Once Upon a Time, There Was Sex in Georgia

Paul Manning

In a recent article titled “Kartuli Mama-p’ap’uri Seksi” (Georgian Ancestral Sex), Aleko Tskhitishvili asks the following question: “was there ever sex [seksi] in Georgia, or not?” But what is sex? The Georgian term seksi is a recent loan from English, inheriting many of the ambiguities of the English word sex. If “sex” (seksi) is defined in terms of its prototypical biophysical referent, (heterosexual) vaginal intercourse, potentially leading to pregnancy, then, Tskhitishvili argues, of course there has apparently been a lot of sex through the ages in Georgia, given the large number of Georgians alive today. But if “sex” is meant as sex decoupled from biological reproduction, then sex has indeed been relatively absent from Georgia. The author is seemingly searching for traces of another kind of sex, a kind of sexual sociability, a purely elective, “play” form of sex, pursued entirely for its own sake and unencumbered by any connection to biological reproduction or marital obligation.

This is a kind of sex defined by absence (it seemingly doesn’t exist in Georgia) and alterity (it is normatively quite alien to Georgia). According to the author, “Among us, there is no sex!” was the oft-heard lament from the “frigid” Homo sovieticus decrying the absence of sex in Georgia. It is also the battle cry of postsocialist Georgian traditionalists decrying the appearance of a Georgian-language Playboy (with Georgian models): “In the land of Queen Ketevan and Nestan-Darejan, Playboy should not exist!”

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4. The Georgian-language Playboy (and the first Georgian “Playmate”) appeared in August 2007 and continued for a short time into 2008, publishing seven issues total. On Playboy’s failure in Georgia, see, for example, “keketketo,” “Failure of Georgian Playboy,”

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In this search for traces of “Georgian ancestral sex,” Tskhitishvili turns to classical literary sources, so that this lost Georgian sexuality resolves itself into a series of literary citations. He concludes with a brief discussion of the literary treatments of traditional sociable sexual practices once found in the Georgian mountainous regions of Pshavi, where such practices go by the name ts’ats’loba, and Khevsureti, where they are called sts’orproba. He concludes that these practices represent a traditional form of what urban Georgians now call “petting” (p’et’t’ingi) and at the same time a mysterious mirror image of the typical Georgian definition of normative sex (that is, vaginal intercourse linked to reproduction). The use of this recent English loan word points to its paradoxical quality of being “sex without sex” (usekso seksi), as another Georgian commentator pithily described it; ts’ats’loba and sts’orproba are purely sociable sex, but they are also not quite sex, in that vaginal intercourse is excluded.

CNN iReport, 25 April 2009, at ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-249628 (last accessed 2 January 2014). Nestan-Darejan is the heroine of Shota Rustaveli’s medieval poem of (largely unrequited) love, The Knight in the Panther’s Skin; she and Queen Ketevan are idealized, stereotypical models for a certain type of Georgian femininity, embodying a restrained modesty and a sexuality that is largely based on unattainability, usually opposed to that imputed to Russian or western women. Emzar Jgerenaia, personal communication. See also Zaza Shatirishvili and Paul Manning, “Why Are the Dolls Laughing?: Tbilisi between Intelligentsia Culture and Socialist Labour,” in Tsypylma Darieva, Wolfgang Kaschuba, and Melanie Krebs, eds., Urban Spaces after Socialism: Ethnographies of Public Places in Eurasian Cities (Frankfurt am Main, 2011), 214–16.


6. The context for this definition is helpful. An online forum discussion began with a long post about ts’ats’loba by “nanu,” who commented, “at a time when even Europe wasn’t ‘developed’ to this level, things were happening in the mountains of Georgia that contemporary Americans would envy.” This provoked a question from “temo,” who wanted to know just what ts’ats’loba was, anyway. To this, “tiamat girl” answered, “Sex without sex *big grin* lol.” At this ambiguous response, temo asked, “and whaat [sic] is that? You’ve got me all confused now,” and nanu offered her doubts that it was entirely “without sex.” This exchange happened at teen.ge/index.php?showtopic=828, 12 March 2007 (last accessed 10 Nov 2013). Since the texts I cite from Internet forums here and below contain animated (.gif) emoticons, expressing the stance or emotion of the writers which cannot be printed, I have resorted to translating the emoticon in each case into its conventional meaning in ordinary language, while capturing the “flavor” of the translated emoticon by using another common internet convention, the bracketing of paralinguistic textual expressions of emotion or action within asterisks. I also cite the location of each emoticon image so that readers can retrieve the original emoticon it transcribes. Here, *big grin*, at teen.ge/public/style_emoticons/teen/teen_075.gif (last accessed 5 January 2014). The *big grin* emoticon has been changed to *happy tongue smiley* since it first appeared.

Throughout this article I use full names or pseudonyms as given. If a full name (i.e., first and last) name is given, the reader may assume that it is the real name of the individual. If less than a full name is given, either a first name or no name, then the reader may safely assume that I am anonymizing the name of the interlocutor (partially because of the somewhat sensitive nature of the materials). In some cases, I simply do not know the names of the interlocutors. Pseudonyms used by forum participants are always reproduced exactly as written (and, if in Georgian, they are also glossed and transliterated). An anonymous reviewer pointed out that my application of these rules produces the effect of segregating elites from non-elites, published authors from the “folk.” I fully agree and
The paradoxical quality of such “sex without sex” for contemporary Georgians does not end there. In this looking-glass world of the mountains, love and sex were allocated to different kinds of relationships, so that there, in effect, the sexual act in the context of marriage actually represented a loveless fornication, an act of “cheating” on the absent ts’ats’ali (a sexual partner in Pshavian ts’ats’loba, the corresponding Khevsur term being sts’orperi): “Ts’ats’loba or sts’orproba, it seems, was a pure Georgian ancestral [form of] p’et’t’ingi. . . . There were frequent cases in which a man and a woman loved their ts’ats’ali [or] sts’orperi their entire lives, but marriage was forbidden to them; therefore, factually, they engaged in fornication with their legal spouse . . . only to fulfill marital obligations.” Georgian ancestral sex is thus a paradoxical inversion of sex in its ordinary, contemporary Georgian understanding. Accordingly, Tskhitishvili concludes that sex was both present and absent from Georgia: “There was sex, and there was not sex, in Georgia.” Or rather, “There was and there was not” (Iqo da ara iqo ra) sex in Georgia. That is to say, “Once upon a time, there was sex in Georgia.”

Sexual Fantasy and Fantastic Sexualities

This last rephrasing plays on the traditional “once upon a time” opening line from any Georgian (or Eurasian) folktale. Using this framing device, Tskhitishvili epistemically transfers the paradoxical present-but-absent “sex without sex” of Georgian ancestral sex to the undifferentiated world of the fantastic, the fairy tale. After all, ts’ats’loba, for contemporary Georgians, is an almost fantastic sexuality that seems like a mysterious inversion of “normal” sexuality which has long fueled Georgians’ sexual fantasies about the romantic, exotic world of the mountains. Through such a generic reframing, this real but exotic sexuality is aligned with fairy-tale beings, imaginary creatures who by monstrous inversion of the normal display a kind of “moral imagination,” “exhibiting, through a kind of via negativa . . . the nature of the society’s values.” According to Charles Stewart, in his study of modern Greek culture, by inverting ordinary normative sexualities, creatures like nymphs, nereids, and vampires are not only creatures of the moral imagination but they also afford potentials for sexual fantasy and models for alternate sexualities, becoming creatures of the “sexual imagination.”

find it an unfortunate and unintended outcome of these procedures. For further consideration of how deeply inscribed these particular boundaries are, see Paul Manning, “Love Khevsur Style: The Romance of the Mountains and Mountaineer Romance in Georgian Ethnography,” in Bruce Grant and Lale Yalçin-Heckmann, eds., Caucasus Paradigms: Anthropologies, Histories, and the Making of a World Area (Berlin, 2007), 44–45.


9. Stewart, Demons and the Devil, 175–77. The slippage here is quite common, as Sarah Alison Miller notes: “That accounts of uncontrolled or perverse sexuality have repeatedly borrowed from the vocabulary of teratology suggests that a certain vigilance is required to keep sexual monsters and monstrous sex properly policed.” Miller, “Monstrous Sexuality: Variations on the Vagina Dentata,” in Asa Simon Mittman and Peter Dendle, eds., The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous (Farnham, 2012), 312. It is note-
In Chicago, in 2008, I was spending the night visiting my Georgian friends Zaza Shatirishvili, Nino Tseradze, and their children. We were bored, so we flipped through the range of bad film options on the Comcast cable service. Desperation drove us to watch *Twilight* (2008, dir. Catherine Hardwicke). None of us had seen it, and since it does take place in my home state of Washington, I thought I would at least show my old friends scenes from a place I know well from childhood. Briefly, let me present the basic plot of the first film (and associated books) of the Twilight series for those who are not privy to the “lore”: The action takes place in Forks, a small town near the Washington coast, where Isabella “Bella” Swan has moved from Phoenix, Arizona, to live with her father, Charlie, a police officer. Bella falls in love with Edward Cullen, who turns out to be a vampire, though he only consumes animal blood. Edward introduces Bella to his vampire family, Carlisle, Esme, Alice, Jasper, Emmett, and Rosalie, who is hostile to Bella throughout the film because she is jealous. Bella is also friends with Jacob Black, a member of the local Quileute tribe, who is descended from a long line of shape-shifters who can assume the form of wolves.10

While probably all contemporary vampires are explorations of fantastic sexualities and sexual fantasies, the vampiric sexuality of the Twilight series is somewhat notoriously about abstinence: “The series reads (and watches) like one giant exercise in sexual frustration,” as one critic puts it.11 Watching the film with my friends, as Edward and Bella develop their asexual romance and it soon becomes clear that no one is going to have anything resembling sex in the ordinary sense, both Zaza and Nino exclaimed, “It’s ts’ats’loba!” Like ts’ats’loba, this vampiric sexuality is defined as an inversion of ordinary sexuality: some ordinarily impossible things are permitted (the eroticization of drinking blood), but other ordinarily possible things (vaginal sex) are forbidden. More directly, the almost palpable, agonizing sexual restraint that characterizes Edward and Bella’s relationship resembles the keeping in check of desires that some argue is at the core of the practices of ts’ats’loba.12

-worthy that the Khevsurs themselves are haunted by sexual fantasies that take the form of creatures of fantastic sexuality, exhibiting both alterity and monstrous inversion of normal sexuality. For example, there is a class of female demons called *dobilebi* (literally, “sworn sisters”) who take their name presumably from the fact that they are consorts allied to male shrine gods by a fictive siblinghood relationship similar to sts’orproba among humans. Both human marriage and sexual reproduction are alien to the divine world, all relations between divinities taking a form analogous to fictive kinship (sworn siblinghood) and sts’orproba. On these points, see Kevin Tuite, “‘Antimarrriage’ in Ancient Georgian Society,” *Anthropological Linguistics* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 48–49. Such creatures are particularly harmful to their human rivals, women and children, but with respect to human men, whom they seduce in dreams, they are rather more like succubi, violating all the rules of marriage and sts’orproba alike: they are promiscuous, they always engage in sexual intercourse, each sex act with them always pollutes their male partner and always produces more beings like or worse than themselves, and they eat their young. Sergi Makalatia, *Khevsureti* (Tbilisi, 1984), 236–37.


12. See Tuite, “‘Antimarrriage’ in Ancient Georgian Society,” 47.
We were apparently not the only ones who naturally associated the asexual sex of Twilight’s vampire characters with ts’ats’loba. In a Georgian Twilight fan forum post, dated 25 January 2009, 1:04 a.m., a certain “Anesthesia” (ანესთეზია) decided to create a Georgian version of Twilight. To produce an appropriately mysterious rural Georgian milieu, she translated the action to the mountains of Svaneti, in west Georgia, and converted the vampires and werewolves into sundry local species of goblin (devi, ჩ’ინკ’ა). At the same time, she recruits the term ts’ats’ali to characterize the sexual partners of these creatures. She writes:

Recently I had nothing better to do and I decided to Georgianize [Twilight] *sad smile* No criticism please. The action happens in misty Ushguli [a village in mountainous Svaneti], where Izo Gediani has gone from Rustavi [a city near Tbilisi] with her father, a traffic cop named Jarji Gediani. Izo falls in love with Eduard K’aloiani, who later turns out to be a kind of devi, and he introduces her to his family. K’arlo, Emzar, Eliso, Jansughi, and Asmat are well disposed to her, which we cannot say about Gultamze K’aloiani, since Eduard earlier was her ts’ats’ali and she is jealous. Izo becomes friends with Jemik’o Shavishvili, who turns out to be a ch’ink’a, only she finds that out later when Jemik’o turns into an ibex [a species of wild goat native to the Caucasus] on a moonlit night.

I’m such a loser. *cry* *sad* 13

Here ts’ats’ali lends itself naturally as a term for the strangely sexual-yet-asexual relations involving fantastic beings like vampires. But more than that, we see this term for a fantastic sexuality become assimilated into a series of other folkloric terms for fantastic beings associated with the mysterious mountain regions of Georgia. In these “once upon a time” iterations of ts’ats’loba, different mountain regions of Georgia (west Georgian Svaneti, east Georgian Pshav-Khevsureti) become a single, fantastic “elsewhere,” an undifferentiated space for the free play of the sexual imagination, in which “monstrous sexualities” and “sexual monsters” coexist and blend into one another.14

However, Georgians can only know about ts’ats’alis, like vampires, through framing them as “once upon a time.” Georgian ancestral sex again becomes not a real set of practices one might experience firsthand, here and now, but a fairy-tale narrative set in a fantastic “elsewhere,” a there and then, which one can only experience through second-hand retellings. This Georgian ancestral sex becomes a haunting, absent presence, its re-presentations shot through with lacunae and absences, which produces a secondary set of desires for the Georgian public: a desire to fill in the gaps, to fill the space of doubt with imaginative supplements. The question then becomes not the ontology of Georgian ancestral sex—that is, what really happened—but rather its hauntology—those gaps in the narrative which allow it to flexibly haunt the


14. On this kind of slippage, see again Miller, “Monstrous Sexuality,” 312.
Georgian sexual imagination. This haunting, however, is more in the manner of a ghost than a vampire. The vampire is, after all, simply a sexual monster. The alterity of the ghost, though, lies in its haunting, its liminality between presence and absence, making it a better figure for the way sexual practices (a presence) become sexual citationality (an absence). Unlike the vampire, the ghost can also be imagined to be, or have been, real—there is an indexical (real) connection to a real presence—but the doubt about what it really was allows it to be imagined again and again, cited again and again, and thus it never ceases to provoke interest.15

Sexuality and Citationality

This Georgian fascination with mountaineer romance is part of a long pedigree of Georgian fascination with all aspects of Pshav-Khevsur culture—a more general “romance of the mountains.” From the late nineteenth century onward, Georgian ethnographers and writers have found in the remote mountainous regions of Georgia, particularly the regions of Khevsureti and Pshavi, a fragmentary ethnographic image of a romantic and exotic lost Georgian world; it comprises a numerically small group of Georgians, whose vanishing customs exhibit lost chivalric ideals that putatively once belonged to Georgia as a whole, thus representing an image of a lost totality that continues to inform the present.16 Fragments of this lost totality, appearing in ethnographies, novels, films, and everyday life, circulate in a complex, multigenred, and interdiscursive space of citations.

Of all the chivalric customs attributed to the Pshavians and Khevsurs, it is their romantic practices that seem to Georgians to be at once strange and exotic, incomprehensible and even scandalous, and in many ways not Georgian at all. According to ethnographic sources, these traditional forms of sexuality involve a freely elective sexual sociability (in Simmel’s sense) between opposite-sex peers from the same community who are ineligible to be married to one another—marriage is exogamous to the community—and between whom intercourse (or at least procreative intercourse) is forbidden.17 In terms of kinship classification, these relationships (particularly when they represent durable erotic partnerships) are also fictively assimilated to the category of consanguineal kinship, essentially forming an eroticized heterosexual doppelganger of sworn siblinghood. In Khevsureti both the boy and the girl are referred to as dzmobili (sworn brother)—dobili, “sworn sister,” is used only for “true” sworn sisters in a non-erotic relationship or for a kind

15. The hauntology of the ghost also resides in its temporality, its lingering. My thanks to Elana Resnick, via personal communication, for reminding me of this. Here Georgians are haunted by both ghosts of the past (“traditional” Georgian sex, whatever that ends up meaning) and also specters from possible futures (associated with the “developed” sexualities found in Europe and especially the United States), which, according to some interpretations found in the online forums, turn out to be doppelgangers: the Georgian “traditional” past turns out to be a premonition of the Euro-American “developed” future.
17. Note, for example, that sts’orperi, which refers to any participant in sts’orproba, also has a nonsexual sense that means something like “peer.”
of female demon—while Pshavians use terms like *nadzmobi* (sworn brother) and *nadobi* (sworn sister), as well as hybrid terms like “brother-spouse” and “sister-spouse.”

The refractory reception of these customs in Georgia strongly exhibits what Michael Herzfeld calls a *disemia*, an ambiguity or tension in nationalist discourse between official, public self-presentation and intimate self-recognition. Thus, ts’ats’loba is presented as instantiating the best aspects of the romance of the mountains in general (romance, chivalry, platonic or spiritual unrequited love), but at the same time it is a kind of dirty laundry, a scandalous inversion of normative models of heterosexual sex.

As a strange, exotic custom belonging to another time and place, it has been used as a flexible resource for constructing all kinds of representations about both public and private aspects of Georgian tradition, reflecting a wide array of desires—some erotic, some not. Part of this disemia stems from the ways it is repurposed as it circulates within the horizons of the nation: as a national tradition, it becomes respectable, platonic, chivalric; as an erotic tradition informed by diverse repressed private desires, it takes on the opposite properties. This ambiguous disemic reception results in part from the furtive, intimate nature of the practices themselves. As a secretive world that has become part of national life, public knowledge about this intimate practice is always full of absences, gaps, and lacunae. It is “obscured in the mists of secrets,” as the ethnographer Sergi Makalatia wrote in the first half of the twentieth century. “The Khevsur will not reveal its rules to outsiders, and for this reason it is extremely hard and dangerous for an investigator to collect correct data about it locally.”

Unlike publically observable mountain rituals, whose descriptions fill ethnographies from the nineteenth century forward, the bulk of what goes on in ts’ats’loba cannot be observed. It is a kind of black box, the outer dimensions of which (what is officially allowed and what is forbidden) are visible, but whose specific content (what actually happens between two lovers) is known at best secondhand, if at all, thereby becoming a fertile field for the imagination: Was this a purely platonic love of absolute restraint? Or was it, on the other hand, an absolutely libertine form of fornication? Such doubts and questions exist not only for ethnographers and other contemporary Georgians but also for the very people who practiced it, who constantly express similar doubts about how things went with others.

The alterity of the practices of ts’ats’loba is magnified by these absences. The practice is exotic and strange in itself, but it is also distant in space and time, belonging to there and then, an “elsewhere” to the “here” of normative Georgian sexuality. It presents itself as a hieroglyphic, which needs to be deciphered and translated. But each attempted translation into normative categories of sexuality produces only deformations and distortions, doubts

and aporias about what ts’ats’loba “really” meant in practice. Since it cannot be experienced directly, it circulates not as a practice but a set of citations, whether folkloric, ethnographic, or literary, which circulate independently of the (absent) practice. The very citationality of its circulation, the irreducible gap between the actual practices (then, there) and the circulating fragments about those practices (here, now), produces a haunting sense of absence and alterity. As Constantine Nakassis points out, citation involves an indexical relation that is “based on an irreducible difference, or gap, between the indexical source and its target, the cited and citing events. . . . To construe a discursive event as a citation is precisely to maintain . . . the distance between these two time-spaces.”21 The citationality of this practice, the fact that it now lives only as a reported sexuality, not a practiced one, allows it to serve too as an imagined or fantasized sexuality, a field of unrealized and unrealizable potentials for the framing of desires. Thus, as it drifts further and further from reality, it comes to have what Patrick Galbraith, in another context, calls a sort of “virtual potentiality” in which “the threat of real-world relational interaction is effectively removed from the fantasy, as is the potential for any real-life consequences.”22

Following Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick, here I assume that sexuality, whatever else it may be, is irreducibly about alterity, a framing of the erotic and a relational or transitive matter of desire that necessarily involves both self and other. Sexuality also consists of the various genres through which people “represent their erotic desires, the way they construct themselves as desiring subjects and address the real or imagined objects of their desire.”23 Sexuality thus not only involves real sexual practices but also centrally involves the circulation and citation of genres of representation of real and fantasized sexual practices. In this sense, all sexuality is shot through with citationality.

These citations stand at varying degrees of distance from actual sexual practice. The linguistic genres that frame Pshav-Khevsur desire (for example, poetry) originally circulated within the same community in which these desires were acted upon, serving to report on or reflexively frame concrete desires for actual others. By contrast, the citational recirculation of these reported Pshav-Khevsur desires in fantastic, folkloric, ethnographic, and literary discourses in the nation-state allows these reported desires to serve as an object of desire themselves, becoming an absent, unattainable image of a (by now) impossible sexuality. Ts’ats’loba, once the name of the desire for an other (that is, for a ts’ats’ali), now becomes a parasitic desire for a genre of desire (desire

for ts’ats’loba). This desire consists of fragmented fantasies refracted across the various reframing genres, fragments of a lost totality that must be reassembled and refashioned in the imagination. Each such refashioning reflects different, and often disemically opposed, models of the original.

To explore these reframings, I will report three further ethnographic encounters I have had with fragments of this tradition, each of which follows a specific, concrete mode of citationality that reframes this practice. First, there is the folkloric and ethnographic representation of ts’ats’loba as a tradition, beginning in the 1920s and 1930s. Second, there is the somewhat salacious literary reframing of these ethnographic descriptions in the early modernist period (also from the 1920s to 1930s) in what might be called an indigenous erotic literature. And last, there is the reframing of all these different versions of ts’ats’loba on contemporary anonymous Internet forums as either an object or a position of critique for normative Georgian sexuality and also potentially as objects of private desire.

**Folkloric Sexuality**

The Pshavians of Pankisi Gorge settled on the higher slopes of the gorge, nearer to their ancestral homeland, some of the villages so high that they say they sit “on the shores of the sky.” It was in one such village, after a grueling hike of many hours in the hot sun, that a Georgian folklorist colleague and I found ourselves sitting with Babulia, an elderly Pshavian woman. For different reasons, we both wanted poetry, and, like many Pshavians, Babulia was a poet. My colleague wanted examples of folk poetry, handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth and exhibiting the features of an anonymous and collective “folk creativity” that is the central object of folkloric study. For me, the content was more important than the medium of transmission: I wanted poetry about love, specifically ts’ats’loba.

At my colleague’s request for folk poetry, Babulia brought out some tattered notebooks and put on some reading glasses. My colleague looked at the piles of worn notebooks in obvious and undisguised dismay. For him, written poetry was not “folk.” Here we had something else entirely: notebooks filled with poems that were tattered from years of circulating from hand to hand between villagers; perhaps they could be called “folk samizdats.” In spite of

24. A general desire for ts’ats’loba (i.e., a desire for a kind of relationship) is parasitic on actual relationships that express desire between specific ts’ats’alis, which is what the term ts’ats’loba denotes. Thus, reframings of ts’ats’loba are not only citational but parasitic, in Michel Serres’s sense of denoting a relation to a relation and not the entities brought together by the relation. Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Baltimore, 1982), 33. For further discussion of citationality and parasitism as parallel semiotic conditions, see Constantine V. Nakassis, “Para-s/cite, Part I: The Parasite” and “Para-s/cite, Part II: The Paracite,” in “Parasites,” ed. Matthew Wolf-Meyer, special issue of *Semiotic Review* (May 2013), at www.semioticreview.com/index.php/thematic-issues/issue-parasites (last accessed 7 January 2014).

this, my colleague became excited on my behalf when Babulia announced she had found at least one poem about a ts’ats’ali:

BABULIA: Here, this one is about a ts’ats’ali.

COLLEAGUE: Well, well, we are really interested in ts’ats’alis, Paul is especially interested; that’s why he came all the way from America, so he could record that sort of thing.

BABULIA:

\[
\begin{align*}
P’at’ara davts’ev kaltana, & \quad \text{I lay down with a woman for a short time,} \\
Gavkhsen mdzivian saqelo; & \quad \text{I opened her beaded collar;} \\
Kalma khelebi shem’t’atsa: & \quad \text{The woman grabbed my hands:} \\
“Ras shevebi, dzaghlis nasheno!” & \quad \text{“What are you doing, you offspring of dog!} \\
Khelebs ubeshi rad miqop, & \quad \text{Why are you sticking your hands in my bosom,} \\
Agremts shav mits’am dagpeno! & \quad \text{May you go to hell!} \\
Its’ek da kheli ar gadzra, & \quad \text{Lie there and don’t move your hands,} \\
Aghar gamikhsna saqelo! \ldots & \quad \text{Don’t open my collar again! \ldots} \\
Me arai makvs sasheno!” & \quad \text{I have got nothing for you!”} \\
Avdek, gamovts’qe menatsa; & \quad \text{I got up, I got angry myself;} \\
“Ra makvis shentan sapero? & \quad \text{“What do I have that is good enough for you?} \\
Ts’ukhelis vits’ev kaltana, & \quad \text{Last night I lay down with a woman,} \\
Mtel kveqanaze gavpeno!” & \quad \text{I’ll spread the news across the whole world!”} \\
Chokhis k’altaze gameba: & \quad \text{I tied my chokha [coat] about the waist:} \\
“Sad mikhval, mits’is damqrelo?” & \quad \text{“Where are you going, wretched of the earth?”} \\
Avdek, davuts’ev iseva, & \quad \text{I got up, I lay down next to her again,} \\
Gavkhsen mdzivian saqelo. & \quad \text{I opened her buttoned collar.} \\
Mopereboda isitsa: & \quad \text{She, too, showed affection:} \\
“Sad midiodi, shavbnelo?” & \quad \text{“Where were you going, evil one?”}
\end{align*}
\]

COLLEAGUE: Who said it?

BABULIA: What do I know?

COLLEAGUE: It’s folk?

BABULIA: It’s folk.

COLLEAGUE: [appreciating the irony of the ending]

Mopereboda isitsa: She, too, showed affection:

“Sad midiodi, shavbnelo?” “Where were you going, evil one?”

The poem Babulia offered us is a somewhat racy one, which specifically describes the kinds of intimate negotiations of the “rules” of ts’ats’loba (specifically, those about “where you can put your hands”) that would never be known about otherwise. The poem is particularly interesting because it also carries the meta-message that the publicity of poems like this one might be used not only to report on such intimate sexual negotiations but also to act
performatively within those very negotiations by threatening to publicize them (“Last night I lay down with a woman, / I’ll spread the news across the whole world!”).

The poem turns on intimate negotiations of the explicit rules of ts’ats’loba, which are themselves reasonably well known, as Gabrieli, another Pshavian, showed when we asked him about the practice. However, as Gabrieli moved from a relatively confident articulation of the rules of ts’ats’loba, he became much more hesitant and skeptical when discussing the question of the extent to which the rules were followed in practice; that is, given such license, how did it not end in sex?

GABRIELI: They had freedom [to touch] the chest. Both had their bodies alongside one another, they were not allowed to touch one another with their bodies and they freely touched each others’ chests; they could kiss each other too, they could hug each other too, they could caress each other too.

COLLEAGUE: And to what extent was there this, that is—in the youthful period, that is—self-restraint?

GABRIELI: Self-restraint, as it happens now, I myself underwent this . . .

COLLEAGUE: This process.

GABRIELI: I have undergone this process. Here I think that it is a belief, a belief that the doors to everything carnal there is are already locked to you. Well, that’s the way it was with me; I don’t know how it was with others.

COLLEAGUE: It’s a tradition.

GABRIELI: Yes, a tradition . . .

The rules of ts’ats’loba that Gabrieli provided are relatively “public” aspects of the tradition, known to anyone. They are part of the implicit knowledge that is presumed in the poem recited by Babulia, but Babulia’s poem alludes to the hidden possibility that these rules were often subject to negotiation. Having adduced the normative order of what my colleague called a (secular) “tradition” (and Gabrieli cast as a [religious] “belief”), Gabrieli himself can only refer to his own personal experiences here when confronted with the question of the extent to which these rules were actually followed: “Nowadays some people don’t believe me and they ask me, ‘Were there really, Gabrieli, such things?’ ‘There were,’ I answered. ‘Have you experienced them yourself?’ ‘I have experienced them,’ I said. ‘Then, how did you restrain yourself, man?’ ‘Well, I restrained myself without a problem.’ I don’t know.” At this point, my colleague proposed that because it was a folk tradition, everyone was more or less as well behaved or well disposed toward ts’ats’loba as Gabrieli. Gabrieli politely corrected this generalization. Even then, apparently, some were not happy with engaging in it (for reasons that, in this case, remain a mystery).

COLLEAGUE: Everyone was that way then and that’s why.

GABRIELI: That was why and it was something . . . and not everyone was that way, not everyone could be that way. I knew one old man, he was eighty-two years old, this man, when I was sixty-two . . .

Yes, I was asking him, “Hey, Uncle Khumara, . . . wasn’t that
a great time, that ts’ats’loba, and wasn’t it in your day?” “No,” he told me. “It made me unhappy.”

COLLEAGUE: Not everyone could stand it.

GABRIELI: Not everyone could stand it, and so they avoided it.

**From Poetic to Ethnographic Sexuality**

When attempting to move beyond his own personal, private experiences of ts’ats’loba and those of others he had spoken to personally, poetry was the main resource that Gabrieli turned to, and, one should note, the only material Babulia offered. Gabrieli, for example, expressed some doubts about certain practices, since he had not experienced them himself. Sometimes he filled in the blanks with reasonable conjecture. For example, when asked what a boy and a girl would talk about when they lay down together, he surmised reasonably enough that “probably they would talk about love, other [quotidian conversational topics] wouldn’t be there, like sheep, cows, fields, nothing like that.” However, when he reached the limits of his own private experience, for the most part he became noticeably hesitant, and he turned again and again to poetry. He adduced evidence from poetry that, for example, two women would on occasion lie down with one man.

GABRIELI: Sometimes two lay down together.

COLLEAGUE: Two women.

GABRIELI: Two women, the man lay down in the middle. There is a poem:

*Or kalt sho, vt’rialebd*, Between two women, I turned,

*Sagrekhelshi t’arivita* Like a spindle in a spindle-spinner.

Notice the comparison!

Poetry and other modes of nonpersonal experience play an analogous role in ethnographic accounts of the practice. Indeed, if we look more closely at the data in the various ethnographies produced from the 1920s to the 1930s which form the bulk of the canonical texts, such as those by Sergi Makalatia, we find that they rely on indigenous representations of the tradition in the form of poetry to a remarkable extent when discussing ts’ats’loba and sts’orproba. 26 For early ethnographers like Makalatia, the first ethnographer to write extensively about ts’ats’loba and sts’orproba, another avenue of entry into the mysterious, intimate world of ts’ats’loba and sts’orproba, as with Gabrieli, had to do with personal social networks. Indeed, it was through a slender set of coincidences and an extremely intimate social circle that the private sexual lives of Pshavs and Khevsurs entered the national ethnographic and  

26. For example, Makalatia’s short pamphlet of 1924, *Pshauri Ts’ats’loba da Khevsuruli Sts’orproba*, runs to twenty-eight pages, of which fifteen (pp. 13–21, 24–29) are reproductions of poetry about these relationships. His complete ethnography of Pshavi (Sergi Makalatia, *Pshavi* [Tbilisi, 1934]) devotes about eight pages to the topic, which contain no less than sixty lines of poetry in the discussion of the practice (pp. 118–126), as well as ten pages in the section on folk poetry which are devoted to this topic (pp. 221–30).
folkloric canon. In Makalatia’s case, it was through his membership in a circle of mountaineer ethnographers revolving around a Khevsur couple, Aleksi Ochiauri and Natela Baliauri. These two had been exiled from Khevsureti to neighboring Pshavi for eloping (and having broken related rules forbidding marriages between members of the same community). They subsequently became ethnographers of their own region as well as hosts to virtually all outsider ethnographers, like Makalatia. In addition, the fact that his brother Niko had married Natela Baliauri’s sister Melano also probably provided an intimate resource for the exploration of Khevsur customs.

Essentially, then, ethnographers like Makalatia confronted the same epistemological dilemmas and aporias that we have seen Pshavians like Gabrieli wrestle with themselves: “Well, that’s the way it was with me; I don’t know how it was with others.” When confronted with the epistemic limits of their own experiences, the ethnographers, like Gabrieli, often turned to poetry.

While I was interested in the content of this poetry (that is, as “love poetry”), my Georgian colleague was particularly interested in its mode of circulation (as “folk poetry”). From a folklorist’s perspective, the terms folk and tradition both point to a sphere of oral, intergenerational textual circulation (called “tradition”) that is characterized by anonymous collective authorship (the “folk”). This received view of traditional publics makes them the opposite of modern print publics; they become slumbering publics whose primary mode of transmission is intergenerational rather than between contemporaries, unconscious publics who lack self-awareness and reflexivity, for whom anonymity results from the immersion of the individual in the collectivity through forgetting. We have, however, already seen evidence that these publics acted reflexively, not just reportively, in the negotiations of romance, and that they provided individual participants with an indigenous metacommentary in the form of strangers’ anonymous poetry with which to compare their own private experiences. In addition, mountain poetry was not typically anonymous, as many poems in fact had the name of the author (matkvami) built into the poem itself. Poetry tended to be composed anonymously, depending on whether the poem’s generic content would be inconsis-

27. For a detailed discussion of this episode, see Manning, “Love Khevsur Style,” 34–45.

28. The sphere of circulation of (rural, peasant) folk poetry is thus ideologically opposed to a sphere of modern, urban print “publics” inhabited by individual writers: “When I say ‘Folk Poetry’ I mean . . . that poetry, which spreads, usually by oral transmission, from one man to another and from the older generation to the younger. Its preserver and defender is the memory of many persons, and this is the reason that its form and content is mutable.” Akaki Shanidze, Kartuli Khahluri P’oezia, vol. 1, Khevsuruli (Tbilisi, 1931), 5. On the formation and policing of this opposition between “folk” and “individual” creativity, see Zaza Shatirishvili and Paul Manning, “Why are the Dolls Laughing?,” 213–18, and Paul Manning, Strangers in a Strange Land: Occidentalist Publics and Orientalist Geographies in Nineteenth-Century Georgian Imaginaries (Boston, 2012), 155–82. On the practices of the erasure of various kinds of hybrids of folk and individual authorship, see Manning, “Love Khevsur Style.”

tent with having an explicit matkvami (such as in the leksi or shairi genres, which dealt with living people and were potentially insulting).\(^{30}\) Poetry by women in particular tended to be composed and circulated anonymously, but it was reclaimed from the commons of the folk as individual compositions as the women authors grew older: “Women take part in the composition of leksi and shairi poetry too, but not as openly as men; reciting poetry publicly like a man is very shameful for a woman in Pshavi. While a woman is young, she composes poems secretly; when she gets old, then she no longer is ashamed as much and often teaches poems she herself has composed to young girls and boys.”\(^{31}\) Thus, these intimate practices are not merely objects of private experience and gossip between known consociates but, thanks to the circulation of large corpuses of poetry about such experiences and practices, they can also be compared to those of anonymous strangers. The intimate experience of ts'ats'loba and sts'orproba, as with any modern public, normatively includes not only intimates but also strangers.\(^{32}\) As one Khevsur poet put it, “A good poem is like a bird: whence it flies and where it is flying, no one knows.”\(^{33}\) But these indefinite strangers are not “just anyone”; they are strangers who have shared some of the same or similar experiences. Moreover, as the poem above shows, these publics could act reflexively within the private negotiations between lovers: the woman adduces the publicly known rule about where one can touch, and the man adduces the possibility of writing a poem publicizing their private encounter.

It is with folkloric and ethnographic citations of these poems that they entered actual modern print publics, which included strangers who have no comparable experiences. These publications comprised not only ethnographies but also modernist novels, like Mikheil Javakhishvili’s Tetri Sagelo (White Necklace, originally written in 1926 and recomposed in 1934), in which poems seemingly drawn from folklore or folkloric chrestomathies (such as Akaki Shanidze’s collection of 1931) abundantly decorate the text.\(^{34}\) Thus, the ability of ethnographers (and modernist novelists) to write about this practice without having experienced it directly was parasitic on the ways that Pshavians and Khevsurs themselves publicized their own experiences as part of an indigenous epistemology of an only ever partially knowable intimacy.

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Literary Sexuality

In the official disemic register of “self-presentation,” the Pshavs and the Khevsurs are the chivalric knights and romantic troubadours of Georgian tradition, and the public imagination of their private romantic life is equally chivalric, which is to say, chaste. However, the often salacious Georgian modernist novels, specifically Javakhishvili’s *Tetri Saqelo* and Grigol Robakidze’s *Engadi* (1932), drawing on a more carnal interpretation of ts’ats’loba, present another, somewhat opposed, citational representation of Pshav and Khevsur sexual practices. Such novels capitalize on the potentially scandalous and even lurid private dimension of ts’ats’loba and sts’orproba through a kind of ethnographically licensed voyeurism, remaking ethnographic materials into an indigenous erotic literature and at the same time conferring on the erotic a kind of literariness.

Given this ambiguous literary precedent, it is not surprising that I encountered these two discourses—romantic and pornographic, sublime and salacious—conjoined in a literary context of sorts. In 2006 I was sitting in a restaurant of socialist vintage that sat behind the Soviet-era central publishing house, the unwilling guest of some book publishers who also happened to be Svan mountaineers. (Such mountain dwellers come from a region that does not happen to have these romantic practices, or, for that matter, much romance at all. It is important for this anecdote to know that the local stereotypes about Svans’ legendary stupidity make them the butt of equally stupid jokes, quite the opposite of rather more positive stereotypes about Pshavs and Khevsurs.) These Svan book publishers were acquaintances of a friend who was trying to get them to publish his book. I was staring down a large glass of vodka that I was required to drink, while drunken, disjointed conversations ebbed and flowed around me. The whole tenor of the proceedings seemed designed to remind me of the early postsocialist period. Certainly, everyone present was of that vintage.

It was also a literary evening of sorts. One Svan, rehearsing a conversational gambit I hadn’t heard since 1992, listed all the American authors he had read and then asked me whether I had read any of them. I confessed that William Saroyan, J. D. Salinger, O. Henry, and assorted others from the late socialist canon of American literature were not my favorites. In drunken triumph he announced, “See?! You are not cultured; you do not even know your own culture, let alone ours, while we have read your great geniuses!” I allowed that I was a notoriously uncultured barbarian, which seemed to satisfy him. The man to my left somehow got us on the topic of Georgia’s other mountain dwellers, the Khevsurs. Perhaps inspired by the obligation to give a toast to love, he chose the topic of Khevsur romantic traditions. With a sly drunken grin he said, “You know, there the boys and the girls lie together, with a sword between them, you see, so that nothing happens.” He leered and leaned closer, explaining why Svans, compared to the Khevsurs, are not as stupid as people think. If he, a Svan, were lying next to a Khevsur girl, he would just take the sword, toss it aside, and get down to business!

If the way that Khevsur traditions seem to accrete random chivalric details, like swords lying between chaste lovers, illustrates the romanticizing
tendency surrounding ts’ats’loba and sts’orproba, the creepy drunken Svan tossing these imaginary swords into the corner of the Khevsur hut illustrates the perverting tendency of the public’s reception of Khevsur romance. By dispensing with these swords, which are, after all, no more than literary decorations, Khevsur private life, made into public national tradition, can again inform private fantasies.

But there was, of course, more to this particular literary reference than I realized at the time (since I am, in fact, not as well read as I should be). This drunken Svan was actually following through on the whole literary tenor of the conversation by alluding to Tetri Saqelo, Javakhishvili’s novel about ts’ats’loba. It is in this novel that a good deal of the “revisionist” versions of ts’ats’loba (such as the sword of chastity) made their first appearance. There was nothing innovative in the Svan’s suggestion that all that needed to be done was to toss the sword in the corner, since this is in effect what the hero of the novel does. What at first blush appeared to be a somewhat lecherous non sequitur was revealed to be a coy literary citation.

As this encounter shows, there are two kinds of public stories told about these private practices, one aligning them with restraint, platonic love, and chivalry, the other replete with erotic and frankly salacious fantasies grounded in one’s own sexual frustration. These two opposed tendencies happen to be illustrated by the two Georgian modernist novels from which most of the contemporary mythology about these practices derives, namely Javakhishvili’s Tetri Saqelo and Robakidze’s Engadi. While Tetri Saqelo frames ts’ats’loba salaciously and sexually, Engadi turns on the restraint imposed by this chastely framed tradition (in this case, Khevsur sts’orproba). Written around the same time as Tetri Saqelo, Engadi also grew out of the period’s ethnographic and folkloric literatures discussed above. And like Tetri Saqelo, the novel features an outsider hero (the vicarious site of reader identification and illicit desire), a Georgian from the plains who, finding himself in the mountains, does not understand the nature of the practice that he becomes involved in with a local girl.35

This general incomprehensibility of Khevsur sts’orproba to the rest of Georgia is a major trope of the narrative. In one important scene, the non-Khevsur hero finds himself enjoying, and yet enduring, this relation with Mzekala, a local Khevsur woman:

[Mzekala] came, lustful and immaculate. Our caresses turned into torture.
“Why can’t what happens between men and women happen between us?” I asked her, lying by my side. “Am I not your sts’orperi and you—mine!” she answered me. “Is this not torture?” I cried out. “Is it torture?” she answered me. “Isn’t it sweet?” “This’ was without a doubt sweet, but also so torturous. What man could endure this fire?
Mzekala informed me of many things about sts’orproba.
“Sometimes the sts’orperis don’t have enough strength,” she told me, “but this is shameful, it is a shame.” “If they were to marry?” “There can be no

35. Both novelists reinterpret the nature of the rules to make the relationship permeable to outsiders, allowing outsider Georgian readers to imagine themselves vicariously participating in it. In Javakhishvili’s case, the practice is explicitly framed as an obligation of the host to the guest.
As this early literary reworking of the Khevsur practice of sts’orproba shows, the incomprehensibility of this framing of desire arises from the way that it colonizes a space of erotic license (“sweetness”), limited by self-restraint (“torture”) and opposed to both marriage and intercourse.

In Javakhishvili’s novel, too, a woman (Khatuta, the sister of Jurkha, our hero’s sworn brother) comes to the man at night, but their encounter goes somewhat differently. When he sees the woman carrying a sword (khanjali) in the darkness, he calls out:

“Khatuta... Is that you?... Is it really you?... What in the world do you need that khanjali for, woman?”

“So that you do not touch me... I came for sts’orproba... I came to Jurkha’s sworn brother.”

I came close to her, but I encountered the sharp blade and I stopped. Now I understood. I remembered the whispers of the previous day, Khatuta’s shy singing, Jurkha’s warning, and stories I had heard in the past about a strange Khevsur custom—cruel, delightful, and destructive sts’orproba—ts’ats’loba—a strict custom expressive of the highest brotherly love—even today I do not know whether it is savage or superhuman, divine or satanic: a Khevsur has a woman lie in bed with a guest who is a relative or a sworn brother, but in the morning this woman must rise again still a virgin. I snatched the sword from her coat and put it aside.

Khatuta noticed and told me:

“Give it to me here. This is not the rule!”

“What time is it for rules?”

I couldn’t open her buttons and I tore them with force.37

In both novels the heroes confront a custom that is seemingly a unity of opposites: pleasure crossed with restraint. Robakidze’s hero behaves with restraint, while Javakhishvili’s dispenses with all restraints, opening her shirt by force (compare this with the male protagonist of Babulia’s poem above). Similarly, Robakidze’s hero ultimately accepts not only that he cannot have sex with Mzekala but also that he cannot marry her, whereas Javakhishvili’s hero ultimately does both with Khatuta. While Robakidze’s account is often credited with being the more realistic ethnographic representation, Javakhishvili’s is the more popular, presumably not only because of the frankly erotic content (his ts’ats’ali [he uses the different terms interchangeably], for example, performs ts’ats’loba in the nude) but because it refashions the practice with literary artifices that domesticate this exotic tradition: he adduces a concern for virginity not found in indigenous tradition but which is a major concern for Georgians, and he turns a sword into both a symbol and a material guarantor of chastity (in a manner strikingly similar to Arthurian romance).

36. Grigol Robakidze’s Engadi was originally published in Bedi Kartlisa, nos. 10–11 (Paris, 1932). The edition I cite here is Grigol Robakidze, Tkhzulebani Tkhutmet’ Tomad, 15 vols. (Tbisili, 2004), 2:189–224. This quotation, from Robakidze, Tkhzulebani Tkhutmet’ Tomad, 2:216, is, incidentally, also the precise one adduced by Aleko Tskhitishvili for the rules of sts’orproba discussed above.

One notes, too, that while Khevsur tradition emphasizes the freely elective, purely sociable nature of these romantic involvements for men and women alike, Javakhishvili turns the sexual relationship between the foreign man and the local woman into a ritual obligation between men, an expression of the homosocial, brotherly love between host and guest or sworn brothers.

Thus resituated, the Svan publisher’s drunken literary reference points to a much wider way in which citations of this tradition informed late socialist sexuality, to the grounding of late socialist sexuality in a much earlier, ethnographically informed (inter)textual practice. Indeed, such citations indicate how ts’ats’loba and st’orproba informed the sexual imaginary for a whole generation. According to friends of the same generation as this man, the generally somewhat impoverished repertoire of erotic and pornographic representations available to them included not only the usual prized western imports of Playboy magazines and pornographic videos but also indigenous forms of ethnographic eroticism, mediated by pseudo-ethnographic novels, like Javakhishvili’s, which included fantasies about some place in Georgia where otherwise unimaginable sexual liberties of various kinds were possible. One of my friends from this generation explained it as follows:

I remember really well that my classmate Temo, when we were, like, fourteen or fifteen years old, that would be 1980 or 1981, drew our attention to one episode from Mikheil Javakhishvili’s novel White Necklace, where, if my memory serves, the main hero (who is the narrator) says, “That night my ts’ats’ali so ts’ats’al-ed me that the second day I couldn’t stand up straight.” Temo’s interpretation of this passage was, “You see, that is, either she gave him a hand job or a blow job.” From this my classmates and I soon came to the conclusion that in reality there was much more sexual liberty in the mountains, that there anal and oral sex and so on were a normal activity, that the activity of being a ts’ats’ali, ts’ats’loba-ing, refers precisely to these kinds of activities, that the so-called legends, that the ts’ats’alis place a sword between them, are simply lies. My classmates and I were not alone in having these notions; many people my age and older have expressed similar ideas.

For Georgians of this background, the Pshavians were libertines for whom anything was possible, except vaginal intercourse: Pshavian romance becomes an absolute inversion of Georgian normative sexual expression, and the ambiguous eroticism of the literary model of ts’ats’loba is concretized as essentially pornographic. More generally, the social life and circulation of this citational sexuality comes to reside essentially in its almost algebraic quality, as incomplete propositions with variables. Its virtual potential for sexual fantasies, what drives its continued circulation, derives both from this indexical linkage to some objective reality that is also always distant and combined with incompleteness, gaps, lacunae, and absences, which can be filled with conjecture and subjective fantasy. That is to say, it is driven by its citationality.

**Virtual Sexuality**

This late socialist citational tradition, with all its aporias and ambiguities, is inherited by online discussions of these practices on the postsocialist Geor-
gian Internet forums of today, where pseudonymity and anonymity afford a public space for open dialogue about sexuality. In recent online discussions of ts’ats’loba, we find all these different streams of citation (ethnographic, literary, and so on), with their various epistemic grounds and authorities, often cut and pasted in large, unreadable blocks of text, swirling and eddying together, so that different, even opposed, understandings of the custom are present side by side in the same debate. For example, depending on how “sex” is defined, in such internet discussions ts’ats’loba maps onto both completely chaste and completely perverted interpretations in ways that precisely echo the literary division of labor in the first half of the twentieth century.

Since these exchanges exist alongside a large number of other Internet forum discussions on a number of other topics—some sexual, some not—one tendency is to assimilate discussions of ts’ats’loba and sts’orproba to the more generally disemic discursive polarities of online Georgian debates on just about anything. For example, one forum participant, “»··A··ä··A··,” wanted to know why this well-worn topic of “mountain traditions” was being resurrected once more, treating it as one more repetition of an endless forum debate about the institution of virginity which can only lead to polarization between well-known camps: “Some say that we take nothing seriously and we have forgotten our culture. . . . Others post once again on ‘the institution of virginity’ and call out to the people that we no longer need this institution of virginity, so we can take off as much clothing as possible: ‘Let’s be free to have boyfriends!’”

Certainly, some forum debates about the topic end up being excessively concerned with what this all has to do with virginity, or they degenerate into general arguments between so-called murtazis (slang, “defenders of tradition”) and progressives. These discussions become just another generic battleground for well-worn debates between positions defined within the disemic representational space of the nation. However, because of the ambivalent nature of the “tradition” under discussion, it can serve not only as a proxy for any national tradition (hence, favored by traditionalists and challenged by progressives) but also, because it is a scandalous inversion of traditional sexuality, be embraced as “European”—that is, “developed”—by progressives and condemned by conservatives.

While it is the very indexicality of the citation that allows it to be epistemically aligned with national tradition, the epistemic uncertainty created by the gaps within that citation produce a space in which doubts and desires can proliferate. One forum participant, “sheshlili” (“crazy”), having gleaned (apparently from Tetri Saqelo, in which this is the case) that ts’ats’loba could happen in the nude, wanted to know some other things: “So to cut a long story short what interests me [is that] I have heard that there was completely nude ts’ats’loba and also caressing the breasts, sex was completely forbidden, but was there caressing the sexual organs by hand and fellatio and cunnilingus or not I haven’t run across anything about that anywhere. And what’s the

38. In TBILISIS FORUMI, 8 July 2011, 1:11 p.m., at forum.ge/?f=20&showtopic=34278143&st=30 (last accessed 10 November 2013).
deal, was there anal sex or not?”39 The possibility of this literary “antimodel,” as raised by sheshlili, is not simply a pornographic inversion of Georgian norms (such that “no sex” means “everything but vaginal intercourse”). For certain posters, it represents the possibility of a progressive, “European,” and yet simultaneously authentic and indigenous, subject position, a challenge to those norms that forbid sex and public displays of affection, celebrate virginity, and so on. As a certain “Sophie Golden” put it in a comment on a recent Internet blog post,

I know a lot of Pshavians and from them I know that very very often ts'ats'loba ends in sex and I think that Pshavi is to this day the most “European” region, where no one pays attention to virginity. This ts'ats'loba is a slightly ridiculous tradition, but even so it seems kinda cool and colorful, if we consider it today.
Likewise, in Javakhishvili’s White Necklace precisely this theme was used, if you remember.
That was my first “erotic” book :D.40

Similarly, one poster, “babairo,” simply considered ts'ats'loba the equivalent of the “European”-style teenager relationship of “boyfriend–girlfriend” (which in contemporary Georgia involves kissing in parks, albeit illegally): “If we were to translate it into contemporary language, this would be girlfriend–boyfriend minus the directly sexual act.” The same commenter added that “such displays of affection, or what contemporary teenagers do (and the police fine them for doing *smile*) had exactly this form.”41 Likewise, “nani” commented in another forum, “At a time when even Europe wasn’t ‘developed’ to this level, things were happening in the mountains of Georgia that contemporary Americans would envy.”42

What is particularly interesting about these occasional online forum debates is how the various fragmentary understandings of this custom can not only inform private fantasies but also open up a public space for critical discussion of contemporary Georgian sexuality in general. On the one hand, the custom in whatever version it is found can become fertile ground for critique of tradition in an endless battle between culturally conservative and culturally progressive Georgians. On the other, it can become a space for progressive imagining of an alternate form of Georgian sexuality. As we would expect, given the complex ambivalence and uncertainty surrounding such practices and their citational histories, the status of ts'ats'loba in these debates is highly variable: sometimes ts'ats'loba plays the role of a venerable tradition defended by conservatives and dismissed as backwardness and idiocy by progressives, while at other times it is an inversion of “correct” tradition.

39. In TBLISIIS FORUMI, 8 July 2011, 12:11 p.m., at forum.ge/?f=20&showtopic=342781438&st=0 (last accessed 10 November 2013).
41. In TBLISIIS FORUMI, 8 July 2011, 3:27 p.m., at forum.ge/?f=20&showtopic=3427814367&st=75 (last accessed 10 November 2013). For the emoticon glossed as *smile*, see forum.ge/html/emoticons/smile.gif (last accessed 10 November 2013).
dismissed by traditionalists as scandalous and stupid and embraced by progressives as “European” and enlightened. In other words, like any traditional custom discussed in any other medium, it becomes a battleground for the defense of or challenges to Georgian national traditions. But because the tradition is itself a somewhat scandalous inversion of other Georgian traditions of sex, marriage, and virginity (and the topic of whether virginity is typically preserved is also frequently debated), it can also be embraced by progressives as an indigenous antidote to traditionalism. This ambivalence makes it, and has made it, a fecund site for citational reanimations, a continual return and ever-ready possibility across generational time and semiotic space.

Certainly, just as its own internal ambiguities make it an ambivalent proxy in heated political discussions between traditionalists and progressives, ts’ats’loba also opens up spaces for imagining alternative sexualities. This is the case whether it is to imagine them only to condemn them, to reconcile them with a moral imagining of the national sexuality, or to imagine them so as to link them to alternate or contemporary sexualities in the present. We have seen, for example, that the absence of sex can lead to erotic interpretations that relate this to a certain licentious attitude toward the frowned-upon practices Georgians now call “petting” (that is, “everything up to vaginal intercourse”), or that, regardless of the rules, it routinely led to sex in actual practice, including frankly pornographic interpretations (wherein this means “fellatio, cunnilingus, anal sex, everything but vaginal intercourse”). Alternatively, the absence of intercourse, and the trial of self-restraint required of both partners, frequently causes others to claim that this is in fact a form of sadism or masochism. Others in the online forums occasionally see in ts’ats’alis nothing other than a translational form of an aspirational, modern, “European” Georgian sociality (an indigenous version of the boyfriend–girlfriend relationship).

For others, it is not so much that ts’ats’loba is an equivalent of an absent, “European” kind of sexual sociability, or even an emergent kind of affection one can find teenagers expressing (and policeman fining) in any park in Georgia, but it is simply the exoticism and alterity of ts’ats’loba that becomes a figure of desire. Ts’ats’loba moves from being the name for a particular kind of desire to being something that is itself an object of desire. Here ts’ats’loba, a figure of desire that has moved from private to public, moves again from public contexts of desire (desire to preserve or change the Georgian nation) back to the realm of private desire (something one wants for oneself), a forbidden desire one can freely express only in the anonymous space afforded by the Internet. “Amelia” wrote: “Oh I’m crazy about it, it’s my dream to experience ts’ats’loba, but who engages in ts’ats’loba in Tbilisi, I seriously like it, a lot.” When asked by another forum member what about the custom attracts her, she could locate it only in a purely irrational space of desire: “What do I know, it must be some sort of psychological nonsense, but to tell you the truth I haven’t thought a lot about why it attracts me, it just does.”

43. In TIBILISIS FORUMI, 9 July 2011, 10:25 p.m., at forum.ge/?f=20&showtopic=34278143&st=75 (last accessed 10 November 2013).
ity that consists of citationality, citations that point back indexically to actual sexualities that are also full of epistemic gaps that gives them a kind of virtual potentiality, an ability to be reanimated by the desires of others and still others, so that they finally move back again from the public space of the nation to the private space of the imagination. Sexualities lost become sexualities regained. Such a cycle of citation and reanimation is in part at the heart of the workings of culture in general: the citation of literary sexuality in the publishing house conversation discussed above, for example, is no different from the recitation of the names of great Georgian and American authors which framed it. However, the fact that it is a citation of a specific sexuality, one that implies a desire for an other, something that is absent, confers upon these citations part of their specificity. Hence, public debates on Internet forums about possible framings of sexual desire are at the same time fraught with private desires for absent others: a desire for a kind of relationship (ts'ats'loba) frames a desire for an actual relationship with a specific other (a ts'ats'ali). “Mtis-Yoili” (whose online pseudonym is a transcription of mtis-goili [“mountain-flower”], goili being the Khevsur dialect form of the standard Georgian qvavili [“flower”]), a stalwart of online forum debates, draws her authority from both her claims to be a Khevsur girl herself and her many citations of standard sources, defending the tradition by framing it ethnographically as an alternative, but still Georgian, form of desire, though not, like amelia, framing it as something she desires for herself. In a reply to Mtis-Yoili, a certain “Lomgul Orgeli” concluded with a striking conflation of these two modalities of desire: “In today’s times, nothing better than ts'ats'loba has been invented *big grin* I want a ts'ats'ali *two people kissing*45

I tarry a moment on the multiple voicing of this last, apparently simple, statement of desire. Uttered by a Pshavian girl of generations past, this post could be read as exactly that, perhaps no more complex than a North American girl wishing for a boyfriend. A desire for something absent, but possible. But uttered by a contemporary Georgian girl on an Internet forum of today, the statement becomes more complicated. It is a statement of personal desire (an expression of sexuality) and also a reference to a long chain of statements of desire refracted through many genres (an instance of citationality), an imagined virtual desire that can never become an actual consummated desire. This seemingly simple statement becomes a declaration of a desire for something absent and also impossible: not only a specific absent other but also a kind of other, an absent kind of relationship (whether a traditional ts'ats'ali or a western-style “boyfriend”) in which such an other is possible. Ts’ats’loba begins as a framing of desire for an actual other, like a frame around a picture of a loved one. Through the long chain of citationality I have described here, attention moves from the picture to the frame itself, which becomes an empty frame for impossible pictures painted by the imagination.

45. In Tbilisis forumi, 9 October 2011, 7:08 p.m., at forum.ge/?f=20&showtopic=34278143&st=135 (last accessed 10 November 2013). For the emoticon glossed as *two people kissing*, also known as “2kiss” (in actuality, one emoticon face kissing a smiling face), see forum.ge/html/emoticons/2kiss.gif (last accessed 10 November 2013).