conservative, and so much more Armenian, in many ways than I act." This case is another indication where a narrator associates being Armenian with conservativeness in opposition to the expectation that Americans are liberals, and implies that though his boyfriend is white, i.e. American, he expects his mother would approve of him because he's conservative and well-mannered – traits linked to being Armenian.

[123] *ʃad lav*: very good.

One factor for the relevance of significant others' ethnicities is language. Since most of their parents were first generation immigrants, they primarily communicate with their children in Armenian, and now having to switch to English to communicate both with their children and their significant others creates a level of distance and unfamiliarity. There is an ideological aspect that goes beyond mere communication when it comes to language, given its symbolic role in the construction of Armenianness in a diasporic context (Karapetian 2018). First generation immigrant parents' insistence on their children to "speak Armenian!" throughout their childhood and youth (Karapetian 2014) stands in sharp contrast to now having to communicate in the Other language, which functioned as a threat to the Armenian identity the parents were so invested in cultivating. This is even the case with their children's non-Armenian friends, but makes the family dynamic more complicated when it's a significant other that's non-Armenian. Another factor is the culturally like-mindedness, from the expectation of behavioral traits to the familiarity of customs. Furthermore, since dating and marrying non-Armenians is still relatively uncommon in the heterosexual diasporic community of Los Angeles, it adds an extra component of reconciliation for LGBTQ Armenians. Otherwise, since by the time the parents are meeting the significant others, it is usually quite some time after the coming out and they have come to terms with their children's sexual identities, the overall meeting experience is positive. Even those who are coupled at the time of coming out introduced their significant others to their parents *as their significant others* at a much later date.

- **Reasons for Antipathy**

[Post coming out to his parents]
"And if you think this excuses you from providing me grandchildren, you couldn't be more mistaken" [his mother said].
"Um, and how exactly do you expect me to do that?" Alek asked.
"You'll figure it out," his mother informed him.
"You can adopt. Lots of gay couples do that," his father said.

- Michael Barakiva[124]

When the parents insinuate that Alek can adopt, they mean you can adopt an *Armenian* child. During the interviews, participants would often attempt to explain their parents struggles with acceptance of their sexual identities by looking from the parents' perspective. The following cultural factors were some of the reasons mentioned for their antipathy toward LGBTQ people:

> M The way they were conditioned, the way they were raised, the way they were told that it's bad, either by Armenian culture and American culture… Machismo Armenian. Hands down. I don't think it's the American. I think the American definitely influences them but not so– I think it's machismo Armenian and they use the church as an excuse but it really doesn't matter… Being gay as a man is very threatening to men because it shows them that someone may look at them the way they look at women, which is, the way men look at women can be awful. And they think I could be– I'm not on top now? And that's very threatening to them so there's– It's just the way they were– you know, the machismo attitude. My mother, she thought it was a deviant lifestyle. And also, she wouldn't get grandchildren. That was her biggest thing. I was like, "How do you know that?" … Oh, Yeah. my mom actually was convinced that my dad raped me. That was one of her things, which is another reason why she wasn't okay with it. And I was like, "No, it never happened." And also she was like, "You're going to dress like a woman." I was like, "No. Because that's not what being gay is…" [Another] one of her things when I came out, my mom was like, "What about God?" I was like, "Bitch, when was the last time you were at church?" Like, seriously? "He's only there as arsenal when you fucking need him? Seriously, either you're a Christian or you're not. You don't get to use that as a…"
>
> M Definitely religion with my mom, with my dad this idea of Others and whoever's not Armenian is an Other. White people are even made fun of… "But we're Armenian" like, "Dad, I want to wear red shoes", "But we're Armenian." So, a lot of just unnecessary, not that it's ever necessary, but unnecessary pride. A lot of pride in this vague idea of what it means to be an Armenian that has kind of little to do with fun things about being Armenian, like our music, our culture, poetry, our history. But this idea of, "We're Armenian and we're better than everybody else." And being Armenian comes with this criteria of straight, married, kids, doctor, lawyer, engineer, whatever…
>
> M It was definitely the denial that it exists in Armenians. The idea that, "Yeah, it's an American thing." The shame of telling family members. The traditional– I mean it all goes back to those traditional values of the man and the woman, and the kids, and those pretty strict gender roles. Which again, is odd, because my parents were kind of– my parents are very atypical for an Armenian family[125]. But they still had those traditional–

[124] *One Man Guy*, 2014.
[125] In terms of gendered parental roles: his father was the primary caretaker and his mother the breadwinner.

> So I think that that was the biggest part of it – that Armenian cultural belief; the Armenian cultural homophobia. And just heteronormativity – that idealization of the great married couple.
>
> M I say that it's our nationalism. But, there are lots of other reasons. There's only one way to be Armenian, being gay you hear a lot as something that's foreign to us– Americans do those things. In Armenia, you hear lots of people saying that that is a European thing… I don't know, I wish I could go into their brains and see what they're thinking or how they perceive these things, because I mean this is what you hear: it's shameful, it's disgusting, it's bad, you're not going to get married, you're not going to have children. I mean, we're talking about nationalism, procreation is a giant, important part of nationalism, "We have to make the nation bigger and create more Armenians." So if you approach it that way, it's clear why that's important for nationalism. But even on an individual, familial core[126], it's still super important for the individual, forget the nation, for us[127], we want grandchildren, the parents want grandchildren… We're not very good at assimilating number one… But also it's shameful to assimilate. It's bad to assimilate… Also you have the Genocide, which only compounds this anxiety over assimilation and it's like, not only we shouldn't assimilate, but look what happened to us, look what they, the enemy, tried to do. We have to not assimilate. So, before the Genocide, we were still Armenians for 3,000 years, so the Genocide only made it ten times worse. There's huge pressure, you hear it all the time – "We're a tiny nation, we're going to die, how can you be gay? We need more Armenians, you need to make more Armenians." It's just like, "fu– oh my God, I can adopt!" (laughs).

Participants listed reasons such as religion as an instrument, machismo attitudes leading men to feel threatened by gay men, adherence to traditional gender roles and idealizations of heteronormative couples and marriages. They expressed that the LGBTQ lifestyle is deemed deviant and is a sickness that is viewed as an American, Western, or European phenomenon. They listed misconceptions about childhood molestation as cause for homosexuality, that being gay has the same connotations as being a cross-dresser, and alluded to the culture's fear of Otherness and the boxed definition of Armenianness. These reasons indicate that parents have a clear lack of knowledge about what it means to be gay, because sex and sexuality are taboo,

[126] Interesting to note how the narrator does not differentiate between the individual and the family, signifying the collective nature of Armenian culture.
[127] The narrator differentiates between the nation and the individual, but in his definition of the individual he includes an "us" i.e. the family core.

stigmatized, and not discussed. Apart from being ignorant, they are very misinformed in these matters by Armenian society, family members, and community leaders.

Being a product of genocide, procreation is viewed as an integral part of the continued existence of Armenians, as compensation for those lost and their potential progeny. This atmosphere highlights the pressures of the heteronormative structures of gender, marriage and family while fearing any Other lifestyle. Therefore, the false assumption that LGBTQ Armenians do not have children, or *Armenian* children, is one of the factors why homosexuality is deemed a threat to the culture. Interestingly, those who oppose LGBTQ families and use the undermining of traditional family values as their excuse, with the false presumption that the children will automatically grow up LGBTQ themselves, are a huge contrast with Armenian families, who not only never mention this argument, but rather accept the children as foundations for reinforcing Armenianness and family unity and continuity.

- **LGBQ Armenian Families**

"Documenting the existence of LGBT parents is important, in so much as they reflect the diversity of family arrangements, and provide greater insight into the ways in which social policies and structures affect families on the micro-level. They also show how families, by their very practices, help to engender macro-level social change. Yet family and same-sex sexuality appear as mutually exclusive categories in most treatments of Black family structure and change. However, LGBT people indeed have siblings, care for elderly parents, raise children, and develop families of their own..."

- *Juan Battle & Natalie Bennett*[128]

LGBQ Armenian families have yet to be represented in academic discourse. As has been demonstrated in this chapter thus far, LGBQ Armenians do not have visibility in Armenian society, therefore, not surprisingly, LGBQ Armenian families have even less. As Battle &

[128] "'We Can See them, But We Can't Hear Them': LGBT members of African American families," 2001.

Bennett (2005) demonstrate, family and sexuality are seen as mutually exclusive categories in the Armenian family case as well. LGBQ Armenians do get married and do raise and have children of their own, not necessarily in that order, and one is not necessarily contingent upon the other. By marking their LGBQ Armenian identities as an open and significant component in raising families, their approach challenges some of the theoretical and empirical approaches previously researched by scholars. Similarly, "including women of color in the study of lesbian practice and lesbian family formation reveals how these women structure their lives and approach family formation and identities of all kinds… These alternative foundations lead Black women to approach lesbian sexuality and the structuring of lesbian-led families with different goals and objectives than previous theories of lesbian sexuality might predict" (Moore 2011, 3). LGBQ Armenian mothers are simultaneously altering existing systems of family and parenthood, while seeking "social change that will facilitate their integration into existing social structures" (Moore 2011, 150). As the findings in this chapter will show, by applying queer diaspora as a theoretical concept, LGBQ mothers provide new methods of contesting traditional family structures, while facilitating these integrations into the existing Armenianness structures of parenting adopted from their families of origin.

LGBQ Armenians in Los Angeles, living in a country that officially legalized same-sex marriages in 2015, have these options. The trend for LGBQ Armenian families is to have children of their own instead of adopting, in itself an Armenian move, since previous discussions have depicted that transmission of Armenianness is through blood ties[129]. The questions that were posed about LGBQ Armenians' families of origin experiences regarding their upbringing,

[129] None of the LGBQ Armenian families encountered in this research or fieldwork had adopted children – they all had children of their own. Therefore, this study does not cover the struggles with adoption that LGBTQ Armenian families face in the United States. Additionally, participants included LGBQ mothers but the LGBQ men in this family, though some were married, were not parents at time of interview.

expectations in education, significant others, traditions, and the role of the Armenian Genocide, history, and religion, were now approached pertaining to their own families. The following are the results from their discussions about having children, marriage, name decisions, upbringing, Armenianness, and Armenian institutions.

> W We're just like any other normal family. I always identify with I fell in love with a woman. That's it, so. I don't really think about my identity at all. My life is consumed with my children and that's all that matters and making sure they're good people and, at the same time, knowing who they came from. They all three know that they came out of me or (wife) and we're very honest with them. We're always honest with them. But, that's it.

> W Well, we were– we wanted to always have kids and we were getting older. So soon as we got the house, we said– we thought that, "OK, now we can have kids." Like every other couple, I'm sure. And since I was older, I wanted to go first and I wanted to experience pregnancy. My plan was for each of us to have one. So, we– how did we find out? I don't remember if we talked to somebody– I think we had some gay friends who went through the Cryobank[130] and they told us about it. So, I went online and I looked at the Cryobank and you learn about how to do it there. And then we saw there were Armenian donors, so we went through– there was only a few, which is kind of good that we were limited to Armenian, because there was only a few. So, we didn't have to be like– So we read about them and we picked the one we liked and then I had a hard time getting pregnant. I was trying for a year and a half and it wasn't working. Every month, I was trying. And eventually, they found out I had a polyp in my uterus, which they think prevented me from keeping the pregnancy. So, I ended up having surgery and they took that out, but we had already started the process to try in vitro at that time. So, we said, "Let's– since we started with the process, let's just go ahead and do it." And I– it was expensive. My mom– actually, my mom helped us pay for it. Yeah. So, I said, "Well, let's do it once and if it doesn't work, then I'll give up and (wife) can have the kids." So, we did it [and it worked]… And then after a year and a half or so (wife) was ready, so then she got pregnant on the first try.
>
> **Had you guys already reserved it for when– ?**
>
> Yes, we bought all the– we saw that there was only a limited number and we wanted the kids to have the same– So we bought all of– and we had them frozen. I used up a lot of them, so thank God (wife) got pregnant on the first try. You know, we tried for a fourth after. (Wife) wanted to have one more. And she was 38 at the time but she started having– she couldn't get pregnant and there was only I think six or seven left. So, she tried with those and it didn't work and then she gave up. She said, "It wasn't meant to be." … But yeah, we always wanted to have kids. Yeah, that was important for both of us.

[130] Donor sperm bank.

For LGBQ families, having children is a conscious choice and never a byproduct of accidental pregnancies. As such, mutual understanding and decision-making are required to have children in same-sex relationships. Both the thought process and the steps taken are seen in the participant's statement. Once they bought a house, they were now ready to have children, *just like every other couple* – participants were eager to point out that the steps they took or paths they followed were not extraordinary, yet again emphasizing normalization as of one of their strategies with their sexual identities and now with their families. Age was a determining factor in who got pregnant first, Armenian was a determining factor in which donor to obtain, and her mother helped ease the financial burden.

On the topic of marriage, participants had various sentiments. Some criticized the necessity and the heteronormative nature, others expressed a desire for and felt fortunate to have marriage rights. LGBQ parents expressed how marriage alleviated the adoption process and expressed the desire to provide their kids with the sense of security that comes from societal expectations for parents to be married.

> W Marriage came about– let's see. When– at the time that I had the (first kid), they didn't legally see (wife) as the parent. So, it was weird, it kind of happened during the time that we had the kids. I think right after they were born, they changed the law. So, (wife) was not on the birth certificate as a parent, but then we went through legal adoption, because we didn't want to ever have problems. So, (wife) adopted them, and then that's when the laws started changing around that time. So then, they sent us a new birth certificate and she was listed as the parent. And then when we had (second kid) at that time, there was no question. The law had already changed. I was on the birth certificate and I was seen as the parent. But even so, not all states accept that, so I adopted (second kid) too, which is just in case. Because you never know. What if we're in– somewhere vacationing– yeah. So, both of us legally adopted the kids. And then, I– we always kind of talked about getting married because we wanted the kids to know that we were married. And we knew we were going to be together, so we thought, "OK, let's get married so that our kids know that we're a married family." So, we– during that short time in 2008 that it was legalized. Well, I– a friend of (wife)'s is a judge. So, she asked her to marry us and she came to our house, so we just did it here… It was so cute. Because I asked (cousins) to be– to give me away, yeah. So that was really cute that they did that, and then the kids were the flower girls so it was really cute.

W We didn't invite our parents. We– it was still– even though the kids were born it was– we felt it was just going to be too hard for them to deal with that… And I regret not having my mom. My mom said, "hnqhu[131], why didn't you tell me? I would have come." I was like, "Fuck"… You just never know and I felt really bad… [We thought], "No. Let's just not have it. It's our moment." I said, "I don't want it to be like– I don't want to worry about your mom. I don't want you to worry about my mom and vice versa. I just want a happy moment." And it was great… It was really fun.

W I, with my first partner of 10 years, we jumped into it the minute domestic partnership became legal– like '98 was it? or something like that, or 2000? And, you know, I felt that need– the need to do that. And then we ended up spending a lot of time and effort to dissolve that. Personally, that just kind of left me a little cold, a little cynical. My current– my current partner, I think, would really love to take the next step. Eh, to me I'm over it (laughs). I have no– I mean I– I'm not passionate about it. I see why it became the big topic, because it's one topic that kind of has many things rolled into it. It's like a candy wrapper with a lot of stuff in it. It's your right as a human being, it's equality, it's all of these things that it entails, and so it was a good topic to target for the community at large. Personally, I couldn't care less about it.

Domestic partnership in California was enacted in 1999 and same-sex marriage was legalized for a very brief period in June 2008. In November 2008, the passage of a state constitutional amendment, Proposition 8, barred same-sex marriages in California. The marriage licenses issued between June–November 2008 remained valid, though new licenses were halted until June 2013 when the United States Supreme Court overturned Proposition 8 as unconstitutional. And, in June 2015, the US Supreme Court recognized that same-sex couples have a constitutional right to marry (Brettschneider, Burgess, & Keating 2017; Frank 2017).

LGBQ Armenians appreciated the equality achieved with these milestones, yet, some criticized the politics of sameness that has been encouraged within the LGBTQ community as a result of those movements, consequently, many other LGBTQ causes have been neglected. One participant said, M "To think that gay politics has basically centralized gay marriage as the absolute crossing through the pearly gates type of an experience is just insulting in many ways,

[131] *Hɔkʰis:* my soul – term of endearment.

because being queer and being outside of the normative society is where all the adventures of life that you want to be in lies." Furthermore, some participants also discussed their disinterest in traditional monogamous relationships, regardless of gender, which are a byproduct of heteronormative societies that their sexual identities do not confine them to.

In lieu of predisposed gender norms predicting last names, LGBQ Armenians have discussions and come to mutually agreed upon decisions about their children's last names.

> W Well, we wanted them to have both our names, but we knew if we gave them both our names they're already so long, for them to have (last name-last name), way too long. We didn't want them to have to deal with that. So, I suggested that, "Why don't we put one as the middle name? Let's put one as the middle name, so that way they have one long last name and they don't have to deal with writing both and hyphenating." So then, I don't know, I just said, "OK." I asked her, "Which one do you want to– ?" Because I didn't really care, and she said, "Why don't we put (your last name) and then we'll put (my last name) as the middle name?" So, she said it, because I didn't want to say it. And then I said, "Well, are you sure you're OK with that?" And she said, "Yeah." And then I said, "Do you– " when (second kid) was born, I said, "Do you want to keep (second kid)'s the same?" She goes, "Of course I want to keep (second kid)'s the same." She goes, "I want them all to be the same." So now, I tease her and I say, "You planned this, because when they get married they're going to drop (my last name) and you're always– they're always going to have the (your last name)."
>
> **This is assuming they're going to drop their last names (laughter)…**
>
> Yeah, that is assuming, because I do tell them, "You don't have to." Actually, (first kid) asked me the other day asked me whose name does– do they take? When they get– when people get married. I said, "Usually, the man's, but not always. You don't have to, you can do whatever you want." Yeah. And then I asked (wife), "Well, since we all have (my last name), do you want to put it?" But we– none of us– neither of us want to hassle with the paperwork and all that, that's the only reason.

The reason she questioned if her wife wanted to keep the names in the same format for their second child is because technically the second child is biologically her wife's, however, that component plays no significant role in their family. The participant did emphasize that it was important for them for their children to have Armenian first names as well. Furthermore, cultural gender norms are so deeply engrained that even in queer families the traditional assumption takes automatic precedence in the mind – evident when the participant initially assumes her daughters

would take on their *husband's* last names. The sense of the continuation of the family name is still a concern in Armenian society, thus, as discussed previously with Armenian families being very child-oriented, grandchildren signify the continuity of the next generation. The following section indicates the role of Armenianness in their family & children's upbringing.

> W The kids were baptized, so that is very important to us that it be done in an Armenian church with the Armenian mass and all of that, because– and the donor we got was Armenian… So it was very important for us to– for our kids to have full blooded Armenian. Yeah. So they're full Armenian. They look Armenian.

> W The Armenian language– I wanted the kids to know, so since they were born we only spoke Armenian to them. And all the cultural things that I grew up with. Armenian Christmas and a little bit teaching them about April 24[132], Armenian food, and then just– I don't know… The music, the dancing, the weddings, everything. I would love for them to have that.

> W With my children, [I speak] Armenian and English. I speak to them in Armenian 90% of the time and they answer always back in English. But, that's OK, because I know that they're getting it.

> W So since they were born, we always spoke Armenian. And then we tried– we did the Armenian Christmas, tried to do the Armenian things and then we– when they were older, we told them about April 24 and honoring, da da da[133]. Yeah, but it was important, and then when– we were at a fair here in (city) and we saw an Armenian flag. We were like, "What is that?" They had a booth. And the lady that was there was like– we walked up and said we're Armenian, and she's like, "Ohhh." And then she saw the kids, she's like, "You guys have kids?" We're like, "Yeah." She's like, "We have a school on Fridays in (city)." We're like, "No, we don't know about it." We're so thankful we saw her. And she's like, "You should bring them." And of course, she had no clue we were a couple. She probably thought we were two moms with our kids. So she gave us all the information. So we showed up there.

The LGBQ Armenian parents in this study emphasized the importance of their children being full Armenian, the Armenian language, educating their children about the Armenian culture and their heritage, and that it was important for them to attend Armenian school. One participant stated that it went even beyond his desires, that M "preserving Armenian is very important for

[132] Date of Genocide commemoration.
[133] Referring to the Genocide.

my mom... I think if I told my mom that I'm having kids with my husband, and I don't want my kids to grow up Armenian, then there would be issues. She'd be like, "What? What do you mean you don't want to transfer that on to the next generation?" Furthermore, LGBQ Armenian parents stated their preference for their children to grow up surrounded by other Armenians, whether that be through Armenian schools or organizations, since this would increase their chances of maintaining their Armenianness and marrying Armenians.

> **Did you consider sending them to an Armenian private school?**
> W At first, I did, because that's what I went through because I thought it'd be kind of cool. But there's none around here, it's very expensive, so those– and even if there was one close by, just because it's so expensive we probably wouldn't have. At the– and now that they're older, I'm happy with public school. It doesn't really matter.
> **How about Armenian organizations?**
> I would like to– actually, they did one year participate in the Homenetmen[134]– because our chapter has a tiny Homenetmen. So one year, they did participate in the Olympics, so we put them in and they went and they did track and field. And that was really cool and they– we walked the parade and they experienced that whole thing and I loved that. But they don't have– they didn't continue it. I think they have a Homenetmen chapter, which is tiny with older kids, but they don't do the Olympics or any of that. When they're– through the Armenian school, I'm hoping as they get older, when they graduate Armenian school that they continue at– either in AYF[135] or Homenetmen. I would like that, but they have to want it, too. But I want them to be around Armenians because I think I would like them to be married to an Armenian. So I want them to have that social circle, but I know that they may not. But I'll deal with it when it happens.

The parents having faced no discrimination about their sexual identity or towards their family from the Armenian community did not state any fears or apprehensions about sending their children to these institutions for their antipathy toward people like them. Rather, the reasons listed were of proximity and financial[136]. This is significant because the younger participants in

[134] Homenetmen [HMEM] is an Armenian scouting and athletic organization, affiliated with the ARF
[135] AYF – Armenian Youth Federation, ARF's youth organization.
[136] There is a generational difference in that previous generation Armenians would have driven far distances and prioritized tuition money, above all, for Armenian schools. However, this has not proven to be the case with newer generations, and neither for Armenians from Armenia. For the latter, not only could they not afford or prioritize funds, they took their children's Armenian identity for granted, because they assumed their children will speak and be Armenian.

this study stated concerns reflecting the former: M "If I send my kids to an Armenian school, I'd be a gay parent with a partner sending my kids, and (laughs) I would have to have– I don't know what I would do. I would have to have a very serious conversation with all the teachers, all the administrators, to make sure that my child is protected. Whether or not they're gay, having gay parents– that's a huge stigma on my child in our community." The impact of these familial and communal issues on the younger generations, regardless of gender, is highlighted since they are still in their multi-layers of coming out, and the future possibilities of further negative reactions seem much more plausible than the reality depicted by the LGBQ Armenians who are parents, are older in age, and overcame these issues decades ago.

The findings regarding family of origin's structure, upbringing, and expectations in the beginning of this chapter are revisited here to depict which factors are maintained, prioritized, and continue to be emphasized by LBGQ Armenian parents now with their own children.

> W Religion– at some– (wife) and I both wanted them to have some spirituality. So we– I was– we were happy that we found the Sunday school, because they told us at the Armenian school that there's a Sunday school. And I thought it was great, because they teach them the Bible and all that in English and things they can understand and apply. So I'm really glad that they do that, I want them to continue with that. And then at home, we sometimes pray before we eat dinner, thanking and– but not every day. It's not like a strict thing. So the kids ask us about God and we tell them, but we– I don't know, how do I explain it? Yeah, we don't tell them the rules of– how we grew up. Just the good stuff. So that's the extent of religion, I guess. It's not that– they're young, too, so– as far as marriage, we tell them– we never say husband. We say husband or wife, whatever you choose, a girl or a boy. And then what was the other one, education? Definitely, they know they're going to college. We already have their college fund going and they know it. So – but of course, if they decide to do something else, that's fine. But we want them to continue their education.

> W So the հայոց պատմութիւն[137] and all that they get from the school and when they bring it home and we do the homework, we talk about it then… Speaking Armenian, I mention it a lot with the kids– not a lot, but a little more than (wife), saying it's important to speak Armenian and we have to continue– it's your mother language. It's who we are. So once in a while that comes up for me, because I get frustrated with all the English talk,

[137] *Hajɔtsʰ badmutʰjun:* Armenian history.

but it's everywhere around them… It's really important for us, because we all need a sense of identity… I want them to know they're Armenian and that as far as religion… [It's] great, because they're really learning about religion. That's really important for us, because we all need a sense of identity... As far as marriage and sex I tell them all the time. I say, "When you have a boyfriend *or* girlfriend, I don't know." That's how I always approach every conversation. They have to be someone who's nice to you. And, if they're not Armenian, I don't– I tell them it's fine. They just have to be kind and good people. And, if they're good people, then I don't care if they're black, if they're white. If they're good people, they're in this family. That's what I tell them.

Do you have a preference for them?

I prefer Armenian. I do, because I know what that feels like– it's just different. It's just different… There's no– you can't deny that. It's your blood. You just– you can't deny that. So I would prefer that, which is one of the other reasons why I want them in Homenetmen and I want them to start to go to AYF camp, because I want them around Armenians to understand how we have the same likes and understandings and maybe meet someone and, if not, that's fine. That's fine too. They know that.

In connection to her children's Armenianness, the second mother states, "I want them around Armenians to understand how we have the same likes and understandings." Interestingly, she, as an LGBQ Armenian, is technically marginalized by Armenian society, yet her minority within minority status does not change her outlook on the sameness and closeness of Armenians. This is another indication of the salience of Armenian identity over a queer identity, which is especially a trend when entering parenthood (Moore 2011). Though in her own upbringing religion did not play a major rule for the first participant, she wants her children to grow up with some spirituality. The terminology of "spirituality" is very striking in that it indicates a concept outside of the traditional Armenian context, presumably imbibed from their American ambiance and thereby offering their new perspective to religion in their new construction of Armenian identity. It is a much more personal approach to and choice for religion than being members of a specific Armenian church. She admits that they never prayed before meals or at night in her family of origin but wishes to begin that practice with her own children. Even if it was not practiced in her immediate family, she attended an Armenian school which offered religion classes. Since her own children do not attend Armenian schools, she is happy that they get to receive that education

from this Sunday school. The parents in this study indicated that it was important to them for their children to know about the Genocide but they did not want to their children to be educated about the Genocide in the same way they were. Awareness and education were very important, but not the focus on hatred towards modern Turkish people or association with the victimization of Armenians. In terms of the restrictions that were imposed on them regarding significant others' race and sex, neither mother applies these rules upon their own children. They make sure to provide the kids with gender options for dating and even though they state having a preference for an Armenian for reasons of cultural similarities and closeness, neither insisted that their children had to exclusively date Armenians. Once again, education was emphasized both in their families of origin and with their own children. Based on the results from the findings on education in this research, these findings follow suit with LGBQ Armenian parents placing a high value on education in their own families. However, some take it a step further by securing a college fund which is arguably an American tradition. Their own parents having been first generation immigrants struggling to adapt to a new country and culture, were additionally burdened economically. Therefore, they would not have had the financial opportunities, means, or foresight to set up a college fund, nor would they be aware of the common American custom of creating college funds for their children.

M "So [Baptism] just seemed like you get registered as an Armenian." To quote one of the participants, the reason culturally religious Armenians may baptize their children is to record them as Armenians. For example, Armenians who don't have Armenian last names can use their baptism certificates to prove their Armenian heritage when applying for scholarships with Armenian ancestry as qualifications[138]. Therefore, even though the following couple stated being

[138] Also seen as a rite of passage for Armenians in general.

culturally religious, they still wanted to baptize their children: W "We wanted to have them baptized, I don't know why. I guess because that's what you do, Armenian people do. That's the thing to do." – further marking baptism as a cultural tradition. The subsequent story is their experience baptizing their children in an Armenian church. The interviews were conducted separately and segments are arranged here to reflect the story from both perspectives. Each wife is depicted by the numbers "1" and "2" to show the change in narrator:

> **1.** That's probably something you should know about, because we were really fearful that– we wanted to baptize them in an Armenian church, but we're two women. So we were like, "How are they going to react to that?" Because, I know that there was– one of the people in that church wrote an article, a bad article, about gay people. Yeah. So we're like, "OK. How are we going to do this?" We wanted to baptize the kids and do the whole *kef*[139] thing afterwards.
>
> **2.** Well, we wanted to have them baptized, I don't know why. I guess because that's what you do, Armenian people do. That's the thing to do. So my best friend from high school, her dad's the priest, the ՏԷր Հայր[140]? So I asked her, I said, "Listen, we want to do this but we don't know how to go about doing this." So she asked her dad, because he knows about (wife) and I. And so he had to ask the սրբազան[141] and I guess it went all the way up to– supposedly, they asked the "Pope." I was like, "Oh my God." And so we got the OK.
>
> **1.** The կաթողիկոս[142] came back with the answer, "Every child is God's child." He said, "Yes, absolutely. We're baptizing."
>
> **2.** But they told us, "Just keep it small," which, at the time, we were OK with, because we– I think we were so happy that they said they'll do it. But now, when we look back, (wife), especially, gets mad. She says, "We shouldn't have done that. We should've had a big party like everybody else."
>
> **1.** The condition, not from the կաթողիկոս[143], but from the church was that they just ask that you just– that you don't invite everybody, just the godfather and the godmother and your two small, immediate families. So no one was there. So now we're doing this baptism and everybody's at the (restaurant) waiting for us… They didn't want the community to know that all these people were there for a gay baptism… OK because, it's

[139] Party.
[140] *Dɛr Hajr*: reverend, term of address to priests.
[141] *Srpʰazan*: terms of address for Armenian bishops.
[142] *Gatʰɔʁigɔs:* Catholicos – supreme patriarch of the Armenian Apostolic Church.
[143] *Gatʰɔʁigɔs:* Catholicos.

all about food? No. We want them there. So that's the only thing that I wish we didn't– I just wish we just should have said, "ԵկԷք"[144] you know? But, at the time we're like, "We don't want to burn any bridges." We never want to piss anybody off. And we were just grateful that they were doing it, so we were happy with– happy with the whole thing.

2. I was just happy at the time and in fact, I even said how is– like for (first kid), how– where is (wife) going to stand? How are we going to do that whole thing? And you know how they have the family kiss the– ? So I wasn't sure how it was going to be, because he was– they weren't sure, because it was their first time. So I think at first they told us, "Just don't have too many people" and they said, "(wife) could be there." But that was it. But then actually, the day they had it, the priest was awesome. (Wife) stood there like she was the mom and she was part of the family and there was nothing to it. He was great. So we're lucky that we got him. Another priest may not have done that… [When it was time for the second child's baptism] "we have another one." And he was great, he's like, "I want to– can I come baptize your house?" You know how they do that? With the– we never had him, but he offered, which was– we were shocked. So we're really lucky we got one of the more progressive priests, I think… He was really sweet. And now, when he sees us he's, "Hi, how are you?" He looks at the kids, he's great. Yeah, got really lucky. So, that was cool.

They were initially fearful that their own sexual identities would stand in the way of Armenian priests baptizing their children in the Armenian church. They were surprised when they were welcomed and very happy to get the opportunity to baptize them that they did not initially focus on the priest's demands to not have the extended family present at church. Though they feel very fortunate to have encountered a priest who was kind enough to baptize without hesitation, they are upset that they had a restricted version of a traditional Armenian baptism, one without the privileges non-LGBTQ identifying Armenians have.

Overall, LGBQ Armenian parents included in their own families the same upbringing customs they were exposed to in their families of origin, however, with the adaption of more inclusive strategies and approaches to parenting. They have the opportunity to parent and create families without a set family structure which allows them to redefine gender and family and challenge traditional notions of parenthood. Yet, as with the mothers in Moore's study, "even

[144] *Jɛgɛkʰ:* [you all] come.

when they oppose structures of domination, they see their success as rooted in how well they are able to conform to the expectations created by those structures… They are not merely attempting to reproduce the Black communities that they are in. I see their choices, rather, as attempts to enact an identity in which race and sexual orientation inform and therefore modify one another" (Moore 2011, 150). In the negotiation and fluidity of family structures, they continue to highlight Armenianness, place value in education, religion, Genocide, traditions, marriage, yet approach these with increased awareness and inclusivity, in order to implement social change facilitating their integration within the confines of existing social structures.

Discussion

The LGBQ Armenian families in this research present the latest models of the Armenian family while representing family as fluid and contested. Within this modern family structure, they utilize different approaches to parenting and maturation separate from the heteronormative operations of their upbringing. By employing feminist standpoint theory and queer theory, this research uses the marginalized lives of LGBQ Armenians as the starting point for analyses of findings, which moves away from the traditional practice of simply studying neglecting groups by focusing and making LGBQ experiences the foundation of this research and by highlighting operations of heteronormativity (Fotopoulo 2012; Asencio 2009; Harding 2004; Wood 2005). This research focuses on the experiences LGBQ Armenian mothers as its starting point. The research shows the implications of similar approaches in terms of parenting expectations and Armenianness from their families of origin, yet they approach parenting with more openness and flexibility than their own parents, and thus provide a new interpretation of being Armenian in Los Angeles. In some instances, realizing their marginalized status as LGBQ mothers, they

prefer to normalize and conform to traditional notions of parenthood in order to protect their children from any additional criticism (Goldberg 2012) by emphasizing that their approaches are "just like any other couple", "we're not different than other families", etc. However, their perspectives on the Armenian family are about much greater understanding, greater contact, discussions present between parent and child, and far less sense of strict control.

Specific to the Armenian families in this research, they are also undermining the traditional patriarchal family structure and male hegemony that is presented in Armenian societies by having an egalitarian family approach. Consequently, applying queer diaspora as a theoretical concept provided new methods of contesting traditional family and kinship structures (Eng 2003), as the LGBQ Armenian families in this research have indicated in doing with the steps taken in their methods to having children and approaches to parenting. Therefore, introducing the possibility of families in the next generation with much greater openness in terms of coupling, marriage, child-rearing.

Conclusion

M *So I came out to myself and it was a wonderful time in my life, honestly, so amazing, and even though I was completely aware of the fact that, if anybody else knows about this, it's not going to look pretty, it was still amazing… That has always made me wonder if this secretiveness around being queer has a lot to do with being queer. Once everything is out there, it's like it doesn't feel as exciting. It's just kind like, "OK, now my life is public discussion, and I don't like that either."*

Cultural influences and standards allow for sexuality to be inherently seen as a private and secret matter justifying the above participant's statement. LGBQ Armenians do not have a way of preparing for the public portion of their sexualities, especially with their families. Whether participants were 21 or 51 years old, they were 1.5 & 2nd generation immigrants. A significant trend was in the age at coming out – what is becoming more common is the

possibility for LGBQ Armenians to come out as teenagers, whereas the youngest age of coming out was 25 among the older interviewees. But, coming out in 1990 verses coming out in 2015 had no difference in terms of reaction and acceptance by family of origin, because, though the children are influenced by American culture, the parents being born outside, are not paralleling this progression[145].

Since the family is primary to the lives of LGBQ Armenians, the heartbreak of not having their families be part of their authentic lives is evident among participants. The significance of familial support and acceptance was communicated as a necessity by all participants. Participants expressed the desire and importance of having Armenian specific support groups for parents[146], because M "they do suffer, too. It's not like my experience was in a vacuum and I'm the only one who had a hard time. I know that my parents suffered really greatly from it. And I'm not saying that it's OK that they had those ideas. But they did have those ideas and values, and that needs to be acknowledged and a little bit more sympathetically." LGBQ Armenians are understanding of the cultural factors that are the reasons for their parent's beliefs and reactions, however, parents do not have the knowledge to provide their children with the same understanding and necessary compassion. Additionally, the reaction by some parents, which was not so expected by the children, in being offended by their children not telling them about their sexual identities earlier, further highlights the close ties of the family. In relation, because of this close-knit nature, the children do not want to create problems for their parents and are, in fact,

[145] Interestingly, in their Middle Eastern host countries, such as in Iran and Lebanon, Armenians were regarded as being more progressive, liberal, and advanced on the whole *and* were used to regarding themselves as more liberal than the other ethnic and religious groups in those countries.
[146] For example, in April 2018, GALAS had an event titled "Soorj Sessions" (Coffee Sessions), the first of its kind, whose purpose was to provide a supportive space for LGBTQ Armenians, their parents, families, and friends to explore understanding and acceptance.

protective of them – their physical and psychological well-being (not wanting to cause stress-related health problems). Neither parent nor child want to jeopardize the relationship.

Traditionally having a patriarchal familial structure, it would be expected that mothers play a more active and central role in child-rearing and addressing personal issues with children, and that was in fact the case for LGBQ Armenians. This does not deny the role the fathers played in their coming out experiences. It mainly emphasizes the more significant role of the mother. When participants had their mothers' support, their personal issues with their sexual identities were immediately resolved. Moreover, regarding LGBQ Armenian families, their approach for caring for their children is different, where their families of origin perceived care in physical and external terms (i.e. providing shelter, food, clothing etc.), they now take the children's emotional needs into consideration.

Parents think of being queer as a deviant social behavior, making it believable when a child says, "ok, I won't be gay anymore, let me move back home". To the parents, it's the equivalent of saying "ok, I'll stop doing drugs," for example. When being gay is not seen as an identity, it's a behavior that can be reverted. However, replacing "gay" with another identity, would one declare, "I'll stop being Armenian, let me come back home"? Sexual identity must be seen as concrete as ethnic identity, and not simply a behavioral trait, for parents to understand the complexity of the situation. In order to alleviate parents' struggles, a discussion of sex and sexuality both in the family and community realm would be beneficial. With sex and sexuality remaining taboo and stigmatized topics, education about sexual violence, appropriate sexual relations, safe sex practices, and achieving LGBTQ visibility and equality remain difficult. The silence around their sexualities, even post-coming out, serves as another form of the closet.

CHAPTER IV

COMMUNITY

Introduction

I suspected that Armenians became crazy and controlling when they left each other or when they defied expectations because of an ingrained, possibly genetic, survival mechanism: if we didn't cling together as a group, we would get clobbered individually until extinction. It would explain why I still needed my mother's approval to embark on anything risky and why she was so fearful I would die whenever I took a trip. It would also explain the tendency I sensed in the Armenian community towards conformity; since it seemed there were so few of us, any divergence from the traditions of family and church (such as marrying a non-Armenian or being gay) was seen as disunity threatening the survival of the entire culture. One reason why these dynamics stayed with us: the lack of recognition for the event that had started the trauma. Neither the current Turkish government nor their predecessors have ever acknowledged the truth of the matter, that Armenians were massacred intentionally, over a million lives raped, maimed, beaten, destroyed. Shame and guilt were installed and instilled in anyone who survived, and when it came time to continue their lives, they tried not to think about it. It didn't help that no one else wanted to think about it either. And yet it was impossible for feelings not to erupt; the safest place to have them was with family. Fear and mistrust, enacted over and over again on sons, daughters, loved ones, with no resolution nor apology. You screamed your head off and then you moved on.

- *Nancy Agabian*[147]

The diasporic community of Los Angeles is becoming increasingly complex, diverse, and heterogeneous. In its ideal form, the Armenian community exists as a space in which Armenians can identify with others *and* be themselves among co-ethnic peers. The diasporic community, in its essence, should serve to provide a sense of belonging for Armenians from various host countries, however, this is not the case for LGBQ Armenians in Los Angeles. The LGBQ Armenians in this research all had some sort of association with the Armenian community and institutions functioning within it, either by attendance at Armenian schools or participation in ethnic-based organizations. Through these experiences, LGBQ Armenians expressed

[147] *Me as Her Again,* 2008.

frustrations with the systems in place, leading to a varying degree of commitment to and identification with the Armenian community. Consequently, some have distanced themselves from the greater Armenian community due to its antipathy towards LGBTQ people, while others, through activism and a queer Armenian organization, are challenging the community for inclusivity. Additionally, by employing queer diaspora as a theoretical concept, this chapter analyzes the pertinent role of the Gay and Lesbian Armenian Society (GALAS) as a literal queer diaspora functioning within a diaspora.

Literature Review

Identity formation within diasporic communities, sense of belonging, and reinvention of meanings between nation of origin and nation of settlement are several of the factors Manalansan (2003) investigates in researching the Filipino gay diasporic experience. Specifically, he depicts Filipino gay men's negotiations between the bakla (a Tagalog term encompassing homosexuality, hermaphroditism, cross-dressing, and effeminacy) identity and the American traditional gay male identity. Amid contested notions of the gay community and the nation, Filipino gay men in New York City create a sense of belonging through the practices and rituals of cross-dressing. Homeland traditions of vestiges of homosexuality have now become a space for marking difference and articulating modernity, while also exhibiting the negotiation between assimilation and its total defiance.

For immigrant communities, culture acts as a lifeline to the home country and a basis for both group identity and political and sociocultural platforms (Eastmond 1993). For the African diasporic community in Toronto and Halifax, the Black community serves as a home space for belonging (Crichlow 2004). However, for Black men engaging in same-sex relationships, the

community experiences are ones of heterosexist and homophobic tensions, resulting in disassociation from the Black community. "Publicly accepting one's same-sex identity also means leaving the community, suffering alienation, guilt, and shame, and becoming the target of oppressive communal attitudes towards same-sex practices" (85). Constantly having to negotiate their sexual identity in their communities, they are often left with feelings of shame and find that they must deny their selves and their sexualities in order to be part of Black communal solidarity and familial expectations (Crichlow 2004). Heterosexism becomes a daily reality; one they cannot remark on, complain about, or contest – "in the ongoing debates over race, racism, sexuality, and gender within various Black communities, race is still viewed as absolute, and all other identities such as gender, age, disability, and sexual orientation are put aside or completely ignored" (Crichlow 2004, 26). With race viewed as absolute, it is no surprise that black communal activities are also family activities, "this means that 'public shame' involves more than individual guilt and shame; it also threatens to bring shame on the family. The family also exists in part through its participation in the community, where its members work, play, shop, and socialize… Most Black families join community organizations, share family networks, and belong to church groups and clubs; by extension, this makes Black families synonymous with community" (Crichlow 2004, 85, 91).

African Americans with a strong sense of linked fate acknowledge their futures to be shaped by the position of Blacks in society as a whole, by making social and political decisions with the assessment of what is beneficial for the race as a representative for what is beneficial for them and their family (Dawson 2009, Moore 2010a). A sexual identity status can be the root of division and disagreement within the community since it could conflict with this sense of linked fate (Moore 2010a). Due to the sense of community and belonging, LGBT African Americans

remain in their racial communities, even though they experience conflicts over acceptance of their sexual identities. Many are willing to sacrifice complete acceptance from family and friends in order to maintain their racial group affiliation. Group membership is about having a commonality that connects its members despite existing differences. In addition to this, many African American elders are faced with threatening the importance of a preexisting racial/ethnic group membership when considering the movement of same-sex desire and behavior into an identity category (Moore 2010b).

Intra-community policing is a common practice in ethnic communities with communal solidarity. As the cornerstone of African American communal life, the Black Church's effects can be found in Black music, neighborhood associations, fraternal organizations, and politics. Simultaneously, "the Black church has also failed to challenge arguments about sexual deviancy. Instead, the Black Church has incorporated dominant ideas about the dangers of promiscuity and homosexuality within its beliefs and practices" (Collins 2005, 107). One reason for the church's resistance to change is that "it has long worried about protecting the community's image within the broader society and has resisted *any* hints of Black sexual deviance, straight and gay-alike. Recognizing the toll that the many historical assaults against African American families have taken, many churches argue for traditional, patriarchal households, and they censure women who seemingly reject marriage and the male authority that creates them (Collins 2005, 107)." Holding onto traditional and patriarchal systems results in the assumption that homosexuality is unnatural, attributes it to a white disease, and thus makes LGBT African Americans seem disloyal to the race (Collins 2005).

Most immigrants rely on their families and communities for financial and social support. Sexually nonconforming Latinas in Acosta's study relied on this support in order to navigate the

racial landscape in the US and take action against anti-immigrant sentiment. Moreover, in the form of co-reliance, the familial and immigrant communities relied on them for this same support (Acosta 2011). Tololyan (2000) argues that diaspora is a permanent phenomenon, and although distinct, these post-Genocide diasporic communities share a commitment to rebuilding diasporic institutions similar to the ones that existed in previously well-established diasporic communities. These institutions and organizations have acted as vehicles for the reproduction of the diasporic Armenian identity. Organizations, their political standpoint, and resources invested mark the production of a particular diasporic identity (Tololyan 2000). There's a persistence, despite competing and contested identities, to have the sense of belonging to one nation, whether or not that nation is spatially bound. Thus, this sense of belonging must be to a homogenous diaspora, since having a heterogeneous diaspora might result in the ideology of homelands not *a* homeland. Furthermore, these diasporic institutions involved in the reproduction of identity attempt to replace state institutions in the latter's absence, i.e. in the diaspora in Armenia's absence (Panossian 1998).

Diasporic Community

Configuring diaspora as displacement from a lost homeland or exile from an exalted origin can thus underwrite regnant ideologies of nationalism, while upholding virulent notions of racial purity and its structuring heteronormative logics of gender and sexuality.

- *David L. Eng*[148]

Though moving to L.A. was an attempt to distance myself from my family, it ironically brought me closer to their people, the Armenians.

- *Nancy Agabian*[149]

[148] *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*, 2010.
[149] *Me as Her Again*, 2008.

Diasporic institutions, organizations, and associations do work that is simultaneously philanthropic, cultural, and political. In their formative years, "this work has required material resources and communal hierarchies, and has combined selfless voluntarism with organized persuasion and socially coerced participation, all in the name of nation-in-exile" (Tololyan 2000, 107). The ethnic features of these diasporic communities are host country specific, in other words, a community in Lebanon would have ethnic features of a Lebanese-Armenian. These communities are organized and develop institutions that aim to address local needs. "While largely locally oriented, a few of these institutions – religious, philanthropic, political – also retain explicitly transnational agendas and seek to foster shared, multilocal, and therefore properly 'diasporic' values, discourses ideologies, orientations, and practices" (Tololyan 2000, 108). However, since most of the institutions predate the modern diaspora, they are calibrated to the needs and interests of different populations. Moreover, "the diasporic community sustains a paradoxical combination of both ethnic and diasporic cultural identities and political practices; the struggle between them strains but also helps define the diaspora as such" (Tololyan 2000, 109). In the Armenian diaspora, "the (re)production of culture and of contesting visions of collective identity is a quotidian, persistent, and costly activity, conducted not just by a few individual aesthetic producers but also by larger groups of journalists, intellectuals, teachers, scholars, activists, artists, performers, and entertainers, some of whom are associated with – or, in the case of most teachers, dependent upon – organizations and institutions that offer material support and make ideological claims" (Tololyan 2000, 109). As in other diasporas, even when communities desire acceptance and a certain level of inclusion, the communal elites of most of the Armenian diasporic communities "exhibit a preference for a carefully chosen and circumscribed exclusion on their own terms and for the right to draw some communal

boundaries, to nurture and maintain certain differences, to imagine and produce autonomously at least some of their identities rather than accepting a collective diasporic subject position assigned wholesale by the host society's dominant regimes of representation" (Tololyan 2000, 110).

Armenian churches in the diaspora are not monolithic and have several roles, often conflicting, adapted gradually centuries before the creation of the contemporary Armenian Diaspora. Tololyan (1998) argues, "history and structural causality have combined to favor the development of a church which neglects its religious mission and lends itself to both administrative politics *and* to the politics of national identity" (59). The Armenian Apostolic Church emphasizes its Armenian nature as much as its Christian faith in promoting Armenianness (Tololyan 1998).

The Armenian community in Southern California is home to over twenty private Armenian day schools, the majority of which are in Greater Los Angeles. Many of these schools offer all grades (K-12), some to 8th grade, a few end at elementary level, and some are only pre-schools. Armenian day schools function as regular private schools, and in addition to a basic curriculum of general studies teach Armenian language, literature, history, culture, and religion classes. There are also part-time Armenian schools in the community, such as Saturday schools, which offer around two hours of Armenian courses incorporating language, history, and culture. Additionally, there are several Armenian language programs in the public education sector: immersion programs, charter schools, after school programs, and foreign language classes (Karapetian 2014). One participant said, M "It was very important for my mom for us to go to a private Armenian school, because she felt like we would be more nurtured than in a bigger environment. And plus, she wanted us to learn how to read and write Armenian, and wanted us to know the history. And she wanted us to have Armenian friends, and grow up sort of in a circle

of life-long friends, which we have." This explains both the need from their parents and the impact of the schools on their individual selves.

The Western Prelacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church has a Prelate and Executive Council which delegates authority to the Board of Regents to govern the Prelacy Armenian Schools. These Prelacy Schools are historically and continually closely affiliated with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF). The ARF is a political party founded in Tbilisi, modern day Georgia, and largely functions in Los Angeles as a mainstream ethnic-based community organization, with its politics playing a major role in its organizational activities. The party has branches operating in the Republic of Armenia and various other countries. Seventy percent of research participants went to Armenian Prelacy Schools. Being closely affiliated with the ARF, it is common for Armenian Prelacy School students to also participate in its organization groups. These students had been members of the Armenian Youth Federation (AYF)[150] and Homenetmen (HMEM)[151] – the two most commonly mentioned organizations during interviews which are also ARF affiliated. While there are other churches, community organizations, institutions, with various political affiliations in the Los Angeles diaspora, as well as non-group affiliated communities, this research focuses solely on those entities discussed by participants.

This particular group of participants felt the full force of the Armenian community's reach[152], as they were influenced by three of its interconnected pillars – the schools, churches, and organizations. In this case, all being affiliates of the ARF, the ideology and influence of one parallels all three. If a school student never participated in Armenian organizations, they would

[150] Armenian youth organization
[151] Armenian scouting and athletic organization.
[152] In this case, referring to the ARF subset of the Armenian community.

still arguably be aware of and even influenced by them because of the association, and vice versa. For example, M "I wasn't officially in AYF but I would go to the events, like everyone else, because it was tied with (name of Prelacy School), so it was all through (the Prelacy School), my involvement in specific events, gatherings, things like that." Similarly, those who did not attend Prelacy Schools but did participate in HMEM or AYF shared similar sentiments about the community – association with any *and* all parts of the community pillars produced similar knowledge, opinions, and critique about Armenianness in this community. The following figure is the breakdown of attendance and participation in community institutions that are discussed in this chapter.

	Armenian School Attendance	Participation in Armenian Organizations	Participation in LGBTQ Organizations	Participation in an Armenian LGBTQ Organization
1	√*		√	√
2	√	√		
3	√*	√		√
4	√	√		
5	√	√	√	√
6	√	√		
7	√	√	√	√
8	√	√		
9	√	√		√
10	√	√	√	√
11	√	√		√
12	√			
*Saturday Schools				

Figure 3: School Attendance & Organization Involvement

- Significance of Community Support

The link between gay normalization and the tightening of social control is more than coincidental. Assigning a fully human, normal status to gay individuals fuels a fear of disorder because of the association of homosexuality with a freewheeling, promiscuous desire. It also

creates a fear that other sexual outsiders will demand inclusion, further fueling anxieties of impending disorder. It is to be expected that every step toward gay integration will likely prompt some opposition that will appeal to fears of children being confused and abused, of families and marriages being weakened, and of a nation tumbling down the path toward moral chaos. As gays are viewed as normal, they are no longer necessarily associated with the bad sexual citizen… In the early postwar years the homosexual emerged as the personification of the menacing sexual citizen. The homosexual became a kind of symbol of a perverse, dangerous eroticism that was detached from romantic, marital, and family values. Accordingly, the hetero/homosexual division came to serve as an important regulatory force.

- *Steven Seidman*[153]

The closeted nature of LGBQ Armenians as well as the antipathy toward LGBTQ peoples by the community can be attributed to Armenians' fear of the Other. The community's heteronormative and nationalistic structure is explained by its fear of assimilation and loss of culture. In this landscape, Armenianness is encouraged while Otherness is feared. M "My Armenian identity was passed down to me from my parents and my community. And those two factors, parents and community, gave me all the resources I needed to perform my Armenianness, but not my sexuality." The sense of an LGBTQ Armenian community helps these individuals come to terms with their identity, however, community of origin experiences can be that of tension; being and feeling Armenian are not sufficient to belong in the Armenian community for LGBQ Armenians. LGBQ Armenians compare the state of Armenians in Los Angeles to that of the pre-Stonewall era. They express a strong desire to make Armenian inclusive of Other identities[154] where they will no longer have to sacrifice a part of themselves to be their whole selves.

> M I definitely have felt more comfortable telling non-Armenians about my sexuality. So there's this weird process of you feel like it's more comforting to tell them, yet the answer that you receive from them does not necessarily match up with what you wanted to hear. With Armenians, it's like, I'm not sure if I'm comfortable telling them, but I

[153] *Beyond the Closet: The Transformation of Gay and Lesbian Life,* 2002.
[154] Other here meaning non-typical Armenian identities.

know that if I get support from these people, it's like "Whoa!" And I've definitely felt that way.

M You can relate to your sexuality with other օտարs[155], like non-Armenians, in a healthy way. And when you don't get that as an Armenian, you're dually fucked… You're deprived of your own ethnic identity– to your ethnicity in a healthy way. But also to your own personal sexuality in like a much, much deeper personal, biological way. Like you're deprived of how to be a sexual person. Your sexuality is not addressed, and it's considered a first-world issue[156]… I think that's what the real cost is. The cost is that you kind of forfeit… you lose an opportunity to practice a very natural part of being human, relating to other people in an intimate way. And in a way that's not stigmatizing… Gay Armenians aren't aliens. They have parents. They have families. And it's not just the gay Armenian, the gay who suffers. It's the gay's parents. The family also needs, like, a receptive, warm support system and environment. It's not just that if AYF accepted it, they wouldn't just be doing a benefit to the gay Armenian. Or if HMEM did it, they wouldn't just be doing it for the gay Armenian. They'd be doing it for the community. They'd be doing it for like other gay families who, you know, are not supported… Because the last time they thought about these things was probably in the home country before they moved where it was like, you would be killed.

The support from an Armenian or the Armenian community is immeasurable for LGBQ Armenians. Growing up in Los Angeles gives them access to non-Armenian support systems and networks of people, yet time and again participants expressed the need for support from Armenian friends, family, and, the community, and how those systems provide support that is unmatched. Without this support, LGBQ Armenians are left with both unhealthy relationships with their sexual identities and coping mechanisms. The needs of the individual and the family can be ameliorated by a community provided support system. The second participant states that the benefit of helping LGBQ Armenians would in turn benefit the community as a whole, because with the community and family so closely intertwined, and synonymous with one another (Crichlow 2004), benefitting one would benefit the other. Parents and older community leaders, not having been born in the United States, have not been influenced by the progressive

[155] *ɔdar:* term meaning "strange" or "foreign," but used colloquially to refer to non-Armenians.
[156] Referring to the community and family viewing issues of sexuality as secondary by believing there are more important struggles to adhere to.

social climate of Los Angeles and are presumably still holding on to beliefs they were exposed to in their host countries[157]. Therefore, education about these issues across the board would create an environment within the community that would allow for support systems as well as change the closeted nature of LGBQ experiences. In one instance, a participant explained having a variation of this support within a community organization in the late 1980s – early 1990's:

> W And then I started meeting other people that I heard were [gay]– I don't know how I heard. Just rumors, I think. And I was playing basketball at the time in Homenetmen… We heard about other players who were gay… and then we all became friends. And then yeah, it was like we all knew we all were [gay] and then we'd see players from other teams that are from other cities at places. And then we knew they were, too. So it was kind of– we all knew each other. It was kind of a secret in that way.

The organization, HMEM, unbeknownst to them, was aiding LGBQ Armenian women come together. By having this sense of support, these women no longer felt isolated because of their sexual identities since they were able to connect with women similar to them, make friendships, and share struggles and experiences. Additionally, another participant shared having had positive experiences when she was in HMEM. They were very kind and respectful to her and her wife and she credits their approach: W "The respect that you show the person in front of you is what you're going to get back. And I have found throughout our lives together that we've never had a problem." When an ethnic-based group also provided the queer space, LGBQ Armenians were able to find the ultimate support and sense of belonging while combining their queer and Armenian experiences. Another participant expressed joy in finding a non-Armenian queer support group that reminded him of his memories with the AYF when he was younger.

> M I've been part of this queer group of mostly gay men that is this– it sorts of feels like AYF in that it's this international group and they have this certain culture and way of

[157] Interestingly, in their Middle Eastern host countries, such as in Iran and Lebanon, Armenians were regarded as being more progressive and were used to regarding themselves as more liberal than the other ethnic and religious groups in those countries.

> doing things within– as a subset of gay and queer… It's fairly loose and it's very socialist, environmental, sexually free, body positive and it's mostly gay men. And mostly nature-oriented, and I was at this [event]. There was some drag and there was some drumming and there was this song that someone sang and he helped everyone sing it and some people joined in on the drumming and the singing. And the entire environment felt very much like AYF Camp or an AYF gathering where everyone knows a certain song or this accepted way of doing things, and a certain language… It felt very familiar all of a sudden. It was this, "Whoa, I've had this experience as a kid," and growing up. And it's really cool that now I have this second network of queers… it was very refreshing… And they consider each other their family and that's their core and go-to. And so I'm very lucky to have my Armenian family and then I have this gay family. So It's– yeah, special.

He found comfort in a non-Armenian queer group when it reminded him of previous experiences with an Armenian ethnic-based organization. For those who identify strongly with their ethnic identity, the lack of Armenianness in non-Armenian queer groups hinders them from benefitting from those groups, even though they support their sexual identities.

- Benefits of GALAS

The Gay and Lesbian Armenian Society (GALAS) was formed in 1998 by a group of Armenians in Los Angeles who wanted to start an organization which solely focused on the needs of sexually non-conforming Armenians. One of the founders of GALAS shared the story of finding an ad in the back of a Los Angeles lesbian publication, calling for gay and lesbian Armenians to come to a meeting. When she responded to the ad, she found out that Azad Mazmanian had been running the circular for several weeks hoping to reach gay and lesbian Armenians. She went to the meeting with her own group of five or six gay and lesbian friends and met several others there. They instantaneously became a close-knit group and together founded GALAS.

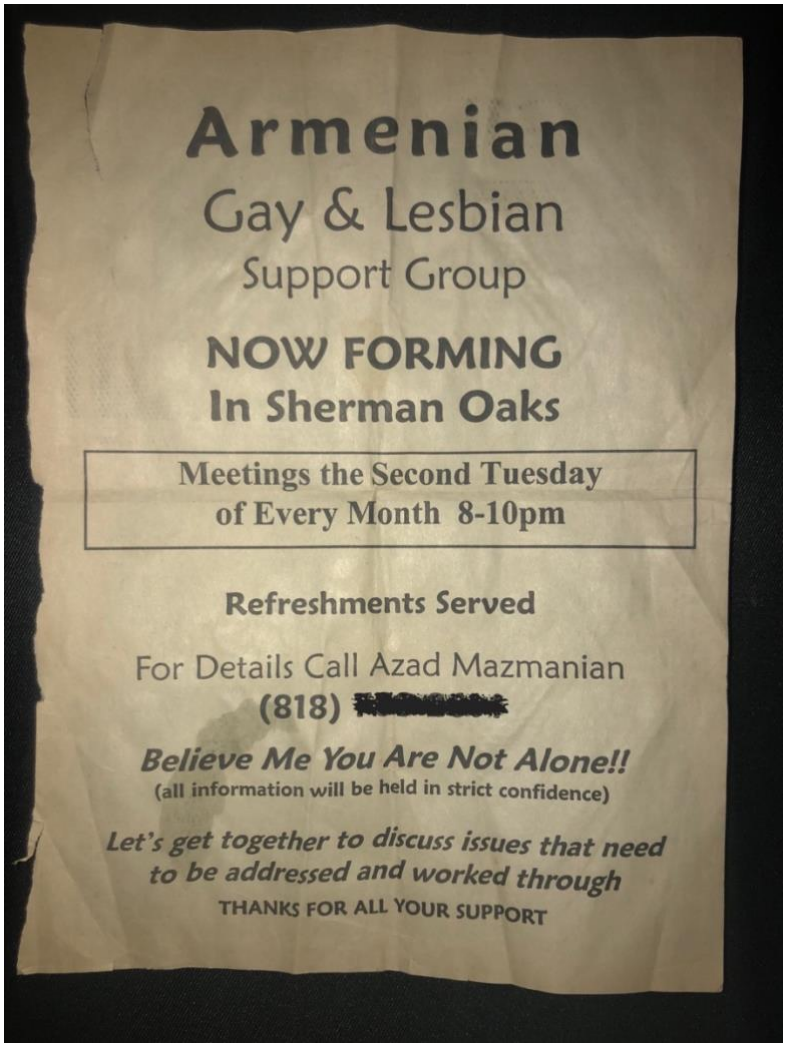

Figure 4: GALAS Circular[158]

In the first three to four years of the organization, their main vision for the group was to be a safe space and social network for people – there was no preoccupation with taking their identities beyond the closet. It wasn't until the early 2000's that they switched platforms and started focusing on awareness and outreach, and with this switch, they lost members because they were afraid of the group coming out – they stopped attending because they still had fears of being disowned by family. There was a distinction between members – those who were already out, whose parents were better with them, and were ready to do more with the organization, were able

[158] Image from personal photograph during GALAS event.

to conceive of a different future and moved forward with their new vision. The organization brought Armenians together socially, romantically, and professionally, offered free counseling and therapy services with Armenian therapists, and organized events where supportive parents would talk to parents with children who had just come out. The organization was very active until about 2010 when they began having membership issues. The younger generation did not volunteer to take ownership, and slowly the organization started to decline. One of the founders of GALAS attributed the rise of internet support groups for the decline. Online social networking has allowed queer Armenian youths to find support systems in a more private and at times anonymous space, where they no longer needed an organization like GALAS to meet other LGBTQ Armenians. However, with the realization of the significance for the resources and support GALAS provided, the organization has been back on the rise since 2016, with new Armenian youth on the board, as well as older members who are active once again, one even returning to serve as president. Now, GALAS functions as a space for community outreach, education, and activism, *and* as a safe space and support system for those who have yet to come out. The organization accommodates and respects the privacy of their members by taking two versions of photographs at events, one with out LGBTQ Armenians for social media posting, and one for non-public means. There are still distinctions between members. As was evident in the previous chapter, though there are generational differences among LGBQ Armenians' coming out experiences, these are not due to the social climate progressing in Los Angeles and rather due to the years passing and relationships progressing since initial coming out. Therefore, group members of GALAS today struggle through the same privacy issues as those in the late 1990's. For example, the following is the reason for one participant's hesitation to joining GALAS: W

"I've thought about joining GALAS but the thing is I don't know what I would tell my mom… I

could make my sister go with me and be like we're just going out, but then also I don't know what I would [tell my mom about my whereabouts]… That was the only thing. One time the meeting was on Saturday morning and I'm like "I don't know what I'm going to tell mom". Why am I up so early on a Saturday?" For those queer Armenians living with their parents, attending GALAS events would mean having to lie to their parents about their whereabouts, further isolating them from spaces and opportunities to perform and have healthy relationships, if any, with their sexual identities. Those who had the opportunity to join GALAS expressed the benefits they experienced:

> M [Joining GALAS] just seemed like the most obvious thing for me – I'm gay, I'm Armenian, these are two huge parts of my– of who I am, that are kind of at odds with each other, that have always been at odds with each other. As part of this personal journey for me to bridge these two identities, or reconcile them together, this is going to be a good thing.
>
> M When I was coming out, GALAS became a source of support for me… What was supportive for me was just the sheer collection of gay Armenians. As a concentration, like converging in spatially, at a club, or a bar, or an organization. And you can hang out and talk with them… A lot of the older members– the average age of the membership of the older one was probably [born in] mid to early '70s. So, they're on average 15 years older than I was at the time. They had gone to schools like (names of Armenian Prelacy Schools), and they had been in the Armenian com– you know, they grew up Armenian in L.A. They knew what it was like. They knew how suffocating it can be and how stifling it is. And they had been to Scouts.[159] They had been to all this AYF stuff. And, they had grown up in extremely heteronormative environments that taught them the importance of retaining a personal connection to their own identity and their own ethnic heritage and their obligation to the nation and all this stuff. But they were also at odds with that from the time they were conceived, OK? Or not, depending on where you stand on sexuality. But I mean, they were gay. So, that was totally always challenged by this identity. And, I found comfort in [them]… There was something desperate in the early gay movement of like, "We're so few and we're so marginalized and we're so stigmatized that we're going to band together no matter what." And, "We're going to tolerate each other's bullshit no matter what." And all the kinds of unhealthy behaviors, "No matter what because we're the only ones who can affirm one another's gay Armenian identities or gay identities."… It's like your community totally rejects you. And you take a step to create a community that embraces that.

[159] Scouts refers to the scouting unit of HMEM.

GALAS has been a place where LGBQ Armenians can be their whole selves without having to sacrifice any components of their ethnic and sexual identities to coexist and belong. Additionally, since LGBQ Armenians lack LGBQ figures they can look up to while growing up, GALAS brings together queer Armenians of all ages, allowing for younger Armenians to relate and learn from those who have previously experienced their current experiences. In lieu of an embracing community of origin, some LGBQ Armenians find solace with GALAS and its members. However, both members of GALAS and other LGBQ Armenians strive for inclusion and visibility within the greater Armenian community by working with other youth organizations to challenge rejection from the community of origin.

Relationship with Armenian Community

I was not, for example, a Black Muslim, in the same way, though for different reasons, that I never became a Black Panther. Because I did not believe that all white people were devils, and I did not want young black people to believe that. I was not a member of any Christian congregation because I knew that they had not heard and did not live by the commandment, "Love one another as I love you." And I was not a member of the NAACP because in the North, where I grew up, the NAACP was fatally entangled with black class distinctions, or illusions of the same, which repelled a shoe-shine boy like me.

- *James Baldwin*[160]

In their choices of friendships and social circles, participants under the age of 35 tended to have strong feelings of resentment towards Armenians and their Armenian friends, because of the latter's traditional and conservative beliefs:

> M Majority of my friends are Armenian. For some reason, I feel like it's very engrained to a point that I almost gravitate towards Armenians, not (at university), but at home, all of my friends are Armenian. But recently ties with them have been cut off, precisely because of their traditional values, not that they didn't accept me being gay, but because they accepted it, you know the bullshit excuse that "because it's you, we accept it, but if I see a gay person next to me I would punch them in the face" that was actually a line told

[160] *I Am Not Your Negro,* 2016.

> to me by one of my friends… I'm distancing myself from a lot of Armenians that I just, I would love to educate them, but I don't want to be friends with them because it takes a lot of energy to not say something back to them… [being progressive] has become a thing that I actually value, that I actually look for in my Armenian friends, just the mere fact of "you are Armenian and I am Armenian" that is not enough anymore, at all.

> M I resented the Armenian community, because I lost all my Armenian friends after I came out, I resented them so I was just like, "Chill the fuck out guys."… I have two groups of friends– two groups of close friends. None of them are Armenian.

> M I didn't really seek Armenian friendships… I always had really diverse set of groups… In high school I had I would say one– maybe two– close Armenian friendships. And I went to (name of high school), where the Armenians had their territory… And I would consciously avoid it, too. And that's also tying into my sexuality and conservative– the traditional roles and stuff. Because that was a part of why I think I developed some internalized racism, sort of… against Armenians. Just feeling weird about Armenians, and especially knowing that most of them are homophobic. It just felt better to– I don't know– Not deal with that… Now it's increased a lot. I met them through the Gay and Lesbian Armenian Society, yeah. And I mean, what I have noticed– it's just like we're Armenians– right when we met, we just started talking about whatever. And so it was very casual. It was easy to talk to each other; easy to become friends.

The consequences of these situations were the distancing from Armenian social circles – these participants did not retain any of those friendships or seek new friendships with non-LGBTQ identifying Armenians. Having been tainted from their intolerance once, they have no desire for additional attempts. Progressive, ally, and/or queer now become attributes that are highly valued and prerequisites for friendships. Participants above the age of 35 were closer to their Armenian friends, and not just their queer Armenian friends:

> M The majority of my friends tend to be Armenian. I do have non-Armenian friends, but the majority is Armenian… I don't think Armenians are the best. I don't think–I–there's a comfort level with my own people, and– not that I'm uncomfortable with օտարներ[161]. But there's a warmth, and there's this– it's different. I have beautiful non-Armenian friends, but my bond with Armenians– and not to say every Armenian I meet, I bond with– but there is something very special. I moved to (city name), and about a year ago, I met this Armenian girl at some Armenian function that I went to, and we just clicked. And we're all of a sudden super-close, and she wants me to be the godfather of her child. That just

[161] *ɔdar:* term meaning "strange" or "foreign," but used colloquially to refer to non-Armenians.

> doesn't happen with օտարs[162]. It doesn't. We've become besties in a year... And she's married to an օտար[163], I'm married to an օտար[164], but we understand each other. We'll switch to Armenian, and be like, "Uff. This, that." It's just– it's a special bond that you have with your brethren. I can't– and it's a beautiful thing, because I moved, and I knew a handful of people, and almost two years later, you meet another Armenian that you click with, and all of a sudden, you've got this social circle that a lot of օտարs[165] don't have. My husband moved here, and he's like, "God, you guys are like– you stick together. You form layers and layers of social interactions." And he goes, "What the fuck? I moved here, and I have three friends from work." You know what I mean? That's the beauty. I can't explain it to you in any other way. And I do find that we're also a lot more genuine... We're very honest, I think, in the way we interact with one another, compared to, I guess, your average American. Maybe other ethnic groups also interact the way we do with one another, but I find that, with my American friends, it's a lot more– I don't want to say "rehearsed," but there's a formality, and there's a lack of sort of, "Let me just kick up my feet and tell you what's on my mind." It's not that I'm in this Armenian cocoon, like a lot of people… It's not because I think we're better. I just– I jive with my people.
>
> W It's really dictated by my children. 12 years ago we were in Homenetmen, so we had that and we had a large– we had a lot of friends that we hung out with that were Armenian… But the Armenian friends that I have now is through my daughter's Armenian school and the other parents. So we have that community… And the non-Armenian friends are their friends' parents or their teachers. We're close with their teachers. So it's their public school teachers and then it's their Armenian friends' parents and that's it. We don't have much time for anything else. They dictate it all.

The age discrepancies between their experiences with Armenian friendships can be attributed to the stages of their coming out. The younger generation of interviewees were still in the processes of coming out and in the initial stages of leading public queer lives, thus, they are facing more changes, confronted by their first homophobic encounters, and weening out the good friends from the bad. And in these circumstances, they are much more passionate and frustrated about these realities. While the older generation has already overcome those instances, are coupled, and in some situations married with children, and simply do not have the time to consider these factors especially when they're not facing these apprehensions in their daily lives. Nonetheless,

[162] *ɔdars:* non-Armenians.
[163] *ɔdars:* non-Armenians.
[164] *ɔdars:* non-Armenians.
[165] *ɔdars:* non-Armenians.

the commonality between all the interviewees was their admittance of the genuine connections felt with Armenian peers, which is what makes it more heart-breaking and more disappointing when they face rejection from their Armenian friends – intracommunity discrimination is more difficult to process.

Many LGBQ Armenians, having grown up in these insular environments, seek to break out after high school, and since, as indicated in previous findings, a major percentage of Armenians attend colleges or universities after school, this next life step serves an additional opportunity, a new and non-Armenian space for self-actualization, expression, and independence, especially if they are allowed to move out and live on campus.

> W I always think about how this [coming out] process would have been so much more difficult if I was at home and it probably wouldn't have happened if I was living at home… When I'm at school I really can just be myself. I don't have to think twice about what I'm saying. I don't have to think about what I'm wearing. I don't have to... It's going to be– I'm just– I don't know. I'm just so thankful for my current situation that it really scares me to think about what it's going to be like when I'm not like that anymore. Yeah because it's even difficult on the weekends when I go home and I'm FaceTiming with one of my friends and she says something out loud I'm like, "Yo, my mom's in the other room. You've got to not."

> M When I was in high school, I wanted to move to the East Coast for college. I wanted to get as far away from everyone, because… I don't think I would have been able to come into my own if I had continued to surround myself with that same circle of friends, with those same– I mean, they're all Armenians in that Armenian bubble, the bubble. We call it the bubble. I just, I had to get away. I couldn't even imagine being openly gay in that community, in those spaces, in those circles. That wasn't an option, I couldn't even think about it. I was like, "I have to get away from all these people to be myself, and to figure out who I am." So, I wanted to go to the East Coast and I was worried that if I had gone to UCLA or USC my parents would say, "Well, you can just drive to school" and I was like, "No, no, no, no!" like I would literally say no to UCLA if I have to live at home, I will not go to UCLA, I will go to a lower ranked college just so I can live on my own.

Once attending college, the first participant made a conscious effort to avoid Armenians and the Armenian Students' Association. Even though all his friends prior were Armenian, now having for the first time the opportunity, he wanted to meet non-Armenians and most of his college

friends ended up being non-Armenian. Interestingly, this participant lived primarily with his non-Armenian parent after his parents' divorce, yet having been so closely associated and connected within the three pillars of the community, his experiences as an LGBQ Armenian are no different than those with two Armenian parents. It is not unlikely for Armenian youth to never befriend a non-Armenian until after high school; if they attended Armenian schools, they're directly connected with the community, and likely participate in some sort of ethnic-based organization activities: dance, music, art, cultural, athletic, scouting, etc. This scenario was true for all but two of the participants in this study. Most, similar to the above participants, have strong desires to escape from the community, which for LGBQ Armenians tends to be suffocating. The experiences of the remaining two exemplify a stark contrast from the rest.

> M And you know, I was definitely privileged. I got a lot of social support in that, and I think that this contributed to the assimilation and the internalized racism. Because I got support from white people – the white (LA city) community. Because I knew that it was a liberal community, I knew that there were openly gay people there. So for the most part of my high school, I was pretty accepted. We didn't really have hate crimes or anything happening on our campus. It was in (LA city)… So, for the most part, from friends and everything, I was very accepted. And I am very open about my sexuality. I'm completely out of the closet, except for my family.

> M But as far as community goes, I don't give a shit. I'm sorry. Yes, I do believe that– well, I think our community should change. I think yes, we should change the way we view things but I'm not in charge of the Armenian community. I'm not a representative of them. I belong– gay, American, then Armenian… And if the way I act doesn't work with your narrow aspect of what an Armenian is, then there's a problem with you, not me.

The strength and impact of the double life LGBQ people lead is evident here when the first participant considers himself to be *completely* out of the closet, "except" with his family. Further indicating that outness can occur in hiding from family and community members. These two participants having grown up without close connections to the Armenian community are completely alienated from the pressures of the community and its members. By attending a public school in one of Los Angeles's most liberal cities, the first participant greatly benefitted

from that safe and supportive space. Having never been active in the community, the second participant feels none of their burdens nor the need to be the voice of the community, and prioritizes his sexual identity over his ethnic, most importantly, without any hint of guilt, which is unlike most other participants, although his sentiments are presumably a result of his resentment towards the community for its antipathy towards LGBTQ peoples. Those who were raised within the community, and, having spent decades solely negotiating their ethnic identities, have a very difficult time assimilating or compromising their ethnic identities even if it allows them the freedom for their sexual identities.

- Silence within the Community

What concerns me most about the Armenian community is that in an effort to maintain a strong sense of Armenian culture, the community hangs on to old ways of thinking. That is self-defeating and does not achieve what it intends… My adult female identity is not reflected in the community. I can barely bring my feminist self into the community, let alone my lesbian identity.

- *Arlene Avakian*[166]

LGBQ Armenians do not face outright discrimination by community members, but this does not mean they experience acceptance either. Silence within the community operates similarly to silence within the family – as another form of the closet. These instances are not isolated to the Armenian case, as Crichlow (2004) found among the African diasporic community in Toronto and Halifax, "for many members of the African diaspora, 'the Black community' signifies home – a space where they feel they belong and where they can be themselves." However for Black men engaging in same-sex relationships, the opposite is true, "In their community involvement, these men have witnessed and experienced tensions of heterosexism and homophobia. As a result, they vary in their commitment to and identification

[166] "Invisible or Abandoned: Gay and Lesbian Armenians Search for Acceptance" (Sarkissian 2000).

with Black communal life. Same-sex men who identify with their community often deeply resent its homophobia; some openly challenge their community's negative attitudes, or they reject their community or its most hateful elements" (106). Expectations of homogeneity create an environment within the community that lead to participants having internalized homophobia and racism, which they spend years unfolding.

> M There's a reason why I feel this way, it's because I'm gay and because being gay in our community– you're taught your whole life that we're all Armenian, and we're all proud to be Armenian, and we're all part of this nation. But no one says that if you're gay– Well, I mean it's the unspoken rule that if you don't fit into this box of what it means to be a good Armenian boy or girl, to be the Armenian boy or girl that makes everyone proud, then you're shameful, you're a traitor, you've betrayed your nation. And so gay people in our nationalism are excluded as being part of the nation… And, when things start getting scary and ultra-nationalistic which I don't know where the line is, gay people become the enemy and they become the traitor, and we become Turks… And so to me, in my way of trying to reverse that, number one, you're not hurting me by calling me a Turk because there's nothing inherently wrong or undesirable about being a Turk, you fucking racist. But what does hurt is that you're saying that not only am I not an Armenian but I'm the opposite of what it means to be Armenian. In our Armenian nationalism, our other is the Turk, the opposite of an Armenian is a Turk… If an Armenian is good, we're the good guys, our gay people are evil. We're the evil Turk.

> W I did go to Armenian school and– okay, so I'm dealing with a lot of internalized homophobia that I'm trying to undo and it's pretty difficult and I do think it's because of the very homogenous Armenian community that I grew up in because I really didn't have any– I didn't interact with anyone that wasn't Armenian until I came to college, at all… I definitely didn't really interact with anyone who was queer until college. I didn't even know what queer meant… I was constantly surrounded by a lot of homophobia, not only from my classmates but teachers… And it actually took me a really long time to undo the "that's gay"… I feel like I still have so much internalized homophobia that I'm fighting and it's so difficult because I've undone so much of it. But then when I'm kind of like, "Okay, it's over." No, it's actually not. Fucking Armenian schools…

If there are LGBQ Armenians in organizations and institutions, even in leadership positions, their sexual identities have a "don't ask, don't tell" approach, usually entirely ignoring that aspect of the individual's life. Similarly, "while censuring homosexuality, Black churches have also not banished LGBT people from their congregations… accepting LGBT Black people, just as long as they are not too visible – 'be in the choir… but don't say you're gay'" (Collins 2004,

112). For both Blacks and Armenians, racial passing is highly criticized; for Blacks as denying one's true self, and for Armenians, assimilation is viewed as a betrayal of both ancestors perished during the Genocide and to those who persevered for centuries maintaining their Armenianness as ethnic minorities on foreign land – even being referred to as a "White Genocide" in a speech given on April 24, 2017 by the AYF at the annual Genocide Protest at the Turkish Consulate in Los Angeles. The term White Genocide was used in reference to assimilation to the mainstream "white" society, marking another Genocide for the Armenians, this time by racially passing as white. Yet sexual passing, passing as straight, is encouraged in both cultures and not regarded as denying their true identities. In this climate, consequentially, participants expressed the lack of support in community institutions in terms of resources and safe spaces,

> M I was having a conversation with a teacher a couple years ago and she said, "We were talking about gay kids in schools like (name of Armenian Prelacy School)," and she was like, "Oh! We know, we know. We talk amongst ourselves 'This student might be gay, that student…'" And I was like ,"Wow! Like, really? You knew? You talked? You saw these things? And you didn't do anything to help that student? To tell that student that you're fine, you're ok who you are?" It's, just like, fuck man…There's nothing for LGBTQ people in the Armenian-American community, literally nothing… Resources, information, materials, safe spaces, safe spaces don't exist at all… If there were, we'd have openly gay people in our community, there would be visibility… No one is talking about this thing. If you're gay and Armenian, you hear this all the time, we all think we're the only gay Armenians on the planet. And it's so not true.

Participants also stated their desires for inclusion, representation, and visibility within the greater Armenian community. In that regard, one participant said, M "Because I'm a part of this nation, I'm a part of this community but at the same time I'm not part of this nation and I'm not part of this community. It's so hard. There is a desire, of course, to want to be a part of it, but I don't want to be a part of it if it means that I have to be racist, or that I have to be homophobic, and if people are going to hurt me for being gay, for trying to be a gay person in the nation…"

Additionally, when asked if he was a member of any Armenian organizations, another participant stated that he isn't because: M "I don't discriminate against other people just because I'm Armenian, and I feel like that was a big thing in Armenian groups." He explained hearing racial slurs and conservative, hypocritical beliefs that pushed him away from wanting to participate in community organizations. Some queer Armenians are apprehensive about participating in ethnic-based community groups because of their heteronormative and patriarchal foundations. They also shared their need for visibility about LGBTQ peoples and issues from community leaders, M "If there was an Armenian who was vocal about LGBTQ issues, you bet I would gravitate towards that person, no one talks about this thing and not even talk, no one is telling little kids it's okay to be gay in our community. No one is saying that, not in the schools, not in the organizations. And even if they believed it, would they say it out loud? No one's doing this. The conservative Armenians, the parents, they hold the power. It's still the older folk, the immigrants in charge." In these instances, benefitting from GALAS is not sufficient, because there is a need for belonging in and support from the greater community.

- Community Activism

LGBQ Armenians wish their struggles were integrated into the community's social issues platforms as well. The participants had very strong frustrations with these ethnic-based organizations. At the heart of the issue is the conflict between their Armenianness and their notions of not belonging in the community.

> M I'm very Armenian, and I love being Armenian, but I don't feel like I belong with this community, and I don't feel like I belong in this nation… I don't feel welcomed… And so, all this talk about: the nation, Western Armenia, and all these things that we are all in this struggle together, I'm like, "This is such bullshit." How can you expect me to be on board with all of these things when it's like I'm not even a person in this community?... I don't get it. It just doesn't make sense to me. I was taught to be proud of my Armenianness, and proud of who I am… it just doesn't make sense. Why should I? This doesn't make any sense.

W Yeah especially because in the past I have felt very uncomfortable within the Armenian communities that I have been a part of, to be queer. It's difficult for me to be in both– thinking of both at the same time. I'm kind of resentful of my Armenian, not identity but the community that I've been a part of because– it's just that I know I won't be comfortable with my queerness in those spaces. Even though I feel like if I – and I do think they need to be addressed and they need to be worked on and I can't just say, "Peace out. I'm out" just because– even though I could but then also it's like if we don't talk about it they're never going to get fixed.

M All these organizations, schools, institutions, they were built, established, and run by immigrants from the Middle East predominantly, but the kids that are going to these schools, they're Americans. They're so smart. They see the world now. Another general critique of our community, I don't think young people, even someone my age (at 40) or even you, I don't think we're given the credit that we deserve. We're still seen as kids, like we're naïve, or we're ignorant. But it's like, "Dude, no, we have the internet (laughs)." Or, "Oh, you're an American [for thinking this way]". Listen, even though I don't feel like I'm a part of this nation, I don't feel like I fully belong, it's in me. I've tried to deny it, I tried denying it in college, it didn't work. I can't. And the fact of the matter is that I love being Armenian, but I'm no longer going to sacrifice this part of me, or that part of me, or feel like I can't just be my whole self because this Armenian identity says, "That can't happen, or that can't exist, or that's shameful, don't do that, don't be that, don't say that". I'm like, "No. Fuck that. Fuck all of that."… I just want to smash all this ամօթ[167], this patriarchy, all this bullshit, I just want to shake it and break it and get rid of it.

Even though they do not feel integrated in the community or its institutions, they are not ready to step away, nor do they have any desire to be disconnected. For the most part, it's not even an option to consider. They are more invested in bettering the situation than walking away from it. LGBQ Armenians, those with supportive families and emotional ties with the community, take initiative to engage in community activism.

M No one cares about LGBT Armenians, no one cares about our struggle, no one gives a fuck. If we don't make people care, it's going to be like this forever, because its 2015! And we live in Los Angeles of all cities! And it's like we have marriage equality now in Los Angeles, but our community is still back in the Stone Age. And it doesn't matter that we can get married now, our families aren't going to celebrate our unions, the way they would if it was a straight couple. I see people get married on social media, all these Armenians, and they have these huge weddings… but there's something that makes me

[167] *Amɔtʰ:* shame.

> really sad to know that I'm not going to have that type of wedding. We don't see gay couples having those types of weddings. You don't see families, Armenian families, celebrating those relationships. And it's just like, if we want this, we have to do it ourselves… It's our job to make them care, so that's what I've learned in the last couple of months, and I'm just trying to get people excited about these things, like to get excited about their identities, and you know, our struggle, and we're all in this together. We have to help each other. We have to support each other… We need allies, we need straight people on board with these things…

The inspiration for his activism and wanting to make a change in the community came from his reflections after leaving the community and completely immersing himself in American culture.

> I started working at (name of American business). I'm like, "This isn't fun, I'm not having fun here. What are we doing here? We're not doing anything meaningful or impactful. We're not changing the world. I kind of want to change the world, or at least change something in the world." So I was like, "Let's go back, let's go back to the Armenians, let's change the Armenians. That's what I can do." So that's kind of what I'm doing now. I had to leave the community, go to college, and then get this job that had nothing to do with being Armenian to realize that it's not what I'm passionate about. Even though I'm critical of this community and I sometimes say nasty things about these people, I still love them. All of it is coming from a place of love… I'm not this bad Armenian they think I am. I'm actually– I think I'm a really good Armenian, and I'm trying to make this place, this community a better place…I criticized them so much, I stayed away from them so much, but with all my non-Armenian friends, all I could talk about was being Armenian.

There is a point to be made about activism being inherent to some of these diasporic organizations. There is an activist culture, especially regarding organized activities fighting for the recognition of the Armenian Genocide and other historic and contemporary Armenian issues. When Armenians are raised in these activist environments, it becomes second nature to be proactive, as socialized activists, in challenging systems of oppression and remedying these situations. Aside from the intrinsic value of respecting all peoples' human dignity, there is also a pragmatic argument: by rejecting Othered Armenians, who, as marginalized LGBQ people,

inherently fight for their rights, the community is depriving itself from potential seasoned activists for otherwise common Armenian causes.[168]

> I think we're very indifferent and hypocritical, as a people. And I think that there's all this talk about all these things about Armenia, about the community, but I just think that we need to actually become active and do something, instead of just bitching all the time… At the same time, I think that there were visionaries in the Armenian diaspora, right in the aftermath of the Genocide, that set up these amazing structures of community, whether it was from Beirut to Tehran, to Athens, to Paris, to Marseilles, to Buenos Aires, where you have Armenians that grew up in these different countries, but in a very similar church, school, Homenetmen, AGBU[169], Scouts, arts, Hamazkayin[170], and all these things that did a great job of preserving it. And I think in the last 20 years, there needs to be a version 2.0 that is going to keep our generation engaged. And that is failing miserably, because the institutions have become obsolete that the visionaries created a hundred years ago, with the exception of a few. And unfortunately, whatever institutions we do have are still run by people that are in our parents' generation, and we just don't speak the same language. I'm not even talking about Armenian-English; I'm talking about mentality, where it's going. You still have these people that do things like they're in Beirut, or in Aleppo, or in whatever, and you're like, "What are you talking about?" And it's become a power and control thing, where they don't want to let go. And they still look at our generation as a bunch of kids, but they're losing us because we're not interested anymore... And we're tired of Genocide, and– you know, let's celebrate our culture. And it's not even the gay issue, I think you have a lot of our generation… where you're like, "What are these people talking about?" Let's showcase our culture. Let's be proud. Enough of this victim, and everything is sad and Genocide… So, I think that's my biggest criticism. And I criticize our generation for not making a more active decision, and being like, "You need to step to the side and let me take over," because there's three of them and there's ten of us, and you're like, "Let go. Give it to me. Pass it on, and let me revamp it." I think we've become indifferent, too. It may be hopeless, but I don't know. I don't know what's going to happen… How many years can you do the same thing? It needs to change.

There's a fundamental institutional issue where the focus isn't on LGBTQ issues not being on the forefront, but rather that these organizations are not meeting the needs of the younger and future generations, to keep them engaged *and* for them to want to be involved and proud

[168] Personal Communication with Vaché Thomassian, ARF–Western United States Central Committee Member, July 26, 2016.
[169] Armenian General Benevolent Union [AGBU] is a non-profit organization devoted to upholding the Armenian heritage through cultural, humanitarian, and educational programs.
[170] Hamazkayin, short for Hamazkayin Armenian Educational and Cultural Society, is a diasporic cultural organization, affiliated with the ARF.

members of the community. Participants repeatedly mentioned their dissatisfaction with Genocide recognition being at the forefront of social justice issues in the community, when gender and sexuality matters are neglected. The policies and mentality represent the acculturation of the older generations in the Middle East and not the current needs of the Los Angeles Armenian community.

- Covering

In her study on the inclusion of LGBT sexuality in the Black community of Los Angeles, Moore (2010a) analyzes the strategies Black LGBT people use when negotiating multiple identities to create a sense of ethnic belonging in Black environments. Believed to have a stigmatized status, many Black gay people practice covering in Black social spaces. Covering or passing is the process of "toning down" one's stigmatized identity in order to fit in. Passing "is not a simple, effortless act; It's not just about denial or suppression. The closeted individual closely monitors his or her speech, emotional expression, and behavior in order to avoid unwanted suspicion" (Seidman, 2002). For immigrant communities, culture acts as a lifeline to the home (and, in this case, host) country and a basis for both group identity and political and sociocultural platforms (Eastmond 1993). For the Armenian diasporic community in Los Angeles, the Armenian community serves as a home space for ethnic belonging. For LGBQ Armenians, this creates tension in their community experiences. Queer Armenians employ certain strategies when negotiating multiple identities to create a sense of ethnic belonging in Armenian environments. Some participants cover, i.e. adapt their clothing, speech, behavior, and mannerisms when with other Armenians, family, or at community events, because the climate in these environments is one of intolerance and antipathy toward LGBTQ people; though they may not face outright discrimination, hearing derogatory terms and anecdotes takes its toll: W "If

you're at an Armenian function, you can't hold hands with your girlfriend, I took my girlfriend to an Armenian festival and you're just pretending that's your friend. You can't be yourself. There are certain things you can't do." They cover, not only to fit into these heteronormative spaces, but also to maintain a peaceful coexistence with family and community members since severing ties with these networks is not a risk worth taking. Sometimes the covering takes place by avoiding certain topics, for example, one participant tones down his discussion of sex. He refers to himself as a very sexual person but admits to not calling himself sex positive in Armenian spaces, especially with people from the older generation. And, even with his own generation, the conversation becomes uncomfortable for them if they talk about it for too long. Furthermore, several participants discussed the difficulty of having Armenian co-workers or working at Armenian businesses.

> W I hide, like at work, no one knows at work, because I don't feel comfortable. Well, first of all, when I was working with Armenians, I couldn't. So, it was an office full of Armenians, always the pressure of, "When are you getting married? What's wrong with you? Why aren't you getting married?" My supervisor would sit me down and say, "Are you dating? What's going on?" I have this girlfriend I'm living with, but they don't know. And they're like, "Oh, I have this guy." One of them took me home to lunch to meet her son, you know? And it's crazy so I could never come out there and I had a cousin working there, so it would go back to my mom and you know.

> M [Having Armenian co-workers is] stressful. Not stressful, anxiety. I have anxiety. I have to say that my Armenian co-workers right now are older and I think almost all of them are immigrants. So that causes a lot of anxiety from me because when I'm around those people, I go into that mode, the way that I'm the good Armenian boy who sits in his chair, does his work, does not talk, does not do anything unless he's spoken to, unless he's told to do it. It's ridiculous because I'm only like that around Armenians… At (American company) everyone knew I was gay, but how can we compare a major American corporation to a local community Armenian (business)? Where you're practically not in America, in that space… and that's great. That's beautiful. There are really nice, loving things about that. I also just don't feel comfortable there, I have a lot of anxiety being around them and I feel like when I'm there, I feel like I'm sitting at my grandma's house with all my family, and when I'm at my grandma's house, speak when spoken to.

These Armenian workspaces tend to feel like family environments and oftentimes co-workers actually have connections with family members. Though this is a "beautiful" setting, it is unfortunately also a cause for major anxiety among closeted LGBQ Armenians. One participant, after graduating from college, temporarily worked at a bank with Armenian co-workers and mentioned the difficulty of working with older Armenian women, because of their homonegativity. They had a "we love you but it's your handicap" approach to his sexuality and he constantly overheard them making homophobic comments about customers. His supervisor made him feel like a failure for not having a girlfriend and he was taunted and teased. LGBQ Armenians tend to not feel welcomed around other Armenians because the cultural and social forces shaping and molding Armenians do not encourage inclusivity of Otherness. They often feel isolated; their experiences in these environments are marked by their difference – now becoming the Other, the օտար[171] among Armenians.

- LGBQ Armenians Families' Relationship with the Community

These feelings of isolation and exclusion tend to change with time and especially when LGBQ Armenians become parents. Having to now consider their children, the circumstances and their reactions change. Since they want their children to be part of the Armenian community, they attend community events without apprehension, W "It didn't matter to us what people thought, because we want to give our children the most normal life. So to us doing what we do is showing them the bravery that we're not ashamed. If we prevented [ourselves from] going places, then we're actually telling them there's– it's something wrong, and it's not. [Whereas] in the past I was fearful the community was going to just let me down and that was it." Now, her main concern is protecting her children and she tells them, W "Look. You have two moms.

[171] *ɔdar:* term meaning "strange" or "foreign," but used colloquially to refer to non-Armenians.

Some people are going to make fun of you about that. Some people are not. But, those who make fun of you, they've got something else going on in their lives and it's not you. It's them, because they're looking to pick on someone and those are bullies." Another participant expressed her strategies in approaching Armenian schools for her children, initially feeling weird about going with her wife to register their children, knowing that the administrators would wonder about their situation, they decided to be honest from the beginning,

> W We feel that we need to tell them right away that we're a couple and these are our kids and [ask], "is it OK?"… And so it's almost like we have to get permission– not get permission but know that it's OK with them because I don't want to just go there and think, "My kids are coming here, and that's it. You have no choice. This is our right." We don't want to offend anyone and we want to make sure that our kids are going to be accepted… And the same thing at the Sunday school. She's young, the principal there. So we told her right away and, "Do you think it's going to be OK? Because we don't want to cause a problem here… Especially because it's church." And both places, both principals were really accepting, and the teachers. I think because they got to know us at first they were like, "Of course."… But we don't go flaunt it around either. So in that sense, maybe I– we do tone it down. We're not out there saying, "We're a lesbian couple, you have to accept us, here we are." We don't say anything to anybody, we just assume that we're going be OK… And luckily, we haven't had any really bad reactions.

Not only do they approach the schools carefully, but they even strategize with school assignments. For instance, she explained that when the children were supposed to draw a family tree for homework, she asked the principal if she was sure the principal wanted their children to do the activity as well since it would be posted on the wall for churchgoers to see: W "She's like, "Don't worry about it." So they did it, they did the activity and the kids tell their friends, "We have two moms," and they're fine with it. And luckily, they get great reactions. I remember when the kids were young. (Name) told one of her friends that she had two moms and her friend's reaction was, "How cool. You're so lucky, you have two–" They didn't understand. So that kind of reaction was like, "Awesome!" I was like, "Yes!" She continually stated how lucky they were that everyone has been accepting towards their family in these Armenian spaces. By strategizing,

adapting, challenging, and normalizing, LGBQ Armenian families have very positive experiences within the community, further indicating the significance and results of visibility.

The Collective vs. The Individual

[My mom and I] were having an argument, because she thought I should be doing something I wasn't (i.e. being straight), and I was telling her I had more choices now in my life, and she told me I was too free… "That's right, that's your problem, you're too free." If the person reading such a line were a stereotypical American, with few links to past and ancestry, she might think, "Hmm. Agabian didn't seem that free to me. In fact, her lack of freedom seemed to be her problem." If the person were someone else from another culture with great duties to his family, he might have thought, "Yeah, she was too free. She had too many choices and it confused her. She should have been guided more by rules and family duty." It is this conundrum of the Armenian American, or any traditional ethnic person living in the U.S., that I want to address now. Recently I lived in Armenia for a year, and my young students, who were in their early twenties, living with their extended families, studying English and the culture of the English-speaking person in America, understood the difference between their lives and the lives of Americans. They knew that Americans valued leading independent lives, making their own decisions, expressing themselves freely. But with this freedom came a price: a lack of connection to family support–the sense of security, generosity and sacrifice that a family can provide, which is valued in Armenia... Here am I at forty, still confused by the dynamic of freedom and connection. But I suppose the difference between how I am now, and the her that I was then, is that instead of seeing myself as a completely unliberated daughter, needing to be liberated, I now think of myself as someone trying to balance my individuality and my need for collective identity.

- *Nancy Agabian*[172]

In the previous chapter, there was a discussion of what it means when Armenian parents use phrases like, "it's your life, do what you want." It usually means the opposite, as a threat for the child to understand that it is not *their* life and they *should not* do what they want, because of the implications of shame from these actions – a component of the collectivistic nature of Armenian culture and families. It explained a participant's frustration when his father stated, "well, it's your life, right?" and the participant knew that was not a genuine comment. Similarly, Agabian alludes to the need for Armenians to balance their individuality and their need for

[172] *Me as Her Again,* 2008.

collective identity. One participant frustratingly stated, M "It's so much work. Honestly. Like, it's so much cognitive work to have to put into 'Who am I?'" When freedom within one's identity and connectedness to the collective are seen as mutually exclusive, LGBQ Armenians struggles are heightened.

> M I hate that, this collective, this we're all in it together… I'm an individual, and I feel like in our community people are scared to be themselves. People are scared to express themselves. People don't feel comfortable just being their own individual– and having their own thoughts and speaking their own thoughts. And it's like, if you go away from the herd, then you're kind of ostracized, will they let you back in? And so, that's something that I really don't like, because I don't like to be told what to think, do, or act… There's nothing wrong with having a different opinion, and the way that our culture is doesn't leave a lot of room for different opinions.

Differing from the collective and pursuing individuality is often associated with rejection of the community and family. It would be deemed selfish to consider one's own interests above the collective's, which is why LGBQ Armenians, those desiring connectedness with the collective, do not prioritize their own needs. The participants are raised in an individualistic culture (American) by parents from a collectivistic culture (Armenian). Part of the struggle is that they think there should be greater individuality and tolerance of them, unlike their parents' generation prioritizing the good of the collective over the individual. In their new approaches to identity and family, they strive for greater diversity within the functionality of either. Participants are critical about the negotiation of their ethnic (Armenian) and national (American) identities, because they feel as though the Armenian collectivist mindset is hypocritical. One participant argued that if Armenians were truly collectivistic then they would treat their queer peers as brothers and sisters. In the collectivistic culture, sexual identity should not separate the individual from the collective. Therefore, for him, the lack of that companionship implies that the collective exists to

maintain the fear of Other, the fear of change, and the fear of anything that's outside of the boundaries of traditionally Armenian.

Discussion

Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz (2005) argue that collectively the fields of queer of color critique and queer diasporas have reconceptualized critical race theory and postcolonial studies sparsely placing sexuality across domestic and diasporic landscapes. Thus, by denaturalizing origin narratives such as home and nation, queer diasporas, "investigates what might be gained politically by reconceptualizing diaspora not in conventional terms of ethnic dispersion, filiation, and biological traceability, but rather in terms of queerness, affiliation, and social contingency" (Eng 2003, 4). Consequently, emerging as a theoretical concept, queer diaspora provides new means of reorganizing national and transnational communities to be based on destination rather than origin, affiliation rather than filiation, and the assumption of a common set of social practices (or political commitments) rather than genetics (Eng 2003). As this research has shown, GALAS, a queer Armenian diasporic organization, is based on destination – formed in Los Angeles, affiliation – for queers and allies, and addresses the needs of the local community by operating for a common set of social practices and political commitments.

The methodological approach of queer diasporas rejects "the normative impulse to recuperate lost origins, to recapture the mother or motherland, and to valorize dominant notions of social belonging and racial exclusion that the nation-state would seek to naturalize and legitimate through the inherited logics of kinship, blood, and identity" (Eng 2010, 13). Rather, this theoretical approach contests the pervading rhetoric that situates "queer" and "diaspora" as dependent on "heterosexuality" and "nation" (Gopinath 2005). Instead of focusing on the origins,

continuities, and commonalities of diaspora, queer diasporas, as a methodological tool, highlights the break, discontinuities, and differences (Eng 2010). Moving a step further in the application of this methodological tool, regarding GALAS, there's a literal queer diaspora: an organization that started in the diaspora and queer is at its core. As an organization functioning in the Armenian community which was founded by Armenians in the U.S. rather than being transplanted from home or various host countries, GALAS represents the needs expressed within the local community. As a result, it functions as the main vehicle aiding in the negotiation of and as a means for reaching the fuller potential of their queer Armenian identities, unlike other ethnic-based community institutions in Los Angeles.

Conclusion

For the most part I'd been avoiding the Armenian community since I moved to L.A. because I was sure they would treat me like my family, that they wouldn't be able to tolerate my identity.

- *Nancy Agabian*[173]

This chapter demonstrates the importance of a sense of community for LGBQ Armenians and how, for most of them, the Armenian component is crucial for their identities. The community of origin has the potential to be a major support system for their families as well, yet the necessary resources do not exist, such as support groups, allies, etc. The benefits of GALAS include the support system, the resources (e.g. free therapy services), the safe space *and* the space for the belonging and coexisting of their multiple identities. However, that was not always enough. Since participants who had close connections with the community could not break those ties, they strived for inclusion and fought for recognition within these ethnic-based community organizations. For those LGBQ Armenians, distancing themselves is not a favorable option,

[173] *Me as Her Again,* 2008.

making those moments of disassociation very difficult to cope with and manage. Meanwhile, for those who were never part of any of the three pillars of the diasporic institutions, they are unburdened by the pressures of the diasporic community, and can prioritize their individuality since they don't feel the need for a collective identity.

The distinction between generations was evident in their choices for friendships and community spaces. Those in the older generation were more likely to have Armenian friends, queer and non-queer. They were also more probable to have positive experiences within the community of origin. This variance can be attributed to the stages and layers of coming out. Those in the younger generation were in their initial stages of leading public queer lives, and facing homophobic encounters for the first time, while the older generation has had the time to process and prioritize which encounters deserve their time and energy, if any at that point. Additionally, they have a sense of stability in their queer lifestyle. With maturation and development of autonomy and agency, they are less vulnerable in general and can handle being in Armenian spaces. Especially, once coupled, married, or with children. They generally have a more positive outlook regarding the community, first, because they are not actively engaging with these people and spaces on a regular basis, second, because whatever encounters they do have tend to be positive, and third, because once established in life, they simply do not have the time for such worries, especially when raising children becomes their priority.

A research goal was to depict the post-coming out changes, if any, for LGBQ Armenians in these organizations and institutions, but there was no data, because there are currently no openly gay Armenians in these spaces. Instead, participants expressed their frustrations with the lack of visibility and the worry of being the poster-child for gay Armenians when out in public spaces, M "I go to parties and I'm the only gay guy there. And there's 100 people there, but

everyone's Armenian… And I don't want to be this– not pedestal, but a show. I don't want to be a show. I don't want to be like, "Yeah, I'm the gay guy, let me juggle for you. Let me tell you about all the sexual escapades that I've had. Or this adventure that I had." When LGBQ Armenians come out, their second step is almost always the desire to stray from the community to avoid being in homonegative spaces, and where they find comfort and community is with organizations like GALAS. Therefore, there aren't any openly gay active members in these mainstream Armenian organizations for them to have intra-community of origin queer experiences.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

 [174]

Figure 5: Armenian Rainbow Flag

Armenians did cling to their language and religion, but they also have been composed of many communities that adapted the best aspects of various cultures. When one Armenian community was suppressed, another one thriving elsewhere picked up the slack, maneuvering for greater freedom, maintaining the culture and identity. What allowed Armenians to survive, then, was their diversity.

- *Nancy Agabian*[175]

You do not have to be me in order for us to fight alongside each other. I do not have to be you to recognize that our wars are the same. What we must do is commit ourselves to some future that can include each other and to work toward that future with the particular strengths of our individual identities. And in order to do this, we must allow each other our differences at the same time as we recognize our sameness.

- *Audre Lorde*[176]

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[174] Flag sketch by Martiros Saryan, Armenian artist, as one of the options for the first Republic of Armenia in 1918. Ultimately, a tri-colored flag of red, blue, and orange was chosen. The original rainbow sketch is housed in the Martiros Saryan Museum in Yerevan, Armenia. Image retrieved from: http://www.sarkavagagirq.net/2011/05/blog-post_27.html

[175] *Me as Her Again*, 2008.

[176] *Sister Outsider*, 1984.

- Perceptions of the Future of LGBTQ Armenians

In depth interviews with LGBQ Armenians have demonstrated that circumstances are significantly improving with time[177], further personal interactions, and development in community relations. The diversity of the Armenian community in Los Angeles, with its various levels of conservatives/liberals, traditional peoples, subethnicities, class differences, has played differing roles in the experiences of LGBQ Armenians, however, on the whole, participants believe that the community is progressing towards inclusivity. Regardless of age and gender LGBQ Armenians stated that when they are able to communicate with their families, embrace their sexualities, and be comfortable as LGBQ persons in the community, their personal issues are resolved[178]. In turn, this leads them to have a positive outlook for the future of LGBQ Armenians. They also attributed generations changing, exposure, and visibility to this potential for movement. Some also credited GALAS for bringing a sense of community to queer Armenians and providing the space to explore these intersecting identities and allowing for the cultural and ideological shift within the family and community. Echoing the sentiments of Audre Lorde, participants emphasized the importance of actively making allies in the community and in GALAS, since Armenians do not have to identify as LGBTQ in order to recognize that their communal struggles and aspirations are the same for an even more diverse and inclusive community.

- Suggestions for Future Research

A major step moving forward would be for Gender & Sexuality research to include Armenian transgender experiences. Additionally, gender differences and variances between

[177] In terms of aging.
[178] This is the present reality of those above the age of 35, and the imagined future reality of those younger.

LGBTQ men and women need to be investigated in a study highlighting the experiences of men and women, each in their independent studies including their individualized experiences. Additionally, another significant area of research is conducting individuated studies comparatively researching different generations' experiences with a more focused approach on each generation's struggles and strategies. Another path for future research is drawing comparative conclusions with the situation of LGBTQ peoples in Armenia as well as other diasporic communities, implicating the roles of their families and communities on their experiences as LGBTQ Armenians as well as on the negotiation of their identities. Furthermore, an extension of this research involves studying LGBTQ Armenian families in all their diversity: depicting the role of gender, the role of Armenianness, parenting approaches, community involvement, language transmission, and so forth.

- Review of Findings and Implications

This dissertation has depicted significant trends and nuances in the experiences of LGBQ Armenians. These conclusions are not meant to be generalizable, rather they highlight the most substantial research outcomes from the previous chapters based on research participants. Studying individual identity, family, and community through a marginalized lens, using standpoint theory, strongly aided in providing a fuller spectrum of their realities. In order to have a broader representation of Armenian identity, it is imperative to include the views of all, and specifically the views of the stigmatized and the Othered. Researching LGBQ Armenians while using intersectionality as a methodological tool has given a great perspective and richer results in discovering the major components and issues involved in the analysis of Armenian identities. LGBQ Armenians' identities are interconnected and should be studied in relation to forms of systematic classifications – the ones in consideration for this research were ethnicity,

subethnicity, gender, and sexuality. None of their contested identities, whether they be ethnic (Armenian) & national (American), or ethnic (Armenian) & sexual (LGBQ), were reconciled independently, rather they were negotiated within each other's realms. The experiences of LGBQ Armenians, though they shared many similarities, were divided by class distinctions, subethnic variations, gender, and sexuality, highlighting the diversity within the Los Angeles Armenian diasporic community.

Since participants state that Armenian culture promotes the maintenance of its ethnic heritage, most do not identify as American or white. Though nuances were highlighted in previous chapters indicating the fluidity of these identity constructions, Americanness and whiteness are deemed as Other identities while Armenianness is highly valued and encouraged by most of the participants. In terms of the negotiation of their ethnic and sexual identities, LGBQ Armenians were in a constant state of resisting absolute prioritizing one over the other, while simultaneously covering and gender conforming in Armenian spaces. As a result of Armenian shame culture, LGBQ Armenians struggle with both the collectivistic shame culture and sexual shame. These issues are reinterpreted in the process of negotiating and strategizing to reconcile their ethnic and sexual identities and therefore *re*-construct a new sense of Armenian identity, as a result, *Othering* the mainstream. In the context of LGBQ motherhood depicted in the study, the approach to parenting is largely void of this element of shame. By rejecting shame culture, the parents are raising their children without a shame culture of any type – neither sexual nor Armenian. Due to their different approaches to parenting and expressions of Armenian family, their method relinquishes shame as a means of regulating and controlling children's behavior and aids the process of clearing Armenian shame culture. In the reconstruction of a new

form of Armenianness, sans shame, a greater significance is given to individuality over collectivity.

Regardless of participants' ages, they were all 1.5 & 2nd generation immigrants, therefore the year in which they came out (1990 versus 2015) had no significant impact on family reaction. However, with the increasingly progressive social climate in the past three decades in Los Angeles, it has become more common for LGBQ Armenians to come out as teenagers, whereas the youngest age of coming out was 25 for those participants above the age of 35. Since the family is primary to the lives of LGBQ Armenians, the significance of familial support and acceptance was communicated as a necessity by all participants. And while LGBQ Armenians are understanding of the reasons for their parent's reactions, their parents do not have the resources (i.e. community services that raise awareness) to demonstrate to their children the same understanding and necessary compassion. Sexual identity must be viewed with the same weight as other valued identities, and not simply a behavioral trait, for parents to understand the complexity of the situation and behave accordingly to the needs of the child. Dialogue and education about sex and sexuality are critical to overcoming the taboo and stigma associated with these subjects, and consequently alleviate familial turmoil surrounding these issues to no longer consider them sensitive topics. The family's silence on their sexualities, even post-coming out, serves as another form of the closet.

Queer diaspora as a theoretical concept provides new methods of contesting traditional family and kinship structures (Eng 2003), as the LGBQ Armenian families in this research have done in their methods for creating families. They indicate the creative development of families in the next generation with much greater openness, understanding, and flexibility in terms of coupling, marriage, child-rearing, and provide a new interpretation for the Armenian family in

Los Angeles in terms of inclusivity for them and their children. Queer diaspora as a methodological approach reconceptualizes diaspora, focusing on affiliation rather than filiation, destination rather than origin, and social contingency rather than biological traceability (Eng 2003). Instead of focusing on the origins, continuities, and commonalities, queer diasporas highlight the broad spectrum of diversities in the diaspora (Eng 2010). As this research has shown, GALAS, a truly queer diaspora, founded by Armenians in the U.S., is based on destination and affiliation, and addresses the needs of the local community by providing a space and platform for the negotiation of and as a means for reaching a fuller potential of their members' queer Armenian identities. An organization starting in the diaspora, instead of being transplanted from other countries, with queer at its core, GALAS functions as space for LGBQ Armenians to bring together components of their ethnic, sexual, and gender identities. Moreover, GALAS brings together queer Armenians of various ages, subethnicities, and other categorical systems, creating an environment filled with role models and co-queer companions. Some LGBQ Armenians find solace with GALAS and its members, in lieu of an embracing community of origin, but not all, because of its organizational struggles and lack of interest by some LGBQ Armenians. The community of origin can play a major role by providing support for families, however, mechanisms, such as support groups and allies, are scarce. LGBQ Armenians, with pre-existing community relations, do not simply isolate themselves from the community, rather they strive for inclusion and visibility. On the other hand, those unburdened by the pressures of the diasporic community having never been associated with any of its institutions tend to prioritize their individual needs in place of a collective identity. Furthermore, there aren't any openly gay active members in these mainstream Armenian institutions for LGBTQ Armenians to have intra-community of origin queer experiences. LGBQ Armenians' tendency to not feel

welcomed around other Armenians is due to the cultural and social forces shaping and molding Armenians that do not encourage inclusivity of Otherness. Participants' experiences in these environments are marked by their difference – now seen as the Other, the օտար[179] among Armenians.

Older and younger generation LGBQ Armenians faced distinct challenges with the community, that run parallel with their family experiences, in the multilayered processes of their coming out stages. Since the older generation had more of an opportunity to process and prioritize their participation and relationships with both family and community events, their reflections had more positive undertones. Thus, indicating that time plays a vital role in healing family relations, reestablishing community involvement, and ultimately allowing identity to authentically express itself. There is an interrelation between family and community – *family is community writ small, community is family writ large.* In this context, one participant in his 30s, whose identity complexities paralleled the rest's, had a very distinct experience with family and community, with the two so closely intertwined and interconnected, because he had never been coupled. His lack of experience in this department, though did not affect his identity in any way, left a significant gap in his life stories regarding family and community, indicating the significance of partnership in the performance of sexual identities within the family and community realm.

Examining the interdependent role of identity, family, and community necessitates the salience of relations within the three. Starting with identity, the reconciling and negotiation happen internally, yet the concept of community acts as an agent that fulfills external validation for their multiple identities, while also providing a sense of belonging. Similarly, the family unit

[179] *ɔdar:* term meaning "strange" or "foreign," but used colloquially to refer to non-Armenians.

plays an extensive role in shaping their identities, by being the first mechanism in the imprinting of identity, it further solidifies the inescapable importance of familial acceptance. For LGBQ Armenians, though community support strengthens their queerness and Armenianness, without harmony within the family they remain distraught, emphasizing the insufficiency of ameliorating only two of the three aforementioned markers. The community while aiding the individual has the potential to also positively influence the family, however those structures are still relatively scarce. Thus, LGBQ Armenians throughout their lives are navigating between their contested identities, familial relationships, and community networks. The synergy of these three creates the optimal environment for the fulfilling experiences of LGBQ Armenians.

"Afraid? Ok. Do it afraid."

- *Jesse Williams*

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