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Performing Paradox:

Balleticized Bodies and the Construction of Modernity in Armenian Concert Dance

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

in Culture and Performance

by

Natalie Kamajian

2022

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Performing Paradox:

Balleticized Bodies and the Construction of Modernity in Armenian Concert Dance

by

Natalie Kamajian

Master of Arts in Culture and Performance

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Anurima Banerji, Chair

This thesis explores *bemakan par*, a genre of Armenian concert dance invented in the twentieth century. *Bemakan par* is both the state-sanctioned dance form in Armenia and is the predominant form in the Armenian diaspora—positioning it as the primary representative genre of Armenian dance globally. Despite its popular trademark as a distinctly "ancient" and "traditional" "folk" dance form, *bemakan par* paradoxically cultivates an ideal Armenian dancing body that is submerged by balletic comportment and syntax. As a bodily discourse that negotiates the layered histories of Armenian national identity formation, *bemakan par* reflects a hierarchical conception of modernity informed by Eurocentric and Soviet ideals. As the first critical examination of *bemakan par* technique, pedagogy, and performance, this thesis employs an interdisciplinary methodology combining participant observation, discourse analysis, autoethnography, archival research, and choreographic analysis. I argue that as ballet supersedes Armenian vernacular

aesthetics in *bemakan par,* practitioners are simultaneously taught to reify colonial notions of modernity that mark those aesthetics as primitive, devoid of technique, and as needing "development" by way of a Soviet-mediated balletic encounter. Ultimately, as *bemakan par* overwrites and balleticizes indigenous aesthetics, it continues to be circulated as an emblem of the nation—one that gestures towards Armenian identity in a form "improved" along colonial lines.

The thesis of Natalie Kamajian is approved.

Susan Leigh Foster

Janet M. O'Shea

Anurima Banerji, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2022

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INTRODUCTION:
Complicating "Armenian Dance"

It is a warm August evening in the summer of 2019 in downtown Yerevan, Armenia's capital and the country's largest city. Hundreds of people are gathered at the foot of a giant outdoor stairway at an open-air museum called The Cascade. At the base is a sculpture garden and a large public courtyard lined with restaurants and cafes that host an active night life; as the warm six o'clock summer breeze swirls through the crowd, the microphone is turned on, a few introductory speeches are made, and the music begins. The sounds of traditional Armenian instruments like zurna[1] *and dhol*[2] *reverberate in the air, and massive concentric circles are quickly formed. Hand-in-hand and shoulder-to-shoulder, people dance with exuberant intensity for hours well past sunset and into nightfall. The dancers—young and old, experienced and first-time learners—fill the air with joyful vocal interjections and energetic stomping that echo throughout the city center.*

Just across the central square is the famed Yerevan Opera Theatre that housed Armenia's first national operas and ballets, dating back to the 1930s. Inside the Opera complex is the Aram Khachaturian Concert Hall, bearing the name of Soviet Armenia's premier classical composer and conductor, where locals and tourists are seated awaiting a performance by the Pari Petakan State Dance Ensemble of Armenia. The air inside the theatre is heavy and damp. Seated in the balcony far away from the stage, dozens of women are restlessly waving their fans, and as the theatre lights dim, the soft rustling sound of their movement becomes a permanent drone throughout the performance. The curtain rises and 50 dancers, young men and women of

[1] A double-reed wind instrument

[2] A double-sided barrel drum

approximately the same height and physique, appear in bright colorful costumes, leaping onto the proscenium stage with fully extended limbs, their sculpted silhouettes moving with precision and in perfect synchronization to the booming acoustics of zurna and dhol.

These scenes encapsulate the two primary forms of Armenian "folk dance"[3] that currently dominate the performance landscape in Yerevan. While both forms seek to represent an "authentic" vision of Armenianness, they diverge in their aesthetic form; ideological and pedagogical approaches; and social, historical, and political implications. The first dancescape described above is commonly referred to as *azgagrakan* (ethnographic).[4] A communal activity and social dance form, *azgagrakan par* ("ethnographic dance") consists of ritual, wedding, and martial dances where practitioners are connected either by holding hands or waists and dancing in a single circle or a straight line. Practice and performance repertoires are sourced from exiles and survivors of the Armenian Genocide in Ottoman Turkey (1915-1923), many of whom sought refuge in what became Soviet Armenia in 1920. Seen in Armenia at outdoor dance gatherings and on the proscenium stage, *azgagrakan par* is an increasingly popular idiom that consciously integrates knowledge of indigenous Armenian lifeways and Armenian vernacular dance aesthetics into contemporary practice and performance. Imbricated in the *azgagrakan* style are

[3] I place "folk dance" in quotes here to signal to the reader my general skepticism of the term, particularly its deployment as a term that exclusively delineates non-Western or "ethnic" dance forms. Joanna Kealiinohomoku in her groundbreaking article "An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance," argues that ballet—a form that is often considered to be universal, "high art" form—is indeed a form of "ethnic dance" as its aesthetic constituents reflect its Western European cultural origins. The term "folk dance" like the term "ethnic dance" both euphemistically signal non-Western dance forms as being "primitive," "unmodern" "devoid of technique" and "bound to the past." But are all dances not culturally bound? And are all dances not born *of* community, even when they happen to be credited to a single "genius"? In writing against the pejorative associations with folk dance in particular, this paper focuses on naming different styles of Armenian dance and putting them in conversation with Armenian vernacular dance aesthetics and technique.

[4] *Azgagrakan* [Ազգագրական] is a compound word using *azg* [ազգ], "tribe/people" and *grakan* [գրական], "writing."

sentiments of reviving Armenian cultural heritage amidst a past and present of genocide, dispossession, and cultural erasure.[5]

Figure 1: Monthly outdoor *azgagrakan* dance gathering in Yerevan, Armenia. Photograph by author. July 26, 2019.

The second dancescape described above is the subject of this thesis and what I refer to as *bemakan par* ("stage dance").[6] A strictly concert dance form which goes by many names,[7]

[5] Ethnomusicologist Armen Adamian, in his conference presentation "The *Azgagrakan* Movement: An Embodied Form of Armenian Nationalism," theorizes the *azgagrakan* idiom as a social movement where practitioners, scholars, and activists mobilize a decolonial and irrendentist strain of cultural nationalism amidst genocide, Sovietization, and the conflict of Nagorno-Karabagh (Adamian, 2019).

[6] *Bemakan* [Բեմական] consists of the word *bem* [բեմ], "stage" and the suffix *akan* [ական], "of" to articulate something that is "of the stage" or "staged."

[7] *Bemakan par* can often be referred to as *bemadrakan par* (staged dance), *joghovrdakan par* ("dance of the folk/people"), *avandakan par* (traditional dance), *azgayin par* (national dance) or even *azgagrakan par* (ethnographic dance). For this thesis, I decided to use *bemakan par* in order to unmoor these otherwise romanticized and broad terms used to measure cultural authenticity in an Armenian dance context. Instead, I chose to name the form according to its value system and aesthetic constituents, which in the case of *bemakan par* is one that aligns with other global concert dance forms. The stage is a key component of *bemakan par*, as it dictates its exclusively frontal orientation and is used to legitimize itself as an official presentation of "high art." This decision to use *bemakan par* also puts this form in conversation with other concert dance forms and opens new possibilities for critical discourses on Armenian dance topics in both the fields of Armenian studies and Dance studies.

bemakan par is a newly invented genre that consists of predetermined single-author choreographies and a dual gendered technique, where practitioners memorize variegated movement sequences that are frontally oriented for the purpose of staged performances. The technique for women is focused on the upper body as functions to exude delicate and demure ("feminine") qualities of movement, whereas the technique for men is focused on the lower body displaying strength, athleticism, and highly precise movements. The seventy-year Soviet occupation of Armenia (1920-91) institutionalized cultural hierarchy that ranked Russian and European forms and aesthetics as superior, thereby marking native cultural heritage as inferior, underdeveloped, and unmodern. *Bemakan par* practitioners negotiate this history of domination and are taught that only by balleticizing the Armenian body can Armenianness be elevated to an "enlightened" and "civilized" status that is both modern and globally legible.

Figure 2: Tatul Altunyan Ensemble performing in the *bemakan par* idiom at the Yerevan Opera Theatre in Armenia. Still from video recorded by author. June 23, 2019.

While the democratization of *azgagrakan par* through monthly outdoor dance gatherings and other participatory performances over the last two decades has catalyzed a (re)integration of dance heritage into daily life in Yerevan, *bemakan par* continues to maintain its official status as the state-sanctioned dance form in Armenia. Furthermore, the *azgagrakan* dancescape is a grassroots Yerevan-centric phenomenon, with only a few ensembles and dance communities scattered throughout the diaspora such as in Los Angeles,[8] the Hague, and Moscow. Conversely, *bemakan par* enjoys extensive institutional support both in Armenia and across countless communities throughout the global diaspora. For example, in Armenia *bemakan* dancers who graduate from the premiere State Choreographic College in Yerevan are stationed in village communities across the country to work as dance teachers and choreographers for school and community center dance groups. In the diaspora, a longstanding migration chain of *bemakan par* practitioners who resettled from Soviet Armenia to various communities in the diaspora led to an influx of *bemakan* dance teachers at Armenian private schools and community centers. Many of these teachers eventually opened their own private dance studios, and in large Armenian communities like Glendale, CA one can find an unlimited number of *bemakan* dance studios. Thus, *bemakan par* is firmly positioned as the primary expressor of Armenian dance not only in Armenia, but also globally. This thesis attends to the contours of *bemakan par* practice, performance, and ideology, and is also concerned with unraveling the particular presentation of Armenian identity that is crystallized in the *bemakan par* style.

What are Vernacular Armenian Aesthetics?

[8] I am the co-founder and dance director for one of the few *azgagrakan* ensembles based in Los Angeles called *Lernazang*.

This thesis rests on two general claims: 1) that there are two major performance styles of Armenian dance, *azgagrakan* and *bemakan;* and 2) that each style engages with Armenian vernacular dance aesthetics differently. Practitioners in the *azgagrakan* style are not only taught to integrate and prioritize vernacular aesthetics as a core component of technical proficiency in the form, but they also associate dancing with a practice of decolonial reclamation and revival of indigenous Armenian lifeways that have been forgotten or erased, or both. On the other hand, in *bemakan par* technique ballet supersedes vernacular aesthetics and practitioners are simultaneously taught to reify colonial notions of civilization and modernity that mark indigenous Armenian heritage as primitive, devoid of technique, and as needing "development" by way of a Soviet balletic encounter. In the *bemakan* style, traces of Armenian vernacular aesthetics—which are already submerged by balletic comportment and syntax—are reduced to Orientalist ornamentations that are used to add an "ethnic spice" and a sense of authenticity to the form. To better understand how *bemakan par* diminishes Armenian vernacular aesthetics, we first need to take a closer look at its value system and aesthetic principles.

As a social dance form, Armenian vernacular dance technique adheres to two core principles: 1) reciprocative movement; and 2) groundedness. Across various vernacular dances, including ritual and martial dances, the primary spatial concern is one of touch and communality, meaning that dancing bodies are always in contact with one another—either through holding hands, little fingers, or with arms clasped behind one another's waists—and must move in together in various interconnected ways as a core component of the technique. Dancers primarily organize themselves in closed or semi-circles or in straight lines, depending on the dance. These spatial arrangements not only help practitioners maintain connection to each other and to the melodic rhythm, but also enact modes of bodily communication and symbolic unity that ground

participants spatially and temporally. Thus, the primary movement principle is that of reciprocity as dancers are concerned with the mutual exchange of energy as they enact matching steps in close-contact bodily formations. Given that this sense of reciprocal movement and touch are paramount to Armenian vernacular dances, there is no reliance on standardized units for measuring space or movements; instead, dancers strive for energetic exchanges and cohesion in shared movements generated by a united group dynamic. Even in an improvisational partner dance like *yarkhushta*, which is also an important martial dance in the Armenian vernacular dance repertoire, dancers move independently of one another but are still tasked with watching and *responding* to their opponent. Amidst spontaneous interactions and personalized ways of moving, they move reciprocally as they meet every few cycles for a double-hand strike above their heads, while also choosing how to display their own combat abilities throughout.

Figure 3: Youth from Tsovak Folk Song and Dance Group dancing *yarkhushta* in Yerevan. Still from video recorded by author. December 12, 2020.

In virtually all Armenian vernacular dances, the neutral body position begins with bent knees that bear down into the earth while both feet remain flat on the ground. Dancing bodies bear down to the ground as they press their weight over their knees, often performing with

curved spines and hunched shoulders. From there, most movements begin with the *zspanak,*[9] a technique of the body that consists of light, subtle knee flexions or knee springs that push the body downward from the slight bent-knee neutral position to an even deeper knee-bend, grounding down even more towards the earth. Prioritizing groundedness and earthbound steps, vernacular dances engage in cyclical energetic exchanges with the earth and with other dancers, as practitioners are usually positioned shoulder to shoulder in a half circle, taking small steps to the right with two *zspanaks* for each step. The movements are repetitive, rhythmic, and cyclical. Movement vocabularies also consist of stomps that appear to "stick" to the ground as they lift up with slight resistance; single-leg circles that lead with the knee moving either forward or backward like turning a bicycle pedal; light jumps and hops; and *shoror* or "sway," a rhythmic sequence of usually stationary and repetitive weight transfers between the left and right sides of the body that alternate in patterned sets of 2's and 3's.

Figure 4: Men dancing *Alashkerti kochari* with curved spines and hunched shoulders at an *azgagrakan* dance gathering. Photograph by author. July 26, 2019.

[9] The word *zspanak* [զսպանակ] in Armenian translates to "spring."

Conversely, in *bemakan par,* all bodily positions and movements emerge from an erect spine, pulled up torso, and open hip and foot placement that are attuned to the lexicon and sensibilities of ballet and prepare the body for elongation and elevation. Bodies are not connected in terms of touch, but rather in terms of their placement within a geometrized horizontal and vertical axis. This thesis addresses how *bemakan par* measures an ideal Armenian body against a balletically trained one—a long-limbed, graceful body that is of the "right" shape and size, upholds geometric precision, and displays an impeccable external line—and the ways in which this constructs a particular vision of Armenian self-conception. In other words, by mapping ballet onto "Armenian dance," *bemakan par* practitioners not only equate dance with ballet itself, but they also construct notions of ideal Armenianness that are buttressed by colonial currents of auto-exoticization. Post-colonial theorist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in his monograph *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986) conceives of a phenomenon he calls the "culture bomb," which he considers to be the largest weapon unleashed by colonialism and imperialism on its subjects that works to:

> annihilate a people's belief in their names, their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as a wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other peoples' languages rather than their own (3).

While Thiong'o focuses on the languages of the colonizer and colonized, the same dynamics can apply to a dance form like *bemakan par*. In a similar fashion, the "refinement" of vernacular aesthetics through a balletic filter asserts a type of distancing from the "backward" and inferior" self and evinces the desire to more closely identify with ballet, a form that represents the apex of high culture—in this case that which is Russian and European.[10]

[10] It is important to briefly signal to the complex history whereby Russia Westernized itself in the nineteenth century. This process ultimately incorporated Eurocentric ideals into the very mechanics of Russofication, which

Complicating "Armenian Dance"

Azgagrakan (ethnographic), *joghovrdakan* ("of the folk/people"), *avandakan* (traditional), *azgayin* (national), *folk, folklore, etnik* (ethnic) … these are all words one might hear or use when talking about dance in an Armenian context. With such a broad set of terms to choose from, people—including dance practitioners, scholars, heritage dancers, performance viewers, and community leaders—use them interchangeably, often in inconsistent and contradictory ways. For example, a heritage dancer[11] will use the term *joghovrdakan* to refer to a vernacular social dance of their community, but a *bemakan* dancer will also use the term *joghovrdakan* to refer to a predetermined, single-author choreography set to a western orchestral performance of Armenian classical music.[12] This terminological conundrum in trying to talk about Armenian dance (especially to other Armenians) was a major impetus for this research. What these inconsistencies ultimately indicate is how a discourse, critical or otherwise, around "Armenian dance" is largely absent. This opacity not only obfuscates the fact that there are indeed different Armenian dance styles, but it also reduces "Armenian dance" to a single, homogenous entity.

Dance in an Armenian context as a point of scholarly inquiry is largely absent from relevant fields such as Armenian studies and Dance and Performance studies. While not comprehensive, this study takes a first, critical look at the most prominent style of Armenian

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was then projected onto Russia's Armenian and other non-Russian subjects. This phenomenon in further nuanced in Chapter 1.

[11] Given that I am theorizing *azgagrakan par* and *bemakan par* as performance-centric dance styles where practitioners learn in a structured way by taking dance classes, my use of the term heritage dancer refers to those individuals who practice dance in a vernacular setting, or as part of everyday life.

[12] This exact inconsistency and "loadedness" that comes with the term *joghovrdakan* is why I chose not to use it in my discussion on *bemakan par*, despite the fact that *azgagrakan* practitioners in particular do refer to the *bemakan* style as "*joghovrdakan*." *Bemakan* or *bemadrakan par* (stage or staged dance) is more apt for this style, given that it also places it in dialogue with other "concert dance" forms.

dance, *bemakan par*, and considers it a rich point of entry for understanding post-Soviet Armenian identity and cultural production in the twentieth century. Moreover, in naming and articulating that there are (at least) two distinct performance styles of "Armenian dance," this project takes a small, first step in granting complexity and contemporaneity to the idea of "Armenian dance," disentangling it from the often-fraught politics of authenticity that reify Armenian dance heritage as a fixed, primitive, and unchanging emblem of the past.

Upon closer examination, *bemakan par* and *azgagrakan par* reflect distinct social, political, and aesthetic values and can only with great difficulty be classified as belonging to the same category of "Armenian dance." In focusing on *bemakan par* in this project, I integrate my own bodily knowledge and years of training in *azgagrakan par* to demonstrate how each form conjures divergent interpretations and presentations of Armenianness. Moreover, each genre not only reflects a dissimilar relationship to Armenian vernacular dance technique and aesthetics, but also negotiates the layered and complex histories of Armenian national identity formation differently, thereby producing visions of Armenianness that serve distinct political aims. While *azgagrakan par* seeks to reclaim vernacular aesthetics and integrate indigenous ways of being and moving into contemporary practice and performance, *bemakan par* discursively disavows those very ways of moving and constructs a balleticized vision of "high art" that can bring Armenianness into the realm of modernity. Ultimately, this research is also undergirded by a desire to unmoor Armenian vernacular aesthetics from fixed notions of "folk" and "traditionalism" that otherwise mark it as simple, unsophisticated, devoid of technique, and belonging to the past.

For this study, I employ an interdisciplinary methodology combining participant observation, discourse analysis, autoethnography, archival research, and choreographic analysis.

My research is informed by over ten years of ethnographic fieldwork in Armenia. I attended dance rehearsals, classes, workshops, concert performances, and social dance gatherings. I familiarized myself with scholarly monographs on dance in the Armenian language; I surveyed personal archives as well as the state archive collections at the National Library of Armenia; and I conducted interviews with practitioners, heritage dancers, and ensemble/dance directors across both idioms. Central to my ethnographic approach is the use of autoethnography, a research methodology which situates the body of the ethnographer—in this case my own body—as a site of knowing. To that end, my writing and analysis of *bemakan par* is rooted in multiple trajectories of my own bodily learning.

Firstly, as a dance practitioner, ethnographer, and dance teacher in Los Angeles, I have acquired a specialized technical and corporeal knowledge of Armenian vernacular dances, which informs my analysis on how *bemakan par* marginalizes those very aesthetics. I have also spent significant time immersing myself in the *azgagrakan par* community, where I not only learn dances but also socialize and build relationships with practitioners in Armenia. This allows me to parse out how *bemakan* and *azgagrakan* diverge from one another. Secondly, to better apprehend *bemakan par* as a ballet-centric form, I have taken up the study and practice of classical ballet. This process of building kinesthetic awareness in more than one form allows me to conceptualize *bemakan par* technique not as an "end in itself" but as a distinct interpretation of "self and body, of materiality and social ideal" (Desmond 1997, 14). Bearing witness to processes of how technique is taught, how bodies are arranged in space, and how an instructor describes and prescribes bodily ideals allows me to parse out various cultural meanings produced by and for differently trained dancing bodies. In other words, analyzing the physical practice and

corresponding discourse of a given form can more clearly reveal the political backgrounds, social moorings, and ideological underpinnings that frame it.

Performing Paradox

In this thesis, I aim to unpack how *bemakan par* is a paradoxical genre that obscures indigenous ways of moving and reserves dancing for only highly trained balleticized bodies, all while claiming to represent authentic Armenianness. Chapter One sets out to historicize *bemakan par* practice and performance and attempts to unravel the complexity of modern Armenian identity production. To better understand how *bemakan par* developed into the prominent cultural practice that it is today, I begin by outlining Armenia's highly coveted geopolitical location amidst multiple imperial conquests and later trace key political and cultural shifts across four major periods of Armenian history: Antiquity, Imperial Rule & Genocide, Soviet Period, and Post-Soviet & Independence. Living under and between empires for most of their history, Armenians were tasked with embracing multiple identities and weaving other cultures into their own, ultimately having to reinvent and reselect national and cultural memory to ensure their survival. In particular, seventy years of Soviet occupation led to the adoption of a hierarchical conception of modernity that marked Russians as superior and developed and Armenians as "natives" needing civilizing. *Bemakan par,* as a Soviet-era form, reflects this legacy of cultural imperialism as the adoption of balletic aesthetics and movement principles were a medium through which Armenians could attempt to civilize themselves.

Chapter Two explores the contours of *bemakan par* technique and pedagogical training by looking to two premiere *bemakan par* institutions: The Tatul Altunyan State Song and Dance

Ensemble[13] and the Yerevan State Choreographic College.[14] The Altunyan Ensemble was one of the first dance ensembles in Soviet Armenia to perform in the *bemakan par* idiom and has played an important role in the representation of *bemakan par* as an authentic yet "elevated" expressor of Armenian traditionalism. In the summer of 2019, I visited the Altunyan Ensemble's headquarters, observed their practices, and conducted interviews with the ensemble manager (Grikor Voskanyan) and ballet master (Hovannes Khachikyan). Dancers in the Altunyan Ensemble, and across the *bemakan par* landscape, are trained to maintain balletic positions like turn out, *tendu*,[15] hyper-extended and elevated limbs, and graceful *port de bras*[16]—techniques of the body that override the grounded, earthbound elements of Armenian vernacular dances. This chapter further articulates how Armenian vernacular aesthetics are rendered illegible by the dancers' balleticized bodies and are relegated to a representative "essence" of an untouched Armenian past that can simply be choreographed over for the proscenium stage.

My analysis in this chapter is also informed by an examination of the Yerevan State Choreographic College,[17] the foremost dance school in Armenia today, and my interview with

[13] The more official and longer name for the ensemble is written as "The Armenian State Honored Ensemble of Song and Dance Named After Tatul Altunyan" but for the purposes of brevity I will refer to the Ensemble as "The Altunyan Ensemble" throughout this thesis.

[14] In Armenian, the name for the college is "*Yerevani Pararvesti Petakan Kolej*." *Pararvest* is a compound word in Armenian which could directly translate to dance (*par)* art (*arvest*). While the College asserts an English translation of *pararvest* to be choreographic, in Armenia the Russian term *khoreographia* is used more commonly to refer to choreography/choreographic.

[15] A French term meaning "tight" or "stretched," and is a fundamental movement in ballet when the working leg extends along the floor until only the tip of the toe is left touching the floor.

[16] A French term meaning "carriage of the arms," which refers to the positions, pathways, and lines of the arms when dancing ballet.

[17] It is interesting to note that in Armenian, the college is named Երևանի Պարարվեստի Պետական Քոլեջ (Yerevan Pararvesti Petakan Kolej), which directly translates to Yerevan State Art Dancing College. However, on the college website, the English name is written as Yerevan State Choreographic College. In Armenian, the word used for choreography is խորեոգրաֆիա (*khoreografiya*), borrowed from the Russian хореография (*khoreografiya*) ("Yerevan State Choreographic College").

Ballet Master and Artistic Director of the College, Hovhannes Divanyan. What began in 1924 as a small dance studio eventually became the most prominent dance training institution for the development of *bemakan par*. I contend that even though the College is organized into three departments, "classical dance/ballet," "Armenian folk dance/*bemakan par*" and "dance teaching," these divisions are ultimately specious as approaches to dancing across all departments are submerged by ballet aesthetics. In other words, despite the rhetorical strategy of separating classical ballet from the "Armenian folk" form, or what I identify as *bemakan par*, ballet technique and pedagogy comprise the official training method of the entire College. I argue, then, that *bemakan par* is in fact a ballet-centric genre belonging to a Western European hegemonic mode of artistic production that obscures, rather than promotes, Armenian vernacular aesthetics.

Chapter Three conducts a close choreographic analysis of two choreographies, "Traditional *Kochari*" and "*Krunkner*" from a Tatul Altunyan performance that I attended in 2019. I put the *kochari* choreography in conversation with my own bodily knowledge of the multiple vernacular dances that fall within the *kochari* "*parauntanik"* or "dance family," [18] a martial category of dances that evokes battling rams. I intend to demonstrate how this particular presentation of "traditional *kochari*," with its balletic lexicon and with its reduction of multiple *kochari* variations into one homogenized performance, succumbs to a Western European hegemonic mode of artistic production that flattens Armenian vernacular aesthetics. To do this, I weave in information gathered from my years of preliminary fieldwork in Armenia, and from Srbuhi Lisitysan's foundational text, *Hay Joghovrdi Hinavurts Pareruh yev Taterakan*

[18] In addition to "*parauntanik*" («պարաընտանիկ») or "dance family," *paratesak* («պարատեսակ») or *paradzev* («պարաձև»), both meaning "dance style," are also used to describe and classify types of dances that share similar characteristics and structures.

Nerkayutsumner [*The Ancient Dances and Theatrical Performances of the Armenian People*]. An early twentieth-century Soviet Armenian ethnographer, scholar, and transcriber of traditional Armenian dances, Lisitsyan is an important figure for Armenian dance studies worthy of a separate and lengthy study.[19]

The second section of this chapter looks at the *Krunkner* or "Cranes" choreography, beginning with a textual analysis of the corresponding song with the same name, a twentieth-century composition by prominent, classically trained Armenian composer Khachatur Avetisyan. I also draw on examples of the crane in Armenian literary and musical cultures and shed light on the immense transnational importance of the crane for Armenians, as it continues to be the most well-known symbol of the Armenian diasporic and exilic identity. My choreographic analysis of *Krunkner* considers how the crane motif is articulated exclusively through the movement vocabularies and choreographic choices that are drawn from ballet, given that there is no evidence of any crane-related dance in Armenian vernacular heritage. Referring to my own bodily knowledge of Armenian vernacular dances, I show how *Krunkner,* and by extension *bemakan par*, is an "invented tradition"[20] that paradoxically eschews Armenian aesthetic values in order to propagate ballet-centric virtuosity and "high art." To demonstrate this, I look to the *corps de ballet,* or "ballet company," and draw connections to the famous Romantic ballet, *Swan Lake*.[21] This comparison is compelling not only due to the choreographic similarities of female

[19] Lisitsyan collected and transcribed many dances into two large textual volumes; created a dance notation system and was also a prominent choreographer and dance director for both professional and amateur ensembles during the 1920s and 1930s. Through researching and studying various dances, dance genealogies and etymologies, and analyzing staged interpretations of traditional dances and their transformations, Lisitsyan effectively guided Armenian scholarship into a new direction during the Soviet period and laid the foundation for the field of Armenian ethnochoreology (Kilichyan 2009, 120).

[20] Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger. 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[21] *Swan Lake* was first performed in 1877 at Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre and choreographed by Julius Reisinger.

ensembles embodying elegant birds like swans and cranes, but also because *Swan Lake* was the first classical ballet from Russia or Western Europe to be performed in Soviet Armenia,[22] further evidencing its influence on Armenian cultural production. Lastly, given that *Krunkner* is exclusively a women's dance, I show how the crane-like and highly regulated ballet-centric movement qualities construct the ideal Armenian woman on stage, who is disciplined and demure, and who is simultaneously a vessel for authentic traditionality and a subject of hegemonic "modernity."

[22] While *Swan Lake* was the first ballet performance at the Yerevan Opera Theatre in 1935 (after its opening in 1933), another ballet *Coppelia* was said to be staged in 1926 by the small dance studio that grew to become the Yerevan State Choreographic College.

CHAPTER ONE
Historizing *Bemakan Par:* Performing Armenianness in/between Empires

As the dhol rolls and the shrill zurna blares, eighteen male dancers briskly form a straight line as they hold hands outside of the ruins that remain of the seventh century Zvartnots Cathedral in Armenia. The men in the dance video[23] *appear to be of the same height and are dressed in identical costumes that emulate medieval Greco-Roman defensive armor. Their black t-shirts and pants are embellished with reflective metal-like sheets across the shoulders and chest, and across the waist, hanging vertically in rows like a skirt. With the last dancer arriving at the end of the line, they begin the synchronized choreography by stepping out to the right and kicking their left leg high in the air, moving in complete unison. The zurna cuts out and the dancers, only accompanied by the rhythm of the dhol perform several combinations of intricate steps, quick turns, arm gestures, and high kicks, which emulate the feel of highly disciplined military drills. When the zurna returns, they form a circle and kick their legs up high and outward. As the video plays back in slow-motion, dancers split off from one another, take a knee, and thrust their arms forward with their hand out as if to say "stop." Now only accompanied by the soft timbres of the duduk, the video pans to a dancer leaping in the air in slow-motion with a sword in his hand. As the camera encircles him, another dancer appears who is jumping in mid-air with arms and legs fully extended, reaching his sword high in the air. They land on their knees as their swords collide, with one of the dancers rising up to do a barrel turn*[24] *behind the other dancer before swinging their swords at one another again.*

[23] The dance video is posted by the *bemakan par* Bert Dance Ensemble based in Armenia, and choreographed by the Ensemble's Artistic Director and Ballet Master, Karen Gevorgyan. The title *Haykazunner* translates to "descendants of Hayk," who is considered to be the "father of the Armenians. (BERT DANCE ENSEMBLE, 2010).

[24] In classical ballet, a *barrel turn* is when a dancer completes one full turn in the air with one leg lifted up and out in the direction the dancer is turning while bringing the other leg along, usually repeated in a series which looks like a barrel rolling.

Often considered to be a place where “East meets West,” Armenia has for millennia been at the crossroads between key trade routes, clashing empires, and rich cultural interactions. Today, Armenia is a small, mountainous land-locked country that borders present-day Iran, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Nestled between the southern Caucasus mountain range, the Armenian state consists of a largely homogenous population of approximately three million people, 98% of whom are ethnically Armenian and 92.6% of whom identify as Christian, specifically the Armenian Apostolic branch (Minority Rights Group International).[25] While contemporary Armenians emphasize an identity that hinges largely on their Christian faith, Armenianness is also rooted in a longstanding pagan belief system that predates Christianity by over one thousand years (Hovannisian 1997, vii).

Figure 5: Map of the Republic of Armenia. (Source: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. Public Domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Armenia_Map.jpg.)

[25] This statistic is according to census data from 2011.

For most of their history, Armenians have been tasked with bracing multiple identities and weaving other cultures into their own—an "in between-ness" that was at times both precarious and fruitful. According to many Armenian historians (Garsoian 1982; Bournoutian 1993, 2006; Suny 1993a, 1993b; Aslanian 2002, 2018a, 2018b, 2021; Panossian 2006), the survivability of the Armenians is rooted in their fragmented and decentralized reality, much of which can be attributed to the land on which they historically lived. Firstly, the topographical features of historic Armenia—which at one point spanned across the Black, Mediterranean, and Caspian Seas—comprised vast mountain ranges, valleys, and rivers. This difficult terrain proved to be a natural obstacle for the centralizing efforts of both local Armenian and imperial powers, which provided various regions and enclaves with a certain degree of autonomy (Panossian 2006, 34-5). Secondly, the historic territory of the Armenians was a prized corridor and international trade route between Asia and Europe (Bournoutian 2012, 7). Thus, Armenians witnessed multiple invasions and experienced long durations of foreign rule on their historic territory by the Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, Persians, Arabs, Kurds, Turks, Mongols, and Russians (7). Informally known as "Garsoïan's Law,"[26] named after Armenian historian Nina Garsoïan, the geographical position of Armenia as a "meeting point" usually between two more powerful civilizations enriched Armenians culturally but often had devastating consequences politically (Garsoian 1982, 474). In her observations, Garsoïan identifies a pattern where "Armenia flourished only when the contending forces on either side were in near equilibrium and neither was in a position to dominate [Armenia] entirely" (474). Despite brief periods of self-rule

[26] For a more in-depth discussion on Garsoian's Law see Sebouh Aslanian's chapter "From Autonomous to Interactive Histories: World History's Challenge to Armenian Studies," in *An Armenian Mediterranean: Words and World in Motion,* 110-125.

over their historic territory, the Armenian people have had to be adaptable, "cultural shape shifters" in order to ensure their survival in an otherwise hostile environment (Aslanian, 2018b).

Politically disunified and culturally fragmented, the Armenian people also have a longstanding diasporic history that extends back one thousand years, centuries prior to the Genocide committed by Ottoman Turks in the early twentieth century (1894-1922).[27] And yet, despite the constants of dispersion, dispossession, and (often forced) mobility, Armenians have managed to survive as a largely extraterritorial community under different spheres of foreign domination and cultural influence all while still maintaining a *subjective* sense of "Armenianness" (Panossian). What George Bournoutian calls "a blessing in disguise," the absence of political unity in fact actualized "the survival of [Armenia's] culture even while its kings were deposed and its capital cities destroyed" (Bournoutian 1993/4, 6). This "shape shifting" fluidity, while not a thing of the past and certainly not unique to Armenians, is incredibly useful in understanding Armenian identity formation and cultural production both globally and within the modern Armenian nation. According to historian Sebouh Aslanian,

> Armenians' nationhood is not a result of genetics or the vitality of some mysterious national essence or spirit, as nationalist historiography often claims. Rather, an explanation must be sought in the versatility with which Armenians have constantly reinvented and reselected their cultural memory, even in a state of dispersion and despite the polycentric and fragmented nature of their historical experience (2002, 10).

The need to revive and recover has touched multiple aspects of Armenian identity from history, language, and literature, to architecture, visual art, song, and dance. *Bemakan par*, the official state-sanctioned dance form in Armenia and the subject of this study, is certainly no exception.

Entrenched in the Soviet folkloric dance style, *bemakan par* is a newly invented genre developed throughout the twentieth century. An urban and elitist construct relying heavily on

[27] The Armenian Genocide (1915-1922) was an organized extermination project against the Ottoman Empire's Armenian population that also targeted Assyrians and Greeks. Prior to the 1915 Genocide were other anti-Armenian massacres and pogroms such as the Hamidian Massacres (1894-1897) and the Adana Massacre (1909).

balletic and Eurocentric notions of choreography, professionalism, bodily discipline, and virtuosity, *bemakan par* was and continues to be a vital aspect of national Armenian identity both in the Republic of Armenia and the greater diaspora. Yet another manifestation of "shape-shifting" fluidity, *bemakan par* is an "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) that draws primarily from ballet while it simultaneously claims to perform a fixed representation of "ancient" Armenianness. On one hand, through its occasional citations of Armenian vernacular dances—albeit appropriative and extractive—*bemakan par* practitioners invoke autoexoticism, or "exoticism under local control" (Savigliano 1995, 153), by alleging the preservation and presentation of "unique" and "ancient" Armenian traditions in their "purest" form. On the other hand, by balleticizing the Armenian body, *bemakan par* practitioners believe that "Armenian dance" is then elevated to that of an "enlightened," "high art" form that is both modern and has global legibility.

Bemakan par is, thus, a reflection of Armenia's past and present, emblematic of the "in between-ness" of Armenian identity that asserts Europeanness and Easternness—sometimes alternately and sometimes at once. This chapter seeks to explore the intersection of the various political, cultural, and historical forces that both shape Armenian identity and contextualize the genre and its contemporary enactments. My primary inquiry concerns how Armenian identity is crystallized in *bemakan par* practice and performance. As dance is often left out of Armenian historical texts, this chapter seeks to historicize my own ethnography and to demonstrate how *bemakan par,* as a bodily discourse, is both informed by and actively negotiates the layered histories of Armenian identity. To do this, I look at four major periods of Armenian history: Antiquity & Empire, Imperial Subjects & Genocide, Soviet Period, Post-Soviet & Independence.

Antiquity and Empire

According to Armenian historian George Bournoutian, "the history of Armenia is difficult to reconstruct" and like many ancient peoples "the origins of the Armenians contain elements of myth and unresolved scholarly arguments" (2012, 4, 15). Given that the Armenian alphabet was not invented until the fifth century BCE, accessing any source material prior to that requires knowledge of Aramaic, Greek, Middle Persian, and Syriac (4). Furthermore, countless invasions have led to the destruction of much historical evidence, and "the divisions of historic Armenia among modern neighboring states have made archival and archaeological research a sensitive, and often difficult, task" (4). Armenia's antiquity is attested to in the Behistun inscription and rock relief authored by Darius I sometime around the fifth century BCE, "which speaks of the Persian king conquering the Armenians with great difficulty in three battles" (Suny 1993a, 7). Yet the ethnogenesis of the Armenian people continues to be a lively debate full of competing narratives, contradictory sources, and accusations of nationalist revisionism. Diverging accounts draw from various sources including Greek scholarly evidence, linguistic and archaeological studies, and even biblical testimonies to attempt to demonstrate whether Armenians are autochthonous to historic Armenia or if they migrated from Asia Minor in the sixth century BCE (Aslanian 2002, 28). While I will not be discussing these competing narratives in depth, I will address specific features within these debates that illuminate my study of the tensions of Armenian identity projected in the dominant dance form of *bemakan par*.

The biblical narrative situates Armenians as descendants of Noah himself whose family first settled in Armenia after the famed Ark landed on Mount Ararat, a most sacred national symbol for Armenians. According to this narrative, Armenians trace their lineage to Noah via Hayk, the "father of the Armenians" and the righteous protagonist in the mythical origin story of

Hayk and Bel. Taught to primary students in Armenian schools across the globe (Panossian, 51), the legend tells of a rebellious and powerful archer, Hayk, who resists the evil king of Babylon, Bel, kills him, and establishes the Armenian nation around Mount Ararat. For Armenians, Hayk is not only an epic national hero but is also the namesake of the Armenian people who refer to themselves as *hay* in Armenian. Historian Razmik Panossian further highlights the important symbolism imbedded within this legend and its privileged position in constructions of Armenian national identity:

> First, it makes Armenia the cradle of all civilisation since Noah's Ark landed on the "Armenian" mountain of Ararat. Second, it connects Armenians to the biblical narrative of human development. Third, it infuses a very important element of righteous rebellion against tyranny and oppression (of Babylon). Fourth, it situates freedom, independence and justice at the centre of the nation's origins. And finally, it makes Mount Ararat the national symbol of all Armenians, and the territory around it the Armenian homeland from time immemorial. With such powerful symbolic resonance, the Haik and Bel story is often cited by nationalists as the paradigm of Armenian identity (2006, 51-2).

One of the most important figures of Armenian historiography and the first "'nationalist' Armenian historian" was Movses Khorenatsi (Panossian, 51). The "father of Armenian history," as he is often called, not only authored the Hayk and Bel legend among others, but also wrote the first and most comprehensive text on Armenian history sometime between the fifth and eighth centuries CE, which was "arguably the most important text for defining the Armenian tradition" (Aslanian 2002, 21). What makes Khorenatsi's work so significant in any discussion on Armenian national identity, is that it not only served as a foundation for all future writing on Armenian antiquity, but it also set forth the notion of "Armenia as a distinct and individual nation" (Thomson 1997, 205).

In the case of dance, it is often alleged by Armenians that Khorenatsi referenced the well-known martial dance *yarkhushta* in his texts.[28] Armenians also defer to 15,000-year-old

[28] According to Armenia-based dance scholar Naira Kilichyan, Khorenatsi and other historians wrote more broadly about martial dances, mourning dances, and "epic" dances (personal communication, November 20, 2021).

petroglyph carvings of what appears to be dancing bodies on volcanic rocks at the Ughtasar Mountain in the Syunik region of Armenia. These two examples function as a testament to the antiquity of Armenian ritual dance traditions and, by extension, the antiquity of Armenians themselves, thereby affirming their ancient cultural heritage and longstanding existence in the region.

"The First Christian Nation"

Arguably, the foremost identity marker that set Armenians apart as a distinctive people in the region was the formal adoption of Christianity in the early fourth century, 301 CE. According to many scholars (Garsoian 1982, 1997; Suny 1993a; Hovannisian 1997; Hewsen 1997; Barseghyan 2003; Panossian 2006; Maarten van Lint 2009; Aslanian 2018a, 2018b), with Christianity as the new state religion, Armenians understood themselves to be a unique collective identity, a separate ethno-confessional community distinguishable from their Zoroastrian past, from their Orthodox Christian neighbors to the west, and later from their Muslim neighbors (Barseghyan 2003, 405-6). In the pre-Christian period, Armenianness was characterized by cultural and religious flows with Persian, specifically Zoroastrian, and Hellenistic civilizations (Hovannisian, vii). However, during and after the conversion process many of these religious and cultural artifacts, such as pagan temples and shrines, were destroyed. Simultaneously, Armenia's pagan roots formed the basis for the syncretized Armenian "brand" of Christianity, the Armenian Apostolic Church.

This syncretism also impacted the revitalization of dances and can be illustrated in the dance that today is called *Ejmiatsin*, which translates to "the descent of the only-begotten son" in reference to Jesus Christ as the only son of God. *Ejmiatsin* was the name of first cathedral built

in historic Armenia in the early fourth century and it was allegedly erected over a pagan fire altar. Today, it continues to serve as the headquarters of the Armenian Church in present day Armenia. When performing *Ejmiatsin,* dancers move in a closed circle and make multiple repetitive bows, traveling to the left and then to the right; they later lift their arms up above their heads, bouncing them from left to right. The discourse around the origins of the dance *Ejmiatsin* and meaning behind its movements oscillates between Christian and pagan symbolism. According to the website of Karin Folk Dance and Song Group—one of the foremost *azgagrakan* ensembles in Armenia—the historical description and meaning of *Ejmiatsin* is depicted as having ancient roots with explanations of the movement choices transitioning between Christian and pagan-based interpretations (Karin Traditional Song-Dance Group, 2012). For example, raised hands are said to portray the dome of a church, the bowing movements depict the bowing before the church altar, and the six steps to the left and six to the right make for a total of twelve steps symbolizing the twelve apostles of Jesus (Ibid.). After every Christian-centric explanation, however, there is a caveat that asserts that "the nature of the movements seems to be more archaic," and that according to Soviet Armenian ethnographer Srbuhi Lisitsyan, the twelve bows in a pre-Christian context represent constellations, in this case the twelve zodiac signs (ibid.). Accordingly, the closed dancing circle also symbolizes a sun disk, the arms swaying left to right represents sun rays emanating outward, bowing symbolizes fire or sun god worship, and the dance circle contracting into itself represents the setting sun and perhaps death (ibid.). While the dance *Ejmiatsin* is just one example,[29] it certainly illustrates how

[29] There are several examples of various Armenian life-cycle feasts and celebrations that were originally pagan and have been adopted by the Church. *Vardavar*, a pagan water worship festival that celebrates bountiful harvest and venerates the goddess Astghik has been adopted the Armenian Church as a feast celebrating the transfiguration of Christ. *Trndez* is another pagan celebration that is associated with fire worship and venerates the fire and sun god Vahagn and according to the Christian calendar is a feast of purification that celebrates 40 days after Jesus' birth.

Armenians want to affirm both Christian and pagan "origins" simultaneously and interchangeably.

The Armenian brand of Christianity offers a certain distinctiveness for Armenians, acknowledging their pagan roots also validates their ancient presence a fact that is often called into question by their hostile regional neighbors. Geopolitically, both are needed. Regarding Armenian Christianity specifically, Razmik Panossian writes that "quite simply, Armenians wanted to retain a separate identity both against the East and the West, and their unique brand of Christianity was the means to do so" (2006, 44). As far as religious identity, Christianness and paganness as identity markers continue to serve Armenians in different ways, and the often-simultaneous appeal to both is indicative of the survival strategy used by Armenians to navigate shifting powers and mitigate cultural forces without losing their sense of distinctiveness. Over time, the Armenian Apostolic Church became a powerful unifying entity for Armenians "in the absence of a separate polity or organized secular power" (Maartan Van Lint 2009, 276). However, as Armenia was to be partitioned once again between Byzantine and Persian empires in 428 CE a unique alphabet was commissioned by the clergy and the king to further unite and consolidate Armenian identity against enclosing powers (Bournoutian 2012, 53-4).[30]

Despite countless invasions and partitions during this period, the decentralized nature of the primary social structure in Armenia, known as the *nakharar* system, as well as the

[30] Paired with the formal adoption of Christianity, the creation of the Armenian alphabet also helped to further cement Armenianness as a distinct ethno-linguistic and confessional identity. Kristine Barseghyan writes, "throughout the extended periods of foreign occupation that followed, it was these two systems of differentiation—language and religion—that continued keeping the borders of Armenian identity" (2003, 405-6). Prior to the creation of the alphabet, the Armenian language was strictly an oral tradition, where "history was not recorded, but recited from memory and sung by various Armenian and Persian *gusans* or minstrel-poets" (53). Thus, out of a conscious need for "cultural unity for the survival of their people," the King of Armenia (Vramshapuh) and the clerical leader, Catholicos Sahak, commissioned the clergyman-scholar Mesrop Mashtots to create the Armenian alphabet (Panossian, 45). This new alphabet was inextricable from a state and clergy-led Christian conversion agenda which had yet to reach several pockets of the Armenian population (Panossian, 45).

establishment of the Armenian Church, and the creation of the Armenian alphabet are what ultimately "provided the structures essential for the continuation of traditional society and a national existence" (Hovannisian, viii). Without a powerful centralized state, Armenians relied on a subjective sense of ethno-cultural, linguistic, and religious belonging which was to be carried on through the early modern period and through to the age of modern nationalism (Panossian, 57).

Imperial Subjects and Genocide

While Armenian identity has roots extending well into the first millennium BCE (Panossian, 183), it was not until the fourth century CE where it clearly asserted its uniqueness as an ethno-confessional identity, as discussed in the section above. However, it was only later through a period of secularization in the nineteenth century where Armenianness was reinterpreted and emerged as a modern national identity.[31] This process occurred across multiple hubs of Armenian communities without a formal state apparatus and in a decentralized manner. Furthermore, the rise of three secular nationalisms—European nationalism, Turkish nationalism, and Russian nationalism—all contributed in various ways to the formation of a new, secular Armenian national consciousness.

The recurring geopolitical pattern of being cast between two empires continued for Armenians well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this time between Ottoman and Russian rule. At first, Armenians conceived of themselves and were marked by both empires as a

[31] According to Ronald Suny, as more and more Armenians came into contact with other nationalities and were exposed to Western notions of nationhood, there was a shift in self-conception from Armenianness as demarcating a religious community, to Armenianness delimiting a nationality and a shared history and cultural commonalities (1993a, 23). Somewhat tied to an anticlerical movement, Armenian intelligentsia dedicated themselves not to the Armenian church but to the Armenian nation (10).

religious community (Suny 1993a, 9). However, the reconceptualization of Armenian identity from a religious to a secular one was, according to Suny, a result of both internal and external forces (22). Internally, the Armenian intelligentsia across both states were exposed to intellectual and political trends from western Europe and Russia[32] and "began to articulate a new idea of what it meant to be an Armenian, a secular myth appropriated for the 'modern' world. The image of the Armenian as an ethnic rather than a religious figure, as a creature of culture with political claims" (ibid.). Externally, the rise of two hegemonic secular nationalisms (Turkish and Russian)[33] created an ultimately hostile socio-political climate for Armenians. Their continuous oppression under the yoke of the imperialist regimes that marked Armenians as "other," paired with the development of a new "secularised conception of belonging" (Panossian, 183) based on ethnic and nationalized political aspirations, shifted Armenian identity and self-understanding in ways that exist through to the present day.

"Zartonk" or the Armenian National Awakening

In Armenian collective memory, the 150-year period spanning between the eighteenth and mid-nineteenth century is known as the *Zartonk* or "awakening," when the "'dormant'

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[32] Ronald Suny discusses the contours of Armenian nationalism in depth in his monograph *Looking Towards Ararat,* and articulates how Armenians viewed Russians as Europeans, whereas Turks were regarded as "an Asiatic people, an inferior and uncultured people" (1993a, 24). Armenians, inspired by European thought, saw themselves as Europeans and viewed European nationhood as a model for the Armenian nationalist endeavor (24). Furthermore, Armenians were quick to distance themselves from Muslim powers, such as the Ottomans and the Persians, and viewed Russians and Europeans as their Christian liberators, who could protect them from future Turkish and Persian misrule.

[33] Turkish nationalism was a secular ideology insofar as it distinguished itself from the preceding Ottoman millet system of governance that defined communities throughout the Empire according to religion. No longer a Muslim millet but a Turkish *ethnie* or nation, Turkish nationalism was ultimately a project of Turkification that required the elimination of Armenians from the region entirely. In Russia, Russians saw themselves as saviors of the Armenian Christian minority who were oppressed under Muslim rule. A once strong affinity between Russian Orthodoxy and Armenian Christianity transformed from one of Russian protection of the Christian minority to one of Russian distrust of Armenians. A policy of Russification was therefore mobilized leading to a more secular form of Russian nationalism that repressed, persecuted, and aimed to assimilate non-Russian peoples.

Armenian nation 'awoke' after centuries of Turkish and Persian misrule" (Panossian, 128). Razmik Panossian writes against the notion that an existing Armenian nation underwent an "awakening"—rather, he asserts that Armenianness was *transformed* into a constructed modern nationality, one that was based on an existing ethno-religious identity (ibid). Vahe Oshagan describes the *Zartonk* as a period of revival "characterized by the slow emergence of a native intelligentsia and by the establishment of certain social and cultural infrastructures" (1997, 139). At this point, Armenianness expanded to include newly established diasporic communities of merchants and intellectuals scattered across the globe, from Moscow, Kolkata, and Nor Jugha (New Julfa) to Tiflis, Constantinople (now Istanbul), and Venice.[34] It was from within these diasporic centers, outside of historic Armenia, that a new national Armenian consciousness emerged.

These far-flung communities acted as a type of state apparatus[35] by "encouraging or sponsoring the evolution of national identity," in a well-coordinated manner (Panossian, 90). Heavily influenced by host cultures, namely the French, Italian, German, Russian, and English (in India), Armenian intellectuals "had a 'xenophilia' towards the West" and "became agents of western ideas, technology and language," a dynamic that was at times in contradiction with the

[34] Between the 14th to 16th centuries, a new socio-economic class of Armenian merchants began to emerge in the diaspora. While the Armenian homeland was continuously ravaged by war and destitution, the centers of Armenian life began to shift from historic Armenia to newly created diasporic communities in major cities around the world (Panossian, 71). Eventually, these communities laid the groundwork for an Armenian "national awakening" with many merchants became national intellectuals themselves and/or the financiers of Armenian "culture, learning, and identity" with the opening of schools and the advent of Armenian printing (Panossian, 71, 87). For more on this transformational period see Razmig Panossian's (2016) *The Armenians from Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars,* and for a more in-depth study on merchants, specifically those from Jugha (New Julfa) in the Persian Empire, see Sebouh Aslanian's (2014) monograph, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean.*

[35] Panossian contends that like the role of the state in Europe during this period, diasporic Armenians became "agents of identity maintenance" who funded "churches, schools, publications, and various intellectual endeavors that maintained ethno-religious distinctness" (Panossian, 90). At both an individual and community level, Armenians across the diaspora during this period were producing and funding projects "for the benefit of the 'nation'" almost in unison (90).

Armenian experience (99). A common current of influence during the *Zartonk*, was indeed that of European Enlightenment ideals and the European model for nation states. Suny writes that a key "characteristic of the Armenian nationalist image was that Armenians were European" (Suny 1993a, 24). Armenian intellectuals in the diaspora, the Mkhitarists in particular,[36] took it upon themselves to disseminate European thought and ideology in the Armenian sphere, not only through their printing and publishing endeavors but also through the multiple schools they opened across Europe (Oshagan, 158). What eventually became known as the "Armenian" renaissance, was in fact a synthesis of three sets of parallel national awakenings, what Panossian outlines as a *western point*, an *eastern point*, and a *central point*:

> Geographically these came from different directions, but were intertwined in their common goal of forming one nation. The political projects differed too, although the main aim was to reform or liberate Turkish Armenia(ns). The western component of the awakening, based in Constantinople (as well as some west European cities), evolved around the liberal reform project influenced by French and Italian thought, constitutionalism and "Western" nationalism. The eastern component, based in Tiflis (and other cities of the Russian empire), was influenced by Russian and German thought, radicalism and "Eastern" nationalism. The central point was based on the indigenous conditions in the Ottoman Armenian provinces (130).

Armenian intellectuals did not create or invent a new Armenian nation, but retrieved and reshaped it alongside modern, primarily European, currents of social and political organization. This meant that in addition to secularizing and nationalizing an otherwise ethno-religious identity, the traditional, rural elements of Armenian society were "gradually enlightened and transformed" (Oshagan, 148). Furthermore, what can be described as a "permanent desire to emulate Western cultural models," led to an actual "alienation" of that which is ethnically

[36] One of the most important communities during this period was that of the Mkhitarists, a group of Armenian Catholic monks from Constantinople who faced persecution from the Armenian Apostolic Church and took refuge on the island of San Lazzaro in Venice, Italy. Founded by Mkhitar of Sebastia in 1717, the Mkhitarist monastic order was "dedicated to piety, literary scholarship, and service to the nation" (Oshagan, 143). According to several scholars, the Mkhitarists played a crucial, if not the most influential, role in the "national awakening" of the Armenians (Suny, 1993a; Oshagan, 1997; Panossian, 2006; Aslanian, 2018b). They conducted research on Armenian history, language, literature, and geography and published their findings and while their "motivating force and style were European [their] content was Armenian" (Panossian, 102).

Armenian (142). Members of the Armenian diaspora who were active in this *Zartonk* period were a decentralized, and mostly cosmopolitan people who were refashioning Armenian nationhood outside of the Armenian homeland in strictly urban contexts. For them, emulating the cultural values of the European Enlightenment and adopting European social, political, and economic thought became synonymous with modernization and were imbedded into Armenian national identity formation. Thus, built into the very foundation of Armenian nationhood was a dynamic, multilocal,[37] and heterogenous process of identity construction—one that was not based exclusively on territory (153). This multiplicity and subsequent tensions continue to be present in Armenian national consciousness today.

Armenians in the Ottoman Empire & the 1915 Genocide

One of the most significant demographic and political shifts that impacted Armenians in their historic homeland was the Oghuz Turkish, also known as the Seljuk Turkish, incursion in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Characterized by mass raids, the occupation of major Armenian centers such as the cities of Ani and Kars, and a steady migration of one million Muslim Turks from Central Asia, this period was referred to by Armenians as the "dark centuries" as it marks the beginning of Turkish domination of Armenia (Garsoian, 485; Panossian, 60-1; Aslanian, 2018b). According to Panossian, it was a period that "augmented the Armenian sense of victimhood, as subjects of forces beyond their control" (61). Later, in the mid-fifteenth century, Ottoman Turks—

[37] The term "multilocal" is employed by Panossian (2016) to describe the Armenian condition during this period of *Zartonk* in the nineteenth century, but also more broadly as a frame for theorizing Armenian identity construction over time. While Armenianness is indeed a national construction tied to an irredentist claim to lost homeland and a current post-Soviet republic, it is also a form of identification that is not tied to one particular territory given the multiple waves of diaspora and legacy of transculturation.

descendants of the Oghuz Turks—captured Constantinople and expanded eastward into Armenian proper throughout the following century eventually forming the Ottoman Empire (Hovannisian, viii). Under Muslim Ottoman rule, Armenians continued to conceive of themselves as a religious community, and their Christianity rendered them underclassed and underprivileged in the context of Muslim rule (Aslanian, 2021).

Through what was known as the *millet* system (*millet* meaning religion or religious community), the Ottoman Sultan governed non-Muslim minoritized subjects through their religious institutions; in the case of the Armenians, it was the Apostolic Patriarchate located in Istanbul (Suny 1993a, 9). The Armenian millet, demographically segregated from Muslim citizens, was distinguishable only as a religious community and their sense of identity was formally separated from other identity markers such as any ethnic, linguistic, or territorial sense of belonging (Panossian, 69). Furthermore, they were subject to an ideology of state-sanctioned Muslim supremacy that rendered Christian Armenians second-class citizens, described in greater detail below:

> [The Armenians] were subjects who, however high they might rise in trade, commerce, or even governmental service, were never to be considered equal to the ruling Muslims. They would always remain *gavur,* infidels inferior to the Muslims. For centuries Armenians lived in a political and social order in which their testimony was not accepted in Muslim courts, where they were subject to discriminatory laws (for example, they were forced to wear distinctive clothes to identify themselves), where they were not allowed to bear arms when most Muslims were armed, and where their property and person were subject to the arbitrary and unchecked power of Muslim officials (Suny 1993a, 96-7).

While the *millet* system was imbedded with hierarchical and discriminatory policies, it simultaneously granted peoples of the Abrahamic religions—Christianity and Judaism—a certain level of autonomy, which ultimately contributed to the survival of Armenians as a people in the region (Suny, 100-1; Panossian, 71). Thus, the period between 1453 and 1878 is characterized by Suny as one of “benign symbiosis” for Armenians who came to

be known as the "loyal millet" who saw an increasingly powerful Armenian Church act as the "head of the [Armenian] nation," and whose urban population was able to thrive economically, benefitting from the activities of a few Armenian educational and social organizations (Suny 1993a, 100-1). For example, the first Armenian classical opera, Arshak II,[38] was staged in 1868 at the permanent Armenian theatre based in Constantinople, which housed many other plays based on Armenian historic figures and events (Panossian 141). Thus, without glossing over the repressive features of the *millet* system, the isolating and semi-autonomous nature of this social matrix did indeed help to maintain the distinctness of the Armenians as a unique ethno-confessional community separate from the, usually Muslim, "other."

By the mid-nineteenth century, intellectual and political currents from the West began trickling into Armenian communities, particularly the merchant and intellectual classes who already had longstanding connections with European port cities and schools of thought (Suny 1993a, 102). What became a period of reform in the Ottoman Empire called the *Tamzimat*, or "reorganization," intended to transform the *millet* system by equalizing all Ottoman subjects under the law to quell pressure from minoritized groups and ensure the survivability of Ottoman Turkish hegemony into the age of nationalism (102). The *Tanzimat* reforms marked the shift from religious to secular identifications within the Ottoman Empire, a turning point which also led to the advent of Turkish nationalism. The goal of Turkish nationalists was and continues to be to "create an undisputed homeland for the Turkish people, and even work toward the Pan-Turanian utopia of a Turkic empire stretching from Istanbul to Central Asia" (106). During this

[38] The play was based on King Arshak who fought for "national unification" in the fourth century against Persia and Byzantium (Panossian 141).

period and in the context of the popular *Zartonk* movement, Armenians propelled themselves towards the articulation of a secular nationality that not only laid claims to historic Armenian territory but that also demonstrated a strong ideological proximity to Western ideals. Ultimately, these developments and the overall national advancement of Armenians were viewed as hostile provocations to Turkish nationalists. For the up-and-coming Young Turks political party, Armenians were seen as the link that perpetuated Western and Russian interference into Ottoman affairs, thereby impacting their ultra-nationalist goals (106). Thus, eliminating the Armenians from Anatolia was a necessary step to realize their Pan-Turkic vision.

Building up to the 1915 Genocide, Armenians were subject to excessive taxation as well as random acts of violence such as raids, massacres, and pogroms, often committed by local Muslim Kurdish tribes and militias—some of which were sanctioned by the Ottoman state. Multiple rebellions took place in Armenian districts across the Empire, in Zeytun (1862), Van (1862), Erzerum (1863), Sasun (1893-94), and again in both Zeytun (1895-96) and Van (1896) (Panossian, 161). In response to these uprisings, Sultan Abdul Hamid II ordered what became the most notable precursor to the Genocide—the Hamidian massacres of the mid-1890s, which resulted in the slaughter of over 100,000 men, women and children and prompted a mass exodus of Armenians from the Empire (Mirak 1997, 390). Whenever Armenians made attempts to challenge or resist arbitrary Ottoman rule and oppression, they were met with massacres (Panossian, 162). These acts of resistance have become memorialized in Armenian folklore and cultural expression, particularly in the songs and dances of Sasuntsi Armenians who continue to be revered today for their historic revolutionary fervor, that of which is still emulated in

their unique, expressive style within the Armenian vernacular tradition. Massacres and anti-Armenian violence became a state-sponsored precedent (Panossian 235), and the trope that Armenians posed a "problem" in the face of Ottoman power was ultimately inherited by the Young Turks.

The Young Turk regime which had initially come to power in 1908 under an "inclusive" ideology called Ottomanism—or the legal protection of non-Muslims—was not accepted by either Turks or minoritized groups like Armenians. Panosian details this dynamic:

> For the minorities Ottomanism was a different form of Turkishness, especially since the symbols used to promote this supposedly 'supranational' identity were exclusively Turkish. For the Turks it was a dilution of the true Turkish and Muslim character of the empire. [The Young Turks] used Ottomanism for 'tactical' reasons and 'political opportunism' to obtain minorities' support in their revolution. Once firmly in power they no longer felt the need to sideline their 'Turkist ideology' and turned to Turkish nationalism with great zeal (Panossian, 235).

The Armenian Genocide of 1915[39] was the systematic extermination of one-and-a-half million Armenians from their historic lands. Most were massacred; those who survived were forcibly converted to Islam; and hundreds of thousands were sent on death marches across the Syrian desert—effectively emptying the region of its native Armenian population (see Figure 6). The perpetration of genocide by the Young Turks effectively set the stage "not for their imperial Turanian dream, but for the Kemalist republic, the Turkish state that now occupies the Anatolian peninsula" (Suny 1993a, 114). The historical fact of calculated Genocide continues to be denied by the Turkish state, as state-sanctioned revisionist narratives blame the disappearance of the Armenians on the victims themselves and on the violence of World War I. A multi-pronged enterprise of

[39] While this atrocity is often cited as the "Armenian" Genocide, many Assyrians and Pontic Greeks perished during this targeted annihilation campaign as well.

historical revisionism exports this denialist rhetoric to global institutions and foreign governments to conceal the truth, fearing global support of Armenian demands for recognition and reparations.

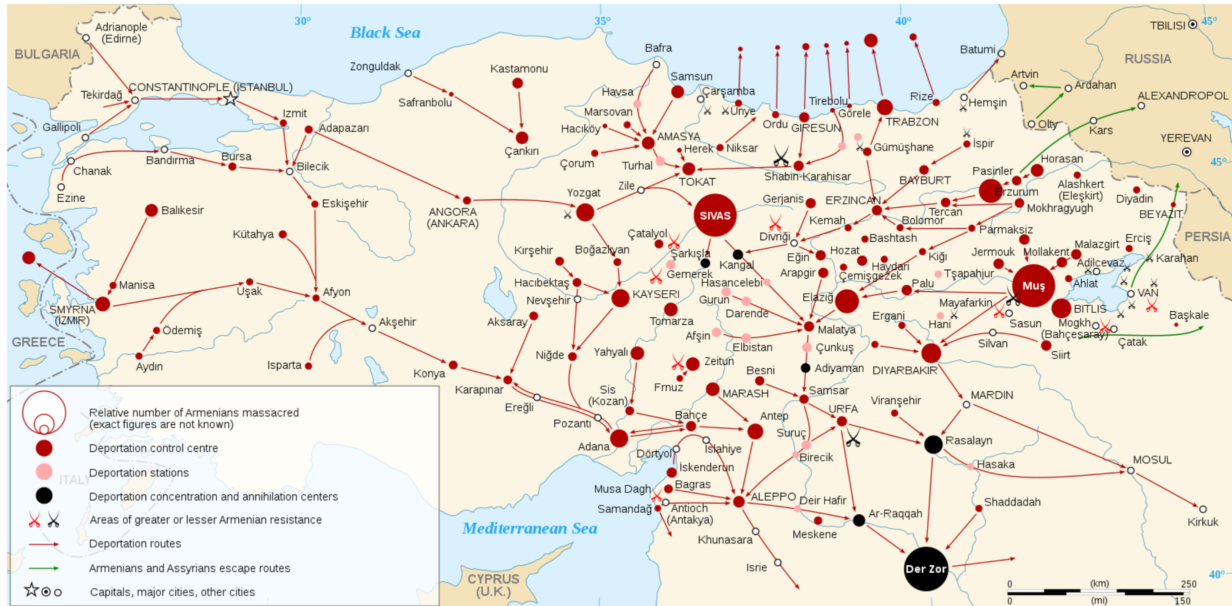

Figure 6: Map of the 1915 Armenian Genocide and deportation routes. (Graphic by Sémhur licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Armenian_Genocide_Map-en.svg).[40]

The Genocide has ultimately become a "prism through which national identity is seen, politics interpreted, and culture redefined," and it squarely places the "victim" mentality in the center of Armenian collective consciousness (Panossian 228, 236). Commemoration events for the Genocide can be witnessed in various cities around the world where there is an active Armenian community. While the Genocide was a multi-year process, it is commemorated by the global Armenian community on April 24th to memorialize the day in 1915 when 200 Armenian intellectuals, poets, doctors, religious leaders, and political dissidents were arrested in Constantinople by Ottoman authorities

[40] Topographic background: NASA Shuttle Radar Topography Mission (SWBD) (public domain). Armeniangenocidemap.gif by Vahagn Avedian, from the website http://www.armenica.org, uploaded on Commons by Electionworld under license GFDL. (Note: Armenica map is a clone of Map 224 (The Armenian Genocide, 1915 (after J. Naslian and B.H. Harutyunyan) in Hewsen, Robert H. (2001) Armenia: A Historical Atlas (1st ed.), University of Chicago Press, pp. 232.

and publicly hung. Every April 24th, Armenians around the world[41] gather in front of Turkish consulates to protest the government's consistent denial of its atrocities and to demand justice. "Our Wounds are Still Open" is a common phrase used during annual commemoration activities, especially among Los Angeles diaspora youth.[42] This phrase encapsulates how the Genocide and its omission from the annals of history have come to constitute a core pillar of Armenian identity. Genocide commemoration activities serve as a unifying or even neutral base for "being Armenian," that despite multiple differences and locales, Armenians can collectively participate in a single struggle, one that they consider to be "*the* Armenian cause."

Embedded in Armenian national memory as *Medz Yeghern* or the "Great Crime," the Genocide disappeared Armenians from their historic homeland, forcing those who survived into exile. Forming a new diaspora, surviving Armenians who fled Ottoman Turkish violence sought refuge in various regions around the world,[43] including the nearby area nestled between the southern Caucasus mountain range that later became Soviet Armenia. Elsewhere, new Armenian communities were formed in the Levant such as Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan; in Europe such as France and the UK; in South America such as Uruguay, Argentina, and Brazil; and in the United States (mostly in Los

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[41] In Armenia, however, participants commemorate by marching silently to the Genocide Memorial outside of the capital, Yerevan.

[42] Commemoration activities that take place annually in Los Angeles are of special significance—as Los Angeles is a major center for the Armenian diaspora and home to close to 200,000 Armenians, according to the 2010 census (US Census Bureau). In 2015, the year that marked the 100th anniversary since the Genocide, approximately 160,000 participants took to the streets making it one of the largest marches in Los Angeles history (Armenian Genocide Committee, 2015).

[43] Surviving communities settled in Syria and nearby Lebanon, and even Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq. Many also sought refuge in countries across Western and Eastern Europe, South America, and the United States.

Angeles, Fresno, Boston, and New York). Today, with approximately 73%[44] of the world's Armenians living outside of the borders of the Armenian nation state, the diaspora serves as a constant reminder of an Armenian exilic past, a collective history of forced dispersion, resistance, and the will to survive. Given that most surviving Armenians were orphans—the dispossession of land, culture, and customs has led to the forgetting of Armenian lifeways and the subsequent penchant for reviving and recovering lost heritage.

The need to revive and recover has touched multiple aspects of Armenian identity from history, language, and literature, to architecture, visual art, song, and dance. In the case of *azgagrakan par*, learning and practicing forms that are from the historic Armenian homeland, including dances like *kochari, yarkhushta* and *taltala,* functions as an embodied response to systematic state-funded projects of historical revisionism and cultural erasure that threaten the existence and survivability of Armenianness.[45] In the context of active denial and revisionism, cultural and heritage practices such as dance and music are viewed as fundamental components in the struggle to exist and to "be" Armenian against forces that seek to erase, rewrite, and invisibilize that identity.

Armenians in Imperial Russia

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[44] According to multiple sources, with a total population of around 11 million Armenians approximately eight million live outside of Armenia.

[45] In Turkey, for example, this includes the destruction of thousands of sacred churches and monasteries, the misappropriation of Armenian heritage sites, belligerent state-sanctioned anti-Armenian rhetoric, and the systematic denial and obfuscation of the Genocide. Similarly, the Azerbaijani government is not only predicated on anti-Armenian propaganda and the falsification and distortion of history, but it has also been engaged in the systematic cultural cleansing of Armenian heritage within its territories, namely the total decimation of the Jugha (Julfa or Djulfa) Armenian cemetery—what used to be the largest Armenian cemetery in the world with cross stones and other artifacts dating back to the sixth century.

As in the Ottoman Empire, Armenians in the Russian Empire were also marked as a religious community, an identification that was eventually challenged by the advent of secular nationalism and the incoming currents of European social and political thought. Prior to the late nineteenth century, Russians advancing into Armenia were viewed positively by local Armenians as saviors of the defenseless Christians from an oppressive Muslim yoke (Panossian, 120). In a similar vein, Russians viewed themselves as both liberators and conquerors— "liberators of Christian peoples no longer able to defend themselves, and conquerors who had brought glory to the empire by defeating the Muslims powers" (Suny 1993a, 35). However, Russian policy and opinion of Armenians gradually shifted from tolerant measures to more repressive approaches to imperial rule (Panossian, 121). For example, Armenians—as a people of the Caucasus—were viewed as *tuzemtsy* or "natives," which solidified the sense of Russian superiority over Armenianness and reinforced the treatment of Armenians as a "colony" that needed to be "civilized" (Suny 1993a, 36, 38-9). This civilizing agenda played out in various domains of social life, including most vividly in the realm of dance.

In late seventeenth century Imperial Russia, Peter the Great embarked on a Westernizing project "to radically re-create Russian society in a European image—to *make* Russians into Europeans" using classical ballet (Homans 2010, 246). Given that ballet dancers during this period were part of the underclass, usually serfs or orphans, they were "'civilized' and 'made European' at state expense," trained to "acquire the grace and elegance and cultural forms of the French aristocracy" (253, 247). Prestigious due to its foreign—particularly European—origin in France and Italy, classical ballet was used by Russian elites as a standardizing rubric for controlling and internalizing an ideal

physical comportment. This civilizing mentality ultimately became part of Russian and later Soviet approaches to establishing social hierarchies and consolidating cultural and political power.

In the early nineteenth century, the *Zartonk* movement grew in popularity. Due to the plight of the Armenians in the historic homeland, political sentiments in favor of separatism and self-rule were primarily directed at the Ottoman Empire. Given that these revolutionary currents of secular nationality and rebellion were also active among Armenians living in the Russian Empire, they negatively influenced dominant Russian images of Armenians, which transitioned from that of helpless Christians to that of stereotypes like “conspiratorial,” “inherently disloyal,” and “sly” businesspeople (Suny 1993a, 31-2, 38-9). Armenians thus became targets of Russification and hegemonic Russian nationalism, subject to maneuvers which included the closure of Armenian schools, the banning of languages other than Russian, the seizure of Armenian church properties, and the censorship of words like “Armenian people” or “Armenian nation” from appearing in any publications (47).

Furthermore, a similar shift towards Russian nationalism took place in the realm of ballet during the late nineteenth century. As Russian elites began to criticize what they viewed as excessively Eurocentric attitudes, dress, and habits, there was an attempt to “make ballet Russian” by incorporation Russian literary and folk themes by “turning ‘back to the people’” (Homans, 258, 262). French choreographer Marius Petipa, who worked on developing classical ballet in the imperial courts, was intimately part of this process of shifting the axis of classical ballet from a primarily French, Parisian form to a distinct Russian art form (Homans, 288). At the intersection of both Russian and Western

European hegemony, ballet became a tool of the state which carried on through to the Soviet period.

Ultimately, the rise of these new waves of Russian chauvinism and Armenophobia that marked Armenians as an "alien" and "pariah nation" occurred in the wake of the pre-Genocide Hamidian massacres of the late nineteenth century (Suny 1993a, 46-47). The advent of Turkish and Russian repression campaigns in response to a growing Armenian nationalist movement simultaneously galvanized Armenian revolutionary activity in the quest for self-determination while also reinforcing the victim mentality amongst Armenians across both empires.

Historically, the "other" for the Armenians was the Turk or the Muslim, and in the aftermath of the Genocide "this Other also came to embody evil … [and] Turkishness was considered immoral, unclean and violent" (Panossian, 240). This certainly continues to be true today, as in the case of nationalized cultural production Armenianness could never be associated with anything remotely related to that which is considered "Turkish" or "Islamic." In the case of music, the singing style known as *rabiz* is often disparaged by Armenians (both in Armenia and the diaspora), primarily due to its melismatic singing style that is believed to be associated exclusively with Islamic cultural production. Regarding dance, Armenians similarly consider Kurdish dancing aesthetics to be "primitive" and "underdeveloped," when in reality, Armenian vernacular aesthetics share an abundance of similarities. In both examples, music and dance aesthetics are used to differentiate and place Armenianness in opposition to its neighbors. In turn, cultural elites looked to westernize and standardize musical and dance forms, such as eliminating melisma entirely and implementing upright bodily comportment—as seen in *bemakan*

par. Tasked with reselecting and reinventing national cultural memory, Armenians continue to impose a superficial separation from regional styles and seek to preserve Armenianness—often anachronistically—by looking to Russia and the West.

The First Republic & Armenia as a "Victim Nation"

Today, Armenians observe not one, but two independence days: the first commemorates the founding of the First Armenian Republic, which declared its independence on May 28, 1918, following the dissolution of the Russian empire; the second celebrates the founding of the Third Republic (the present-day Republic of Armenia), which declared independence from Soviet rule on September 21, 1991.[46] The First Armenian Republic was born out of a power vacuum between the Russian and Ottoman empires, which were both facing major internal problems, including the October (Bolshevik) Revolution and the disintegration of the Russian tsarist system, as well as the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire by the Allied Powers after a major defeat in World War I (Panossian, 242). Once again, "Garsoian's law" is at play for the Armenians. With its two neighboring and rivaling empires both weakened and distracted, Armenians enjoyed a short period of autonomy and independence, albeit one that was characterized by a massive post-Genocide refugee crisis, disease and starvation, and violent territorial disputes and loss of land.

The continuation of Armenian self-representation as victims carried well into the twentieth century. As with the fate of the First Republic, the Armenian mentality that

[46] The Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), also referred to as Soviet Armenia, is the Second Republic.

"salvation need[ed] to come from abroad persisted" (Panossian, 254-55). According to Ronald Suny,

> Armenia's location between Turkey and Russia, its remoteness from the Western powers, meant that the fate of the Armenians would be determined by decisions and events outside the control of the Armenians themselves. It would depend on the success of the Russians in reestablishing authority over the borderlands, on the ability of the Turks to thwart the designs of acquisitive Westerners, and on the willingness of the Allies to attempt to penetrate deep into Asia Minor in a risky and costly cause (1993a, 120).

This reliance on external forces reinforced the legacy of Armenian self-perception as one of perpetual victimhood: from hoping that "Christian Europe" will save Armenians from the Genocide, to later seeing Russians as their saviors against Turkish tyranny, to then believing that European forces would once again act as liberators to ensure their independence. External support from foreign powers (most of which never came) was believed to be crucial for the survival of the Armenians in an otherwise volatile region. Rooted in an ancient relationship with European empires, the expectation that western Christian powers would come to the rescue of a small nation of Christian Armenians "was much more than a political calculation; it was woven into national identity, becoming an inherent element of Armenians' liberation struggle in the nineteenth century" (Panossian, 189). Armenians to this day continue to function from this frame of mind: that Armenia is a small victim nation that must petition for outside support, usually by appealing to its sense of Christian morality.

Despite general pressures of survival, dance made its way into the First Republic along with the survivors of the Armenian Genocide. As exiles from historic Armenia sought refuge in the First Republic, so did their dance practices. The Kalashyan sisters, Akunq Ensemble, Vaspurakan Ensemble, and Ashnak Ensemble were all examples of dance and music groups in the *azgagrakan* style who were made up of genocide survivors

and their descendants. These resettlement communities also became prized sources for Soviet ethnographic endeavors and were even explored by *bemakan par* ballet masters and choreographers.

The Soviet Period

Soviet rule over the Armenians was a period characterized by the simultaneous advancement and repression of Armenian national interests. As the First Armenian Republic dissolved into the Soviet yoke in 1920-21, Armenians recognized that being absorbed into the Soviet Union also meant protection from continuous Turkish advancements into what was left of Armenian territory. And so, "Sovietisation, despite its problems and terror, did bring peace and tranquility to Armenia" (Panossian, 260). While exile and dispersion were part of the Armenian condition for most of the modern period, Soviet Armenia provided territorial stability and a homogenous national center for Armenians for the first time in centuries (Panossian, 261, 280).

During the first decade of Soviet rule in Armenia, the ruling elite—who were almost entirely Armenian[47]—carried out various economic development and renationalization projects (Panossian, 284). These included making Armenian the official state language as well as making significant investments in cultural, educational, scientific, and political infrastructure (Suny 1993a, 142, 151). In the early part of the twentieth century, the Soviet system was what Ronald Suny calls "the incubator of new nations" (Suny 1993b, 6; 1993a, 87). In the case of Soviet Armenia, the already

[47] An important and insidious aspect of Soviet rule was that it often placed local peoples, in this case Armenians, in positions of power across the Soviet satellites. The system was set up in such a way that these individuals would be responsible for answering to officials in Moscow.

burgeoning sense of Armenian nationalism dovetailed with Soviet nationality policy, specifically the policy of *korenizatsiia* (rooting, indigenization or nativization), which promoted and institutionalized local nationality categories across the Union.

Soviet Nationality Policy

An already existing sense of Armenian national identity was consolidated and strengthened during the 1920s in Soviet Armenia. Historian Francine Hirsch writes how "the creation of new national republics, oblasts, and regions, along with the Soviet policy of *korenizatsiia* (indigenization), which called for the promotion of indigenous people in these national territories" activated local infrastructures and established "somewhat-autonomous" states across the Union (Hirsch 2010, 146; Panossian, 268). Through the creation of nationalist elites and intellectuals, the construction of new schools and cultural institutions, the prioritization of the local titular languages, and the establishment of economic development projects, the Soviet Union managed to build an empire made up of small nationalities—a condition that contributed to its eventual downfall.

Thus, the Soviet Union held qualities of both an empire and a new type of state that created "official" nationalities (Hirsch). Soviet governance was constantly negotiating between contradictory policies that on one hand sought to nationalize and indigenize peripheral Soviet republics, and on the other hand was set on maintaining hegemonic power by de-nationalizing, Sovietizing, and modernizing them according to a Russian socialist ideal. Ronald Suny describes this paradox as it pertained to Armenia in detail:

> Implicit in this period was a tension between the effort at modernization and the policy of nativization. Modernization meant the breakdown of many traditional and customary national forms, the end of isolated village life, the emancipation of women, the

> secularization of education, the attack on the church. It meant making Armenians more like other peoples, eliminating certain national distinctions. Modernization contained within it the threat of assimilation. Yet at the same time, the policy of *korenizatsiia* was pulling in the opposite direction, making Armenia more Armenian and making Armenians more aware of their history, culture, and language. The tension between the two was real, but the political system established in the 1920s prevented any real resolution of the conflict. The tension would grow, but so would the political repression that would make impossible any discussion of the anxieties of the nationalities in a modernizing state (Suny 1993a, 148).

The composite imperial and national form of the Soviet Union illuminates this dual, paradoxical approach of official Soviet nationality policy. While there was a major push to "indigenize" local institutions, by way of training Armenians to serve in high political, economic, and cultural positions, leadership in Armenia were primarily made up of Armenians and were thus "of the people." This aspect of Soviet nationality policy reveals the insidious nature of Soviet rule, in the way that it demanded mass participation and interactions with Soviet institutions in order to maintain social control (Panossian, 284; Hirsch, 147).

Furthermore, like European colonizers, the Soviets adopted the worldview that humans evolved through various stages on an evolutionary timeline. "Backwardness" was not a racialized trait, but a sociohistorical one that people could evolve out of by accepting Western notions of cultural and economic development (Hirsch, 9). Thus, Soviet nationality policy functioned as a project of "state-sponsored evolutionism," what Francine Hirsch calls the "Soviet version of the civilizing mission," which was concerned with speeding up the cultural development of "backwards" non-Russian populations to secure a modern, Soviet, socialist future (Hirsch, 7). Soviet nationality policy was indeed a fluid and, as Ronald Suny calls it, contradictory project, which at times allowed for the flourishing of indigenous cultural forms and other times demanded a strict adherence to Soviet Russian norms. In the following decade, the centralization of cultural production

and the repression of the national interests of peripheral republics increased under Stalin’s orthodoxy.

“Official” and “Dissident” Nationalisms

The second decade of Soviet rule, the 1930s, saw a shift in cultural, political, and economic policies under Stalin’s regime. Marked by large-scale projects that sought to modernize, industrialize, and further centralize power in the Soviet Union, the Stalinist period was ultimately one of mass repression and terror. A policy of collectivization that forced peasants to surrender their farmland and livestock, multiple famines, purges and concentration camps, mass censorship, and a large-scale offensive against academic, cultural, and artistic freedoms characterized an excessively violent and oppressive period in Soviet history.

In contrast to the policy of *korenizatsiia* that promoted local non-Russian nationalities and granted them a degree of autonomy, Stalin saw local national and ethnic consciousness as a danger to the Kremlin, which led to antinationalist policies and “state-enforced Russification” (Suny 1993b, 108). For example, while native languages were still taught in the various republics, the study of Russian was compulsory in all schools under Stalin and native languages were considered inferior and insufficient in professional domains (108). Local ethno-national interests were compromised and “there was a clear ideological emphasis on assimilating into the dominant nationality of the Soviet Union—i.e., the Russian nation” in order to prioritize industrialization and economic efficiency, and to homogenize all Soviet nationalities into a singular Soviet Russian identity (Panossian 275; Suny 1993b, 106-7).

This shift in policy and approach to ethnic nationalities had a significant impact on peripheral nations, given that they "downgraded the local nationalities to a secondary level and elevated Russians to the level of a superior people" (Suny 1993a, 154). While expressions of Russian nationalism in music, opera, theatre, and dance productions increased during this period (154), any demonstration of local autonomy or expression of ethnic nationalism was criminalized (1993b, 108).[48] What became known as *sliianie* (blending, merging or fusion) was the idea that all Soviet nationalities could be merged into one entity, effectively making assimilation into Russian culture a dictate of state policy. Enforced in both subtle and overt ways, the central Soviet utilized the "elder brother" approach to generate Russophilia among the peripheral nations, as "non-Russian nationalities [were] expected to acknowledge the leading role of the great Russian people and their indebtedness to the Russian 'elder brother' for their economic and cultural progress" (Conquest 1967, 91). Intended to eliminate ethnic identity and national consciousness in order to achieve a single, Russian-speaking Soviet nationality, this ideology was further advanced by Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev who served as First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1953-1964.

Yet another shift occurred in the post-Stalin 1960s, a phenomenon Ronald Suny termed "dissident nationalism" (1993a, 185). He writes:

> Instead of promoting assimilation, Soviet development had led to the consolidation of nations. Instead of Russification, there was greater awareness of national cultures and devotion to national languages. Instead of brutal and unalloyed repression of nationalism, in the post-Stalin period there were not only concessions made to nationalism, but often subtle encouragement of it (185).

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[48] In fact, it was not until the early 1960s that the Armenian Genocide could be discussed openly, as it was considered a taboo "nationalist" subject matter.

Suny goes on to distinguish between the two kinds of nationalism within the Soviet Union during this period: orthodox or official nationalism and unorthodox or dissident nationalism (185). While the line separating these two forms of national pride and patriotism was fluid, nationalism was unofficial and unorthodox when it took on the form of public protest or political organization (186). While for some Armenians, the dictates of "official" nationalism granted them prestige and social status, for others it compromised their native identity, and they chose to risk "dissident" forms of nationalist expression—disguised as "official"—to evade Soviet retaliation. However, the most significant national threat for Armenians continued to be the Turks, and it was the Soviet state that offered Armenians protection from potential Turkish aggression. Thus, unlike other more anti-Russian nationalisms (such as Georgian, Estonian or Ukrainian), Armenian nationalism was not as hostile to Soviet power and continued the recurring theme of Armenians as the "loyal" subjects—a continuation of Armenians as the "loyal millet" of the Ottoman Empire (186).

Throughout Soviet rule, Armenians were tasked with navigated contradictory policies to further consolidate their sense of national identity. Soviet control was ubiquitous; imbedded in the state structure itself, Soviet cultural and political influence impacted almost every aspect of life across various periods of Soviet rule. For Armenians, as well as other local nationalities, any semblance of national identity was to be articulated through the confines of Soviet expression. This legacy continues to be prevalent not only in post-Soviet Armenia but also across the global Armenian diaspora.

In the case of dance, both *bemakan par* and *azgagrakan par* are manifestation of these exact contradictions. While *bemakan par* practitioners and elites believed to be

performing and promoting a distinctly "Armenian" national form, they were in fact subject to Soviet "state-sponsored evolutionism," given that ballet was a medium through which Armenian dances were to be "developed" and "civilized." Conversely, *azgagrakan par* practitioners believed that they were evading Soviet censorship and state-sanctioned de-nationalization by practicing and performing song and dance material that indexed historic Armenia, thereby strengthening the Armenian national cause. While maintaining a strong sense of nationalism covertly, *azgagrakan par* practitioners managed to perform their loyalty to the central Soviet by adhering to the themes and forms of cultural expression that were deemed acceptable and non-threatening.

A Culture of Paradox

The legacy of Soviet influence on Armenian aesthetic projects, especially dance, continues to be highly visible today. Ballet was a major part of Soviet cultural production and its institutionalization was widespread across the Soviet Union, as "classical ballet was the de facto official art of the Soviet State" (Homans 2010, 342). Stemming from a longstanding legacy of Russian cultural and political dominance over Armenians, the practice of ballet during the Soviet period continued to bear the same "civilizing agenda." Disassociated from its aristocratic and courtly roots, ballet was the basis for all national folk expression within the Union. Ballet became a powerful tool of the state, capable of both civilizing and representing "the diverse peoples" of the Soviet Union.

As part of the Soviet nationality project, ballet companies were established in the capitals of every Soviet republic and were placed under centralized state control (Homans, 344-5). Ballet was viewed as the optimal form of dance expression and its accessibility was key in reframing it as a "people's" art form. According to dance scholar

Susan Foster, ballet—with its origin in the Italian courts and later its popularization by French monarch Louis XIV—cultivated bodies according to courtly protocols of etiquette and proper bodily comportment that would signal "high social rank" (1998, 22). Moreover, Foster theorizes how ballet's geometric and virtuosic forms represented a seemingly universal language of movement that authenticated ballet as "the most refined and cultivated version of bodily expression to be found on earth," one with an implied "mastery over the world's dance forms (211).

In Armenia, the dominant expression of "Armenian national dance" was and continues to be the Sovietized and balleticized *bemakan par* genre. Given that professional dancers and choreographers from "big brother Russia" came to the Armenian Opera Theatre and other dance institutions to teach Armenians how to "clean up" the "uncivilized" elements of Armenian dance vis-à-vis ballet,[49] *bemakan par* is emblematic of the top-down approach to hegemonic Soviet cultural production that eventually was taken on by Armenians themselves. Simultaneously, however, the systematic study of native vernacular dance and music heritage was also undertaken by Armenian state academic institutions and *azgagrakan* ensembles and grassroots communities early on and throughout Soviet rule. Ethnographic research and recordings of traditional and revolutionary songs and dances, especially those from Armenian refugees who had fled historic Armenia and arrived in Soviet Armenia, became important source material for various *azgagrakan* ensembles who would later study and perform the material for local, and global, audiences. Looking to these diverging forms of Armenian cultural expression during the Soviet period not only illuminates the contradictory nature

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[49] From a conversation with Hovhannes Divanyan, Ballet Master, and Artistic Director of the Yerevan State Choreographic College.

of Soviet nationality policy, but also highlights the legacy of Soviet rule and its impact on Armenian national identity and its contemporary enactments.

Post-Soviet Armenian Independence

One might say that Soviet nationality policy was highly successful, so much so that it catalyzed multiple nationalist revolutions throughout the Soviet Union, contributing to its eventual demise in 1991. One of the first of these took place in Armenia, initially as a massive protest movement in 1987-88 that later developed into an opposition movement against Communist rule and in favor of an independent Armenian nation-state (Suny 1993a, 233). The nationality policy set forth by the central Soviet was intended to be undermined by an eventual pan-Soviet, anti-nationalist identity, however given that nationalism was institutionalized across the Union its disillusion was inevitable. Moreover, throughout the Soviet period, Soviet authorities promoted a conflicting set of policies that encouraged "both assimilation and cultural diversity (1970s), [and] an abrupt switch from one policy to the other (early 1930s, late 1940s and early 1960s), [which] meant that neither one could be implemented successfully" (Panossian, 274). And as Suny explains,

> In the 74 years of Soviet power, the Kremlin had practiced a deeply contradictory policy toward its non-Russian subjects: on the one hand, eliminating real sovereignty and (for the long decades of Stalinism) any semblance of political autonomy; on the other, fostering the development in many republics of native cultures, encouraging education in the local languages, and promoting, through a peculiar form of affirmative action, cadres from the dominant nationality. … The result was strengthened nations on the periphery of the empire, not only conscious of their new power before a weakened center but also anxious about their futures in a decaying social and economic system (1993b, 155-6).

The oscillation between political currents that generated national autonomy for non-Russian republics and that conversely mandated Russification often cancelled one another out; by the

1990s, most of the Soviet republics had declared their sovereignty and their intention to secede from the Soviet Union.

The Karabagh Movement

The above-mentioned social movement, considered to be "the Pandora's Box of the Soviet 'nationalities problem'" and the "trigger" that began the process of the disillusion of Soviet power, was the Armenian Karabagh movement (Panossian, 384; Chorbajian 2001, 24). A lush, mountainous enclave that hugs the southwestern border of present-day Armenia, Karabagh (Artsakh) has been an Armenian territory throughout recorded history. [50] Karabagh is but one example of how the Soviets ultimately exacerbated ethno-nationalist conflict and fueled long-lasting instability, particularly in the South Caucasus. It also further illuminates how Armenians view the Armenian Genocide not as an isolated event in history, but as a process of continued attempts by Turkish peoples to annihilate Armenians, displacing them and erasing any trace of them from the region entirely.

Despite the fact that Armenians comprised a majority population (that of approximately 95%), Soviet authorities established Karabagh within the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) (Suny 1993a, 188).[51] It is well documented that Azerbaijani Turks attempted on multiple occasions to cleanse Karabagh of Armenians, and committed large scale violence against

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[50] While the region is most known in international spaces as Karabagh or Nagorno-Karabagh, Armenians have recently revived its ancient Armenian name, Artsakh. The word *karabagh* has Persian/Turkic roots and means "black garden," while *nagorny* means "mountainous" in Russian. Artsakh has ancient Armenian roots.

[51] According to many scholars, the decision to assign Karabagh to Azerbaijan by the Kremlin in the early twentieth century was geopolitically motivated (Chorbajian, 37). These motivations included the desire to placate Mustafa Kemal Ataturk who was the first president and founder of the Republic of Turkey, of which Azerbaijan was a direct Turkish nationalist project of, to appeal to a much larger Azerbaijani population as well as other Muslim populations under Soviet rule; to consider Azerbaijan's large oil holdings; and to appease both Turkey and Azerbaijan, recognizing the potential role they could play in promoting Bolshevism amongst Muslims (Chorbajian, 37).

Armenians living in Azerbaijan in the form of organized anti-Armenian pogroms, as a response to Armenian political dissent and calls for self-determination in Karabagh (Chorbajian 31). This led to an outbreak of full-scale war over Karabagh all while the Soviet Union was on the brink of collapse. Throughout the twentieth century, from 1988 to 1994, Karabagh Armenians and Armenia fought a bitter and costly war against Azerbaijan that was aided by Turkey. While a ceasefire was called in 1994 ending the war with Armenian control over Karabagh, the conflict continues to generate instability in the region with frequent skirmishes, a long-standing economic blockade against Armenia, and tense borders.

Recently, as the COVID-19 pandemic raged across the globe, Azerbaijan—once again aided by Turkey—launched a full-scale war against both Karabagh and Armenia in September of 2020 targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure. Today, Armenians refer to this asymmetrical conflict as the 2020 Artsakh War. The result for Armenians was the loss of over 70% of Karabagh, redrawn borders which are not only precarious but very dangerous, hundreds of soldiers and civilians illegally taken and abused as prisoners of war, one hundred thousand Armenians displaced from their homes, and an influx of Russian peacekeepers and military checkpoints now on Armenian soil. As Armenian sovereign territory continues to be carved up, this recent loss for Armenians has generated devastating results for the future viability of an Armenian state. Viewing this conflict from the inescapable lens of the genocide, the ethnic cleansing of Armenians from Karabakh and the Pan-Turkic vision of a united Turkey with Azerbaijan continues to be an inevitable existential threat.

The Karabagh movement and subsequent wars have become the most significant struggles in modern Armenian history as their legacy—politically, economically, socially, and culturally—continues to be felt today. During this second Karabagh war, with the first war still

active in Armenian national memory, there was a revival of revolutionary songs and dances on the frontlines which memorialized the national and historical struggle against Turks. The image of the "*fedayi*" or freedom fighter was also revived as the threat of Turkish aggression continues to be a through-line in Armenian collective memory. Furthermore, the strategy of seeking outside validation and support by begging and pleading the United States and Europe to help and save "Christian Armenians" was renewed, despite evidence of direct European and American investment in Azerbaijani oil and in future mineral extractions in Karabagh. Furthermore, the US military, among other government militaries, were watching the war closely (such as including Karabagh terrain in US Army classroom training sessions) in order to study the impacts of drone warfare and its implications in future wars (Morgan, 2020; Dixon, 2020). Thus, there continues to be a penchant for Armenians to reproduce similar narratives about their unique sense of Christian morality and the need to be "saved" by outside forces, who may produce comforting statements but provide little action.

Figure 7: Map of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) War. (Graphic by Emreculha licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nagorno-Karabakh_war_map_(2020).svg

Post-Soviet Legacy

Ultimately, seventy years of Soviet rule left an enduring impression on Armenian national identity formation. In addition to the devastating impacts of both Karabagh wars, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and its accompanying infrastructure left Armenia in an extremely vulnerable condition as it spiraled into a calamitous energy crisis. Popularly known as the *mut u tsurt tariner* or the "dark and cold years," the period between 1991 and 1995 was one of immense suffering for the people of Armenia and Artsakh. During these years they endured major shortages of electricity, basic goods, and resources, compounded with a fuel embargo and closed borders imposed by neighboring Turkey and Azerbaijan, as well as the economic and psychological burdens of an extremely brutal war. This energy catastrophe is imbedded in Armenian national memory as the beginning of a series of unending economic crises and extreme poverty post-independence that put the country on the brink of collapse. Thereafter, Armenian statehood into the early 2000s was plagued by corrupt oligarchic rule and mass emigration—with some estimates claiming that as many as 1.12 million Armenians, approximately 31 percent of the population, emigrated between 1991 and 2019 (Avetisyan, 2020). Despite the difficulties of living under Soviet rule, many Armenians in hindsight remember Soviet Armenia as one of general economic prosperity and tend to associate independence with bitterness, war, and even regret.

While the differences between the two periods—Soviet and independence—are stark in many regards, Sovietization left an indelible mark on independent Armenian statehood and by extension the larger Armenian diaspora. One primary reason is that throughout the majority of the twentieth century, Soviet Armenia was where Armenian national identity was territorialized (Panossian, 255). In other words, from the time of the first independent republic, through to the

Soviet period, and the second independent republic, this small territory in the South Caucasus was constructed over time as the center of Armenian national identity (Panossian, 256). Thus, cultural production coming out of Soviet Armenia and later the Armenian Republic became the gold standard across the diaspora. This was certainly the case for *bemakan par*, as the genre spread rapidly from the Armenian SSR to Armenian communities living in Iran, Lebanon, France, and the United States, to name a few. Today, the primary genre of "Armenian dance" seen and practiced across the diaspora is the Sovietized *bemakan par*, with dance schools and performance groups reproducing the repertories and choreographies created and performed by early Soviet Armenian state ensembles. It is also common for the founders or lead dance instructors at many of these diaspora schools to have once been part of a *bemakan par* ensemble in Armenia, thus strengthening the transmission of training and technique.

The following two chapters explore how *bemakan par* is a paradoxical form. A balleticized Soviet era form made to represent "ancient Armenian heritage," *bemakan par* reflects and reenacts many of the recurring themes of Armenian history that were discussed in this chapter. The concept of Armenians as "cultural shape shifters" continues to be a relevant survival strategy. Given that a sense of Europeanness is still active within the Armenian self-image and given that the Genocide and recent Karabagh wars virtually ended Armenian presence on their historic lands, Armenians continue to assert a fluid "in-betweenness," oscillating between Western Europeanness and an ambiguous Easterness, sometimes alternately and sometimes at once. On one hand, Armenians utilize their proximity to whiteness to invest in ideologies that center that which is white and European, equating ballet, for example, with civilization, "high culture," and modernity. On the other hand, Western media outlets and journalists have virtually ignored the real human rights abuses and war crimes committed by

Azerbaijan and Turkey and have reduced one-sided attacks to “ancient tribal struggles” and “border clashes” marking Armenians acting in self-defense as violent and ultimately undeserving of peace and security.

While the *Zartonk* movement incorporated European Enlightenment values and European social and political thought into Armenian conceptions of modernization and nationalism, Sovietization inculcated a hierarchical conception of modernity that marked Russians as superior and Armenians as “natives” needing civilizing. Thus, Armenians have been seeking modernity in Europeanness and Russianness, both of which are encapsulated in the invented genre of *bemakan par*. Furthermore, rooted in the paradoxical nature of Soviet nationality policy, *bemakan par* is an active negotiation between an “acceptable” expression of Armenianness that was to be articulated within the confines of the Soviet imaginary, and the Soviet consolidation of Armenian identity which cultivated a strong sense of national consciousness. Post-independence and across the diaspora, these historical forces are ever-present in *bemakan par* practice and performance as it continues to be heralded as the most authentic expressor of Armenian modernity and “high art.”

CHAPTER TWO
Mapping Ballet onto "Armenian Dance:" Technique and Pedagogy of *Bemakan Par*

I wait alone inside of the well-used Soviet-era dance studio in Yerevan, Armenia for the Tatul Altunyan Ensemble rehearsal to begin. The entire space is lined with ballet barres, with one side of the room displaying several old, narrow mirrors arranged vertically side by side. The studio is also equipped with a grand piano, a few standing fans at opposing corners of the room, and a row of half-filled, used, plastic water bottles along the windowsill. It is a hot, sticky summer afternoon in Yerevan and the air inside is thick and stagnant. The old wooden plank flooring creaks and groans with each step taken by the tall, slender dancers who briskly file into the room. The dancers, who all appear to be of the same height and shape, walk with turn out—an outward 180-degree rotation of the hips, legs, and feet. The men gather in a corner against the back wall; their greetings include loud smacks of their hands, tight embraces, and kisses on the cheek. The women are spread out in the center of the room, some talking and greeting one another, others stretching at the barre or on the floor.

Lead Ballet Master, Hovhannes Khachikyan, enters the room in mid-conversation with the pianist and with the Ensemble Director. Khachikyan's loud, billowing voice quiets the room and begins the rehearsal. Dancers start with an intense and characteristically balletic warm-up, which includes deep floor stretching and the five basic ballet foot positions.[52] *While standing, dancers are isolated from one another as they stare into the mirror and face forward, and each dancer is visible to themself only through small crevices between other bodies. The pianist accompanies the rehearsal by playing Western classical melodies. The warm-up develops from*

[52] Labeled as positions 1st through 5th, these foot positions delimit different feet and hip placements as well as corresponding arm movements according to which method of ballet is being practiced (French, Russian, Italian or English).

stationary movements with dancers spread out and staggered to rapid across-the-floor combinations. The movements also become increasingly athletic and virtuosic, including high jumps and expansive limb extensions, culminating with male dancers performing balletic double and triple tour en l'air.[53] *Every so often the male dancers take the half-filled water bottles that are displayed on the windowsill and spray the wood flooring to prevent slipping. As the warm-up ends, the female dancers file out of the room, returning a few moments later with heeled dancing shoes.*

During this portion of the rehearsal, dancers review select choreographic sequences from the ensemble's repertory. Khachikyan focuses primarily on one female dancer who appears to be new to the particular choreography. He grabs her arm and moves her across the room like a rag doll or prop. He drags her along in a disciplined review of the precise spatial positionings and gestures of the choreographic sequence, loudly enunciating the melody to dictate her movements. Every posture during the entire rehearsal session is elevated; dancers exude weightlessness as they lift themselves onto their toes, extend their arms high in the air, and kick their legs above their torsos and beyond. Spatial formations are frequent, varied, and geometrically precise; dancers are arranged in a succession of linear patterns that shift from male-female pairs to several single file lines facing forward, to intricate oscillations between pinwheel and V-shape formations, and eventually into separate male and female group patterns.

This chapter aims to explore the technique and pedagogy of *bemakan par*, a newly invented genre of "Armenian dance" developed throughout the twentieth century. *Bemakan par* is both the official state-sanctioned dance form in Armenia and is the predominant form among

[53] In classical ballet, a *tour en l'air* or "turn in the air" in French is when a dancer jumps straight upward and completes one full turn in the air. A double or triple *tour en l'air* is when the dancer completes two or three full turns in the air.

Armenian diaspora communities—positioning it as the primary expressor of Armenian dance globally. While my analysis stems from over twelve years of ethnographic observations, interviews, and archival research in both Yerevan and Los Angeles, this chapter pays particular attention to two premiere Armenia-based *bemakan par* entities: The Tatul Altunyan Ensemble and the Yerevan State Choreographic College. Founded in 1938, The Altunyan Ensemble was one of the first dance ensembles in Soviet Armenia to perform in the *bemakan par* idiom and has played an important role in the representation of *bemakan par* as an authentic yet "elevated" expressor of Armenian traditionalism. The Yerevan State Choreographic College, founded in 1924, initially began as a small dance studio and is now the foremost dance school in Armenia. Today, the College is the most prominent dance training *and* dance teacher training institution in *bemakan par* and classical ballet with graduates dancing in state dance ensembles, teaching in village communities across the country, and even dancing and teaching internationally.

In complicating the singular notion of "Armenian dance," a limited scope often granted to non-Western movement practices, I identify *bemakan par* as a distinct genre that bears a "systematic collection of gestures, which are codified, repeatable, and transmissible," or in other words, a technique (Pouillaude 2017, 254). Following Frédéric Pouillaude's conception of technique, *bemakan par* constructs a "whole field of 'ways of doing' or 'ways of being'" that goes beyond poses or steps and gives "movement a specificity independently of, or alongside, its particular vocabulary" (255). These "corporeal regimes," according to Pouillaude, are established and transmitted during the training process (255). Dance scholar Susan Foster theorizes how techniques within a given aesthetic vision generate values that construct not only the dancer's body but also the body's relationship to the self and to the community (Foster 1997, 253). Foster writes, "the daily practical participation of a body in any of these disciplines makes

of it a body-of-ideas" (236). In other words, the concept of the body alludes to a socially constructed figure that both contains and reproduces the values, attitudes, tastes, and emotions that are cultivated by a particular training regime. The repetitious, physical routines embedded in practice settings create meaning and are important, yet often overlooked, spaces for identity construction. In this chapter, I seek to articulate the ideal Armenian dancing body that is cultivated by *bemakan par*, and how and what kind knowledge is being transferred between dancing bodies.

Bemakan Par Technique

As an exclusively concert dance form, *bemakan par* is best understood by considering the following core principles: 1) precision; 2) weightlessness and elevation; and 3) expansion and elongation. While these principles define the genre and apply to all practitioners, *bemakan par* is also a decidedly gendered form characterized by a dual technique that trains male and female bodies differently. Ideal female bodies carry a demure and delicate essence. The movement qualities of their poised arms are curved and fluid as they exude grace and elegance; their feet, usually concealed by long dresses, shuffle quietly as their bodies seem to float effortlessly across the stage. Conversely, ideal male bodies display vigor and strength. Their movements are characterized by rapid footwork decorated with loud vocal interjections and high leaps and jumps that land in thunderous foot to floor collisions; their arms and legs create angular lines and sharp edges that extend outward into space as they produce a spectacle of speed and acrobatics. This divergence in technique for female and male dancers is also mirrored in the musical accompaniment that corresponds to the gendered dancing bodies, with slow-tempo, tranquil

softness during all-female pieces, and fast-paced, boisterous intensity during all-male or mixed gender choreographies.

Despite this duality, the basis for *bemakan par* technique for all dancers begins with an impeccable *ketsvatsk*. An Armenian term which translates to posture, body type or carriage of the body. In the context of *bemakan par*, the ideal *ketsvatsk* is an austere, upright posture and an outward rotation of the hips, knees, and feet—also known as turn out. All bodily positions and movements emerge from an erect spine, pulled up torso, and open hip and foot placement. Emanating outward from the body's central axis, arms and legs are precisely choreographed to create imagined lines in space, featuring geometric angles (for men) and curvaceous arcs (for women). There are strict requirements for an ideal *bemakan par* physique, including being thin, tall, and long-limbed with an already impeccable *ketsvatsk,* or at the very least the potential for cultivating one. As dancers weave in and out of variegated geometric shapes and formations, their bodies draw lines and patterns on the floor with the utmost precision. Furthermore, the *bemakan par* body attends to a primarily frontal orientation, one that anticipates the gaze of a seated audience in a proscenium style theatre. Movement sequences are based on exact, predetermined choreographies that correspond, often predictably, to melodic patterns in the music that are usually—if not exclusively—for the purpose of staged presentations.

Producing Balletic Visuals in Bemakan Par

As the first dance ensemble in Soviet Armenia to perform in this idiom, the Altunyan Ensemble has played an important role in the representation of *bemakan par* as an authentic yet "elevated" expressor of Armenian traditionalism since 1938. To this day, performances include a live Armenian folk instrument where musicians—along with dancers—wear regional Caucasus-

style costumes, both of which establish visual and audible markers of Armenian "spice" that help to corroborate authenticity. When I attended a rehearsal session in July 2019 at the Ensemble's headquarters[54] in downtown Yerevan, singers and musicians were practicing in the building's in-house theatre, while dancers rehearsed in a separate dance studio equipped with mirrors, ballet barres, and a grand piano. Watching the dancers enter the studio, they all walked with turn out—an essential technique of the body gleaned from classical ballet—by torquing their hips and legs outward. The purpose of turn out, a learned rotational flexibility of the hip joint that is disciplined into the body most effectively at an early age, is to ensure that dancers can safely achieve high leg extensions and other bodily ideals of balletic comportment. As an actual muscular adaptation that takes time and years of training to cultivate, it is evident that *bemakan par* measures an ideal Armenian dancing body against a ballet-oriented, Eurocentric one.

Male and female dancers executed various choreographic sequences that looked like an exact visual depiction of the music. Cohen Bull, in her analysis of ballet, explains how choreographic patterns in ballet often depict "a graphic realization of what is being heard" (1997, 274). Similarly, the movements of the *bemakan par* dancers were visually synchronized with the piano melody, as meticulous adjustments were made to match a change in mood or rhythm. As I watched this choreography unfold, I took note of two highly obscured citations of motifs from vernacular dances buried beneath ballet technique: one referenced the Armenian dance-song *mayroke* from the Taron region of historic Armenia, and the other, a shared dance among Armenians, Assyrians, and Kurds from the Urmia region in Northwestern Iran called *sheikhani* (also known by Armenians as *ishkhanats par*). Each of these vernacular dances has a repetitive sequence consisting of grounded, earth-bound movements that embody the rhythmic structure of

[54] The headquarters located on Sayat-Nova Ave. 15 is officially named *Khmbergayin Arvesti Tun* or "Choral Art House" and is approximately 300 meters from the Yerevan Opera Theatre.

the music. To execute these dances, dancers move together in one large circle, a semi-circle, or a straight line and they must connect to one another by holding little fingers or clasping their hands together while dancing together shoulder-to-shoulder. In its vernacular syntax, *mayroke* and *sheikhani* do not abide by a strict frontal orientation, as the leader takes the line around in a circle. If it were to be performed on a proscenium stage, for example, the audience would be looking at the dancers' backs for a significant period of time—until the line were to wrap around for another brief frontal view. The motif citations that I observed at the rehearsal, however, were abstracted and difficult to make out as they did not reflect the above-mentioned aesthetics. Executing highly balletic movements, the dancers leapt in the air with heels kicked up high and back, their bodies weightless and disconnected from one another. Rather than embodying the rhythm, dancers engaged in highly predictable and highly choreographed depictions of the melodic structure. Their hands flared and whipping around in rapid succession in an abstracted and exaggerated imitation of otherwise subtle and heavy arm movements, and in one instance male dancers were twirling female dancers around in pairs. Given that their arms were almost always fully extended in *port de bras,* the dancers were not connected should-to-shoulder and frequently disconnected from one another, demonstrating the priority on visual design and ballet technique in *bemakan par.*

Collapsing fragments from two geographically distinct vernacular forms—in this case *mayroke* and *sheikhani*— into a single balletic routine of lines and shapes overwrites their regional and technical specificities, turning them into superficial, ornamental citations. It is no coincidence that a routine activity of ballet technique is to display mastery over foreign forms, encouraging instructors to docilize "regional styles and assimilate them into a single repertoire" (Foster 2011, 25). Sprinkled onto the ever-shifting pattern of bodies and buoyant limbs, these

abstracted motifs from two entirely different dance forms were transmuted into a homogenous, decorative element. This appropriative process not only distorts and homogenizes their respective cultural, kinesthetic, and historical features, but also further upholds the notion that ballet—via *bemakan par*—is a universal language, uncontaminated by culture that can serve as a civilizing filter for the staging of any dance practice. Thus, through *bemakan par,* ballet is mapped onto "Armenian dance" in such a way that obscures cultural and historical specificity and distorts its aesthetic orientations.

According to dance scholar Cynthia Jean Cohen Bull, ballet, "while attending to the feet and the flow of movement, emphasizes sight as the primary process of artistic conception, perception, and kinesthetic awareness" (Cohen Bull 272). More specifically, ballet technique produces the visual appearance of perfect geometric patterns, linear precision, uprightness, and weightlessness of the body. Consequently, the visual appearance of the lines and silhouette of a dancer's body can be more important than technical skill or dancing itself. Cohen Bull writes:

> Students who do not possess a 'good line,' that is, a slender, long-limbed body which can form geometrically proportional shapes, know that they will never be successful performers and are told so by teachers and administrators of professional schools. They do not 'have the body' (272).

Acute attention to visual design and to the right "ballet body" is also the case in *bemakan par*. I am reminded of an interview I conducted with Hovhannes Divanyan, a student turned ballet master and later Artistic Director of the Yerevan State Choreographic College. While speaking with Divanyan in Yerevan at his office at the College in July 2019, he emphasizes the importance of a dancer's "correct" *ketsvatsk,* the Armenian term for a specifically balletic posture, body type or carriage of the body. He remarked:

> When you go to a performance ensemble or ballet performance and someone comes onto the stage, what do you first look at as the audience member? Their *ketsvatsk.* This one is short, that one is fat, this one has a big head, their feet are big, their toes are not pointed. That is [what I mean by] the *ketsvatsk.* If that isn't there, the dance is uninteresting. Only later do you look at

> how they're dancing, but the first thing must be the *ketsvatsk* as it is also how we conduct our admissions [to the college] (2019, Yerevan).

In consonance with the long lineage of *bemakan par* elites like Divanyan, this balletic carriage or posture is paramount to how a dancer is perceived on stage, and by extension to their success as a *bemakan par* dancer. Accordingly, the Altunyan Ensemble rehearsal was filled to the brim with balletic exercises, deep stretching, and other warm-ups meant to cultivate this perfected visual design. Dancers walked gracefully or ran on the balls of their feet from one pattern to another, their bodies lifted high off the ground, and their shapely, slightly curved arms stretched out buoyantly in a perpendicular formation. The choreographies were rife with extended limbs and pointed toes, and a *ketsvatsk* (an upright posture) made up of a precise organization of bodily appendages radiating out from their centers.

Given that *bemakan par* is filtered through a Soviet-mediated balletic encounter, the "ideal technical specimen" in *bemakan par* is identical to the ideal dancing body in classical ballet: a long-limbed, flexible, graceful body that is of the "right" shape and size, upholds geometric precision, and displays an impeccable external line (Gottschild 2005, 92). Conversely, in drawing from my own dance practice and participant observation, dancing bodies in the Armenian vernacular form bear down to the ground as they press their weight over their knees, often performing with curved spines and hunched shoulders. As *bemakan par* elites and practitioners seek to tone young muscles to achieve an upright and austere posture, the balletic erect spine "corrects" the "backward" and "unenlightened" hunched spine, a revised standard for dancing Armenian bodies that is in direct opposition to vernacular sensibilities. Thus, despite its popular trademark as a distinctly "ancient" and "traditional" Armenian national form, *bemakan par* technique paradoxically cultivates an ideal Armenian dancing body that is submerged by balletic comportment and syntax. As discussed in Chapter 1, Sovietization inculcated a

hierarchical conception of modernity that marked Russians as superior and Armenians as "natives" needing civilizing. Indeed, ballet was a medium through which Armenians themselves would "develop" and "refine" their own heritage under the confines of Soviet expression. Reflective of the paradoxical nature of Soviet nationality policy, *bemakan par* practitioners and elites marginalized vernacular aesthetics as inferior to balletic ones while simultaneously constructing *bemakan par* as an emblem of Armenian national identity. As a training regime, *bemakan par* is embedded in a characteristically Soviet top-down approach to national identification, one that reifies Soviet and European dominance over Armenian heritage. This hierarchical world view informs "ways of doing and being" in the world as it circulates within Armenian dance studios, as it is transferred from dancing bodies to audience members during performances, and as it produces and reproduces notions of an "authentic" Armenian dancing body, one that is buttressed by the very disparagement of vernacular Armenian aesthetics.

Mapping Balletic Hierarchy onto Armenianness

According to *bemakan par* cultural elites, ballet-trained bodies are the perfect means for refining "Armenian dance." This is made most clear through the reverence of ballet masters turned *bemakan par* choreographers. There are several valorized ballet masters, most of whom received classical ballet training at Leningrad State Choreographic School (now called the Mariinsky Ballet) in Soviet Russia. One important ballet dancer, choreographer and ballet master is Azat Gharibyan, who is known for his role as lead ballet master for *Pari Petakan Ansambl* (State Dance Ensemble of Armenia) in 1962 and later the Tatul Altunyan Ensemble from 1963-1983. He also founded the *bemakan par* department[55] at the Choreographic College and

[55] The college consists of three departments: classical ballet, *bemakan par*, and dance teaching/training. Details concerning these pedagogical divisions will be discussed later.

instituted and chaired the "Choreographic Pedagogy" department at the Yerevan State Pedagogical University in 1976 ("*Kulturayi Fakultet"* [Cultural Faculty]). Throughout his illustrious career, he founded several additional *bemakan par* ensembles and dance schools and was also considered to be a dance ethnographer as he visited Armenian villages, notated dances, and from these created fixed single-author choreographies. As ballet masters like Gharibyan and others encountered vernacular dance forms, their balleticized bodies filtered out vernacular aesthetics to make room for balletic ones in their highly choreographed stage arrangements. Grounded, and earth-bound movements were rendered illegible by their pointed toes, extended arms and legs, and turned-out hips. They collected and promptly assimilated vernacular dances into balletic notions of visual design and spatial precision. The result of this filtration process became a series of balletic choreographies peppered with extractive symbols of Armenianness. These symbolic markers include the use of Armenian traditional instruments, text from modern Armenian poetry, melodies from Armenian classical music compositions, Armenian rug patterns adorned onto costumes, Armenian terms that bear national significance as titles for single-author choreographies, and various admixtures of geographically diverse vernacular motifs and movement vocabularies, the traces of which have become sprinkled throughout a codified performance repertory. Thus, vernacular dance technique continues to be marginalized, viewed as inferior and given a "new color and shine"[56] (AR TV, n.d.) by being written over, "elevated," and meticulously choreographed for the stage by *bemakan* ballet masters.

Furthermore, after observing the highly disciplined Altunyan Ensemble dance rehearsal, I was able to speak briefly with instructor and Ballet Master, Hovhannes Khachikyan. Khachikyan was not only a student of Azat Gharibyan's, but also helped him successfully open the *bemakan*

[56] These are the words of *bemakan par* ensemble director, choreographer, and academic Karen Gevorkyan who in an interview speaks of the process of "staging" (essentially balleticizing) Armenian dances.

par department at the Choreographic College in 1957. During my interview, I asked Khachikyan about his opinions on the dance landscape in Armenia, specifically on *azgagrakan par*, which diverges significantly from *bemakan par*. Seen at open air dance gatherings in Yerevan *and* on the proscenium stage, *azgagrakan par* is an increasingly popular idiom that consciously integrates vernacular aesthetics into contemporary practice and performance. When asked about his opinion of this form and particularly of the outdoor public dance events, Khachikyan commented:

> [Dance] mus be classical, or it will not be looked at. Concert dance is for the stage. [Those dances] will not be looked at; they are dances for the grass. In *kochari*[57] for instance, they do the same movement again and again, they go around and around, and then finish. It won't be looked at. In the past they danced like that. Now, times are changing (2019, Yerevan).

For *bemakan par* practitioners, filtering Armenian vernacular dances through the universal European art practice of ballet allows them to reach the pinnacle of human development. Susan Foster discusses the "perfectibility" of the body via the geometric ideals heralded in ballet technique, which confirms a path towards spiritual ascension and "progress toward human enlightenment" (1998, 57). According to Khachikyan, vernacular dances like *kochari* are too repetitive and therefore lack complexity, making them unmodern and uninteresting. Khachikyan is just one of many *bemakan par* elites and practitioners who view dance in terms of binary oppositions: traditional/modern, backward/advanced, primitive/civilized. Using his own words, one is meant for the grass, and the other is meant for the stage, and ballet is the medium through which dance becomes dance. Dancers who learn under Khachikyan and others who share his view are ultimately taught to internalize and embody an orientalist and Eurocentric binary, one

[57] A family of vernacular dances from historic Armenia, which are group line dances that are distinguishable by their combat and warrior like qualities.

that assigns vernacular dances to an "ancient," "primitive" past, and situates balletic syntax as the pathway towards modernity.

This phenomenon is certainly not unique to post-Soviet Armenia, as dance scholar Sille Kapper notes a similar line of thinking regarding balletic choreographies in Estonia. She writes how cultural elites sought to "ennoble former peasant dances [with] body alignment, turnout, extended leg lines, graceful arm movements and gravity defiance to extreme synchronicity in performance and choreographic symphonism in composition" (Kapper 2016, 99). Undergirded by balletic notions of dance and bodily comportment, *bemakan par* operates as a site of hegemonic power that conceals and marginalizes indigenous Armenian aesthetics in its very attempt to represent Armenianness. Furthermore, *bemakan par* practitioners and elites transmit a hierarchical worldview, where Armenian vernacular aesthetics are seen as inferior and unmodern compared to ballet and especially to a balletic form like *bemakan par*. Only by balleticizing the Armenian body can Armenianness be elevated to an "enlightened" and "civilized" status that is both modern and globally legible.

Bemakan Par Pedagogy

To better understand *bemakan par* as a training regime, I look to the Yerevan State Choreographic College. The primary dance training center in Armenia, the College has historically housed a *dasakan par* or "classical dance/ballet" [58] department since its founding in 1924, and only later in 1957 formed a *bemakan par* department, labeled as *haykakan joghovrdakan* or "Armenian folk." More recently a third department was opened in *pari usutsum* or "dance teaching," where students are trained to teach classical ballet and *bemakan par* as well

[58] *Dasakan par* in Armenian translates to "classical dance" and refers to ballet, specifically. The Armenified *balet* is also used to reference ballet.

as practical skills in producing choreographies and performances. Advertised primarily to rural students from various villages across Armenia, this department intends to train dancers who can "return to the regions" to teach primary school students or start amateur dance ensembles in their home communities (Markosyan n.d.).

Notably, graduates from the College comprise the majority of national *bemakan par* dancers and teachers, as it is the primary practice-based institution[59] in Armenia that trains young dancers[60] across a period of approximately three years and presents them with a diploma upon graduation. According to Armenia-based TV Company, *Shoghakat* TV, the College "is the only professional school of classical and folk dances in Armenia [and] is considered to be the smithery of the National Opera and Ballet Theatre" (*Shoghakat*TVcompany, 2018). Graduating dancers consistently perform in all the major state dance ensembles and at the Ballet and Opera Theatre, taking on leading choreographic and directorship roles as well. They also dance in ensembles and companies outside of Armenia and play a significant role in the formation and durability of diaspora-based *bemakan par* ensembles and dance schools, making the College's particular lineage of Armenian dance education a transnational phenomenon. Between these three initial branches of dance training, the College is not only responsible for institutionalizing ballet in Armenia, but also for canonizing *bemakan par* as a form of high art, and as the only "correct" way to dance and express Armenianness.

Yerevan State Choreographic College

[59] The College offers an education that is similar to an MFA (Master of Fine Arts) terminal degree which is practice-based. The Yerevan State Pedagogical University also offers a hybrid practice-based and pedagogically focused dance education; however, it is only available to high school graduates.

[60] The "classical dance" department admits fourth to fifth grade students, the "Armenian folk" department admits ninth grade students, and the "dance teaching" department admits high school graduates.

Founded in 1924, the Choreographic College started as a modest ballet studio[61] led by Vahram Aritsakesyan, an Armenian exile from present-day Erzurum, Turkey. Living in Tbilisi with his family after the Genocide, Aristakesyan was a graduate of the first ballet studio[62] in Soviet Georgia led by famous Italian ballet dancer and teacher Maria Perini (Markosyan).[63] He later became a soloist of the Tbilisi State Ballet and was a well-known ballet master in the region. Upon relocating to Soviet Armenia, he was invited to open and direct the country's first state dance studio, now the Choreographic College. According to Karen Gevorkyan, a renowned *bemakan par* ensemble director, choreographer, and academic,[64] Aristakesyan was a pioneer in the staging of "ancient [Armenian] dance samples'' by giving them a "new color and shine" for the stage (AR TV, n.d.). [65] Mediated through his classical ballet training, Aristakesyan collected and notated Armenian vernacular dances, "developing" and "refining" them for stage presentations. From the Choreographic College's inception, classical ballet was central to the

[61] The College's original name was the "*pararvesti petakan studya"* or "State Dance Art Studio" (Markosyan).

[62] This small, private ballet studio also became the State Ballet School of Opera and Ballet Theatre in Georgia.

[63] Hasmik Markosyan is the director of the Choreographic College and wrote a detailed history on the College's website, a source I cite often in this chapter.

[64] Karen Gevorkyan is the lead choreographer and director of BERT, a *bemakan par* ensemble based in Armenia; is Chair of and Associate Professor within the "Dance Art" Department at the Armenian State Pedagogical University located in Yerevan; and is the President of the Armenian Union of Dance Artists and Scholars.

[65] Aristakesyan's impact on the dance landscape in Armenia is immense. An entire section could be dedicated to his contributions. To elaborate just briefly, in 1925—shortly after the studio was founded—he formed the first state folk dance ensemble and won prestigious awards at the 1928 Soviet All-Union Spartakiad sport and folk dancing competition in Moscow and at the Tbilisi Olympiad in 1934. One year after forming the state folk ensemble, he choreographed and staged the first classical ballet performance in Armenia in 1926[65] (*Jamadrutyun*, 2020*).* Over the next few decades, Aristakesyan would travel across Armenian village communities looking for and notating dances. In the village of Ashnak in the Talin region of Armenia, he finds an already existing ensemble made up of primarily displaced Sasuntsi Armenian Genocide survivors who have maintained their Sasuntsi dance practices. He brings them under his leadership and is said to have "developed" their dances for the stage, winning a gold and silver medal at the 6th World Youth and Student Festival in Moscow in 1957. For Ashnak Sasuntsis this victory marks an immense level of pride and validation of their dance heritage in an international Soviet arena, as told to me by Ashnak librarian Izmir Manukyan (Manukyan, 2019). For Armenia-based dance scholars, this recognition affirms the necessity and value of the "cultivation" of indigenous dance forms for the purposes of global legibility and prestige (AV Production, n.d.).

training practices of its directors and teachers and was therefore a foundational element in instituting dance education in Armenia. By extension, *bemakan par* is a continuation of this legacy of teaching and performing ballet in an "Armenian" template of presentation, one that paradoxically marks vernacular aesthetics as inferior and needing "civilizing."

Moreover, according to the College's current director Hasmik Markosyan—who wrote a detailed history on the College's website—the founding of the Yerevan State Opera and Ballet Theatre in 1933[66] marked the "unequivocal victory of classical dance" (Markosyan). Accordingly, specialists from Russia and other Soviet republics were invited to carry out this "transformation," a process that would make Armenian dancing "applicable for the ballet stage" (Markosyan). She adds how establishing the College on a "solid foundation" of classical ballet was a "historical event," after ten years of "stumbling between folklore, rhythm plastique, gymnastics, and even physical education" (Markosyan). Markosyan goes on to detail that while classical ballet was indeed part of the compulsory curriculum, "[it] was not the main subject, and served as a means of developing professional skills" (Markosyan). Already embedded in the early ideological framework of the College is the notion that ballet not only offers a system of bodily training that is both universal and professional, but also grants a "high culture" status to Armenians. In a televised interview by *Shoghakat*TV, Srbuhi Babayan who is a *bemakan par* teacher at the College in the "Armenian folk" department feels a sense of responsibility in transferring this knowledge to her students. She says, "because this is the only [dance] college in Armenia, we teach them everything: from walking, talking, and moving to responding, dancing,

[66] The late 1920s and early 1930s saw massive consolidation of Soviet power in the Soviet Republics. Indicative of Soviet nationality policy, the construction of a State Opera and Ballet Theatre was a Soviet dictate that was part of a larger "civilizing agenda." In the realm of culture, this agenda saw the implementation of ballet and opera as an opportunity to speed up the development of "backwards" non-Russian peoples to secure a modern, refined, Soviet socialist future (Hirsch 2010, 7).

and greeting. We give them everything" (*Shoghakat*TV). In the same TV segment, famous ballet master, soloist, and teacher Norayr Mehrabyan comments how the College "train[s] [students] with the *correct* art, with cultural achievement,[67] with the right behavior,[68] to be the correct complement to art" (*Shoghakat*TV). Both Babayan and Mehrabyan perfectly reveal how in *bemakan par* the ideal Armenian body is a balletically trained one, from walking and talking to dancing and speaking. This "correct" behavior generates an "enlightened," "high art" body that is both modern and has global legibility. By mapping ballet onto "Armenian dance," *bemakan par* practitioners not only naturalize and universalize ballet as a training regime but can also access the pinnacle of cultural value set forth by global Eurocentrism and Soviet cultural hegemony. At the same time, by ornamentalizing traces of obscured Armenian aesthetics, practitioners also manage to propel sentiments of national pride and cultural preservation. Thus, encapsulated in the *bemakan par* training system is an attachment to a certain presentation of Armenian identity, one that conveniently oscillates between Western Europeanness and an ambiguous Easternness.

Two Departments, One Training Modality

It was not until almost three decades after the College's inception in 1924 that a *bemakan par* department, called "Armenian folk" was established by Azat Gharibyan. Like Gharibyan, almost all *bemakan par* elites who have served as ensemble directors, artistic directors or lead choreographers have undergone extensive classical ballet training in Russia. This is a common

[67] The word used during the interview in Armenian was the Russian term *kultura* for "culture" which is used in lieu of the Armenian term *mshakuyt.* Given the context, *kultura* also connotes sentiments of cultivation, high art or high culture and cultural achievement, which explains my translation choices.

[68] *Motetsum* in Armenian directly translates to approach but given the context *motetsum* can also connote a particular behavior, practice or attitude.

theme across the *bemakan par* genre, and it continues to be relevant today as this final "Sovietized" generation of elders continues to hold leadership positions across multiple *bemakan par* institutions of learning and performance. Given their extensive training in balletic technique as well as its corresponding ways of doing and being, knowledge transfer between bodies for how to dance in the "correct" way is undoubtedly mediated by ballet. In other words, classical ballet—through Armenian dancing bodies—has undergirded the foundation, formation, and development of the State Choreographic College and by extension, the *bemakan par* genre. Paradoxically, however, the College and its elites maintain to this day the illusion that ballet is a pedagogically separate entity from what they label as "authentic Armenian folk." An interview I conducted with Divanyan in his office at the College in July 2019 illuminates some of the dominant discourses around *bemakan par* pedagogy and bodily training.

In asking Divanyan to explain the difference between the two major departments at the College, ballet ("classical") and *bemakan par* ("Armenian folk"), I received a rather paradoxical response. Divanyan begins by clarifying that the classical department is essentially ballet and is therefore "completely different" from the Armenian folk department, which has a training foundation in authentic folk dance[69] (Divanyan, 2019). Shortly after, he contradicts himself by asserting that it is incorrect to say that the two departments are completely different, given that students in the folk section take courses in ballet and "must pass classical [dance training]" (Divanyan). He adds:

> This is because we consider the foundation [of all dance] to be classical dance. … Classical dance trains the most important thing of all: the quality of one's *ketsvatsk* ["upright posture"]. Then, you can dance whatever you want: modern, Hungarian, Armenian, it doesn't matter (Divanyan).

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[69] The exact phrase Divanyan used in Armenian was "*joghovrdakan bnorosh par,*" with *joghovrdakan par* translating to "folk dance" and *bnorosh* roughly translating to "authentic." Divanyan's usage of *bnorosh* to describe folk dance is indicative of its historical usage in the early twentieth century, both globally and in Armenia, signifying folk forms as a representative "essence" of a fixed, cultural past.

According to Divanyan, balletic training and one's balletic *ketsvatsk* constitutes the baseline foundation for any dance form. Qualifying ballet as a universal and neutral bodily training system, Divanyan reinforces the commonly held idea that "all dancers must study ballet in order to acquire technical proficiency" (Novack 1993, 38). Not only does this reinforce hegemonic conceptions of dance, but it also discursively begins to map out a hierarchical understanding of dance epistemology onto *bemakan* trained bodies that prioritizes ballet over indigenous Armenian forms.

Furthermore, Divanyan asserts that the Choreographic College is not a "dance school" but rather a "dance art college," where students learn from the very beginning stages how to dance properly (Divanyan). According to Divanyan, any external dance education or experience is obsolete, as the College is concerned with cultivating dancers with "correctly placed posture so that the meat grows on [the spine] properly later" (Divanyan). He adds, "if [the students'] parents are not backwards, they will understand that" (Divanyan). In her monograph *Choreography and Narrative*, Susan Foster examines classical ballet by tracing its changing function over time and placing it in broader cultural and artistic contexts (1998). She theorizes how ballet functioned as a mechanism to reinforce social and political hierarchies, and how it subjected the body to scientific investigation and scrutiny, disciplining it according to newly established professional standards of comportment (Foster). Similarly, Divanyan project classist notions of backwardness onto lower class families, many of whom come from rural communities that have limited access to basic needs, let alone "dance art" training. Moreover, Divanyan upholds an anatomical scrutinization and disciplining of the body that reduces it to a standardized machine-like object to be manufactured and controlled (Foster). For Divanyan,

meat growing onto the spine "properly" represents a "perfectible" body, one that can only be achieved through a balletic encounter.

As evidenced by the mandatory use of ballet pedagogy for all forms of dance at the Choreographic College, the "separation" of ballet/classical from Armenian/folk is ultimately superficial. Conversely, in the case of Chinese dance and ballet in twentieth century China, scholar Emily Wilcox looks at the ways in which national dance institutions made a conscious effort to pedagogically separate the two forms (Wilcox 2019). In her monograph, *Revolutionary Bodies: Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy,* Wilcox analyses the development of a nationalized training curriculum that helped to fortify Chinese dance as a cohesive set of movements, techniques, and ideas (Wilcox). A core feature of Wilcox's argument is that ballet was not a constitutive element of "Chinese dance" expression in the People's Republic of China. Rather, she demonstrates how prior to the Cultural Revolution ballet was "othered" as a European form, a "foreign language" that could not properly express Chineseness (124). Thus, while ballet was still practiced and performed, it was separated from Chinese dance both pedagogically and institutionally and was delegitimized choreographically.

Wilcox makes the case for the overall importance of bodily training to attain the skills and sensibilities that can cultivate a definitive dance form. Based on her own ethnographic and archival research, she argues that the creation of a national curriculum in China produced a new "'dance language' that could supplant the 'foreign language' of ballet" (124). Like the Choreographic College in Armenia, dance students in China were recruited into separate programs: national/folk dance or ballet. However, in China, ballet was not a requirement for students in the Chinese national/folk dance program. Instead, students in the ballet program were required to study some Chinese dance to demonstrate that "training in Chinese dance was

universally important" (131-2). Going beyond rhetoric, this pedagogical separation encoded ballet as a foreign "Other" that, while an effective tool for physical training, was not an appropriate medium for articulating and choreographing a strong Chinese sense of "Self" according to multiple groups of Chinese dance students, artists, and critics (124).
This approach of incorporating Chinese dance into ballet, and not the other way around, prioritizes Chinese dance pedagogically, highlighting its importance as a valuable system of bodily knowledge worthy of institutional focus, even marking ballet as inferior to Chinese dance (131).

In Armenia, the preferred medium for articulating Armenianness is through ballet as evidenced through mandatory training despite the "separated" departments of "ballet" and "Armenian folk." As a result of this pedagogical structure, ballet functions as the only "correct" mode of dance and Armenian vernacular aesthetics are relegated to Orientalist ornamentations that can add an ethnic "spice" to performances. Used to corroborate authenticity, superficial integrations of Armenian ways of moving that are ultimately submerged by ballet only function to self-exoticize and reinforce the oppressive notion that that which is "traditional" is markedly inferior, fixed, devoid of creativity or complexity, globally illegible, and lacks modernity. This mode of thinking generates a need to then "elevate" the folk through a balletic encounter, an ideology imbedded into *bemakan par* practice and performance. Thus, as a training system, *bemakan par* not only produces overwhelmingly balletic bodies, but also imposes a hegemonic conception of dance, which places ballet and European forms at the top of the hierarchy while disparaging indigenous Armenian dance practices as virtually incompatible with staged or "professional" presentations.

Professionalization and the Disparagement of "Folk"

Even in a post-Soviet context, *bemakan* practitioners in Armenia continue to uphold hierarchical conceptions of dance that place ballet over all other forms, even over their own balleticized constructions of national dance. In my interview with Divanyan at the College, he appeared to be deeply troubled after speaking to the fact that there are more students enrolled in the *bemakan par* department than there are in the classical/ballet department. He expressed that:

> It is not good for us. Because in Armenia there will always be Armenian dance. If we lose classical, we cannot restore it. If we say Armenian [dance] is national, ballet is international. You will not impress many people with Armenian dance or with *kochari*. You will only impress Armenians. Our school began with ballet, and folk came in later. There are many folk dance schools, but ballet schools are infrequent (2019, Yerevan).

These sentiments were surprising. His comments represent a deep worry regarding the mastery of ballet in Armenia, as a distinctly international form that gives Armenians global visibility and cultural credibility. On the other hand, Armenian vernacular dances like *kochari* are limiting and do not fit the ideal vision for dance, which is one of spectacle and virtuosity that fits a particular Eurocentric standard in order to impress everyone but Armenians. These dances are seen as not only provincial, but also aesthetically inferior. Thus, Divanyan's dismay at the high attendance for the *bemakan par* department affirms his interest in maintaining and preserving ballet in Armenia as a signifier of civilization and professionalism.

Moreover, throughout our interview Divanyan would exalt "the [common] people" for being the "source" of *bemakan par* form. He expressed deep reverence for "the people" for their "authentic" ritual, wedding, and military dances. However, when I asked him about the outdoor public *azgagrakan* dance gatherings, Divanyan expressed finding them unbearable to watch. He comments:

> In my life I would never watch that. I'm a professional man. There's a stage for that. ... Everyone can dance however they want but I'm on the professional side. … that street dancing, they are

distorting it. It's good that the people want to dance their dances but let's not mistake it for a professional status (2019, Yerevan).

This position held by Divanyan reveals a clear hierarchical model that I argue is representative of a broader discourse upheld by *bemakan par* practitioners. Firstly, according to Divanyan, anything other than ballet or ballet-based movement is deemed unacceptable and insufficient in any performance setting. Ballet reigns supreme, even over a highly balleticized folk form like *bemakan par*. Secondly, vernacular Armenian dance aesthetics are believed to be devoid of complexity, underdeveloped, and have no business on stage—especially when it comes to representing Armenianness in an international arena. For Divanyan, balletic training is synonymous with professionalism, and is what grants a dance practice its legibility on the proscenium stage. From ballet, to *bemakan,* to vernacular—from most balletic to least balletic, from most professional to least professional—a hierarchical conception of dance is firmly planted within the *bemakan par* idiom, taught to be embodied and upheld by the dancers themselves. That "the people" are both a source of purity and shame[70] encapsulates the doubly paradoxical nature of *bemakan par*. This embodied dynamic subordinates indigenous ways of moving and reserves dancing for only highly trained balleticized bodies, all while claiming to represent authentic Armenianness.

Bemakan par, therefore, as a professionalized performance idiom claims to present authentic Armenian folk heritage while paradoxically promulgating a hegemonic, ballet-centric

[70] I draw inspiration from Cristina Rosa's theorization of *ginga* as an epistemology that exists in alterity to Eurocentric colonial systems of knowledge in her monograph *Brazilian Bodies and Their Choreographies of Identification: Swing Nation* (2015). In historicizing *ginga* from the colonial period, Rosa discusses the paradoxical "pride and shame conundrum," where *ginga* as a bodily discourse mediates histories of slavery, miscegenation, and shame (13). However, with its decentralized and multi-metered pliability that fuses blackness with gracefulness and pride, *ginga* embodies ethnocultural resistance (16). In other words, diverging from the upward mobility and linearity of western movement practices, *ginga* exists outside of colonial thought and its fixed notions of Brazilianness. Additionally, as an embodied practice, *ginga* references the millions of Africans trafficked into Brazil and such a connection to African heritage and presence in the region enacts a decolonial way of moving.

conception of Armenian dance. Pedagogically, the instructional methods and teaching modalities within the *bemakan* idiom are dominated by approaches found in the classical ballet tradition, such as acquiring machine-like precision, cultivating bodily discipline, and proliferating hierarchy, professionalism, and "high art." Moreover, according to *bemakan par* elites and practitioners, ballet's geometric and virtuosic forms are viewed as a universal language of movement, uncontaminated by culture, and synonymous with "dance" itself. Thus, as a technique and training system, *bemakan par* not only produces overwhelmingly balletic bodies, but also composes a hegemonic conception of dance that places ballet at the top of the hierarchy, while indigenous Armenian dance practices are disparaged as primitive and needing refinement through a specifically Soviet balletic encounter.

<u>CHAPTER THREE</u>
The Balletic Ram and the Wandering Crane:
A Choreographic Analysis of the Tatul Altunyan State Song and Dance Ensemble

While the cool, evening summer breeze whirls through central Yerevan, the air inside the Soviet-era theatre is heavy and damp. The audience, who have filled in almost every seat, are waiting for the performance to begin; they can be easily divided into three categories: non-Armenian tourists, Armenian tourists of the diaspora, and locals. Sitting in the orchestra section close to the stage are several large groups of primarily non-Armenian tourists, while the mezzanine and balcony holds a mixture of local and diasporic Armenians. In these upper sections, dozens of Armenian women are restlessly waving their fans to combat the stale humidity. As the theatre lights dim, the soft rustling sound of their movement becomes a permanent drone throughout the performance. The massive, heavy curtain lifts and a choir of 20 singers and 13 musicians appears behind the rising velvet cloak. Elevated on risers towards the back of the stage, the singers and musicians are stern and motionless, a sea of indistinguishable people wearing identical costumes, peering into the audience as they wait for the applause to lull.

Two men holding zurnas walk to center stage and begin playing a piercing sahari, or a long melodic introduction typical of Armenian vernacular music to gather the attention of and call in the nearby community. The zurnas are strikingly loud as the sound waves almost become visible; they seem to cut through the thick air, push through crevices between seated audience members, and reverberate off the walls. As the zurna playing comes to a halt, a loud "HEY!" is launched from a voice backstage and the two dhol players are ignited. The round timbres of their strikes are fast-paced and crisp. Within a few seconds, this rhythmic mixed-meter pattern ushers in a single file line of male dancers wearing identical bright red pants and jackets decorated

with gold-threaded embroidery. One by one they quickly sprint onto the stage, crossing the right arm in front, stretching the left arm outward to the side and back. They move individually and in rapid succession, almost mechanically, as they repeat the same jump-and-pose sequence; each landing produces a soft echo that billows from the hollow stage out into the theatre space. Within a few seconds, as the final dancer reaches the end of the newly formed line and hops into the matching position, twelve men of the same height and physic have quickly unfurled into a perfect straight line. With the last strike of the dhol they now hold an elongated and upright pose and face the audience.

After a single breath of silence, the rest of the orchestra energetically joins in, including duduks,[71] *a kamancha,*[72] *an oud,*[73] *and four kanons.*[74] *With a resounding "Ho!" each dancer simultaneously turns to the right and places his right hand on the shoulder of the dancer in front of him. Their left legs shoot up in bent positions, toes pointed, as they create multiple perfect triangles. This new choreographic combination continues in a sequence of small hops, leg extensions, lunges, short leg kicks, vertical straight-leg jumps, and abrupt turns, including a sustained over-leg leap followed by a full body twist. Arm positions fluctuate between holding shoulders, holding hands, and balletic port de bras; the dancers shoot their bodies forward or backward to add momentum to the synchronized choreography. As quickly as they form connected configurations, they immediately separate and disperse, running across the stage in a basket weave pattern with extended arms, one shooting overhead, the other outward. The*

[71] A double-reed woodwind instrument, typically made from apricot wood, that is considered to be the national instrument of Armenia.

[72] A bowed string instrument.

[73] A short-neck lute.

[74] A box zither.

movement patterns throughout this sequence rely on constant variation, yet they are also predictable as they mimic the rhythmic structure of the dhol almost precisely. The men spread out and back, creating a large semi-circle. With a resonant "Hey!" timed perfectly with a break in the music, dancers lunge toward their proximate left or right wing and shoot one arm up in the air. They hold completely still in this pose as if to usher in whoever will be appearing from behind the metallic silver curtains covering the wings.

In tandem with a reprise of the melody, this time dominated by the delicate articulation of the kanons, twelve female dancers dressed in matching red and brown floor-length gowns glide onto the stage in front of the line of male dancers. Their movement vocabulary is distinct: delicate, demure, fluid, and poised. Their lower bodies, completely concealed by their long skirts, appear to be hardly moving as more emphasis and articulation is on the carriage of their arms, gentle hip movements, and the extensions, curvatures, and positionings of their necks. While all performers are wearing matching gendered attire, the female dancers, female singers and female kanon players[75] *look especially identical to one another. While female singers and musicians wear a veil and a tag—a headdress which covers their hair completely—dancers have two long braided hair extensions draped over both shoulders, each of them adorned with a bright red flower close to the crown of their heads. The female dancers exude refinement and elegance, they are connected by the hands in two opposing lines; swaying left and right, their skirts undulate with each small skip, kick, and weight shift. They delicately bow to the audience,*

[75] It is important to note that Armenia traditional instruments are primarily played by men, which has historically been the case for the *kanon* as well. This is also true in neighboring regions from Anatolia to the Levant. In Armenia in the 1950s, however, the *kanon* became a popular and "acceptable" instrument for women and is now considered to be an exclusively "female" instrument. This shift is credited to the pioneering Armenian *kanon* player Angela Atabekyan, who was a student of famous composer and *kanon* player Khachatur Avetisyan, who will be discussed in the *Krunkner* section of my analysis (*Kanonn Im Kyankn Eh. Anjela Atabekyan*, 2017). Now, almost all *kanon* players in Armenia are women, which aids in the performance of "ideal femaleness" in all-female *bemakan par* choreographies where the *kanon* is the primary accompanying instrument.

their chins touching their necks as they bend their knees, motioning with their hands across the stage to the left, then to the right as the male dancers remain in a line behind them, shaking their shoulders, leaning their bodies forward and back, forward and back…

In June of 2019, I attended an evening-length concert presented by The Tatul Altunyan State Song and Dance Ensemble at the Yerevan Opera Theatre in Armenia. Scheduled annually at the height of Armenia's summer tourist season, these concerts claim to present the "best manifestation of Armenian folk culture."[76] With its 81 year history, as stated by the master of ceremonies during his introductory remarks, the ensemble is expertly qualified to present "traditional song and dance, national instruments, and colorful costumes to the world."[77] Through a close choreographic analysis of two dances from this concert—the all-male *kochari* choreography and the all-female *Krunkner* choreography—this chapter comments on the contours of *bemakan par* performance and seeks to analyze the particular vision of Armenian identity that the genre presents on stage.[78] In building on historicizations of Armenian identity formation introduced in Chapter One, and on the core features of *bemakan par* technique and pedagogy explored in Chapter Two, I assert how *bemakan par* performs a paradoxical vision of Armenianness on the concert stage.

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[76] The master of ceremonies spoke in Armenian first and then translated each sentence into English, but these were never complete translations as many sentiments and statements were only expressed in Armenian. This quote was only read in Armenian as follows «Ասելը թե հայ ժողովրդի մշակույթն իր լավագույն դրսևորումով:» *Hamerg [Concert].* Armenian State Honored Ensemble of Dance and Song Named After Tatul Altunyan. Directed by Jirayr Altunyan and Grikor Voskanyan, Choreographed by Hovannes Khachikyan. Aram Khachaturian Concert Hall, Yerevan Opera Theatre, Armenia. June 23, 2019.

[77] *Hamerg [Concert]*. 2019.

[78] While *bemakan par* performances do include mixed-gender choreographies, I chose to focus on one all-female choreography and one all-male choreography to highlight the ways in which *bemakan* performances typecast heteronormative gender ideals.

Kochari: Dancing the Ram

After the master of ceremony introduces the next all-male dance, the "traditional dance kochari",[79] *the male zurna and dhol players take in a collective breath and begin playing with a fierce, piercing intensity. A soloist leaps out onto the proscenium stage as he makes his way towards the center. He runs with fully extended arms and legs as he soars into a high jump, his leg is in a balletic retiré position (meaning "withdrawn" in French), where one leg bends at 90 degrees as the foot points inward at the knee. He runs downstage and gestures to the audience waving his tashkinak—or handkerchief, a common prop in Armenian dance traditions—in a circle above his head. He spins around once more, twirling the tashkinak, and with a loud "snap!" of the dhol, two diagonal lines of male dancers begin to file in from both left and right wings. They are spread out with arms extended as they travel towards center stage, they grasp one another by the shoulders as they jump vertically and to the side with extended leg lifts.*

While this is all happening, I recall the preceding all-female choreography with its soft timbres and quiet instrumentation and how the whispering soft vocals from the female singers caressingly accompanied the light and airy dancing bodies that were floating across the stage. Creating a striking visual and aural contrast, the now exclusively male bodies on stage were cause for excitement. Their sharp, fast-paced movements were ushered in by the blaring, high-pitched sounds produced by the zurnas as well as the uninterrupted strikes from the dhol players that sent thunderous vibrations into the theatre. By now, the two lines of male dancers have joined the frozen, posing soloist. The choreography immediately transitions to a sequence of high kicks to the back and to the front; abrupt pivots left and right; exaggerated zspanaks; and quick rearrangements into new formations and configurations such as straight lines that face the

[79] *Hamerg [Concert]*. 2019.

front, face each other, and are stacked in staggered rows. Each of these different arrangements are governed by a strictly balletic lexicon; their movements specifically choreographed to articulate and highlight accent patterns of the dominant melody. As dancers independently transition from configuration to configuration, their arms are always in a masculinized balletic port de bras where one arm shoots up, and the other is on the hip or straight out to the side. The overall posture is an elevated one: toes point, bodies lift upward, limbs create straight or curved lines as they extend outward into space.

Figure 8: Male dancers of the Altunyan Ensemble performing "traditional *kochari"* at the Yerevan Opera Theatre in Armenia. Still from video recorded by author. June 23, 2019.

Contextualizing the Ram

Kochari is the most widespread and well-known category of Armenian vernacular dances. It is indigenous to the Armenian highlands, also known as the Armenian plateau, which is the homeland of the Armenian people. Inscribed in the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage list since 2017, *kochari* is both the most represented dance family within Armenian vernacular

dances and the best preserved by both heritage dance communities as well as *azgagrakan* ensembles. In fact, highly choreographed versions of *kochari* have also become important staples in *bemakan par* performances. Early twentieth-century Soviet Armenian ethnographer, scholar, and transcriber of traditional Armenian dances, Srbuhi Lisitsyan, studied and wrote about the *kochari* dance family in her foundational text on Armenian dances, *Hay Joghovrdi Hinavurts Pareruh yev Taterakan Nerkayutsumner* [*The Ancient Dances and Theatrical Performances of the Armenian People*], which was published in 1958. In it she traces the origins of *kochari* to ancient pagan traditions of totemism and animal reverence and worship, particularly to that of the ram (Lisitsyan 1958, 452). According to Lisitsyan, the Armenian word *khoy* or *ghoch* both mean "ram," and adding suffixes *er* and *i* make the word plural and possessive. So *khoyeri,* or *ghocheri*—which she asserts later became *kochari*[80]—can be translated to "dance of the rams."[81]

Beyond etymology, Lisitsyan also claims that the cult of the ram is evidenced in *kochari* choreographically (454). She writes how the dance movements imitate and embody the ram: from their battling charges, head butts, runs, poses, and jumps, which also distinguishes *kochari* as having a combat, warrior-like quality (454). She adds that dancers would imagine themselves as a part ram/part human as they perform the ram's character (454, 455). Animal imitations and movements were common in Armenian ritual dances, as mimicry within the cult of animal worship was believed to enact good fortune and fertility (456). As a "dance family" rather than a

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[80] It is interesting to note that Azerbaijanis, Kurds, and Pontic Greeks also make claims to dances with names that are cognates of the Armenian "*kochari,*" but make different etymological claims, do not index the ram, and use different movement vocabularies.

[81] While these etymological arguments are used to assert essential truths regarding national origin and antiquity, they are considered specious by many Armenian linguists and historians. However, it is noteworthy that Lisitsyan's assertions are widely accepted across the dance landscape in Armenia, by both *bemakan* and *azgagrakan* practitioners. My purpose here is not to critique these claims necessarily, but to integrate them into my analyses to better understand how dance practices and training regimes construct and reinforce particular presentations of national and cultural identity.

single dance, *kochari* has multiple regional variations, each bearing the name of the province or city from which it is said to originate, including: *Alashkerti kochari, Aparani kochari, Bulanukhi kochari, Hamsheni kochari, Karno kochari, Msho kochari, Musa leran kochari, Sasna kochari, Sgherdi kochari, Vana kochari,* and others.[82] There are said to be between 20-50 *kochari* variations that are not only geographically diverse, but also vary in melodic phrasing and movement vocabularies.

Despite these regional distinctions, *kochari* as a dance family adheres to a general set of common values and choreographic choices that fall within the aesthetic principles of Armenian vernacular dances. These include an emphasis on groundedness, communality and unity, configurations that maintain connected circles or straight lines, as well as the foundational dance technique known as *zspanak* ("knee spring"), or repeated knee flexions. In addition to these qualities, most *kochari* dances variations include tight shoulder-to-shoulder bodily arrangements, strong grasping of hands or waists, single and double-foot stomps, and the incorporation of *shoror*, or "sway," a rhythmic sequence of repetitive movements and weight transfers that alternate in patterned sets of 2's and 3's.[83] Another important *kochari*-specific technique is what is called *khoyaharel,* which means "to hit hard from the front," which is more pronounced in some *kochari* variants over others. A combination of the words *khoy* for "ram" and *harvatsel* for "strike," *khoyaharel* also alludes to a military or artillery strike that hits the target "sharply" and "with a fast speed" (*Bararan* Online Armenian Dictionary). In Lisitsyan's text, she uses

[82] The majority of these cities and provinces are located in the Armenian highlands, where various *kochari* dances are believed to have flourished.

[83] For example, the *shoror* in *msho khr,* which is a stationary line dance, consists of *zspanaks* that are articulated in a pattern of 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2. While the 1-2-3 pattern is quicker and consists of smaller *zspanaks,* the last 1-2 is deeper and slower. Weight transfers alter from right to left, with some patterns having one, two, or three *zspanaks* on left or right side before switching over. The meter of the dance itself is in 6, and it fits itself into the musical meters of *msho khr* which are usually in 4.

pozaharel synonymously, which means “to strike with the horns” from the words *poz* for “horn” and *harvatsel* for “strike” (Ibid). Choreographically, it is a clear mimetic expression of the strike or “headbutt” of battling rams: aiming straight ahead, dancers lift a single leg off of the ground, as if to rear up on hind legs, lower their heads and strike forward, as if to enact an injurious head-first attack onto their opponent.

The martial allusions in *kochari* dances hold a particular significance for both heritage dancers and *azgagrakan* practitioners who maintain the vernacular aesthetic. For heritage dancers, specifically within the Sasuntsi community, dances like *sasna kochari, mayroke*, and *yarkhushta* are embodied connections to Western Armenia,[84] the lands their parents, grandparents or great grandparents were exiled from. In a conversation I had with Varik Shekikyan, a Sasuntsi musician and dancer whose family now lives in the village of Ashnak[85] in Armenia, he explained how dancing functions as a metaphor: that “step by step, we [exiled Armenians] will eventually return to our homeland” (Shekikyan, 2019). This imagery generates potent sentiments of returning to and regaining lost territories that are corporeally heightened by the martial elements imbedded in dances like *kochari*. Similarly, Henzel Yeghiazaryan—a Sasuntsi elder of Nerkin Bazmaberd (another village made up of primarily exilic Sasuntsi families)—speaks of the founding of his village and the role of dance as an important lifeway for his community:

> The village was established by heroic people from Western Armenia [historic Armenia] who survived wars and rivers of death, who passed hills, canyons, and caves to get here [Nerkin Bazmaberd]. The elders from Western Armenia brought with them their traditions, habits, and ways of life, which are preserved through to today [,] They brought everything. They brought their weddings and funerals, even the way they walk, they brought with them. [,] When a child is

[84] “Western Armenia” or *arevmtyan Hayastan* is the term many Armenians use to describe historic Armenia, which is currently the eastern part of Turkey and to the west of modern-day Armenia.

[85] Ashnak is but one of many villages in Armenia founded by Sasuntsi exiles. Many of these villages including Ashnak maintain dance heritage through formal instruction for youth and through the everyday, with dance being an integral part to various ceremonies such as weddings, christenings, and other occasions.

> born, they are a weapon, a warrior. Girl or boy, it doesn't matter. They are tomorrow's warriors, tomorrow's soldiers. We don't see a difference. That child's first words are in *our* dialect; and as soon as the child can walk just a little, they must dance. But it must be our dances, danced our way (saghsara, 2020).

For both Shekikyan and Yeghiazaryan, dance not only functions as a survival strategy but also affirms a particular corporeality rooted in the collective memory of a lost homeland. Martial sentiments of resistance and combat are potent elements of Sasuntsi identification. Similarly, the *azgagrakan* community rearticulates these sentiments in both public gatherings and private dance rehearsals, that learning and dancing vernacular Armenian dances will grant them the cultural strength and ability to deal with the vast contemporary issues and threats they face: everything from interpersonal conflicts and local government exploitation, to Russian neocolonial endeavors and oncoming military aggression from neighboring Turkic states.[86] It is not surprising then that many of these dance groups were quick to form independent military units during the recent 2020 Artsakh War where they volunteered to fight on the front lines. Thus, dances like *kochari,* in mirroring the act of combat, generate sentiments of resistance and survival and function as an embodied response to the historical and continued violence faced by Armenians.

The Balletic Ram

The movements and aesthetic values expressed in Tatul Altunyan Ensemble's presentation of *kochari* are primarily balletic and therefore marginalize vernacular *kochari* and native Armenian aesthetics, more broadly. Across *bemakan par* performances, an ideal body is

[86] After a decade of participant-observation within the *azgagrakan* dance community in Armenia, I have observed comments made about how dance can improve oneself as a person on multiple occasions and it has been used as a modality for encouraging cultural nationalist and patriotic sentiments for youth. I also witnessed the participation of *azgagrakan* dancers in various protest activities, such as the resistance against the rise in public transportation costs in 2013, and later in the 2015 mass protests against the rise in electricity prices imposed by a Russian-based company.

attuned to the balletic qualities of turn out as well as the linear and upward extension and expansion of the spine and limbs. In a performance setting, *bemakan par* choreographies demand near perfect unison and include a dynamic array of group configurations and geometric formations as well as countless transitions and variations in movement vocabularies that depict the melody (almost predictably). There is almost always a hierarchical structure of a soloist and his or her *corps de ballet*[87] where dancing is highly gendered, with expressions of strength and advanced acrobatic reserved for men, and soft, supple gracefulness reserved for women. Conversely, Armenian vernacular dances feature earthbound movements with relaxed limbs and upper bodies; their uninterrupted physical contact transmit a constant energetic exchange between dancers either via the hands or arms. Dancers execute repetitive steps and gestures that maintain consistent and meditative rhythmic cycles of movement. In vernacular dances there is no emphasize on a principal dancer who is supported by a *corps* nor does the technique diverge according to the gender of the dancers;[88] instead the dancing group abides by a more communitarian approach and has a group-designated *paraglukh* (or "dance head")[89] who leads the line or semi-circle through the dance.

Elevated versus earthbound, extended versus relaxed, endless configurations versus repetitive cycles—these qualities are, to use Emily Wilcox's words, "kinetically incompatible" and are representative of two techniques that would be nearly impossible to combine without compromising the aesthetics of either (Wilcox 2019, 137-8). While, indeed, *bemakan par*

[87] *Corps de ballet* in French directly translates to "body of the ballet," and is a term used in classical ballet to indicate those who are not soloists, but the large group of dancers who are at the bottom of the dance company hierarchy.

[88] While there are indeed dances for men and dances for women such as certain male-only martial dances or other female-only ritual dances, the core principles of the technique for prescribing *how* to move does not change.

[89] There are other terms for this role including *parkash* which translates to "dance puller" in Armenian, and *parbash* which is a combination of the Armenian "par" for dance with the Turkish "bash" for head.

practitioners have managed to combine some elements of Armenian aesthetics into their performances, I argue that the domination of balletic syntax compromises any expression of Armenian technique. In other words, because this representation of *kochari* reflects a strict adherence to ballet technique and movement principles, the (albeit extractive) elements of Armenian aesthetics are reduced to mere decorative features: from the traditional instruments and the way the dancers were holding onto one another by the waist, to the use of the *tashkinak* and vocal interjections. As a globally hegemonic form, ballet is considered to be "the most refined and cultivated version of bodily expression to be found on earth" (Foster 1998, 211), and for a state-sanctioned professional ensemble that aims to represent the Armenian nation to the world, ballet is seen as a universal, modernizing, and civilizing filter for expressing ideal Armenianness on stage. Given that *bemakan par* discourse asserts that native Armenian ways of moving need civilizing and are "unfit" for staged presentations, select Armenian elements add an ethnic "spice" to performances in order to corroborate authenticity and to mark national difference. This phenomenon of auto-exoticization, or the process by which the colonized uses the lens of the colonizer to represent themselves to themselves (Reed 1998, 515; Savigliano 1995), is expertly used by *bemakan par* elites and performed by its practitioners. By submerging Armenian vernacular technique beneath a balletic one, and by reducing Armenianness to orientalist ornamentations, *bemakan par* performances reify notions of Armenian inferiority and primitiveness that were imposed upon them during Soviet rule. And yet, in post-Soviet context, Armenians continue to subscribe and perform this same auto-exoticized version of themselves, one that must be civilized and orientalized in order to be globally legible. Therefore, in constructing a highly choreographed representation of *kochari* that is superseded by balletic

postures and comportment and is rife with haphazard amalgams of vernacular movement vocabularies, any potential for the expression of vernacular *kochari* technique is obscured.

The Homogenization of Kochari

This marginalization of *kochari* is also evident in the way its diversity as a dance family that is representative of distinct regional variations is flattened and erased. The ensemble's presentation of *kochari* utilizes somewhat identifiable movements and choreographic motifs drawn from three regional *kochari* variations: *Bulanukhi kochari*, *Vana kochari*, and *Alashkerti kochari.* All three dances distinctly showcase the *khoyaharel* technique and each have become individually popularized in the *azgagrakan* dance revival community. However, this *bemakan* choreography has plucked varying elements from each *kochari,* distorted them via a balletic lexicon, and reduced them to a single choreography bearing the name "traditional *kochari.*"

Overall, the movements performed by the Altunyan Ensemble were large, exaggerated, and elevated—qualities contradictory to the value systems and aesthetic principles of the vernacular *kochari* dances, which express sentiments of strength and control by way of subtle movement articulations. The movement vocabularies present in this homogenous *kochari* were not much different from what was seen in other non-*kochari bemakan* choreographies. *The dancers pose with their arms fully extended, at first lunging towards the audience as if lifting an object with their hand and then retreating with arms and legs spread wide apart, facing forward. Dancers in small groups, each in perfect unison, join the existing line of dancers, with the soloist performing a commanding, disciplinary role. Functioning as a type of "commander," the soloist sweeps his arm across the stage from left to right, legs larger than hip-width apart as he gestures at each group of dancers for their turn to begin the choreographed poses before joining the*

existing line. He turns towards the audience to perform exaggerated zspanaks under the spotlight and then attaches to the front of the semicircle, waving his tashkinak.

Presentations of *kochari* within the *azgagrakan* genre, such as staged performances as well as participatory outdoor public dance teaching gatherings, do not overshadow Armenian vernacular aesthetics. Distinct from the *bemakan par* genre, these representations feature dancers who are linked by the waist in a straight line or a semi-circle, depending on the dance and on the allotted space. They perform several sets of repetitive movements as the line incrementally moves to the right. Movements include some leg lifts and jumps forward but toes are never pointed, and movement trajectories are overall earth-bound and grounded. At the call of the *paraglukh,* the dancers are signaled to transition to the next set of cyclical movements, and they gradually transition through several of these sequential cycles. The close connections between dancers are never broken, as they remain shoulder to shoulder throughout the dance.

In any given *azgagrakan* performance of *Vana kochari*, for example, dancers would be in a tight shoulder-to-shoulder orientation at all times, holding one another in place by grasping one another at the hips while dancing. As they move to the right with each step, they lift their legs up from the knee as they simultaneously lean backward before placing it back down to slightly lean forward. In the *bemakan* performance by the Altunyan Ensemble, traces of *Vana kochari* were obscured behind high leg lifts, stick-straight bodies jumping vertically in the air, and even high vertical jumps as both legs were bent at the knee and tucked up and back. In *Bulanukhi kochari, azgagrakan* dancers move in a similar, tight shoulder-to-shoulder orientation as they perform a subtle yet strong forward and backward lean. Dipping slightly forward, they use their collective momentum to sway back up to standing as the line is pushed backward and the dancers land together in a light jump. In the *bemakan* interpretation, the subtlety and finesse of this technique

was transmuted into exaggerated backward and forward leans where dancers pointed their toes, spreading their legs wide, and lunged so far forward that their noses were practically touching the floor. The latter half of the *bemakan* sequence of "traditional *kochari*" replicated the structure of *Alashkerti kochari* by citing its distinct melody and by incorporating the same gradual increase in tempo featured in *azgagrakan* performances. In performing *Alashkerti kochari, azgagrakan* dancers attach to one another at the waist and maintain a semi-circle. As the tempo increases, they repeat the same movements only their grounded, heavy *zspanaks* are replaced with light jumps. The *bemakan* choreography featured dancers no longer attached at the waist but forming a closed circle with extended arms attached at one another's shoulders. The soloist was in the middle of the circle as the dancers encircled him rapidly, jumping up vertically, sending their left leg back as they move to the right. In an instant, the dancers release their arms and with the right arm shooting up and out and the left arm bent towards the chest, they twirl around individually to create a new straight-line formation. As the melody continues to speed up, they transition to a movement sequence made up of tight foot shuffles that inch the dancers forward towards center stage. After a few shuffles in complete unison, they perform an *attitude devant*—a classical ballet technique where dancers stand on one leg and lift the other towards the front—lowering the lifted leg and pointed toe with a loud smack of the foot on the floor.

Paradoxically then, despite the attempt to venerate *kochari,* the Tatul Altunyan Ensemble ultimately distills and neglects a living, breathing, family of dances that continue to circulate within communities of heritage dancers across Armenia and even the diaspora. This performance of "traditional *kochari"* effectively homogenizes and smooths over an otherwise diverse collection of regional-specific innovations. As demonstrated by countless dance scholars, dance and performance practices are an important element in the construction and presentation of a

cohesive national identity (Castaldi 2006; Reed 2010; Rosa 2015; Schaurt 2015; Sethi and Sebro 2019). The tendency to gloss over or minimize difference in order to effectively consolidate a national imaginary, both aesthetically and kinesthetically, is common across modern nation-state projects. In the case of postcolonial India, according to political philosopher and historian Partha Chatterjee in his work *The Nation and its Fragments,* the diverse histories of India's ancient past were flattened to construct essentialist and unitary markers that became the foundation for a modern, postcolonial Indian national culture (Chatterjee, 1993). Regarding India's attempt to assert a modern image, the nation-state succumbed to the same normalization strategies of the colonial apparatus that sought "to obliterate the fuzziness of communities" (227). Similarly, obliterating the "fuzziness" of *kochari,* by blending distinct regional variations into a single choreographic representation of "traditionality" not only erases the multifariousness of Armenian vernacular dance, but also further settles into a colonial and hegemonic nation-state logic that reduces "tradition" to a unitary essence that is fixed and unchanging.

As a post-colonial state-sponsored construction of Armenianness, *bemakan par* actively negotiates Ottoman and Soviet colonial pasts, while it also seeks to (re)construct a pre-colonial Armenian past in order to secure its antiquity. In so doing, *bemakan par* ossifies and reinforces the very binaries that mark ballet as an ennobled beacon of modernity and "high art" while native aesthetics are considered to be underdeveloped, inferior, and primitive. Thus, the *bemakan par* idiom can be seen as an encounter between the "essence" of a pre-colonial Armenian past and a classically oriented, decidedly balletic claim to modernity and Eurocentric "high art." By balleticizing performances of "pure Armenian traditions," *bemakan par* cultural elites seek to civilize Armenian bodies, producing ideal, modern specimens that can adequately perform Armenian "high culture" for the global proscenium stage. James Clifford in his engagement with

Said's paradigm of Orientalism, suggests thinking of cultures "not as organically unified or traditionally continuous but rather as negotiated, present processes" (1988, 273).[90] *Bemakan par,* as a bodily discourse and performance idiom reinforces the very opposite of Clifford's claims. To avoid the "primitive" label, *bemakan par* cultural elites actively compromise the aesthetic elements, choreographic innovations of Armenian vernacular dances thereby denying them the possibility of contemporariness.

Moreover, within *bemakan par* discourses Armenian "traditionality" is marked as a unitary and static object that must be "treated" and "developed," ballet, on the other hand, is considered to be a universal "high art" practice that can elevate Armenian heritage for the proscenium stage. This not only further perpetuates a dichotomous distinction between "the West and the Rest," but it also conjures Western and Soviet cultural hegemony as a civilizing and dominating colonial force on the knowledge and presentation of Armenian vernacular aesthetics. In this hegemonic relationship, the concept of hybridity or to assert that *bemakan par* functions as a hybrid Armenian/balletic dance form is insufficient. Overshadowing vernacular techniques, neglecting regional specificities, and balleticizing movement vocabularies ultimately marginalizes the otherwise prolific family of *kochari* dances, even when they are being selectively and partially referenced on stage through *bemakan par* performance. This not only allegorizes and enacts in the body the very phenomenon of Russian and Western dominance over

[90] In *The Predicament of Culture* (1998), Clifford examines the limitations of primarily Western ethnographic practices, strategies of writing, representation of culture(s), and art collection in the modern period. Clifford destabilizes the concept of an authentic/traditional essence that is incongruous with "modernity," and insists that identity is never essential or whole, but always hybrid, inventive, and mobile. In acknowledging that modern, Western cultures should not be glorified nor processes of colonialism and imperialism justified, Clifford acknowledges the need for a middle ground to apprehending cultural representation outside of binary limitations. He prompts the ready to imagine "cultural futures," where the plurality of culture and identification as a process, not an essence, constitutes this new modern ethnographic subjectivity.

Armenian cultural heritage, it also squarely places vernacular aesthetics in binary opposition to modernity, as inferior, unchanging, primitive, and devoid of complexity.

Krunkner: Dance of the Cranes

As the concert progressed, it became evident that the performance order was based on a general pattern that alternates between exclusively female dances and all-male or mixed gender dances. Dictated by the presence or absence of male bodies on stage, these transitions also shift according to gendered expressions of tempo, timbre, and technique. Choreographies with male dancers, including mixed-gender choreographies, are intensified with fast-paced tempos, energetic and lively movements, and the booming acoustics of zurna and dhol. Conversely, those with only female dancers are decorated with slow, tranquil musical accompaniments that feature fluid, supple movements, soothing female vocals, and the soft tremor of the kanon. The preceding "rams" in kochari, a highly energetic and fast-paced display of masculinity contrast with the ensuing krunkner or "cranes" with their soft femininity adorned by the hushed musical accompaniment.

As the four female kanon players serenely play a tranquil melody, a soloist emerges gently from the left wing with a combination of gliding steps and unfolding arm gestures. Moving with poise and grace, she twirls in a circle, her heeled shoes kicking up her skirt as it billows in response to each step. She goes through a "first arabesque," which is a fundamental position in ballet where the body is supported on one leg with the back leg either lifted or on the ground. With her working leg stretched behind her on the floor, she bows and stretches one arm out in front of her body, extending it upward beyond the typical first arabesque height while the other arm extends backward. She creates a diagonal line with her body that is both supple and fluid as

it extends and lifts outward and upward into space. With her back turned to the audience, she appears to be gliding across the floor as she alternates shifting her heels, then toes, only a few inches at a time. Her foot movements are hardly noticeable, not only because they are diminutive in quality, but also because they are concealed by her floor-length dress, which foregrounds her graceful arms and pliant upper body.

Soft ethereal singing emanates quietly from the choir. The female vocalists are performing in the bel canto technique, an Italian operatic singing style with rounded and elongated vowels. As the soloist inches across the stage, she performs stylistic bird-like arm gestures; leading with her elbow, one arm unfolds upward as the other unfurls downward. As she continues alternating her arms, an ensemble of female dancers in identical costumes inch onto the stage in a forward-facing line using the same heel-toe shifting movement. They are all holding an identical pose: their right arm is stretched out, holding the shoulder of the dancer in front, while the left arm is bent inward right below the chin, the head is tilted and rests on the forearm. As they float across the stage in perfect unison, the choir sings the words, "krunkner ekan antsan, du nrants het mi gna," "the cranes came and passed, do not go with them."

Contextualizing the Crane

"Crane, whence do you come? Don't you have a bit of news from our homeland?" [*Krunk, usti kugas? mer ashkharen khabrik mi chunis?*] These are the opening lines of one of the most ubiquitous Armenian folk songs entitled *"Krunk"* or "Crane," which dates to the seventeenth century (Pifer 2009, 235). According to Armenia-based scholar Shushanik Nazaryan, who wrote an entire monograph on the history of the song, "*Krunk*" is from the perspective of an anonymous wanderer, who is far from the homeland and begs for some news

from a crane flying overhead (Nazaryan 1977, 101-6). This mournful cry to the migratory crane has come to represent the collective exilic experience of the Armenian diaspora (Pifer, 229). Given that the crane has one of the longest migration routes compared to other animals, for early modern Armenians it metaphorically represented "*unwanted* mobility" and dispersion, a theme that rose to prominence in cultural and literary narratives during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (237).

Bird motifs, including those of the crane, can be found on prehistoric rock carvings and petroglyphs, *vishapakar* (or "stone-dragon" sculptures use for water worship), temples, monasteries, ritual ceramics, bronze pottery, and other artifacts found across historic Armenia (Manaseryan and Balyan 2002, 408). Birds held "ornamental and totemic significance" and were "the most prevalent 'wandering' motif in the painted pottery of medieval Armenian art" (Ibid., 410). In Armenian mythology, the crane, specifically, is considered to be "an envoy of fertility[91] and imminent rain" (411). As ephemeral messengers, other types of birds are also indexed in vernacular dances and ethnographic folk songs. The popular clap-dance *yarkhushta* is a quintessential martial dance that emulates the wingspan, power, and fierce energy of the eagle, which is an important animal in the Armenian imaginary representing "the power of the sun, fire and immortality" (Ibid.). The folk song "*kakavuh karin"* or "the partridge on the rock," tells of an anonymous lover asking the bird to call out to their beloved and to deliver a written love letter. Bird images were also frequently used in Armenian miniature art, found in medieval and early modern Armenian illuminated manuscripts, handwritten books of religious teachings with painted ornamentations made from natural dyes and even from gold and silver leaf. While there

[91] The concept of fertility or *ptghaberutyun* in Armenian combines the words for "fruit" and "bearer" and, in both historical and popular uses of the term, it is not only limited to reproductive fertility, but also symbolizes a bountiful harvest and general abundance in one's life.

is no known “crane dance” in Armenian vernacular traditions, it is still necessary to understand this longstanding and diverse reverence of birds, in general, to apprehend staged choreographic and musical motifs of the crane as a constructed expression of Armenian cultural identity.

While the lyrics of *Krunkner* sung in this performance by the Tatul Altunyan Ensemble are different from those in *Krunk* described above, it similarly indexes longing and dispossession. In this song, as the snow falls from the mountain and the flowers turn cold, cranes pass overhead as the anonymous lover is looking at the path of their departed beloved and pleads mournfully, “stay [and] let me live in your radiance” (*Hamerg [Concert],* 2019). The melody for *Krunkner* was composed by famous Soviet Armenian composer, conductor, and *kanon* player Khachatur Avetisyan; the lyrics were written by well-known Soviet Armenian poet Lyudvig Duryan. Avetisyan, a graduate of the Yerevan State Musical Conservatory trained in Western classical music, was well known for integrating Armenian folk elements into his compositions. He also founded and acted as Artistic Director for the *Pari Petakan Ansambl* (State Dance Ensemble of Armenia) in 1958. A decade later, he became the Artistic Director for the Tatul Altunyan Ensemble and upon Altunyan’s death in 1973, he took over as Ensemble Director (“AMN-um hratarakvel e Khachatur Avetisyani bolor ergern ampopogh jhoghovadzu,” 2013). Avetisyan was also responsible for establishing the Folk Music Department at the Yerevan Conservatory in 1978. These roles demonstrate his profound impact on the professionalization of Armenian “folk” music, in particular, and dance, by extension, during the Soviet period.

Throughout his career, Avetisyan created multiple Western classical music compositions that integrated Armenian musical motifs and traditional folk instruments, many of which highlighted the *kanon*. He collaborated with well-known Soviet Armenian poets to write lyrics for his pieces, and he would also integrate existing poems by popular writers, such as Gegham

Saryan and Silva Kaputikyan, into his melodies. Avetisyan's compositions often invoked Armenian national symbols either in the lyrics or in the titles of the pieces, such as Armenian national flora, including regional species of trees and flowers; national fauna, particularly birds including cranes, doves, and swans; dispossessed territories of historic Armenia, and other rural folkloric references, such as the spindle.[92] According to Avetisyan's son, Mikayel, the majority of the lyrics in his compositions were written by Lyudvig Duryan, who had repatriated to Soviet Armenia from an Armenian-populated village in Soviet Russia (Ibid.).[93] Duryan used to call Avetisyan the "contemporary Komitas" (Ibid.), and their collaborative works became canonical in the repertory of state-sponsored dance ensembles in Armenia, which later spread to the diaspora. His approach to the professionalization of Armenian music, which was both Western-oriented yet distinctly Armenian, not only followed the lineage of Komitas but also satisfied the Soviet dictum[94] of cultivating a national "high art" form. Conterminously, the *bemakan par* idiom, which flourished under Avetisyan's artistic and musical direction during the Soviet period underwent a similar choreographic process of constructing a distinctly Armenian "high art" dance form.

Dancing the Crane

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[92] Titles of compositions with these references include *Par Tsirani* (Apricot Tree Dance); *Yegheg* (Reed); *Karapneri Par* (Dance of the Swans); *Vagharshapati Par* (Dance of Vagharshapat), a major capital of historic Armenia; *Msho Aghchik* (Girl from Mush), an already existing folk song motif from Mush, important province known for its resistance against Ottoman violence; and *Iliknerov Par* (Dance of the Spindle), referring to the rural activity of spinning wool by hand.

[93] It is interesting to note that Duryan was born in Chaltyr, a rural locality in today's Russia, which was founded by Armenians from the Crimea Peninsula in the late 1700s who were refugees from the historic Armenian capital of Ani, currently located in Eastern Turkey.

[94] Beginning in the 1930s, cultural production in the Soviet Union embodied the formula of "national in form and socialist in content," an adage set forth by Stalin which describes the fusing together of national and socialist elements to evolve and unify the artistic expressions of the peoples of the USSR. (See Hirsch *Empire of Nations* 2010 for more).

While the choir sings of "wandering cranes," female dancers embody bird-like movements, generating symbolic and choreographic representations of lost lands, the experience of exile, and the resulting Armenian diaspora. In tandem with the warm and airy timbre of the kanon, the female dancers—dressed in seafoam green from head to toe—move as a single unit as they form visually-pleasing lines and circles with their bodies, weaving in and out of intricate group formations. The soloist, who is differentiated from the rest with her bright white veil and crown, continues to elegantly undulate her arms, alternating from left to right, sometimes joining the ensemble formations but still maintaining a principal role. The ensemble then performs what is called a "canon," a common technique of classical ballet that is often used in bemakan par performances. It consists of a succession of movements, where one dancer at a time performs a set of gestures that triggers the entire line to copy those same gestures one after another with expert control and correct timing. In this instance, the ensemble is connected by holding hands and the first dancer twists her arms upward and back as she transitions into a pliant backbend; she then rotates her body around and ends by turning her back to the audience. Each dancer's execution of this sequence occurs with mechanical precision; the result is a dazzling and elaborate display of unison that is both synchronized and individuated. Once all of the dancers complete this canon, their hands grasp onto one another as they create a cross stitch pattern above their heads. In unison, they release, and with hands still above their heads, they begin to gracefully undulate from their wrists up to their fingertips, a wing-like gesture that they continue to repeat. Standing in a line with their backs towards the audience, the dancers maintain this uniform image of small fluttering wings; the soloist runs behind their line, and as if to fly like a bird, using her expansive arms as wings. Then, in an instance of release, the dancers spread out with extended balletic port de bras into several straight lines, as they transition into smaller

groups. They then simultaneously whisk themselves off one by one to form a larger circle, which splits and transforms once again into a straight line that initiates another balletic canon. The ensemble, now holding the same exact pose they entered with, slowly floats off stage with the ritardando of the kanon, concluding a slow-moving, somber, and graceful piece.

Figure 9: Female dancers of the Altunyan Ensemble performing "*krunkner"* at the Yerevan Opera Theatre in Armenia. Still from video recorded by author. June 23, 2019.

The Bemakan Crane and the Balletic Swan

In the Tatul Altunyan Ensemble's performance of *Krunkner,* both the quality of the female ensemble's movements, especially the flapping-wing gestures, and the soloist's expansive flying arms evince the embodiment of the crane. Similarly, in Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake,* the principal ballerina and the *corps de ballet* are tasked with emulating the swan, from the fragile *Dying Swan* solo performance to the flock of flying swan *corps* who dance throughout*,* to the small *corps* of synchronized *Little Swans*. The strategies used in *Krunkner* to mimic the crane are

practically identical to the *port de bras* technique in *Swan Lake* used to achieve "swan arms," where ballerinas perform unfolding arm gestures that lead with the elbows to create undulating, curved, wing-like movements. Graceful and sinuous use of the arms, torso, head, and neck are qualities that construct bird-like female dancers in both productions.

In fact, the impact of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* is so profound that it has been cemented into the built environment of Armenia's capital city. Approximately 100 meters from the entrance to the Yerevan Opera and Ballet Theatre, located in the center of the city, is the artificial lake named *Karapi Lich* or "Swan Lake." Built in the 1960s, the outline of the lake takes the indisputable shape of an oval-shaped swan body, including a curved neck and a slender beak that appears to be tucked into its back feathers. The lake buttresses the Opera complex as an open-air public gathering space, a symbolic and material form of permanent and official reverence for the famous ballet. In fact, after the first time Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* was staged in Yerevan in 1935, the name of the State Opera Theatre was changed to include the word *balet* or "ballet" (Bubushyan et al 2013). Therefore, in more ways than one, classical ballet has been a defining feature of Armenian state-sanctioned cultural production for over 80 years.

Central to *bemakan par* performances are two choreographic and structural strategies inherited from classical ballet: one being the hyper-shifting geometric group formations, the other the hierarchical division between soloist and the *corps de ballet*. Susan Foster writes about the never-ending configurations of bodies in ballet performances: "dancers transited from pinwheel formations to columns, they processed downstage, turned away to either side, reformed in small circles, exchanged single dancers among the circles, and then suddenly reappeared in neatly spaced rows" (Foster 1998, 61). These are the exact choreographic strategies used in *bemakan par*. Line or circle formations that remain intact in vernacular Armenian dances are

never sustained for very long in *bemakan par*. Soloists are frequently utilized—an unfamiliar concept to the Armenian vernacular idiom—and ensemble dancers detach from one another often as they are tasked with prioritizing their elegant *port de bras* and are choreographed to constantly run across the stage to change positions, creating multitudes of geometric patterns and shapes with their bodies. Veering away from apprehending this phenomenon as one of “hybridity,” I assert that ballet functions as a hegemonic force in *bemakan par,* where its aesthetic principles of visual clarity and virtuosity, frontal and linear silhouettes, and multiple spatial formations, override and conceal Armenian vernacular dance aesthetics.

Thus, relying on the concept of “invented tradition” as described by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, both *Krunkner* and the *bemakan par* genre can be understood as state-sponsored, balleticized construction of “ancient” Armenianness. Given that there is no existing evidence of a “crane dance” in Armenian vernacular culture, I argue that *Krunkner* is a national construct built on a balletic swan-like motif. In other words, while the performance indeed draws from folk and literary representations of the crane that are historically rooted, its expression on stage is a choreographic clone of the balletic swan, one that is paradoxically dominated by notions of “high art,” balletic virtuosity, and ideal femininity. Furthermore, a predominant movement quality of the *bemakan par* female ensemble is one of unity and synchronicity. The ensemble in *Krunker* is akin to the *corps de ballet* in its highly disciplinized homogeneity and uniformity. This particular vision of unity effectively overrides the one set forth by Armenian vernacular aesthetics, which values communality and cooperation without necessarily erasing difference.

Emulating the Corps de Ballet

Beginning with the ballet master, who is at the top of the hierarchical pyramid, *bemakan par* conjures balletic hierarchy pedagogically and choreographically--as seen in the use of soloists and *corps de ballet*. The female *corps* is a common feature in *bemakan par* and is closely comparable to the structure and movement qualities of the *corps de ballet* found in most classical ballet stage productions. The tight unison and cohesive fluidity of the *corps de ballet,* which translates to "the body of the ballet," "is both a mirror of perfect control and perfect obedience" (Ross 2015, 30). In describing the *corps de ballet* in *Swan Lake,* theatre and performance studies scholar Janice Ross writes how the choreography "evokes autocratic power with its majestic verticality, hierarchy, and elegantly controlled physicality;" these qualities simultaneously challenge "the contrasting easy geometry and sweeping gathering of [,] the rhythmic mass of swan women" (Ibid). She adds that the *corps de ballet* is "coded as seductively feminine yet drilled into martial precision," and she credits this level of discipline and precision to the school of Russian ballet (Ibid.). In fact, both "the fragile Swan in Swan Lake" and the *corps de ballet* of women in matching costumes, are two prominent features that, according to Ross, "historically stood for Russianness and power in ballet" (52). Because Armenian vernacular dances espouse notions of unity and cohesion, one might deduce that the ensemble in *Krunkner* simply draws from this vision as they move in unison. However, the unity that is demonstrated by the ensemble is one of regulatory power and homogeneity, an aesthetic principle of the *corps de ballet*. The prominent soloist, who is usually differentiated visually through costuming, dances expressively in front of the decorative backdrop of her ensemble, indicative of the hierarchical ordering of female bodies found in ballet.

Conversely, in Armenian vernacular dances, visions of unity work to establish an energetic exchange between dancers that is rooted in collective ritual. Many contemporary

interpretations of vernacular dances, from urban participatory to staged performances, have maintained this aesthetic commitment to communion despite the absence of ritual practice. Dancing in unison is one of energetic transfer, functioning as a modality of community building. The structure of dancers is not hierarchical, but horizontal. While there are roles such as *paraglukh* and *parapoch*, or "dance tail," they are tasked with maintaining communication and connectivity among all dancers. In vernacular aesthetics, physical and rhythmic connection between dancers is key. However, gestures such as the dancers' head positions, gaze, and other individuated variations (such as shoulder shakes) are not regulated, so long as they fall within the general dance schema. Dancers who embody Armenian vernacular aesthetics move in synchronicity with one another, as they assert a functional relationship to unity and cohesion, rather than displaying a dazzling spectacle of strict uniformity executed by highly skilled and expertly trained dancers. Despite adhering to these highly balleticized features and movement principles, *Krunkner* continues to be framed as "ancient tradition" due to the crane symbolism.

Constructing the Ideal Armenian Woman

That *Krunkner* is a highly gendered female performance also speaks to the kind of ideal (feminine) body that is being regulated and constructed at the Yerevan Opera Theatre, the foremost national stage in Armenia. The female "cranes" in *Krunkner* neatly fulfill the mid-nineteenth century trope of "folk-bearing" Armenian women as preservers and vessels of traditional culture (Bilal, 2020). For early nineteenth century Armenians, folklore in the form of songs and poems was used to legitimize Armenian indigenous connections to their homeland (Ibid). Conterminously, "enlightened" and "civilized" Armenian women were typecast as pure, graceful caretakers and mothers who needed to be vessels of Armenian traditionalism for the

common good of the nation (Ibid). As discussed in Chapter 2, the sexual division of movement vocabulary is a key feature in the *bemakan par* idiom. As a gendered technique, *bemakan par* performances like *Krunkner* and like "traditional *kochari*" produce and reinforce binary, gendered ideals, where the performance of ideal female qualities is juxtaposed with the ideal masculine. This, on its own, constructs essentialist notions of femaleness and maleness as fixed, mutually exclusive expressions of national character that serve different purposes for the nation. Masculine displays of acrobatics and spectacle generate images of strong, Armenian warriors, and contrastingly feminine movement vocabularies evince demure, pure, obedient "bearers," of children, or tradition, or both.

This is a common gendered trope that extends across different political, aesthetic, and cultural boundaries. For example, historian Partha Chatterjee asserts that in colonial India, women were viewed as uncontaminated repositories of culture (Chatterjee 1993). Women represented the private realm, the "spiritual core" of the nation, and were considered to be the bearers of tradition. Given that "the traditional" was made to represent "pure" markers of native cultural identity, women were symbolically typecast within this paradigm. Elleke Boehmer, in her seminal study on gender, narrative, and the postcolonial national novels across the African continent and South Asia, argues that women were cast as "symbols or totems, as the bearers of tradition" (Boehmer 2005, 22). Izbella Penier looks at the black cultural nationalism which made African American women storehouses of a cultural essence and analyzes how female stereotyping signified "traditional and authentic culture untouched by the ravishes of the colonial/dominant culture" (Penier, 2019 59). Furthermore, historian Ida Meftahi, in her monograph *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran,* theorizes how dance serves as a site for constructing the ideal Iranian woman on stage. She analyzes the national dance form (*raqs-i*

milli) of the Pahlavi era (1925-1979) as a novel form made up of Iranian regional folk dances and ballet themes. This new genre not only "invented [an] ideal female subject," but also sought to educate future modern Iranian women corporeally, elevating their status to that of European women (Meftahi 2017, 42, 9). Like the tenets of *raqs-i milli, bemakan par* also constructs an idealized national body, one that represents notions of high art and modern development vis-a-vis ballet, while simultaneously indexing the ancient and the traditional.[95]

A replica of the swan motif in classical ballet, the Armenian "crane woman" with her highly regulated ballet-centric movement qualities is the ultimate site for constructing the ideal Armenian woman on stage. Symbolically, the historically rooted yet invented crane motif invokes a somber Armenian past: one of genocide, cultural loss, and land dispossession, but ultimately one of survival. Choreographically, balletic dancing bodies in *Krunkner* perform a "modernized" and "civilized" and (re)constructed vision of Armenianness, one that reifies Soviet Russian and Western European hierarchies that mark native aesthetics as inferior and incompatible with staged presentations. Her body is classically trained, her elongated limbs are long and supple, her back is pliant, and her silhouette is long and slender. She exudes grace and docility, moving effortlessly on the stage like a leaf pushed by a short gust of wind. On the other hand, she is also an exemplar of Armenian heritage, of land, and of history. She is dressed modestly in heeled shoes and what appears to be a "traditional" dress that covers her legs and arms completely. Her hair is bundled up and her head is veiled, the front of her chest is covered by two long braided hair extensions. Accompanied by traditional Armenian instruments, and

[95] It should then be unsurprising then, given how the construction of *raqs-i milli* in Iran parallels that of *bemakan par* in Soviet Armenia, that Armenians pioneered the form in neighboring Iran (Meftahi, 2016). According to Meftahi, Armenians immigrants from the Soviet Union built the foundation for Iran's national dance form (Ibid 2017, 24). Two famous Armenian dancers, Madam Yelena and Sarkis Djanbazian opened dance schools in Tehran, taught ballet and began fusing Iranian themes of movement into balletic dancing, establishing what became known as "national" Iranian dance (Ibid). A transnational and cross-cultural phenomenon that certainly demands further study.

with these visual markers adorning her elegant movements, she typecasts an orientalist vision of Armenian "ethnic primitivism" that is at once civilized by balletic syntax. Fully knowable and globally legible, the disciplined and demure female crane is simultaneously a vessel for authentic traditionality and a subject of hegemonic "modernity" and "high art."

CONCLUSION

My primary inquiry for this project was to better understand the ways in which Armenian identity is crystallized in *bemakan par* practice and performance. In historicizing my own ethnography, this paper sought to demonstrate how *bemakan par,* as a bodily discourse, is both informed by and actively negotiates the layered histories of Armenian identity. Notably, it is the penchant for emulating Europeanness and Russianness by way of "civilizing" and "enlightening" oneself that is rooted in modern Armenian national identity formation that has left a longstanding legacy in the practice and performance of *bemakan par*.

In this paper, I have demonstrated how the rise of Armenian nationalism was in large part infused with the cultural and ideological values set forth by the European Enlightenment. Thus, dominant understandings of "modern" Armenian identity were buttressed by the perceived superiority of Europeanness—a phenomenon that continues to bear both material and ideological significance for Armenians to this day. One primary example being that dancing, according to many Armenians, is synonymous with ballet itself. A globally superior form, ballet is understood as a distinctly European high art practice with a universal training system that can bring Armenian dance heritage into the realm of modernity. Similarly, under Soviet rule, the cultural and political processes of Sovietization imposed a hierarchical conception of modernity that marked Russians as superior and Armenians as "natives" needing civilizing. Ballet was the required dance training regime across the Soviet Union and was forcibly integrated into all forms of "folk dance" expression across the republics. Thus, *bemakan par*, as a distinctly balleticized Armenian concert dance genre, functioned (and continues to function) as an effective medium through which Armenians could "develop" and "civilize" themselves. As a bodily discourse,

bemakan par negotiates these layered histories and performs a paradoxical vision of Armenianness, one that reifies oppressive hegemonic logics that mark native aesthetics as inferior and unmodern, only to be "civilized" through a specifically Soviet balletic encounter. Even in a post-Soviet context, *bemakan par* continues to dominate the dance landscape as the most authentic expressor of Armenian modernity and "high art." An equally important transnational phenomenon, dance studios that adhere to the aesthetic constituents of *bemakan par* saturate some of the larger Armenian communities across the diaspora.

Most importantly, the writing of this thesis across a span of two years has been layered with the inconceivable grief of having experienced the recent 2020 Artsakh War, which was a premeditated war for territorial expansion planned by Turkey and Azerbaijan. As a dance scholar and ethnographer in the diaspora who extracts knowledge from Armenia/Armenians for my own research projects, it was imperative for me to travel to Armenia in October of 2020 shortly after the war began in September of that year to offer my support. I brought with me several suitcases full of much-needed medical and camera equipment for doctors and journalists on the front lines; and I offered dance workshops to recently displaced children and raised money, using my connections and social media platform, for local organizations who were supporting thousands of recently made refugee families from Artsakh. Tasked with writing and thinking about dance during such a visceral period of loss, mourning, and uncertainty has made both the process of writing and the content of this thesis even more meaningful.

For a period of 44 days, Armenians were tasked with surviving deadly drone warfare, enduring ruthless missile and rocket attacks on civilian areas, and were forced to defend their right to self-determination as the world silently watched. With little to no global coverage of the ongoing violence, Armenians across the global diaspora took it upon themselves to draw

attention to the asymmetrical conflict by taking to the streets in protest. In Italy, the United States, Uruguay, Russia, Greece, Netherlands, Georgia, and Spain, to name a few, Armenians gathered at Azerbaijani consulate buildings and other public corridors to protest the recent aggression, to draw the attention of the international community and their respective governments, and to consecrate a sense of unity among Armenians amidst a time of collective existential crisis—despite longstanding linguistic, cultural, and political differences. The single common thread across each of these protests was the intentional incorporation of dance. Watching this all unfold as I wrote this thesis affirmed in the strongest way my desire to do this dance research work, given the continued importance of dance for Armenian identity in, yet another, post-war period. As we witness an entire generation wiped out by drones, and as we witness our sacred sites and graveyards desecrated, dance becomes a powerful embodied response to systematic erasure; it is the enactment of the desire to survive against all odds.

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