Time and the Image in the Armenian World:
An Ethnography of Non-Recognition

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Statement

I hereby state that this dissertation contains no materials accepted for any other degrees in any other institutions. The thesis contains no material previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

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Budapest, March 29, 2018

Abstract

The last three decades have seen the socioeconomic collapse of Armenia occur simultaneously with a proliferation of media links to Los Angeles, the new capital of the nation's global diaspora. This multi-sited ethnography analyzes how new cultural repertoires and moral appeals play out in increasingly mediatized life-worlds by tracing the circulation of images in and between these two locations. Highlighting how histories of rupture, from the Armenian Genocide to post-Soviet collapse, inform media engagements, the entanglement of time and images of the nation is explored.

The first half of the thesis inquires into the iconic forms of pan-Armenian campaigns in relation to alliances between Los Angeles diaspora institutions and the post-Soviet oligarchic state. The second half examines how the global nation's socioeconomic and symbolic inequalities are refracted in participatory visual media in Yerevan and Los Angeles. The case studies exemplify a distinction between a recognition-oriented diaspora, seeking justice for the tragedy of the 1915 Genocide but also aspiring to respectability in the US, and a developmental diaspora, driven to realize its visions of Armenia's future in the present through a redistributive ethos. They also show that how the nation is imagined around the world is increasingly shaped by Los Angeles diasporans, who have privileged access to represent the country in public cultures.

The thesis provides a new take on debates concerning the potential of media to synchronize strangers to common concerns across distances. It shows how historical ruptures and inequalities in symbolic and economic power complicate the production of a shared time between homeland and diaspora, even when new media technologies facilitate the alignment of ethnic imaginaries with the unfolding present. This study also contributes to wider debates in critical social theory on the relation between redistribution and recognition, as it illustrates how different understandings of the sources of social suffering are transformed into ethnic and diasporic identities.

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List of Terms and Abbreviations

AMGA	Armenian Media Group of America (television station)
ANCA	Armenian National Committee of America
ARF	Armenian Revolutionary Federation
Asbarez	Los Angeles newspaper of the ARF
ASSR	Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic
Artsakhtsi	Armenian from Nagorno-Karabakh
Dashnak	Member or supporter of the ARF
FaceTime	Video telephone application
Hayastantsi	Armenian from Armenia
HHK	Republican Party of Armenia (*Hayastani Hanrapetakan Kusaktsutyun)*
Horizon	Los Angeles television station of the ARF
Instagram	Online image sharing platform
NKAO	Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (Soviet era)
NKR	Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (de facto state)
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
Parskahay	Armenian from Iran
USArmenia	Los Angeles television station
Vine	Online video sharing platform (now defunct)
Yerevantsi	A person from Yerevan

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1. Introduction: The Armenian World in Times of Exodus

There is a small area of land in Asia Minor that is called Armenia, but it is not so. It is not Armenia. It is a place. There are plains and mountains and rivers and lakes and cities in this place, and it is all fine, … but it is not Armenia. There are only Armenians, and these inhabit the earth, not Armenia, since there is no Armenia.
– William Saroyan, novelist and playwright from Fresno (1936)

You have a great name and reputation all over the world,
Who does not recognize your brave heroes and scientists?
No matter how much I praise you, you are worth it …
How beautiful your colors are, independent Armenia!
- Aram Asatryan, folk-pop singer, a taxi driver's favorite (1991)

In the media ecology of the Armenian diaspora in Southern California, few people are as controversial as Stepan. A middle-aged, bald man sporting a trademark goatee, he has many dedicated fans, but also a range of detractors who seem almost as dedicated as the fans, compelled to criticize and denounce him. Not uncommonly, the disposition of the fan and the detractor go together in the same person.

Stepan grew up in the 1960s and 1970s in Beirut, which was at the time the global capital of the Armenian diaspora. Having fled the Lebanese Civil War and arriving to Los Angeles in the early 1980s, he began his life in the United States doing low-paid jobs such as packing groceries in a supermarket. Through his restless entrepreneurial spirit and unmistakable talent for self-promotion, he has developed a many-faceted career in the Armenian cultural scene of Los Angeles, which succeeded Beirut as the diasporic epicenter soon after he arrived. Over the course of three decades, he has worked as a TV studio engineer, set up a record shop and label, and authored a number of books. Mostly recently, he became a developer of smartphone applications. He remains best known, however, for his interactive, call-in television shows.

I first met Stepan in an Armenian bookstore in Glendale[1] in early 2014, a few days after arriving to Los Angeles to begin my ethnographic fieldwork. When the store's owner,

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[1] Of all the places in Los Angeles County where Armenians have settled, the suburban city of Glendale, located between Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley, has the largest Armenian population—one that forms an ethnic majority (Fittante 2017: 2). Its reputation as the epicenter of the diaspora is such that Los Angeles and Glendale are

a friend of Stepan, explained to him that I am an anthropologist with a special interest in studying media in the diaspora, he turn to me with a firm tone: "You have to realize that it has nothing to do with Armenian culture. It's just business."

Stepan's assertion that my topic had "nothing to do with Armenian culture" begged further explanation. "I have worked in all the studios here for more than twenty years now," he continued, "and I can assure you… it's nothing but people trying to sell themselves, or some product. There is nothing Armenian about it." But before long, it became clear that Stepan at least viewed his *own* media work as an example of Armenian culture. Moreover, he also saw it as an example *for* culture in the diaspora.

"We need to teach the younger generation that they can make money from their Armenian identity," he said. "I am a living proof that it can be done. I make all my money from my Armenian identity." As if to illustrate this point, he handed me his business card. In place of a job description, the card contained only the television host's name with the caption "The Armenian," and a photo portrait showing his goatee dyed in the red, blue and orange of the nation's tricolor.

Stepan told me that Armenian culture in the diaspora, in his view, is too much under control of the churches and the organizations fighting for recognition of the Armenian Genocide. In 2007 he was fired from Horizon, the television channel of a nationalist political party, for expressing this view in a provocative manner. During a call-in show before the annual genocide commemoration, he went live on air dressed up as a 'genocide justice warrior' wearing a plethora of tricolor items. Telling his viewers that this is how they look every year when they march to the Turkish consulate, he began to provoke his audience, parodying some of the most clichéd patriotic lines of famous poets. While attempting to communicate his conviction that flags, slogans and genocide activism are a poor substitute for substantial knowledge of history, language and culture, many viewers called in to denounce the broadcast as a distasteful insult.

often used interchangeably by Armenians. Until the 1980s this status was reserved for a part of East Hollywood that was officially renamed Little Armenia in 2000 (ibid. 9).

As our conversation unfolded, the owner of the bookstore encouraged Stepan to show me his latest project, which was also publicized in the shop with promotional flyers. As he took his telephone from his pocket, Stepan explained that he was developing a smartphone application resulting from a documentation project for which he had traveled to two dozen countries. "My app is a proof to everybody that you don't have to move to Armenia to be Armenian. People here still dream of getting their lands back. They don't realize that a hundred years later *the whole world is Armenian*!" Besides offering a GPS function with a map that helps users navigate to Armenian churches and monuments all over the world, the application serves to spread awareness of the nation's notable achievements in the century following 1915.

"Every day on the news there is an Armenian guy who is abusing the system. Medical fraud, credit card fraud, identity theft, you name it." As he waits for the beta version of his application to load, he continues. "So the younger generation is being forced to deal with non-Armenians telling them 'oh you're Armenian, you guys have the crooks who are doing this and that…' and the kids have no defense. But all of them have iPhones." The application is loaded, and Stepan taps on 'Contributions'.

"So you can tap *automatic transmission*. It tells you what city it was invented in, who invented it, what's the US patent number for it, and what year," Stepan demonstrated. "So the kid can say: 'Listen, you're driving automatic transmission because *an Armenian* made that thing happen for you! You're using an ATM debit card because *an Armenian* created the ATM machine!' If the person says the kid is lying, he can respond: 'Look, here is the proof.' It's a picture of the patent, the inventor and there is a small bio. So all this information will be here. This will be my gift to every Armenian on the planet, on the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide."

Thirteen months later, I find myself in a metro underpass just a few stops outside central Yerevan, at a time when tens of thousands of diasporans had traveled to Armenia to honor the occasion for which Stepan had designed his application: the 2015 Genocide Centennial. As I attempt to grasp the informal trade in centennial-themed products sold in souvenir markets and on the streets, I meet Gayane, a middle-aged vendor from a semi-peripheral district that was once known for its many factories. Upon telling her

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about my academic interest in the commemoration and in her merchandise, she invites me to sit down with her for a coffee.

While heating the water to prepare me a cup of instant coffee, she explains to me that she had recently acquired a small range of products dedicated to the centennial: phone covers, umbrellas, stickers and commemorative pins. As everywhere in Yerevan, as well as on the profile pictures of tens of thousands of social media users, the same logo and slogan could be found on these products: a picture of a purple forget-me-not flower design (*anmoruk*), accompanied by the sentence "I remember and demand." The iconography of this emblem, incorporating trauma and national rebirth into a flower pattern, was explained to me with rehearsed detail by the vendors I had spoken to earlier. Gayane, however, told me to write down that the whole event is a disgrace. She believed that the centennial is merely a publicity stunt created by the government—not just for Armenia's citizens, but also, especially, for the diaspora.

"These tourists from the diaspora want the world to recognize the Genocide," she tells me. "What they fail to recognize is the fact that there is another genocide happening right now here in Armenia. This genocide is being committed by our own president, that criminal hooligan (*khuligan*) Serzh Sargsyan!" Elaborating on this, Gayane draws a parallel between the deportations of the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire to the Syrian desert, causing an estimated million deaths, and the exodus of roughly a million people who have left Armenia since the fall of the Soviet Union in search of better lives. The problem with Armenia, she asserts, lies not in its past but in the present rule of the country by oligarchs who enrich themselves by stealing the money that belongs to the people, while those who work only get poorer. "Everyone is fleeing the country, we are all trying to escape. We are ready go to any country that is not Armenia. I would do so too, if only I had the opportunity."

When I tell her that I have spent several months as a researcher among Armenians in Los Angeles, she insists that I write down in my notebook that the diaspora does not bring anything good to people like her: "Look at the cafes, the hotels and the restaurants in the center of Yerevan. This is where the tourists from the diaspora spend all their money. Don't they realize that these places are owned by the same criminal oligarchs who are robbing us?" I ask her whether she is going to attend the Genocide Monument

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on April 24th, but she responds that she has no time for such things as she works every day. "In Soviet times (*soveti vakht*), we would have vacations. We would go to Lake Sevan or to Kobuleti in Georgia on the Black Sea. These days, I don't remember when was the last time I could take some time off."

Stepan and Gayane were roughly the same age, but living lives that are worlds apart. They were separated not only by geography, gender, and language—the former being fluent in Western Armenian[2], Arabic and English, the latter knowing only Eastern Armenian and Russian. They also exemplify diametrically opposed socioeconomic trajectories—Stepan shows the successful rebuilding of the Middle Eastern diaspora's middle class position in the United States; Gayane fits the downward spiral towards economic precarity following the collapse of the Soviet Union. They command vastly different degrees of physical mobility; from traveling regularly to Armenian diaspora communities all over the world to not having left the country in more than a decade.

And yet, there are unexpected resonances between these two vignettes. Stepan and Gayane each in their own way express a position on the relations between knowledge, responsibility and identity. Stepan is worried that Armenian culture in Los Angeles will disappear if diasporans fail to communicate their cultural achievements to the larger society in which they live. For Gayane, a lack of awareness and understanding of the present-day troubles of post-Soviet Armenia is a reason to disqualify a diaspora which, no less, insists that the world needs to learn the lessons of its catastrophic past. The media producer and the metro underpass vendor each in their own way, for very different reasons, felt that the singular focus on genocide recognition of the diaspora's established powers had led to a marginalization of other important issues. Yet they were also both involved in publicity campaigns for the 2015 centennial, from selling commemorative pins to designing a smartphone application—objects, images and information circulating for a politics of recognition of Armenian history and identity.

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[2] Considered an endangered language by UNESCO, Western Armenian is the version of the national language that was spoken by the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire, with a print culture distinct from Eastern Armenian, which is the official language of Armenia. Excepting the Armenians of Iran, Western Armenian is the lingua franca of the diaspora. The two versions of the language are mutually intelligible but differ in grammar, pronunciation of consonants, and, to a relatively small extent, vocabulary.

The mix of tensions and resonances in and between these two vignettes, taking place in locations half a world apart, illustrates the central theme of this thesis: the relations between Armenia's troubled independence and the Los Angeles diaspora. How does intensified communication and circulation alter the ties between a collapsed homeland and a prosperous diaspora in Southern California? Does the increased transfer of images and information between Yerevan and Los Angeles expand mutual understandings and amplify a sense of unity as equal parts of a global nation, or does it propel new divisions and misunderstandings? How is the organizational fabric of the diaspora changed by the arrival of newcomers from Armenia? And to what extent is the primacy of the struggle for recognition of the 1915 Genocide altered by the influx of new moral appeals and new cultural repertoires from the South Caucasus?

Tracing the movement of people, images, money and information in transnational circuits connecting Yerevan to Los Angeles, I examine how the emergence of an independent Armenia generates new dilemmas of representation, responsibility and recognition in the diaspora. In theorizing my ethnographic encounters, I develop an approach to diaspora studies that foregrounds the continual remediation of past ruptures and present inequalities in participatory practices of image circulation (Belting 2005; Strassler 2010). My conceptual framework deploys Hegelian notions of recognition and mediation to theorize how life-worlds are turned into symbolic repertoires and vice versa. Above all, I highlight tensions between redistribution and recognition (Fraser and Honneth 2004), as 'iconic' underdevelopment increasingly competes with non-recognition in the cultural production of notions of homeland and diaspora.

The central argument of this thesis is that the interplay between the socioeconomic collapse of Armenia and the proliferation of communicative links with Los Angeles leads to a multiplication of ways of being and feeling Armenian (Bakalian 1993), rather than a merger of differences into shared understandings. This is a fracturing movement driven by the increasing tensions between recognition struggles and redistributive needs (Fraser and Honneth 2004), both of which have proliferated since the transition years. Far from an integrated sociological organism with a shared sense of moving through homogenous time (Anderson 1991), or a teleology of return from exile (Safran 1991), the Armenian world displays an increasingly complex range of orientations to time and space, informed by different historical, geographical and class trajectories (cf. Tölölyan

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2000). While the crises and cultural forms of post-Soviet Armenia increasingly break through the traditional notions of identity managed by diaspora institutions, the degree to which a sense of coevalness with the homeland appears is split along the lines of two trends: on the one hand, a recognition-oriented diaspora is activated for the homeland when current events are felt to resonate with the 1915 Genocide, while on the other hand, a developmental diaspora engages mostly through its visions for the future. For Armenia itself, how the nation is perceived across the world is increasingly shaped by Los Angeles diasporans, who have privileged access to represent the nation and its recognition struggles in global public cultures.[3] As we shall see, these trends and tensions are rendered visible, negotiated and contested in the social life of images.

Taking seriously G.W.F. Hegel's insistence in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977) that one must be ready to 'tarry with the negative', the overarching theme that I return to throughout this thesis is the generative force of non-recognition in sustaining, energizing and reinvigorating diasporic identity projects. Each chapter examines the affective energies released by structures non-recognition, from Turkish denial of the 1915 Genocide to the absence of recognition for the Armenian-claimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic on the *de jure* territory of Azerbaijan and the felt absence of respect for the diaspora in Armenia and vice versa. Conceiving of my thesis as an ethnography of non-recognition, I foreground this generative power of the negative. But throughout the thesis, I also frame the recognition struggles that propel Armenians in relation to questions of redistribution—from the privatization of post-Soviet Armenia's assets by oligarch politicians for the benefit of their personal patronage networks to socioeconomic inequalities among subethnicities in Los Angeles.

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[3] The term *public culture* was elaborated by Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge (1988) in the first issue of the journal of same name as an alternative for mass culture, popular culture or folk culture. The latter terms tend to reproduce unproductive dichotomies between high and low culture, the cosmopolitan and the parochial, the rural and the urban, or the mediated and the unmediated, none of which are necessarily mutually opposed in today's world. The emphasis on 'publicness' also highlights the dimensions of deliberation and negotiation, as public culture is above all "an arena where other types, forms and domains of culture are encountering, interrogating and contesting each other in new and unexpected ways" (ibid. 6).

1.1. Recognition and Redistribution in the Armenian World

Moral wounds of non-recognition provide much of the affective substrate of public life in the Armenian world. It is a negativity that mobilizes people, produces things, raises funds and sustains cultural production. Withheld recognition underlies orientations to both time and space. One is not recognized by *some* entity, *somewhere*, to be addressed in order to right the wrongs it is felt to have caused. Over the last few decades, post-genocide diaspora Armenians[4] have time and again voiced this injustice in a register of halted temporality: time remains frozen at 1915 as long as the world does not provide its due validation of the nation's catastrophic past. Ultimately, only the perpetrator state, it is believed, can restore the flow of time; only after recognition can the wounds of a nation unjustly held captive to denial begin to heal. An estimated 130,000 people gave voice and visibility to this paradigm, which is at once a moral epistemology and an identity claim, at the march to the Turkish consulate in Los Angeles on April 24th, 2015—one hundred years after the roundup of Istanbul's Armenian intellectual and cultural elite, the onset of a genocide that emptied Eastern Anatolia of the Armenian population that had lived on it for over two millennia.

The organized deportation and massacre of an estimated million Armenians between 1915 and 1922 by the late Ottoman Empire remains one of the gravest crimes against humanity of the 20th century. In almost every Armenian family, some member was affected, and stories continue to be transmitted even now that almost all survivors have passed away. Its active, organized denial by the Turkish successor state, a denial in the face of a wide consensus among historians[5], has given birth to damaging hatreds and diplomatic conflicts that know few equals in terms of their persistence and harmful consequences (De Waal 2015). Given the oftentimes shameless links between non-recognition of the Genocide and instrumental politics, such as Turkey's NATO

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[4] By post-genocide diaspora Armenians I mean that segment of the diaspora, often doubly displaced via the Middle East, that became a diaspora as a result of the Genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Turks in the broadest and longest sense of the word—from the Hamidian massacres of the late 19th century to the aftermath of First World War. These are people whose ancestors lived under Ottoman rule on what is today Eastern Turkey, as opposed to Russian rule on what became Soviet Armenia. While their internal differences are numerous, I use the concept here to draw an emphatic contrast with the 'new diaspora' that came to LA from the Soviet Union.
[5] For an edited collection with contributions from renowned international, Armenian and Turkish scholars that exemplifies this consensus, see Suny et al. 2011.

membership informing the decisions of American Congress, it is not surprising that the Turkish consulate or a local congressman is for many Armenians the object of address when seeking justice for ancestors who fell victim to the tragedy.

The hopes invested in recognition are in the first place a result of intergenerational transmission, as memories of the massacres continue to be passed on. Recognition of the planned annihilation of a people, many Armenians believe, is a responsibility owed to its silenced victims. But, as we have already seen, this vision of justice is neither inevitable nor immediate. In Yerevan, Gayane did not feel part of the global struggle for genocide recognition, in spite of living in a country of which almost half the population can trace its origins back to the Genocide's deportations, orphanages and refugee flows.[6] Having experienced the collapse of Soviet society in the transition years on the skin, recognition seemed an abstract demand to her. In Los Angeles, Stepan's unwillingness to support the marches to the Turkish consulate suggests that diaspora institutions, too, play their part in shaping non-recognition as a particular incentive for action: his refusal to reproduce the dominant orientation to Turkish denial got him fired from the television station of a nationalist political party.[7] His expression of autonomy from the recognition struggle on which an entire cosmology has been built was not welcomed. Non-recognition is thus not only an obstruction from the outside, but also internally reproduced as a moral pedagogy, directing past injustices and present experiences toward particular communal ties and investments.

This phenomenon of the social mediation of non-recognition simultaneously expresses something highly particular about the Armenian people and its trajectory through history, and a structure of feeling that seems at times almost universal in today's world. Although Armenians have been a paradigmatic case of a diasporic people since the Middle Ages[8], it is the Genocide that started the trajectory of it becoming a nation with

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[6] Although the Genocide is sometimes treated as a 'diaspora issue', even the most cursory glance at present-day Armenia reveals its huge impact on its population and geography—from districts in Yerevan named after towns in present-day Eastern Turkey to villages where the Western Armenian dialect is still spoken to this day.
[7] This party is the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (*Dashnaktsutyun*), the most powerful political entity in the diaspora, which will be discussed in more detail.
[8] Khachig Tölölyan lists the period from 1045 to 1453, characterized by fleeing from Central Asian invasions and the establishment of the exile kingdom of Cilicia, as the first great wave of dispersion (2000: 116).

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a diaspora population of nowadays six to seven million people—more than twice the population of the Republic of Armenia. The notion of a collective return to the ancestral lands of present-day Eastern Turkey is still a nominal part of the ideology cultivated by some institutions and elites in the diaspora. But the unexpected appearance of an independent state in 1991 has rendered the traditional exilic position increasingly difficult to maintain (Tölölyan 2000), as repatriations have been rare. The diaspora's investment in the struggle for recognition thus concerns an existential validation of the tragedy underlying its genesis. And to the extent that recognition displaces the older trope of return, it also serves to justify its permanence.

If these developments point to the unique centrality of recognition for Armenians, it is also true that demands for the state's acknowledgment of historical injustices and quests for affirmative self-images in public culture have become an ever-more common feature of a broad landscape of emancipatory politics since the end of the Cold War. Both the marches to the Turkish consulate and Stepan's smartphone app do not merely typify one nation's singularity; they also provide insight into a larger global historical conjuncture. Sometimes glossed as a transition from the politics of redistribution towards a politics of recognition (Fraser and Honneth 2004), or more derogatively by critics, as 'identity politics', this development has spawned a large literature in critical social theory, commonly referred to as recognition theory.

The recurrent scenario that runs throughout recognition theory is as follows: an external world mirrors back inaccurate, untruthful or demeaning representations to a subject, which, in response, is compelled to seek a righting of the wrongs felt in this distorted version of itself by entering a struggle for recognition. It was Hegel who famously coined the phrase "the struggle for recognition" (*Kampf um Anerkennung*) in the section on the master-slave dialectic of his *Phenomenology* (1977: 111-119). Central to Hegelian recognition theory is the assumption that intersubjectivity precedes subjectivity—we only gain consciousness when we are conscious of others being conscious of us; identities take shape when we see ourselves reflected in the gaze of others (Williams 1992). When others fail to recognize us, 'moral wounds' are born— psychological injuries that come with the imperative to seek justice from the misrecognizing agent (Honneth 1992; McNay 2008: 272). As much as feelings of hurt and resentment may engender a desire to destroy the misrecognizing agent, as in the

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famous master-slave dialectic, recognitive conflict can ultimately only be settled through a power dynamic in which a mutual *dependency* between the unrecognized and the would-be recognizer is central. Relationships of recognition thus involve dilemmas of agency, or in a more political register, sovereignty, and its limits; a prerequisite for control over one's fate that is itself never completely under control.

In his most influential essay on the topic, Charles Taylor observes that, if identities are shaped by the distribution of recognition by others, "a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or a contemptible picture of themselves" (1992: 24). But this formulation poses a number of problems for empirically driven cultural analysis. For what are the criteria for the non-contemptible depictions that, if mirrored, would be able to heal the moral wound, and would they heal it equally for everyone? How do we distinguish recognitive justice from forms of voice or visibility that are oppressive rather than emancipatory? And, lastly, can we assume that groups are accurately represented when staged in public as unified in their recognitive claims, or is such assumed legitimacy a mere tool of rhetoric for identity entrepreneurs?

We have already seen that even the severe limit case of the Genocide does not create a unified recognition struggle. In fact, a small minority of Armenians in Los Angeles claims that the United States has *already recognized* the Armenian Genocide due to Ronald Reagan using the term in 1981.[9] These diasporans argue that the energies of dominant institutions would be better invested in causes which they believe to be more urgent. This brings us to the relation between recognition and redistribution.

For Gayane, the sale of products that call for genocide recognition derived not from her idealistic conviction, but from economic necessity. In her denunciation of the centennial as an instrument of corrupted oligarchs she saw recognition politics not as a path to justice for all Armenians, but as a simulacrum distracting from the real problems. Stepan's discourse for the centennial was similarly skeptical. But his resentment was not directed at oligarchs, but at local institutions, which he blamed for a sense of

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[9] For context, see Anthony Barsamian and Noubar Afeyan, "The Armenian Genocide: Picking up where Reagan Left off." http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/international/328870-the-armenian-genocide-picking-up-where-reagan-left-off

stagnation in the diaspora. Having launched his application, he instructed his social media followers on April 24th, 2015 to ignore both diaspora institutions and Turkey's provocations.[10] In place of marching for recognition, he urged diasporans to work the entire day and called for donating the day's salary to a post-independence humanitarian organization headquartered in Yerevan: the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund.[11] Prioritizing present poverty over validations of the pains of the past, the two each articulated a personal, vernacular take on the academic debate whether recognition or redistribution should come first in emancipatory politics (Fraser and Honneth 2004).

No matter these takes in favor of a politics of redistribution, recognition remains the more common demand voiced by Armenians across the world. As a promise of a better future for a wounded nation, it exerts a strong gravitational pull. This is particularly so for the post-genocide diaspora institutions in the United States. For much of the last four decades, recognition of the Armenian Genocide has been the primary 'deliverable' that advocacy organizations promise to their constituencies in return for financial donations and support. Since the 1990s, this is regularly supplemented by soliciting declarations of recognition of the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, an unrecognized post-war entity on the internationally acknowledged territory of Azerbaijan. Should a de facto state in an ongoing armed conflict in the Caucasus receive declarations of legal recognition from the state of Alabama or Alaska? Lobbying entities such as the Armenian National Committee of America and the Armenian Assembly of America certainly believe so. These organizations can be said to be curating a collection of recognitions, which are also displayed through their PR campaigns, through press releases, and sometimes even pictured on billboards along US highways. These recognitions are the spiritual and economic lifeblood of the post-genocide diaspora—a restoration of political agency, celebrated in fundraising events as the nation regaining control over its own fate. The recognition professionals who 'acquire' them take great pride in their achievements.

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[10] In 2015 the most blatant provocation was Turkey's moving the commemoration of the Battle of Gallipoli to April 24th, the date of the centennial—a cynical move that most likely sought to ensure as few world leaders as possible would come to Yerevan.
[11] The Hayastan All-Armenian Fund is a humanitarian quasi-NGO dedicated to infrastructure projects in Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. It is most famous for its annual Telethon events in California, which I examine in Chapter 3.

In spite of the more redistributive position of citizens such as Gayane, I would argue that present-day Armenia is also entangled in a politics of recognition. Its moral wound is cut in a different register, with little emphasis on 1915, but related to the structure of feeling behind Stepan's app: a sense of felt irrelevance and impotence on the world stage. Popular anxieties over national sovereignty have become increasingly commonplace since the transition years (Shirinian 2017). "Our country is not a country" (*Yerkire yerkir chi*) is perhaps the most emblematic phrase routinely used in Armenia to signify post-Soviet collapse (Adriaans 2018). Almost any evening on the news of the state broadcaster there are features on global moments of recognition of the nation as such: an Armenian studies conference in Canada, the erection of a new, medieval-style *khachkar* cross-stone in Hungary, a Chinese student who taught herself the Armenian language through online study, a doctoral dissertation on medieval manuscripts defended in Italy, a politician who spoke out on the Genocide in parliament in Australia. Such reports are a consolation for collapse, a sense that the country, for all its current shortcomings, *matters*. Recognition here takes a form of outsider acknowledgment, but remains disjoined from the actual sources of social suffering, which lie in the transition's neoliberal "shock therapies that led to poverty, gross inequality, social exclusion, gangster capitalism and the rise of the oligarchs" (Ishkanian 2008: 110).

What we have here, then are two parallel recognitive configurations, rooted in the very different historical, institutional and socioeconomic trajectories that underlie them. What are the relations between embodied experiences of social suffering, institutional pedagogies and economic inequalities in these quests for validation and respect? Inspired by Raymond Williams's concept of structures of feeling (1978), I deploy the concept of structures of non-recognition as an analytic with which to trace a mid-range level between histories of suffering and intimate feelings in which affective energies are released and translated into conceptions of what it means to be Armenian. The affective[12] energies released through structures of non-recognition are neither pre-conceptual nor immediate, but rather emerge through mediations of concrete historical

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[12] For some scholars such as Brian Massumi (2002) and Nigel Thrift (2008), drawing on Spinoza and Deleuze, affect is distinct from emotion because of its impersonal quality: it reaches us in bodily shocks, as pre-conceptual intensities, affording transitions between different qualities of being in the world. My use of the concept of affect is closer to that of Sara Ahmed, who writes of affective economies (2004: 44-49), as I also foreground processes of circulation that constitute collective bodies.

ruptures. The recognition struggles of the Armenian world are driven, to quote William Mazzarella on affect, by "intensity as well as qualification, mimetic resonance as well as propositional plausibility," as "abstract institutional demands seek affective resonance and affective appeals reach for legalistic justification" (2009: 299). It is structures of non-recognition that are mediated and mediating, through which energies devoted to the nation circulate and take tangible shape, move and unsettle subjects.

Before moving on to examine how structures of non-recognition are shaped by and maintained through media technologies, institutions and iconic power (Alexander 2012), and sometimes translated into a politics of transnational redistribution, I outline key events that linked Armenia and Los Angeles during the transition years. If a distance between places is grasped not as a fixed geographical measure, but rather as an intensity of connections, these years brought them closer together than ever before. At the same time, this proximity created perceptions of temporal distance.

1.2. The Transition Years Between California and the South Caucasus

Armenia is internationally reputed to be a nation entangled in tense recognitive relations with Turkey. But prior to Armenia's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the diaspora was in fact divided in its recognition of Armenia *itself*. If one loads a map of any location on Stepan's smartphone application of global Armenian heritage, one notes that often even the smallest towns feature two adjacent Armenian Apostolic Church structures: the one falling under leadership of the Catholicos of All Armenians centered in Echmiadzin, Armenia; the other serving the Catholicos of the Holy See of Cilicia, centered in Antelias, Lebanon. This division is echoed throughout the spectrum of diaspora institutions, from schools and scouting clubs to lobbying organizations. The central point of contention that escalated this fateful split was the question whether Soviet Armenia was the legitimate homeland of the Armenian people, or an illegitimately occupied entity, and by implication, whether Armenians were a stateless diaspora or already had an actually existing homeland for eventual collective return.[13]

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[13] To be more precise, the two catholicoi existed in parallel for centuries, but only in the late 1950s did the Antelias faction of the church in Lebanon proclaim full autonomy from what is perceived as the 'Soviet church' of Echmiadzin (Migliorino 2008: 100-102). The assassination of archbishop Tourian in the 1920s by militant ARF members at a church in New York greatly aggravated the tensions (De Waal 2015: 106). As Levon Abrahamian has shown, much energies were invested in

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From the point of view of recognition and redistribution in the Armenian world, it merits looking at the transition years that led to independence. It is during these years that many of the old hostilities were overcome, and both factions of the diaspora hesitatingly, but ultimately unequivocally embraced Armenia's independence. It is also at this time that diaspora funds began to be transferred to the country on an unprecedented scale. Telecommunications played a central role in the shift of the position of Armenia in the diaspora's geography of responsibility (Massey 2004).

The first postage stamp of independent Armenia, issued in late 1991, highlights the role of telecommunications in reconnecting the homeland to the diaspora, as well as to the wider world (Figure 1.1). The stamp marks the new republic's geo-coordinates and shows the contours of Mount Ararat, the national symbol onto which Noah's ark landed after the flood according to biblical legend. Physically located in present-day Turkey but visible from Yerevan on any bright day, it serves as an everyday reminder of the non-recognition of Armenian claims to its ancestral territories after the Genocide, as well of the origins of the diaspora. Lastly, it depicts a satellite dish, to which is added the logo of American telecommunications company AT&T, the independence date, and the words *michazgayin kap*—international connection.

Figure 1.1. The first stamp of independent Armenia

staging rituals of symbolic reconciliation after Armenia's independence, including the transfer of a catholicos from the Antelias faction to Echmiadzin (2006: 207-212).

If all the world is a stage, the need to mark Armenia's location reveals that not all actors receive equal opportunities to perform in the spotlight of global attention. The satellite dish and the AT&T logo signaled that Armenia was the first post-Soviet republic to invest in advanced communications technologies equipment from abroad, exhibiting modernist pride and an eagerness to establish ties with every other nation. Because postage stamps simultaneously address citizens inside and the world outside, they have been referred to as 'windows of the state' that seek to transmit particular ideological notions (Brunn 2000). The mediations through which this became the nation's public self-presentation to the world, however, are highly contingent.

An article titled "Armenia Calling: The New Republic Joins the Global Village" from December 1991 in the Los Angeles-based monthly *Armenian International Magazine* gives a first clue as to how the American communications company became a symbol of national independence. "They are only four little numbers," its author writes. "But 7 885 is a code which breaks Armenia's communications dependence on Moscow and connects the republic to the late 20th Century." The new republic's Minister of Post and Telecommunications, Robert Avoyan, adopted a similar metaphor of time travel: "Today, Armenian telecommunications leaps seven decades from the 1920s to the 1990s." At the time, no other place in the former Soviet Union except Moscow made as many international calls, and a satellite technology deal with AT&T enabled the country to have 180 simultaneous outgoing and ingoing international calls.[14]

Note the denial of coevalness (Fabian 1983) in the above quotes: if satellite technologies enabled Armenia to "leap seven decades" and connect "to the late 20th Century" at last, what time had it been living in until then? And if time had been frozen when Armenia joined the Soviet Union in 1920, were telephone lines really enough to defrost it? It is worth noting the implied diasporic readership of *Armenian International Magazine*, the most successful pan-diasporan print publication of the 1990s.[15] Was it

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[14] Tony Halpin in *Armenian International Magazine*, December 1991.
[15] The magazine, published in both English and Armenian, was launched in Los Angeles in 1989 and was exceptional for its investigative journalism, its many opinion pieces by distinguished scholars, and what has been widely praised as its pluralist, non-partisan approach. One if its editors, Vardan Oskanian, became the foreign minister of Armenia in the early 2000s, and another editor, Salpi Ghazarian, spearheaded online independent journalism in Armenia in the late 2000s.

suggesting that the homeland and diaspora were essentially living in different ages? To what extent did the establishment of transnational circuits of communication between Armenia and the US create a sense of the dispersed nation sharing a common time? To begin to grasp this, it is necessary to go back to late 1988, the moment when, for reasons that are as contingent as they are tragic, AT&T first started to develop telecommunications technology in Soviet Armenia.

1.3. 1988: The Los Angeles Diaspora as a Witnessing Public

On December 7, 1988, at 11:41 local time, the Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia was shaken by a disastrous earthquake. With a magnitude of 6.8 and an epicenter close to the country's second largest city Leninakan, today's Gyumri, the earthquake led to an estimated toll of at least 25,000 deaths and 20,000 injuries. Partially due to the poor construction quality of the buildings from the post-World War II era, the tragedy also left roughly half a million survivors homeless.[16] The earthquake took place in an agonized period in the Soviet republics of the South Caucasus. Earlier in 1987 the Armenians of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast in Azerbaijan had delivered a petition asking Moscow for the transfer of the territory to Soviet Armenia, an act that was perceived as betrayal by many Azerbaijanis. Before long, in early 1988, mass rallies for the unification of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh were staged in Yerevan, and lethal anti-Armenian pogroms took place in Azerbaijan (De Waal 2003: 10-44). Conspiracy theories were rampant, claiming that the earthquake had been artificially generated by Moscow in retaliation for the demands for unification.

The disaster suddenly turned Soviet Armenia into a global figure of front page news. Not since the trope of the 'starving Armenian' of the late 1910s and early 1920s had there been such a level of attention for Armenia around the world, and particularly in the United States. Certainly, due to the many assassinations of Turkish diplomats of the late 1970s and 1980s, Armenians had already been more reported in international media than they had been for decades.[17] But the sheer scale of suffering caused by the 1988

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[16] Figures taken from the Armenian National Survey for Seismic Protection webpage: http://www.nssp-gov.am/spitak_eng.htm. Unofficial figures tend to be even higher.

[17] More than 40 Turkish diplomats were killed by assassins of the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia and the Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide, operating mostly from Beirut, then the diaspora's center (De Waal 2015: 151).

earthquake, combined with its mass mediation, made it more than a distant spectacle—it impelled a widespread reflection on the relation between spectator and sufferer, proximity and distance, watching and acting (Chouliaraki 2006: 19).

Although they had become more comfortable with the existence of Soviet Armenia in the perestroika era (Panossian 1998: 160; Ishkanian 2005: 121), diasporic elites in Los Angeles had displayed an ambivalent, at times downright hostile attitude towards Soviet Armenians in the decade prior to the earthquake. In the years 1979-1980, around 12,000 Soviet Armenians had been given exit visas and made use of US immigration policy introduced for persecuted Soviet minorities, especially Jews, to get a refugee status. Priority was given to those who had repatriated to Soviet Armenia after World War II.[18] In 1988, another estimated 10,000 Soviet Armenians entered the United States, where part of East Hollywood was gradually transformed into a working class Armenian neighborhood, with the wealthier segments from Iran and Lebanon already moving to the more suburban city of Glendale. The migration wave became a hotly debated issue of concern for Angelenos, both Armenian and non-Armenian. Just in the months prior to the earthquake, the *Los Angeles Times* ran articles with telling headlines such as "County Braces for Sudden Influx of Soviet Armenians,"[19] "'Refugee' is a Misnomer for Soviet Armenian Émigrés,"[20] and "Inner Dispute Clouds Future for Armenian Émigré Ranks."[21] Some among the leadership of the old diaspora were less than thrilled to see a new diaspora from across the Iron Curtain emerge among its midst.

"[W]e understand their yearnings to live in a more prosperous environment," Harut Sassounian, a spokesperson of the post-genocide diaspora's elite, told to a *Los Angeles Times* journalist in mid-1988. "But we cherish the small portion of the homeland that is left to us and we strive to preserve what little bit is left of its Armenian population." To see them move to Los Angeles, he declared, "goes against our goals, our hopes, our

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[18] After World War II Stalin invited diasporans to repatriate to Soviet Armenia, with the undelivered promise that part of the ancestral lands of Eastern Turkey would be incorporated into the republic. Those who arrived to faced harsh discrimination and, not uncommonly, ended up being deported to Siberia (see Laycock 2012).
[19] Mark Arax and Ester Schrader, *Los Angeles Times*, March 8, 1988.
[20] Doris M. Meissner, *Los Angeles Times*, June 8, 1988.
[21] Esther Schrader, *Los Angeles Times*, July 10, 1988.

dreams."[22] Many other arguments were made by the middle class leadership of diaspora institutions against the influx: life in the USSR was not as bad as it used to be, Armenians were not politically persecuted in the Soviet Union, the newcomers to Los Angeles mostly ended up on welfare or working in gas stations and car repairs, and one should not deplete the last Armenian-populated part of the historic homeland, which had already been decimated by the Turks during the 1915 Genocide, of its population.

The earthquake softened these tensions and hostilities, at least temporarily, for a moment of unprecedented pan-Armenian solidarity. Media technologies played a central role in this reorientation. The post-earthquake circulation of images implicated the diaspora with its "potential to construct audiences as virtual witnesses, a subject position that implies responsibility for the suffering of others," making "ethical claims on viewers" (McLagan 2003: 609). Armenian television producers in Los Angeles responded to this not only by promoting fundraising initiatives, but also by producing original music videos, using montage and visual layering techniques to portray local singers in front of the rubble and debris of Leninakan. "How can my heart sing calmly, when Armenia needs my help?" sings Araksya Varderesyan, a singer who recorded several music videos dedicated to the earthquake victims at the time.[23]

For Armenian-Americans in Los Angeles, the events of 1988 resonated strongly with the diaspora's own historical predicament, as the image of thousands of people who had lost their homes evoked memories of the 1915 Genocide and the armed conflicts in the Middle East that had made many of them flee to California. Unlike in the case of the newcomers to Los Angeles from Soviet Armenia, portrayed negatively by the diasporic establishment both in classist terms and as unpatriotic, the gravity of suffering of the earthquake victims was unquestionable. And in attempts to provide humanitarian aid, the knowledge about Soviet Armenia of the newcomers proved helpful to the old post-genocide diaspora as it began coordinating its aid efforts.

The earthquake became the pretext for an unprecedented opening up of Soviet Armenia to the outside world, as the coordination of humanitarian aid required in a new degree

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[22] Esther Schrader, "Inner Dispute Clouds Future for Armenian Émigré Ranks," *Los Angeles Times*, July 10, 1988.

[23] Music video available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jexhvjPTxBc

of connectivity in telecommunications and finance, as well as bringing an unprecedented flow of people from abroad into the ASSR.[24] The American telecommunications company AT&T sent a number of its employees to install an emergency telephone system to assist rescue workers in the coordination of their work. AT&T's deputy director for Eastern Europe was an Armenian-American, and it was this connection which in the end sealed the 1991 AT&T deal that made Armenia a pioneer in post-Soviet telecommunications, recorded on the first postage stamp marking the independence of the Republic of Armenia. But it also laid the foundations for a transnational redistributive ethos that became central in linking Armenia to a previously anti-Soviet diaspora after independence. It was not just diasporic cultural figures who organized community telethons. For instance, American civil rights leader Jesse Jackson promoted the idea of a global telethon with celebrity musicians during his visit to the Soviet Union.[25] This ultimately became Rock Aid Armenia, a televised concert to raise funds for rebuilding Armenia.[26] This constellation of large-scale and small fundraising media spectacles, inflected by the 'Live Aid' spirit of the times, ultimately crystallized into a transnational sphere of media rituals (see Chapter 3).

1.4. The Karabakh Conflict and the Homeland Eligibility of Armenia

The earthquake that destroyed the second largest city of Soviet Armenia came at a time that also saw hostilities escalate with Azerbaijan over the irredentist struggle of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast's population to unite with Armenia. If the earthquake appealed to humanitarian sensibilities that were cultivated in connection to the diaspora's own past tragedies of displacement, the Karabakh conflict kindled long-dormant anxieties regarding a pan-Turkic threat. Few diasporans in the United States were aware of the struggles of the Karabakh Armenians, or indeed had any particular interest in this region until the late eighties. If sentiments towards Turkey had been negative for decades, there was no special hostility towards the Azerbaijanis.

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[24] This influx included also more mundane initiatives that changed the cultural landscape of Soviet Armenia, such as Time Warner commissioning Armenian-language dubbed versions of its cartoons to bring solace to surviving children.

[25] Peg Byron, "Jackson and Soviets Plan Telethon for Armenia," *UPI*, Dec. 18, 1988.

[26] Several records were issued for these mass mediated earthquake relief efforts. In the UK, British band Deep Purple released a special, re-recorded version of its hit 'Smoke on the Water'. In France, diaspora celebrity Charles Aznavour led a group that recorded a song titled 'Pour toi, Arménie', which sold over a million copies.

This changed drastically when the tragic news of the Sumgait pogrom of February 1988 reached the diaspora. "The method of killing was the same as that used by the Turks during the Genocide of Armenians at the beginning of the twentieth century," observes the anthropologist Harutyun Marutyan. "The Armenians were beaten, tortured, raped, thrown out of windows, slain with metal rods and knives, chopped with axes, beheaded, and burnt in fires" (2009: 93)—a comparison that was not lost on the post-genocide diaspora in Los Angeles. As the struggle unfolded, the little-known Karabakh region, which had been almost entirely absent from the affective geography of the diaspora, came to be invested with tremendous hopes. This trend only intensified, as many diasporans nowadays conceive of it as the most important territory of the nation's historic lands that is still populated by Armenians. Ultimately, the Karabakh conflict spawned a dual animosity in which Turkey and Azerbaijan are merged into a singular anti-Armenian threat, shifting the entire diasporic identity project, from patriotic education in Armenian schools to lobbying in Washington, towards a bi-polar enmity.

This was particularly so for the nationalist Armenian Revolutionary Federation, which set up a special Artsakh Fund[27] that organized fundraising events, including two telethons that became the main precursor of the equally Karabakh-centric Armenia Fund Telethon. Founded in Tbilisi in 1890, the ARF remains the most powerful institution in the global diaspora. It oversees countless newspapers, television stations (such as the channel on which television host Stepan performed his unorthodox take on genocide recognition), sports teams and cultural organizations, as well as parliamentary representatives and, for all practical purposes, the Catholicosate in Lebanon. As the party that laid the foundation for the short-lived First Armenian Republic (1918-1920), the ARF had always considered itself a government-in-exile during the Soviet era. The party has also for decades been the main force behind the international struggle for recognition of the Armenian Genocide. In contrast to the fundraising efforts of the other

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[27] Artsakh is a medieval Armenian name for Nagorno-Karabakh that is considered the more patriotic variant since the conflict erupted and nowadays even adopted as the de facto state's official name. Some believe that the Russian, Turkish and Persian etymology of the name Nagorno-Karabakh harms Armenian claims to indigeneity, while others seek to avoid the limited Soviet-era territorial connotations of the name in favor of the larger territory that is currently occupied by Armenian forces.

main faction of the old diaspora, the more pluralist Echmiadzin bloc[28], which had more cordial ties to Soviet Armenia, the ARF is reputed to have shown little concern over whether the funds were used to invest in humanitarian aid or weapons to aid the battle.

Reminiscing over this period, a diasporan journalist told me how the Los Angeles editorial office of the ARF's newspaper *Asbarez*, the largest Armenian-American daily, used the new communication circuits to follow the conflict. "The way we would do it, is that each of us had a map of Karabakh, which was laminated, on our desks. And we would take these erasable markers and say, okay now they're going from this direction to that direction," based on faxes sent from the party's new press center in Yerevan. "We would first of all try to absorb exactly what was happening before we could tell our readers what was happening and why it is significant that we're telling them that the Armenian troops have advanced to certain points." This exercise, the journalist told me, became a daily "fun kind of game," of which he only realized the true scale when he traveled to Karabakh more than a decade later.

For the increasingly connected diaspora, the earthquake and the violent conflict with Azerbaijan generated a sense of coevalness that was two-faced. On the one hand, the grim reports of deaths by 'other Turks' had alarming affective resonances, as if it was 1915 again in the homeland, with another independence struggle unfolding. But the presencing of the previously absent Soviet co-ethnics through an influx of faxes, reports and videos also made the homeland more mundane. The fact that the war for which funds were raised could be experienced both as profoundly unsettling and as a kind of 'game' brings to mind Benedict Anderson's characterization of long-distance nationalism as a privileged form of engagement that fans the flames of radicalism without accountability (1994: 327). Above all, it shows the paradoxical mix of abstraction, affection and affiliation afforded by the new technological mediations.

Unlike the newcomers who had arrived to Los Angeles in the late 1970s and 1980s, those who stayed in the Caucasus to fight the 'Turks' in the battle were considered quite heroic, and their militant patriotism surprised many. The special relation of West Coast

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[28] The main organizations affiliated with the Echmiadzin faction of the diaspora in the United States are the AGBU (Armenian General Benevolent Union), the Hunchak and Ramkavar parties, and the lobbying organization Armenian Assembly of America.

US Armenians to the Karabakh struggle was amplified due to the fact that it was one Californian-Armenian who grew up near Fresno and studied archaeology at UCLA, the leftist[29] revolutionary Monte Melkonian, who became the most legendary commander of the entire Nagorno-Karabakh War until his death in battle. Countless schools and institutions are nowadays named after him across the Armenian world.

The first president of independent Armenia, the Syrian-born philologist Levon Ter-Petrosian, appointed another Californian-Armenian, the lawyer Raffi Hovannisian, as the country's first foreign minister. While these factors led to the first government being quite optimistically perceived in the diaspora, its pragmatic approach to both the Karabakh issue[30] and the 1915 Genocide soon made it decidedly unpopular. Disagreements between Hovanissian and Ter-Petrosian on the role of genocide recognition in the new state was one of the main reasons why he was removed from the post within a year. Diaspora elites were disappointed to learn of the general consensus in Armenia that the country should establish political and economic ties with Turkey, and leave genocide recognition to the historians. Ter-Petrosian finally sealed his unpopularity in the diaspora by outlawing the Armenian Revolutionary Federation as a terrorist organization, after several of its leading members in Armenia were accused of having ties to arms trade (see Masih and Krikorian 1999: 52-55).

Perceptions of Armenia's economy turned similarly bleak in the same period. In the early years of the transition, diaspora magazines were full of optimism about the country's economic potential. One recurrent trope in these early years, circulating on the basis of mediated images rather than first hand encounters, was that Armenians are by nature a capitalist people, and that not even seven decades of communist rule had been able to crush their entrepreneurial spirit. Before long, however, the reality of the

[29] In a 1986 pamphlet, Melkonian wrote: "Those who are opposed to a socialist 'Eastern Armenia' should be expected to object to a socialist 'Western Armenia,' too. Their rejection of socialism amounts to a political stand which, despite all protestations to the contrary, simply excludes most of them from participating in the future of our nation. The most virulent of these pro-capitalists typically end up in their promised land of Los Angeles, where their loudly professed nationalism cannot be heard beyond a ten-mile radius of a shopping mall." (1993: 175)

[30] Ter-Petrosian's presidency ended with a 'velvet coup' in 1998, due to mass discontent over his willingness to do concessions to Azerbaijan in the Karabakh conflict. Armenia has been ruled by presidents who come from Karabakh ever since.

collapse of the economy reached the diaspora, and although the situation of a post-earthquake recovery and war with Azerbaijan was part of the explanation, another trope was that the 'Soviet mentality' *did* manage to crush the Armenian talent for capitalist enterprise. Publications such as *Armenian International Magazine* reflected this shift from hope to disillusionment, as its pages shifted from guides for foreign investment to reports of the mismanagement of humanitarian funds. Telephone lines, it seemed, were not enough to teleport the homeland to modern times.

The capture of the economy by oligarchs, some of whom made their first riches by trading arms and violently expropriating Azerbaijani property during the Karabakh war (Antonyan 2016: 120), led to a composite picture. On the one hand, Armenia proper remains commonly perceived as stuck in the underdevelopment of a Soviet past, as an object of humanitarian aid hindered by a corrupted mentality. Among the ARF faction, the lack of enthusiasm among Armenia's population to sacrifice economic development for the cause of genocide recognition is often perceived as disrespectful to a diaspora that has donated large sums to the country over the years. By contrast, Karabakh is perceived much less ambivalently, as its victory over other 'Turks' is seen to have transformed Armenia from a victim into a victor nation.

As will become clear in the next two chapters of the thesis, the government in Yerevan is increasingly engaging in transnational publicity campaigns that strategically target this variegated diaspora perception of itself. It instrumentally deploys the non-recognition of both the 1915 Genocide and the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic in circulating new icons for consolidating its power. However, as we have seen, these are not the only struggles for recognition that propel the Armenian world—there are also *intra-ethnic* recognition dynamics, as seen in the examples of a felt lack of mutual understanding with newcomers. It is to these dynamics that I now turn.

1.5. The Homeland and the Diaspora: Contested Notions

If there is an Armenian state, is that the Armenian homeland? This is a dilemma that goes back to the very origins of diaspora studies. The field is often seen as inaugurated by the 1986 collection *Modern Diasporas in International Politics*, and in particular Walker Conner's article in this collection, "The Impact of Homelands Upon Diasporas"

(1986).[31] Conner highlights the distinction between the notions of state and homeland—the former seen as a political entity of governance over a bounded territory, the latter an emotionally imbued, phantom-like notion. Two major facts complicate an overlap between the two in Los Angeles: firstly, the origins of most of the old diaspora, which lie in present-day Eastern Turkey rather than Armenia's present territory[32], and secondly, the persistence of a Cold War optic that frames the entire post-Soviet space as alien, making it difficult to emanate an aura of deep roots and intimate familiarity.

By and large, scholarship on the Armenian diaspora shows few symptoms of what scholars of the Jewish diaspora sometimes describe as the specter of 'methodological Zionism': an analytical habit of treating a diaspora as defined *a priori* by its relationship to a state that claims to be its homeland. Levon Abrahamian calls post-Soviet Armenia a "symbolic substitute" of the post-genocide diaspora's true homeland (2006: 336), while Sossie Kasbarian in a study of repatriation describes Armenia as a "step-homeland," with which the diaspora is "forced into a familial relationship by external forces" (2015: 359). Khachig Tölölyan conceptualizes diaspora institutions as themselves state-like forms of exilic government (1991). Tölölyan describes the Armenian world, or as he puts it, 'transnation', as undergoing a transition from exilic nationalism to diasporic transnationalism, in which the geography of dispersion across the post-independence Armenian world has become self-consciously evaluated as durably polycentric, and the condition of diaspora is no longer viewed as transitory (2000). If mediatized crises such as war and earthquakes do activate diasporans in geographies of responsibility for Armenia (Massey 2004), views on the role of the independent republic in the durably networked nation vary widely, as we shall see.

A similar complexity lies at the heart of the concept of diaspora: who does it apply to, and when? The 1980 US Census estimated that there were 52,400 people of Armenian descent living in Los Angeles (Sabagh et al. 1990: 4). According to the 2011 American

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[31] For instance, Sudesh Mishra in his *Diaspora Criticism* locates this article at the beginning of what he calls a 'dual territoriality' approach to diasporas, also exemplified by the work of William Safran and Robin Cohen (2006: 24-51).
[32] It should however be noted that a community of Russian-Armenians has been present in Los Angeles since the turn of the twentieth century, mostly from the Kars and Alexandropol regions (Fittante 2017: 7-8). This group includes the ancestors of today's most famous Los Angeles Armenian: reality television star Kim Kardashian.

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Community Survey of the US Census Bureau, 214,618 people in the Los Angeles Metropolitan area identify as being partly or fully of Armenian heritage (Daughrity and Cumming 2014: 236). The Armenian diaspora of Los Angeles, it thus seems, has grown spectacularly over the course of a mere three decades. If one listens to the representatives of diaspora institutions, though, one often hears a narrative of perpetually escalating crisis: schools are closing, Armenian culture and language are said to disappear, the newcomers fail to integrate into institutions.

Can the diaspora shrink while the Armenian population increases? Are the Soviet-era and post-Soviet newcomers to Los Angeles a part of *the* Armenian diaspora? Can we assume *a priori* that those who have lived in the US for many generations and those who came to the US from Lebanon, Iran or Iraq in the 1970s and 1980s fleeing armed violence all share a kind of 'diasporicity' with those who arrived more recently from Armenia in search of better lives? The answers depend, of course, on definitions.

The cognitivist theorist of identity Rogers Brubaker (2005) argues that what scholars habitually reify as diasporas are in fact rarely, if ever, clearly circumscribed groups. Echoing his earlier arguments on ethnicity without groups (2004), Brubaker warns against the uncritical adoption of categories of practice as tools of analysis by social scientists. Preferring the use of adjectival forms to the essentialist sin of using diaspora unreflexively as a thing-like noun, he draws three criteria from the literature as indicators that we are dealing with diasporic stances, projects, claims, idioms and practices: dispersion across space, a strong orientation to a homeland, and boundary maintenance of those inside and outside the group (2005: 12). Similarly, Dan Lainer-Vos (2010) adopts a verbal form, *diasporization*, to emphasize that diasporas and homelands both need to be continually assembled in complex, negotiated encounters.

These claims certainly apply to the Armenian diaspora, or diasporic formations, or perhaps, diasporization of Los Angeles. For the ARF faction in particular, so-called economic migration from Armenia has always been stigmatized and unwelcome, which was also behind its firm opposition to newcomers in late Soviet times. For instance, at the time of formulating the Lautenberg Amendment, a bill adopted in 1990 to continue allowing minorities from the former Soviet Union to resettle in the United States, the ARF's salaried recognition professionals in Washington actively lobbied against

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including Soviet Armenians in this legislation. This is a clear example of *diasporization* or diaspora-making: the refusal to recognize these *Hayastantsis*[33] as a diaspora simultaneously draws class boundaries and frames certain forms of social suffering as more legitimate as foundations for identity than others. This also shows the futility of creating taxonomies of diaspora types. To state that the Armenians are a typical 'victim' diaspora, as Robin Cohen (1997) does, is already to legitimize the claims of certain identity entrepreneurs at the cost of others. This also became clear in the views of the journalist who earlier recounted his reporting experience during the Karabakh War:

> The reason that I'm living in the United States is because my grandfather, who is from Erzurum, was forced out of his home, and his family was killed. He was forced to go to Eastern Armenia, fight an independence movement, lost his first wife to an illness, ended up marrying an *Artsakhtsi*.[34] He was persecuted by the Bolsheviks because he was an ARF-er. He fled Armenia to the Ukraine, and then was forced to flee to Iran where they had to face persecution because Reza Shah closed all of the Armenian institutions. And my mother was born in the Ukraine and met my father in Tehran, they married and then the revolution happened and we came to Boston, until the ANCA[35] called me to work in Los Angeles. *That's the diasporic reality*! Not some migrants who simply decided that they needed a job!

As this illustrates, Brubaker's insistence that diaspora is a category with a contested and variable correlation to 'actually existing groups' is certainly apt. At the same time, social life as lived in practice is full of actually existing groupness (Jenkins 2008: 8-12), whether face-to-face or assembled through media. While pockets of Armenian groupness in Los Angeles are indeed usually isolated from one another due to locality, subethnicity, institutional affiliation and socioeconomic class, many of these *do* come together in moments of effervescence to assemble themselves as 'the' diaspora, or even as the global Armenian nation, even if they then dissipate into little-connected factions shortly after, and the mass interpellation fails to appeal to some segments.

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[33] A *Hayastantsi* is an Armenian from Armenia.
[34] An *Artsakhtsi* is an Armenian from Nagorno-Karabakh.
[35] The Armenian National Committee of Armenia (ANCA) is the lobbying organization of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation.

What many of the moments and scripts in which the diaspora, and sometimes the nation-at-large, is assembled have in common is that they are driven by struggles for external recognition in which the nation remains wedged between an enemy and an entity withholding recognition—most often of the 1915 Genocide by perpetrator Turkey and the United States government, of the independence from Azerbaijan of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic by the international community. But, as we will see in the thesis, there is also an emergent, alternative mode of accomplishing nation, diaspora, and Armenia as *homeland*, none of which are givens of nature (Lainer-Vos 2010: 895), as felt social realities: developmental practices of redistributing financial and human resources. The importance of media technologies in both modes of engaging people transnationally begs some closer consideration of constitutive processes of mediation.

1.6. Time of the Nation, Immediacy of Mediation

Of all theorists of nationalism, it is Benedict Anderson who has been the most explicit about the linkages between media technologies and an experience of time that would be characteristic of a world of nations. Anderson opposed the time of the modern nation to the cosmological, oftentimes non-linear and non-quantifiable temporality of pre-capitalist dynastic cultural formations (1991: 22-36).[36] Highlighting the impact of new circulating cultural forms that became widespread in early modernity, for Anderson, it is through dispersed acts of reading that pre-modern time makes way for the modern, capitalist time of nations. Is it through the novel, staging imaginary worlds of simultaneously progressing characters, and the mass-circulated newspaper, adding a time-sharing readership to this narrative structure, that nations come to be imagined as singular, sociological organisms moving calendrically in what Anderson calls, borrowing from Walter Benjamin, "homogeneous, empty time" (ibid. 24).

Anderson's *Imagined Communities* is, thus, among numerous other things, a theory of the synchronization of consciousness facilitated through media technologies. This is not merely a matter of the reification of the nation as a linearly unfolding entity, but

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[36] Anderson opposed to our modern simultaneity across time to a pre-modern "simultaneity-along-time," exemplified for instance in images where ancient religious figures are depicted in the local dress of the present. The particularity of the present in this temporality resonated with the "cosmic-universal" and vice versa (1991: 24; 23).

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also concerns the structuring rhythms of media practices that sustain this imagination of the nation steadily moving into the future. This dimension of synchronization is echoed in a Durkheimian lineage of media theory, e.g. Dayan and Katz's media events (1993), which adds 'liveness' as a dimension of history unfolding, or more recently, in Nick Couldry's concept of media rituals (2003), routinized practices that reinforce the notion that what is staged in the media reveals what matters in society at a particular time. These authors, in different ways, each suggest that belonging to 'a society' or 'a nation' is thoroughly entangled with media synchronization processes.

Taking this synchronization perspective into account, it should come as no surprise that time in the Armenian world is neither empty nor homogeneous. Anderson's time of the nation depends firstly, on the standardization of vernaculars and, secondly, on a particular infrastructure of circulation, both of which are ultimately consolidated by the state. For Armenia, these trajectories were never able to approach this model. The first newspapers and printing presses in the Armenian language appeared in remote places such as Madras, Venice and Amsterdam. And when Armenian literature began to bloom in the 19th century in places closer to the Armenian highlands, such as Constantinople and Tbilisi, this took place in two parallel vernaculars, largely with each its own respective sphere of circulation: Western Armenian in the Ottoman Empire, and Eastern Armenian in the Russian Empire (Panossian 2006). But let us also remember the original formulation on which Anderson draws: for Benjamin, historical transformations do not happen in "homogeneous, empty time," but instead act as an immediacy that makes "the continuum of history explode" (1999: 253).

The Armenian case shows how the blasting of moments "out of the continuum of history" (ibid. 253) can emerge through such immediacy. The trauma and subsequent denial of the Genocide set one half of the Armenian world, the post-genocide diaspora, into a repetitive pattern of remediations of 1915 that Anahid Kassabian and David Kazanjian characterize as a form of obsessional neurosis (2005). The two parallel vernacular print languages might have led to a simple 'doubling' of national time, were it not for the 1915 Genocide's bringing an almost literal end to Western Armenian time. Only when the survivors of the deportations to the Syrian desert began to rebuild media infrastructures in the Middle East (Migliorino 2008), could a form of national time be regenerated in diaspora. And it remains haunted by turns to and resonances with 1915.

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Three quarters of a century later, war, economic blockades, deindustrialization and the collapse of the Soviet developmental state also drastically reconfigured national time, in this case for the *other half* of the nation—those who had continued to live in Armenia after the Genocide. In her ethnography of the transition years, Stephanie Platz (1996, 2000) has shown that the nation was experienced not as a "solid community moving steadily" in a linear history (Anderson 1991: 26) but in fractured and cosmologically imbued registers of rupture, regression and repetition (Platz 1996: 249-256). Above all, with the collapse of the Soviet developmental state, there was a wide sense of demodernization, the disappearance of such basic functions as electricity, heating and water infrastructure becoming a symbol of time moving backwards (Platz 2000).

What, then, is the relation between historical ruptures, mediation and the time of the nation? I have already argued that the structures of non-recognition that propel the Armenian world are mediated through pedagogical translations rather than immediate external impulses. But in some moments, such mediations are experienced as an unmediated, affective *immediacy*. Writing about a different earthquake than the Armenian 1988 one that destroyed Leninakan/Gyumri, media theorist Richard Grusin argues that the "affectivity of media aftershocks" that are caused by natural disasters "must be understood to have the same ontological immediacy as its geotechnical aftershocks" (2015: 132). Such affective shocks confront diasporans with a sense of the *present as nation* (cf. Panossian 2002), activating them in geographies of responsibility (Massey 2004) for the rebuilding of an Armenia homeland. This synchronizing force can, as we shall see, however, also be used instrumentally by the state and diaspora institutions. Few of their spectacles and publicity campaigns for gathering funds go without the targeted remediation of the nation's past and present shocks and wounds.

There is another issue of time at stake for the Armenians of Los Angeles, which is not merely about connectivity but also a matter of the community's increased internal demographic diversity. "Communication is, ultimately, about creating shared Time," writes Johannes Fabian in his classic book *Time and the Other* (1983: 31). While he is primarily concerned with the manner in which anthropologists portray the people they study as being not quite contemporaneous, his insight that spatial relations between different parts of the world are treated as sequences of time in modernity can also clarify

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the often tense relations between different groups and locations in the Armenian world.

In Los Angeles, it is indeed common to see the temporal discourse of modernity refracted in spatial terms and vice versa, such as when the middle class of the old diaspora complains that late Soviet-era arrivals live in a 'time capsule'—imagined as frozen in the pre-modern condition of the homeland of the period they arrived to Los Angeles. This denial of coevalness is constitutive of everyday distinctions between different generations and subethnicities who live in the diaspora, as newcomers are often portrayed as living a life stuck in the past. This brings me to the last part of my conceptual framework: images of nationness and their varying scales of circulation.

1.7. Diasporic Iconicity and the Internal/External Dialectic

Perhaps more than ever before, in our age of digital media saturation, we are all walking repositories of vast iconographic repertoires. Not only do we carry with us what we have witnessed before, as images encountered in the past continue to mediate our sense of being in the world in the present. We also increasingly become everyday participants in vast visual archives, uploading and downloading images to platforms on which we represent ourselves, and using the body, or devices close to the body, as a screen for the display of identities. This brings me to the following central issue: how, in today's digital world, does the continual interplay between circulating images and everyday life affect the imaginaries of diasporic nations that span across vastly different spaces?

The map of the world, dotted with Armenian monuments and churches, on the screen of a smartphone; a diasporic television broadcast with the show's host wrapped in a tricolor flag; a purple umbrella printed with the forget-me-not emblem of the 2015 Armenian Genocide Centennial, on display in a Yerevan metro underpass—all of these are images that enter commonplace moments in which the nation is objectified, reified and re-imagined. Such moments highlight the continual mediation of mental images by material images and vice versa (Belting 2005). While Stepan showed his smartphone application, he was also verbally conjuring up images—mostly of those he distanced himself from: of those who march to the Turkish consulate on Genocide Memorial Day every April, those who want 'their land back' from Turkey, those who believe Armenians should return to the homeland. In a similar fashion, Gayane's denunciation

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of the diaspora in the metro underpass drew on pre-formed images of wealthy foreigners whom she imagined to live comfortably abroad, in the West. This brings us to Taylor's point about the harm that demeaning images of collectives do, and the relations between recognition, public representations and the political economy of social suffering.

The visual studies scholar Marie-Aude Baronian (2010) writes that post-genocide Armenian culture is characterized by "a constant desire to reconstruct and legitimate the past by any 'visible' means available, precisely because the Armenian Catastrophe is characterized by the way it remains unrecorded and unrepresented." Inspired by French-Armenian philosopher Marc Nichanian, she states that "Armenians are … caught in an inextricable archival paradox: they have to produce (visual) evidence precisely because the evidence has been destroyed and negated." (210). While Baronian focuses mostly on arthouse movies produced for international audiences, this archival dimension is also present in more commonplace visual culture for internal circulation such as music videos reenacting pre-genocide folklore, which indeed seek to turn material (media) images into mental images (Adriaans 2016).

This archival impulse, however, is only one aspect of Armenian visual culture that is relevant in relation to present diasporic iconography. Changes in the composition of the diaspora, the proliferation of new technologies, as well as new realities in the independent homeland have created a much more variegated visual landscape than the genocide-centric one portrayed by Baronian. For if the centrality of the non-recognition of the Genocide is maintained through the pedagogical translations in which traditional diaspora institutions invest, there is an ever-increasing production of images that come to represent the nation in public cultures without being directly tied to the symbolic repertoires of these institutions. Significantly, the Armenian state now commissions and circulates forms of iconography that also become part of diasporic recognition struggles but lack the emphasis on archiving the past or expressing exile.

This splitting of the nation into increasingly diverse visual repertoires brings into focus a broader question of iconicity for diasporic nations. For Michael Herzfeld (2005) nationalism operates through an iconicity principle that equates constructed resemblances with identity: modern urbanites craft ties to the imagined villagers of antiquity by dressing up in a villager's folk costume, providing "temporal depth for

modern homogeneity" (95). At the same time this iconicity principle "always contains within itself the seeds of its own potential dissolution," as ordinary citizens, unlike many nationalist ideologues, tend to "know perfectly well that they are not ancient Teutons or Aztecs" (ibid. 103). As we will see, this process of iconicity, taking lived social forms out of their original context and transforming them into iconic folklore suitable for the staging of national identities, takes on ever new forms.

Today, Armenian-Americans in Los Angeles certainly continue to circulate visual forms for the purpose of genocide recognition. But this increasingly bifurcates into a variety of aesthetic repertoires. For instance, fashion designs that express the moral wound of non-recognition of the Genocide in a style that echoes hip-hop culture may help young post-Soviet diasporans gain respect from other present-day ethnic groups in Los Angeles that cultivate memories of victimhood and survivorship (Chapter 2). Diaspora institutions, on the other hand, have little interest in how different working class, racialized groups perceive Armenians, and instead prioritize forms of middle class respectability, often with implied overtones of whiteness (and certainly distinct from the presumed oriental nature of Turks and Azerbaijanis). The iconographic stance of the elites of these institutions is much more firmly invested than post-Soviet newcomers in Taylor's idea (1992) that contemptible pictures of collectivities do emotional harm to those groups and impel them to circulate desirable depictions (Chapter 5). Visual culture thus relates to recognition struggles not merely as a witness to a disputed past, but also captures differences of socioeconomic class.

If in a prior age, one could imagine a more-or-less closed repertoire of national symbols that come to represent the Armenian nation at a particular time, such repertoires are now reassembled at an expanding rate by a number of structural forces. The increasing access of non-professionals to circulate iconic representations of the nation suggests that it is nowadays not just through newspapers and novels, as Anderson (1991) foregrounded. Expanding on Michael Warner's influential formulation of the public as a "social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse" (2002: 63), Karen Strassler argues that it is "through the reflexive production and circulation of images that 'imagined' social entities like nations become visible and graspable," and "come to seem to exist prior to and independent of those images" (2010: 4). National

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iconography becomes more participatory, but this does not make it independent of socioeconomic and other structural realities.

First of all, the repertoire of iconic forms is continually expanded by the presence of public figures of Armenian heritage in the global cultural industries, especially now that the center of the diaspora has moved to its very heart. It is common to hear that two decades ago no one knew anything about the nation, but that nowadays upon disclosing that one is Armenian, the first association is a small pantheon of Los Angeles diasporans, from reality television star Kim Kardashian to metal band System of a Down. Second, political developments in the homeland have reinvigorated and 'opened up' iconic repertoires, such as the expanding repertoire of the *fedayi* militants who fought against the Turks in the late 19th and early 20th century, now including the already mentioned California-born Karabakh war hero Monte Melkonian as well as, for some, the militants who tried to overthrow the oligarchic government in 2016 (see Ishkanian 2016b). Third, the Armenian state has in recent years begun to experiment with launching new national symbols, most successfully but also rather coercively during the 2015 Genocide Centennial when children in all schools in the country had to reproduce a floral design (see Chapter 2). These are all specific to the changing structures and spatial distribution of the Armenian world over the last decades.

Fourth and foremost, however, is a more general point that has become universal in the digital age: all of the previous developments take place in an iconographic field of continual participation, editing, commenting, remixing and montage on a variety of online platforms. This digital turn allows not just the Armenian celebrities of Los Angeles or the villagers of antiquity to become icons of the nation, but also to create new symbols from scratch. For instance, the stereotyped 'backward' appearance of sub-proletarian post-Soviet Armenians, i.e. squatting, conservative *rabiz* or *qyartu* men, can, with some irony, take on a character for diasporic identity similar to that of tricksters of classical folklore (Chapters 4 and 5). In an age of digital diasporas, the iconicity principle of nationalism is thus not merely a matter of the staging of the past to construct temporal continuities, but also of integrating images from near and afar to imagine the nation on a variety of temporal and spatial terms.

Returning to Herzfeld's reflections on the iconicity of nations (2005) and Taylor's hopes that affirmative depictions can provide an existential validation to groups (1992), it should be noted that staging the nation in public culture involves not just varying degrees of legitimacy, but also issues of collective intimacy (Shryock 2004). If, for instance, some diasporans in Los Angeles are upset when LA Armenians are portrayed on prime time television as overly invested in expensive BMW or Mercedes cars, these are often the very same persons who in their private lives take great pride in driving such cars. However, they may also be lawyers, doctors or scientists besides car owners, and, as Armenian-Americans, imagine themselves in a relation of public iconicity to ancient monasteries, folk arts, and mountain landscapes. It is this latter side of their identity that they would prefer to see reflected as the public image of the nation, together with the upper middle class professions befitting a 'smart nation'—not the assimilated, ethnically nonspecific consumption patterns of their leisure time. The contestation of images of the nation in diaspora is thus also about the shelter such images provide for aspects of collective intimacy considered unfit for iconicity.

In his book *Social Identity* (2008), Richard Jenkins presents a related idea that helps us understand tensions between class, representation and recognition. Jenkins's idea is, put simply, that all identities, whether personal or collective, take shape through a dialectic of internal and external definition. The fact that, as already mentioned, Armenians living anywhere in the world are nowadays regularly expected to position themselves towards celebrities of the Los Angeles diaspora exemplifies this dynamic lucidly. Of course, what is 'internal' to one context can become 'external' in another, and identities are becoming more layered as a result of the proliferation of scales of publicity resulting from digital technologies. Social media generate ever-more 'small publics' of varying intimacy, a scalable sociality (Miller et al. 2016) redrawing the levels of externality and intimacy on which the nation is performed. For post-Soviet youth in Los Angeles, for instance, present-day processes of local stereotyping inform diasporic iconography as much, if not more than the Genocide (Chapter 5). And their depictions of Armenianness are a far cry from the middle class respectability that the older diaspora aspires to, operating on a more intimate scale of external validation in the Los Angeles cityscape as opposed to legal declarations from powerful politicians.

1.8. Methodology and Research Ethics

From the outset, my research has been guided by a simple methodological imperative: to 'follow the images' between Yerevan and Los Angeles (Marcus 1995). In an attempt to facilitate the open-ended, serendipity-driven, and improvisatory nature of ethnographic knowledge production, my original research proposal had only a few preliminary notions of concrete sites and cases: a souvenir market, online shops dedicated to diasporic e-commerce, and the annual Armenia Fund Telethon fundraising spectacle (Chapter 3). As my research unfolded, I kept adjusting the focus of my project to the new forms of circulating iconography they uncovered, each in turn revealing new social, economic and political entanglements. Over the course of thirteen months in Armenia and five months in Los Angeles, spread over seven fieldwork trips between autumn 2013 and spring 2017[37], I have kept continual ethnographic diary entries, recorded a total of 59 semi-structured interviews, and built up a large, mostly digital archive of visual culture, from internet memes to music videos. I have also drawn on archives of diaspora publications, of which the already mentioned *Armenian International Magazine* has proven to be especially relevant.[38]

The methodological incentive to 'follow the images' has made my research play out on a conceptually defined field, as opposed to more traditional, strictly delineated empirical sites. In my initial research proposal, I drew a schema that was constituted by the two axes of circulation and display. The circulation of national iconography, I assumed, could be material, such as a portrait of Mount Ararat transported as a souvenir, or mediatized, for instance a downloaded and reuploaded Facebook profile picture commemorating the 1915 Genocide. The display of images representing the Armenian nation, I thought, could be either take place for external/public audiences or for an internal/intimate public. The now obvious insight that materiality/mediality and publicity/intimacy can be analytically separated but are, in empirical terms, by no means discrete either/or variables, only became apparent as my research progressed.

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[37] Yerevan: October 2013 to February 2014, April to July 2014, April 2015 and February to April 2017. Los Angeles: March 2014, October and November 2014, September to December 2015.

[38] Most issues of *AIM* are available online: http://armenianinternationalmagazine.com/

The actual case studies that make up this thesis have, as it were, materialized by 'running' the period from 2013 to 2017 through this conceptual lens, as it unfolded. Most of the forms of national iconography that I ended up studying were unknown to me before I embarked on my fieldwork trips. I certainly expected the 2015 Genocide Centennial to give birth to new iconographic forms, but was taken by surprise both by the campaign launched by the Armenian state and the fact that Los Angeles celebrities traveled to Yerevan to play key roles in the official events (see Chapter 2). Some of the other domains in which new icons of diasporic belonging are produced and remediated were even more surprising to me, as I did not own a smartphone when I wrote my research proposal. The world of Armenian memes on Vine and Instagram in Los Angeles (Chapter 5) or repatriate digital culture on Snapchat in Yerevan (Chapter 4) were thus entirely serendipitous discoveries. Of the four case studies, only the visual culture of the Armenia Fund Telethon (Chapter 3) was largely familiar to me before I left to the field, due to my earlier research on music videos (Adriaans 2016).

In terms of access, the fact that for most of the time of my fieldwork in Los Angeles I was living in Little Armenia (the old center of the community in East Hollywood), and not in the wealthier 'new' capital of the diaspora, the city of Glendale, had a few consequences worth reflecting on. These days, Little Armenia does not attract many newcomers and the diasporans who live there tend to consist mostly of *Hayastantsi* Armenians of the generation that came to Los Angeles in late Soviet times. This ensured that I initially had contact mostly with pensioners, who had plenty time to converse with me about opposition politics, diaspora television and the shifting demographics of the community. It became easier to mingle with younger generations once I started attending classes in Armenian history at a community college in Glendale, where I first noticed the importance of a new digital youth culture, and then became a visiting researcher at UCLA, where I attended Armenian student events.

Unlike the author of one classic study of Los Angeles (Banham 1971), I did not have the fortune to acquire a driver's license for my research.[39] This meant that I could spend anywhere from three to six hours per day in public transit. This also came with a few

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[39] In his study of LA's architecture, Banham writes: "[L]ike earlier generations of English intellectuals who taught themselves Italian in order to read Dante in the original, I learned to drive in order to read Los Angeles in the original." (1971: 5)

small benefits: interviewees would often drive me around out of pity, in spite of me asserting that I had gained first-hand evidence against their claims that 'no one in LA rides the bus'. These rides would be an occasion for discussing topics more freely than was possible in the semi-structured interviews that ended up on the record. I also learned much from talking to drivers of ride-sharing services such as Uber and Lyft, including how various ethnic groups in Los Angeles perceive the Armenians.

Due to my focus on the connectivity and circulation in and between Yerevan and Los Angeles through media technologies, following numerous pages and accounts on Facebook and Instagram has been crucial throughout. At times, the frictions between my newsfeed relaying events from one site and my immediate surroundings in the other led to highly productive insights, for instance when turbulent developments in the homeland were relayed to me by friends from Yerevan while I was in California. More routinely, media connections were essential to acquire visual material, to get in contact with image producers, and to stay updated about relevant events. In some cases, for instance the young meme artists in Los Angeles (Chapter 5), the direct message function on Instagram was important to get access and set up meetings.

This increasing entanglement of ethnography and everyday social media engagements is fraught with ethical dilemmas, some of which are long familiar to ethnographers, but take on new shapes and accents in the digital age. This is particularly so when it comes to the fuzziness of fieldwork; the question where it begins and where it ends. In a number of cases the boundaries between friend and informant became gradually blurred as my research progressed, as the changing focus of my project at times impelled me to ask friends whether they do not mind to become interviewees for my thesis. Sometimes my *neglect* of drawing clear boundaries between friend, informant and fellow researcher became a source of tension, and I was rightly scolded for instrumentalizing the rapport built. This happened a few times in online exchanges with educated diaspora contacts with whom I would ceaselessly share texts, images or experiences in group chats to solicit interpretations. Such moments were a pressing reminder to make sure to draw boundaries, define and redefine categories, and to be explicit, to ensure that I do not draw any unwilling voices into the project.

To respect the mask-like character of online avatars and pseudonyms, I have chosen not to combine quotes from interviews with participatory media producers with visual material from their personal accounts or even their real account names, although these accounts are nominally public. The images I include as figures have all either already crossed the threshold to mass publicity or are in no way traceable to personal data. The handful of real names I use are either artists, writers and publicists who publicize themselves regularly for large audiences, or companies rather than private persons.

There is another issue of research ethics that is perhaps uniquely pertinent in the study of the Armenian diaspora, or diasporic nations in general: the fact that identity entrepreneurs invest hopes in one's research to serve as 'raw material' to construct a particular notion of identity (Dudwick 2000; Brubaker 2004). I remember rather vividly how one of my informants in Glendale asked me to recommend a book in the field of Armenian studies. "I must have this book, let's go get it," the man responded when I told him about a book I consider one of the most interesting anthropological works on Armenian identity, and he drove us to the bookstore with which this chapter began. However, after leafing through the book for a minute or two, he expressed disappointment, stating that there is nothing in there that can help the Armenian community in its fight to retain its identity against assimilation. The man had hoped for an authoritative source from which to *construct* Armenian identity, rather than a critical account of the various social forces through which it is *constructed*.[40]

Due to the above dilemma of potentially being turned into 'raw material' for a particular version of identity, I have tried to maintain some control over the terms on which I could present my work whenever I gave lectures or interviews to diaspora communities. At the same time, it is only natural that anthropologists and identity entrepreneurs have different needs and notions of the kind of research that is worth pursuing and promoting. When the organizer of a lecture insisted, for instance, on promoting me as a *Dutch* anthropologist who speaks Armenian, I expressed my discontent with this emphasis on 'branding' my outsider position, and maintained that it is the content that should matter. In the end, it mattered little how I wanted to be presented, as for those attending the

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[40] It became clear that other titles in the store, such as nationalist historian Armen Aivazian's leaflet *The Fundamentals of Armenian Identity, or Who is an Armenian?* were closer to what my informant had in mind. (See Panossian 2006: 12-18)

lecture it *was* important that a non-Armenian was researching 'their' culture. Ultimately, the ubiquity of this fascination with foreigners studying Armenian topics also helped me to construct the argument of my thesis, revealing once more the pervasive and ubiquitous emotive force of non-recognition.

1.9. Overview of the Chapters

Each of the four central chapters that follow covers a separate case study that can, in principle, be read on its own. The argument of each individual chapter, however, provides a necessary part of the larger argument I make in the thesis as a whole, and is amplified by cross-resonances with theoretical points and contexts from other chapters. I have sequenced the chapters in a manner that prioritizes conceptual development over the chronology of the project's empirical unfolding. In the most abstract terms, the thesis can be read as a gradual unfolding of diasporic shapes of homeland consciousness. In this trajectory, the post-Soviet homeland begins as a highly mediated experience that 'breaks through' mostly when it resonates with the collective trauma of the Genocide (Chapter 2 and 3), then becomes a tangible 'raw material' to transform for the developmentalist young diasporans who move there (Chapter 4), and finally is normalized as an audiovisual archive for the everyday creativity of newcomers from Armenia to the Los Angeles diaspora (Chapter 5).

The first two case studies look at pan-Armenian publicity campaigns in which top-down struggles for recognition are accompanied by a counterpoint of grassroots quests for redistribution, challenging the transnational elites of the Armenian world. 'The Genocide Centennial in Red and Purple' examines a series of events that took place in 2015 in Yerevan and Los Angeles to further recognition of the foundational tragedy of the diaspora. Next, 'Materializing an Unrecognized Republic' examines the Armenia Fund Telethon of 2013 and 2014, a diasporic media spectacle that seeks to improve the fate of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. While the non-recognition that energizes both causes can only be externally upended, the campaigns also embody the promise of a new potential to overcome long-standing divisions internal to the diaspora. In both cases, the state has nurtured icons and institutions to manage transnational relations and create an affective geography where Yerevan is the unifying center that provides guidance to all Armenians. By examining grassroots responses to both of these

campaigns, I show how the apparent unity of such 'all-Armenian' appeals is challenged from below by a variety of excluded voices.

Having shown the centrality of struggles for legal recognition of the 1915 Genocide and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic's sovereignty to Armenian identity, the second half examines in more detail the role of participatory media in the internal divisions over how the nation is represented and imagined between different factions and locations. 'The Homeland as a Really Broken Down Bus' continues the thread of redistribution by examining the developmental gaze of so-called repatriates toward the surroundings of the homeland. 'Intimate Stereotypes in Los Angeles' is a study of the online creativity of newcomers from Armenia. In both of these cases, I examine everyday practices of image production of those who are largely outside the scope of the old institutions and their recognition struggles, yet at the same time seek to be acknowledged and imagine themselves as equally Armenian, but differently so.

2. The Genocide Centennial in Red and Purple

At first, it appeared only as a gigantic, indistinct crowd. But slowly, presumably attached to a drone hovering above the crowd, a video camera zooms in, and a pointillist mosaic of human bodies begins to manifest itself. A recurrent pattern surfaces in the seemingly endless mosaic of people: red dots, purple dots, and flags waving in the air. The colors turn out to be the t-shirts and banners of the crowd gathered on April 24th, 2015 for the March for Justice—the Los Angeles event dedicated to the Armenian Genocide Centennial, running from the Little Armenia neighborhood in East Hollywood to the Turkish Consulate, a six miles walk southwest, at the intersection of Wilshire and Crescent Heights. Besides Armenia's red-blue-orange tricolor, people also wave the flags of Lebanon, Syria, France and the United States. Municipality officials had already completed a ceremony that renamed the intersection where the crowd had gathered as Armenian Genocide Memorial Square. The unveiled street signs on each corner showed not just the coat of arms of the City of Los Angeles and the new name, but also, in resonance with the colors of the marching crowd, on each street sign, two purple forget-me-not flower depictions.

Red, in this chromatics of contention, is the color of blood: words and phrases such as 'wounds', 'victim' and 'survivor' are all discernable; in some cases the fonts in which these are written are further complemented by such dramatic details as dripping blood stains. Expressing the diasporic predicament of non-recognition through the imagery and discourse of unhealed wounds was itself not new, although some of the designs were launched especially for the Centennial. The annual march to the Turkish consulate on April 24th has long had the largest turnout of all community events in Los Angeles, and of the colors of the Armenian tricolor, the color red had long been the most prominent. What was unusual, however, was the scope, scale and variety of the designs, as well as the unprecedent levels of mediatization they underwent. The single most popular t-shirt design, featuring the text '1915: Our Wounds Are Still Open' with the letters 'R.I.P.' in red, is nowadays not merely *worn* year-round by many young diasporans. They also remediate the image by circulating photos of themselves wearing it online, and a dedicated hashtag maximizes its exposure: #openwounds1915. Remediation at times also transforms the body into the medium of the image, as the

design has become a popular tattoo in Los Angeles. And the image is being copied by people around the world, including in Russia and Armenia.

The ubiquity of the color purple also signaled something unusual. Purple, on most t-shirts bright and penetrating, on other surfaces a dark violet hue, was suddenly everywhere to be seen. The official invitation posters for the March for Justice, spread by diaspora organizations across all factions and subethnic affiliations, were in purple. The color appeared online, in profile pictures on social media, and also in the physical spaces of churches, community centers and schools in Los Angeles. The stage on which spokespersons for organizations gave their speeches was decorated with large banners that displayed the purple forget-me-not logo. There were purple balloons. Even the City Hall in Downtown Los Angeles was lit up in purple for the occasion. This color change was an index of a dramatic intervention in the visual appearance of the struggle for genocide recognition across the Armenian world, even if, in all likeliness, not many participants were consciously reflecting on this transformation.

Why was the 2015 Genocide March in Los Angeles not painted in the usual color palette of the marches for genocide recognition, of the red, orange and blue of the tricolor? How did it find its expression, instead, primarily in purple and red? The short answer to this question is that Armenia's president Serzh Sargsyan formed an official state committee for the Genocide Centennial back in 2011, which held a competitive tender for new commemorative designs, won by a Yerevan-based PR company that proposed the purple design. But this opens more questions than it answers. For, to frame this case in the larger overarching theme of my thesis, what do interventions of the post-Soviet state in the visual appearance of a diasporic recognition struggle tell us about the changing relations between Armenia and Los Angeles?

The traffic of culture in the 2015 Centennial was by no means a one-way movement. Several diaspora celebrities from Los Angeles traveled to Yerevan to participate in the events, most notably reality show star Kim Kardashian and popular metal band System of a Down. The former received an official reception from Armenia's prime minister and a welcome declaration read in parliament, and the latter performed a concert on Yerevan's central square as part of the official events. The capital of the 'homeland'

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and the 'capital' of the diaspora were thus each turned into a composite commemorative site, integrating symbolic elements originating in both locations.

Figure 2.1. Red and Purple color spectrum, March for Justice, April 24th 2015

In this chapter, I treat new forms of national iconography such as the red blood fonts on t-shirts and the purple floral design not as representations *of* the event, but as its unfolding *as* an event (cf. Belting 2005). To highlight how diasporic orientations to time and space are themselves historically produced, I draw on Raymond Williams's conceptual triad for conjunctural analysis (1978), conceiving of both layers as composites of residual, dominant and emergent elements. As we shall see, whether the residual or the emergent of these commemorative constellations is oppositional or hegemonic in nature depends very much on the context in which they unfold.[41]

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[41] My approach thus differs slightly from Raymond Williams, who was interested primarily in those manifestations of the residual and the emergent that "may have an alternative or even oppositional relation to the dominant culture" (1978: 122).

A plane flies over, towing a banner: "We demand recognition of the Armenian Genocide." Four priests of the Armenian Apostolic Church, their heads covered in black hoods, with golden crosses around their necks, are singing a patriotic song about the sacrifice and struggle needed to get back the ancestral lands and plant the Armenian flag on top of Mount Ararat. A banner shows a drawing of US President Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) pointing at Eastern Anatolia in front of a historical map of the Near East, stating: "These lands belong to Armenia!"

The bird eye's view of the red and purple dots in the crowd of 130,000 people marching on April 24th, 2015, and these more close-up observations, serve as a prosthetic device for the arguments that I develop in this chapter. After all, I was in Yerevan, not in Los Angeles during the 2015 Genocide Centennial. I rely on interviews taken in autumn 2015 in Los Angeles, as well as the video footage that appeared in the aftermath of the centennial march for my reconstruction of the events there, as well as my studying the reception of the LA diaspora presence in Yerevan in April 2015. As arguments in favor of multi-sited ethnography have often stated (e.g. Marcus 1995), the sources of one's immediate surroundings tend to lie in networks that stretch out to increasingly distant places. In the centennial, much in Los Angeles was sourced from Yerevan, and vice versa—hence, elements of my understanding of both sites derive from my having had the opportunity to move between them.

The chapter starts from a Los Angeles youth movement named Open Wounds 1915, which uses hip-hop music, fashion, social media and street art to raise awareness about the Genocide, and became the most visible player in public culture, winning even the sympathies of older generations through its cooperation with institutions and its making attractive of genocide recognition as the basis of Armenian identity to the young generation. While its foregrounding of non-recognition as a moral wound echoes the old narratives of post-genocide diaspora establishment, its epistemology and geographical orientations are quite different. For its adherents, recognition is not primarily a matter of obtaining declarations from pressured politicians, but of the reflexive circulation of iconic forms in public culture. The next section examines how the Republic of Armenia attempted to position itself more centrally in the diasporic geographies of genocide recognition, by presenting its own existence as proof of the resilience of a nation that was almost annihilated in 1915. In the 2015 Genocide

Centennial, this took not only the shape of the purple forget-me-not publicity campaign, but as already noted, also involved celebrities from Los Angeles making visits to Yerevan. I explore how the hopes for social change of youth in Yerevan, many of whom were quite skeptical of the official campaign 'in purple', were projected onto these celebrities as an emancipatory force. This brings into focus the relation between the diaspora's struggle to establish the truth of its own death a century after it occurred (Nichanian 2009) and the instrumental reason of the oligarchic state.

2.1. The Red Centennial: Remediating the Moral Wound

I first meet Armin in a parking lot next to a concert venue in the Sunset Strip, West Hollywood, where he was scheduled to perform the same night. Seven young men and two young women are chatting and smoking cigarettes nearby the entrance to the venue; most of them wear black, oversized t-shirts, a few of them matched with snapback caps that have a skull-shaped emblem portrayed on them. Around half of the group gathered for the concert are Armenian-Americans from Los Angeles, and it turns out that several have some connection to hip-hop music, three of them being rappers themselves. I had already been communicating via Facebook with Armin for a few weeks, and as we met on the parking lot he introduced me to his friends.

As it often went, the fact that I had lived in Armenia proved key to establishing a sense of rapport with diasporans, as many were curious what life in Yerevan is like. While people waited for Armin's concert to start, I asked the group what they thought of the Armenian hip-hop music scene in Los Angeles. It soon became clear that the majority of those present could not unanimously confirm that such a scene really exists. "There is and there isn't a scene," Armin intervened. "It's complicated, but I try to bring everyone together." The friends discussed issues of labels, distribution, and careers, as thus far none of them had managed to reach the level of success where they could live off their music. When Armin stated that he sometimes felt that it is depressing to be stuck on the same level of moderate success without breaking through to a larger audience, a non-Armenian friend tried to cheer him up. "You're doing something so much bigger than that," he reassured him. "You're holding up an entire people. That's something beyond success, to me you're a *politician*."

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When the concert started, in which Armin performed accompanied by a DJ scratching on the turntables, an electronic musician and a guest singer, I was surprised that although there was an Armenian tricolor front and center on the stage, few of the songs showed any influences that were recognizable as Armenian to my ethnographic sensibilities[42], whether in the lyrics or in the samples used in the backing tracks. The only exception in Armin's repertoire is his trademark song 'Open Wounds', about the 1915 Genocide, which uses a *duduk* sample and a chorus of the folk song *Kilikia*, about the medieval exile kingdom of Cilicia. Armin's song expresses the idea that denial is the last stage of genocide[43], and that in the absence of recognition, Armenians cannot move on. In the lyrics, he states it as follows: "We're praying to God to make them admit it, we're still hoping. But they still won't, and that's why these wounds are still open!" Later on, I learned that this song serves as a kind of signature for Armin: to 'represent the struggle of his people', because hip-hop music is all about struggle and being truthful to one's roots. But since he otherwise aims at a wide international audience, he does not produce more songs on Armenian themes.[44]

Next to the stage, a table was set up where two young women were selling merchandise. The products included snapback caps with '1915' printed in red on black and white on red, as well as the t-shirt for which Armin had become famous around the world, based on the lyrics of his signature song: a black t-shirt with the white text "1915: Our Wounds Are Still Open," with 1915 and the letters R.I.P. highlighted in blood red. The t-shirt,

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[42] Of course, it is not the role of the anthropologist to judge what is or what is not Armenian. But during my fieldwork in Yerevan I had internalized as a measure the common 'ethnic' touches used by local Armenian hip-hop groups, such as the use of folk instruments, or lyrics that reflect on the nation's history and present struggles.

[43] This formulation echoes the influential '8 Stage Model of Genocide', a model developed by renowned genocide studies professor Gregory Stanton and popularized by organizations such Genocide Watch and the International Association of Genocide Scholars, both of which link knowledge circulation with genocide prevention. In this conceptualization, denial is not something that happens *after* a genocide occurs, but is an integral, final stage of it. Such theories are increasingly translated into vernacular expressions in Los Angeles, especially since in 2013 the state of California has passed an Armenian Genocide Education act. Critical voices, however, counter that replacing Armenian culture with the genocide recognition struggle is the last stage of genocide.

[44] In this sense, Armin was himself also ambiguously positioned in the making of the Armenian hip-hop scene in Los Angeles, the existence of which my interlocutors complicated. A true 'scene', it seems, would require a critical mass of performers, fans and intermediaries who are exclusively dedicated to Armenian-themed hip-hop.

designed by his friend Narek, has sold more than ten thousand copies since 2013, although it was initially launched only to promote the rapper and his trademark song. A recent, more optimistic variation was also for sale at the concert, with the text "2015: We Are Still Here," and the centennial year 2015 in red. There were also red ski hats with '1915' for sale, black phone covers with "1915: Our Wounds Are Still Open", plus hoodies and children's shirts with the design.

Figure 2.2. '1915: Our Wounds Are Still Open' t-shirts and snapback caps

As the concert finished and I looked through these products, which I had already seen advertised online through links popping up in YouTube videos to Armin's webstore *shop1915.com*, a number of questions came to my mind. How had it become possible

to turn 1915, the year of the Genocide, into a brand? Was its turning the memory of the annihilation of a people into a fashion product a form of desacralization, dictated by the instrumental reason of the market, or, to the contrary, an emancipatory tool in the struggle for voice and visibility in public culture for an unjustly silenced nation? Or was it perhaps but a mere marker of symbolic Armenianness (Bakalian 1993), the year as a sign of 'light' belonging, for those who are already too assimilated into American culture to maintain more substantial ties to their backgrounds?

Sara Ahmed argues that "the transformation of the wound into an identity" has a problematic tendency to devolve into fetishism, as it "cuts the wound off from a history of 'getting hurt' or injured" (2004: 32). She cites Kleinman, Das and Lock (1997), who note that the political economy of suffering attains it shape by such contingent factors as the relative ease or difficulty with which particular forms of victimhood can be commodified. More recently, the marketability of victimhood has been conceptualized by Terri Tomsky in terms of a "trauma economy, a circuit of movement and exchange where traumatic memories 'travel' and are valued and revalued along the way" (2011: 49). The value of Tomsky's approach is that it asks us to go beyond a critique of the commodification of victimhood, and instead take into account "the material conditions and networks that propel its travels" (ibid. 50). For as much as critical theorists may find the notion of shopping for genocide fashion a form of fetishism, the unmatched success of the initiative shows that it certainly does not generate *experiences* of alienation. For those who wear it, whether or not genocide fashion cuts off the wound of 1915 from their history, it certainly has significance in the context of the recognition struggles of the *present*. Indeed, having had the chance to converse about these t-shirts on multiple occasions with those who wear them, I realized that it is really not so much about the commodification of trauma, as it is about commodifying non-recognition to *overcome* the absence of recognition—illustrating how non-recognition is an energizing force for diasporic cultural production and identity (see Chapter 1).

Of course, as should be obvious, there is a degree of instrumentality to this: the circulation, hashtagging and display of genocide fashion does not just publicize the recognition cause, but also the diasporan hip-hop artist whose song lyrics the t-shirts, caps, hats, telephone covers and hashtags are based on. To bear witness to the history of the Genocide becomes a form of capital that can be converted to stage the rapper's

authenticity.[45] This was also clear in my conversations with Armin, who said that hip-hop culture is essentially about struggle, and that his being a bearer of the wound of 1915 helped to legitimize his work to a scene dominated by Black and Latino musicians. But I will demonstrate that, from the point of view of diaspora institutions, branding and commodification is also a sensible strategy for the Armenian Cause.

First, though, it is first necessary to clarify what social processes the Open Wounds t-shirt, as the main symbol of the 'red' centennial during the March for Justice, is a case of. It being exemplary of the current *dominant* form of Armenian public culture in LA should be understood in the context of residual traces of the former hegemony of diaspora institutions over the legacy of 1915. Even as late as the 1980s, it was still common to find in the struggle for justice in Los Angeles overtones of the myth of return—the exilic notion that diaspora Armenians "should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland" (Safran 1991: 84): present-day Eastern Turkey, commonly referred to as Western Armenia.[46]

After the fall of the Soviet Union, however, the realization that no mass repatriation to independent Armenia would take place rendered the exilic position increasingly illegitimate (Tölölyan 2000). The legacy of 1915 became increasingly autonomized from the exilic imaginary, as the struggle for justice became phrased exclusively in terms of recognition rather than the right to collective return. The influx of new migrants from Armenia further compromised the hegemony of traditional diaspora institutions over its legacy. This autonomization of the wound is also seen in the field of cultural production, as nowadays it is not necessarily those who carry direct family histories related to 1915 with them who integrate it most explicitly into their creative labor; Armin is himself of Iranian-Armenian and Russian-Armenian descent.

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[45] To conceptualize this in Bourdieu's terms (1986), e.g. as embodied cultural capital, however, seems cynical and reductionist to me.

[46] Examples of this can be found in the 1980s issues of *Haytoug Magazine*, the Los Angeles publication of the Armenian Youth Federation. Even during perestroika, young nationalist Armenians ignored Soviet Armenia and proclaimed that the future of the diaspora lies in a return to the Armenian lands inhabited prior to the Genocide, after the liberation of Eastern Turkey. The writings of the Californian militant Monte Melkonian (1993) of this same period are, albeit more open to the possibilities of a free Soviet Armenia, similarly focused on restoring Western Armenia.

If the Open Wounds 1915 movement differs from the old exilic imaginary in its orientation to space, what it shares with it is a particular notion of halted temporality. It conceives of Armenian history as being put on hold due to an unresolved sequence of denial, betrayal and the injustice of non-recognition (cf. Crapanzano 2011); the flow of national time halted until the Genocide is recognized by the governments of Turkey and the United States. Its discourse brings to mind the insightful study of Armenian-American youth activism by anthropologist Melissa King (2013).

King argues that Armenian-American activist youth perform their identity in two key registers, that of *woundedness* and that of *survivorship*, being continually impelled "to think of themselves as survivors …. who in their existence evidenced their ancestors' survival" (ibid. 116). In temporal terms, we could restate this as a form of double time: living simultaneously in a halted 1915 ('Our Wounds Are Still Open') and in a wounded 2015 ('We Are Still Here'). King's insights into this formation are crucial, as she shows how the integration of this woundedness and survivor identity into notions of selfhood has become the distinguishing mark for being authentically American-Armenian. This creates a cultural hegemony in which those who are unable or unwilling to identify with this woundedness are considered less authentically Armenian (ibid. 231), which might explain the popularity of Open Wounds 1915 merchandise among those new migrants from post-Soviet Armenia who oftentimes have no direct family ties to 1915. The products sold at the concert and on *shop1915.com* are perhaps the paradigmatic affective devices to popularize the double time of 1915 and 2015, circulating to propagate Armenianness as simultaneously a halted past and a wounded present. This double time also has a spatial counterpart: a past in Western Armenia, a present in America. Like the exilic institutions, but with a focus that is primarily on present-day America rather than the imagined ancestral Western Armenia, the Open Wounds genocide fashion naturalizes a diaspora identity that at no point claims any strong relation to the present-day Republic of Armenia.

During my fieldwork, it became clear that the resilient and resistant mix of victimhood and survivorship adopted by young Armenian-Americans underlies the production of horizontal solidarities with other historically repressed groups that, often due to present-day injustices, remain similarly invested in collective trauma. Many of my informants told me that they felt that Armenians, Blacks and Latinos can relate well to one another

due to their similar historical fates of discrimination and persecution. In the Los Angeles context, the fact that Armenian youth in the 1990s gained a city-wide notoriety for their entanglement in gang violence[47], many of them either joining Latino gangs or an ethnic Armenian gang that paid tribute to Latino patrons, further adds to this credibility. For example, 2Pac remains a legendary rapper for Armenians in Los Angeles, not just because he is from LA—his most well-known song is 'California Love'—but also because he has been recorded explicitly equating the position of Mexicans, Black people and Armenians as subjugated peoples.[48]

The remark made as I chatted on the parking lot before Armin's concert, that the rapper was "like a politician" to his non-Armenian friends, is an illustration of this horizontal dynamic—it meant being a truthful ambassador of his people who tells it like it is, representing a 'race' with its own authentic struggle for justice in the US multicultural mosaic. When we met again later, Armin explicated on this by stating that the Open Wounds 1915 merchandise is appreciated by people from all kinds of different backgrounds. "It doesn't say 'Armenia', it doesn't say 'Turkey', it just says Our Wounds Are Still Open. And that's why it's so popular. Because other races and other people relate to it," he told me. "Do you know how many people have gotten a tattoo of it that are non-Armenian? I had this one guy in New York he sent me a photo, it was a Black guy, he had the tattoo, the same design, 'Our Wounds Are Still Open', and then instead of 1915, he put the year his little sister was killed."

The design and the overall approach of combining the struggle for genocide recognition with hip-hop and urban fashion resonates with young Armenian-Americans who otherwise feel little connection to the institutions that propagate it as the basis for

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[47] In his article on the history of Armenians in Southern California, Daniel Fittante writes that Armenian Power, the first LA Armenian street gang, initially served "to protect siblings and friends from pre-existing street gangs," and only gradually "began dabbling in money laundering, extortion, and other forms of theft." (2017: 9)

[48] The rapper put it as follows: "I represent five million fuckin' sales. And no politician is even checkin' for us. But by the next election I promise I'll be sitting across from all the candidates. …. I guarantee we will have our own political party. It's gon' be for Mexicans, for Armenians, all you lost-tribe muthafuckas. We need to have our own political party 'cause we all have the same muthafuckin' problems. We built this nation and we get none of the benefits." Interview with Tupac Shakur, published in "Last Testament," *VIBE Magazine*, November 1996: T6-8.

diasporic identity. Armin in the interview stressed the power of hip-hop culture and fashion to generate moments of recognition:

> Every time you would wear it [the 1915 t-shirt], someone would ask you: "What is that?" Other people, non-Armenians would come and ask: "What does that mean?" And that was the opportunity to educate someone. And that became the whole point. You wear the t-shirt, you're spreading the message. But in a cool way. Because I used to always go to these genocide commemorations. At schools and stuff. And it was always so boring. …. So when I first did my song that was my whole point. I'm like, you can spread this same message but in a way that the kids actually think is cool. So the Open Wounds movement kind of made it cool with all these kids, they want to wear the shirt, they want to talk about it and they want to *represent*, you know? That was the whole thing.

Here I return to Tomsky's assertion that we need to look at material conditions and networks that make trauma travel, be valued and revalued, rather than simply critique its commodification. The transfiguration of the Armenian Genocide into a range of cultural forms drawing on genres of African-American and Latin-American popular culture, such as hip-hop music, urban fashion and mural paintings, ensures that the trauma travels more widely both within and outside the Armenian community.[49] It makes the intergenerational trauma, or perhaps more aptly, the moral wound of non-recognition, appeal to and resonate with other groups engaged in the politics of recognition in the contemporary United States. The solidarities emerging from this are glossed over by King (2013), as she treats Armenian-American youth culture as emerging vertically from the past rather than horizontally through hybridizations in the multicultural present. Armin's assertion that those who wear the t-shirt are driven to *represent* highlights the importance of cross-cultural commodity aesthetics in the staging of public claims for genocide recognition and the politics of identity.

The transition from an exilic homeland orientation to a horizontal urban orientation for young Armenians in Los Angeles was a structural process, as was the increasing autonomization of the wound of non-recognition from the diaspora institutions that

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[49] Lamont and Molnár (2001) show how the mass production of such cultural forms in the US is shaped by ethnic marketing specialists, as companies increasingly divide the market in segments for "'blacks', 'Hispanics', and the 'general market'" (35).

claim to manage it. There were, however, also more contingent factors that went into making the '1915: Our Wounds Are Still Open' t-shirt the main symbol of the red centennial. Indeed, the popularity of the shirt among the older generation was partially the result of deliberate promotion, but importantly also resulted from unexpected events occurring in the city of Glendale. The deliberate part was the fact that institutions were asked to adopt the t-shirt for April 24th as a sign that they are not caught up in internal divisions and competition. "The thing here in the Armenian community is that every year every organization for themselves will do their own t-shirt. And they sell it to their own people," Armin said. "So you go to the march and everyone is kind of divided in a way. It's all competition and stuff. It's a little *too political*. So we contacted all the organizations and say 'take our shirt, make it yours.'" But what made the t-shirt most popular among the older generations, many of whom have little interest in hip-hop culture, is the fact that the display of the famed t-shirt was banned by a shopping mall in Glendale in March 2015. This charged the merchandise with an aura of defiance, resilience and resistance even among those with whom the Black and Latino histories of oppression did not resonate.

Having rented an outdoors kiosk at the Americana shopping center in Glendale, one of the most popular, luxurious commerce areas frequented by Armenian-Americans in Los Angeles, its management notified the vendors after two days that they had received complaints about the offensive nature of the 'genocide-themed' merchandise, as well as of images of protests that were used to promote it. While the shirts were not banned from being sold, the Open Wounds vendors were threatened with having their license withdrawn if they would continue to display it. After the ban on displaying the shirt, the word circulated quickly across the diaspora through social media and local Armenian-language newspapers to mobilize the community. A small group of mostly middle-aged and elderly held a protest at the mall, where, of course, most of the protesters now also wore the '1915: Our Wounds Are Still Open' t-shirt.

Rumors circulated quickly and it was claimed that Rick J. Caruso, the owner of the Americana mall, had given in to Turkish lobbying, which proved once more how important it is for Armenians, as victims and survivors, to continue struggling for justice until recognition is a reality. The wealthy, self-appointed elite of the diaspora, whose approach to genocide recognition Armin had described to me as "boring," immediately

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sponsored a law suit and issued numerous publications and press releases, projecting the entire moral wound of non-recognition of 1915 onto the events. "If Americana refuses to take remedial measures and fails to reassure community leaders that such misconduct will not be repeated," wrote one renowned genocide recognition publicist, "Glendale residents must boycott the shopping center, continue their protests, and urge the City Council to take decisive action, including the repeal of previously granted financial subsidies."[50]

2.1.1. Mural Art and the Armenian Emcee Cypher

While Armin had always been integrating his identity as a diaspora Armenian into his musical persona, as was clear from his artist name, R-Mean, it was only in the last three years that he had literally been bringing Los Angeles Armenian hip-hop together. Since 2013, he has released an annual YouTube video of approximately 8 minutes length, titled the "Armenian Emcee Cypher," each showcasing up to ten Armenian rappers from Los Angeles. The music video is a digital variant of the *cypher*, a central institution of global hip-hop culture, referring to a semi-improvisatory, cyclical freestyle performance in which a group of rappers, beatboxers and/or breakdancers perform one after the other, expanding on a common theme.

Since the advent of YouTube, cypher videos are often used to promote hip-hop collectives, record labels, a particular scene, or, more rarely, a brand that sponsors artists. In this case, however, it is not the cypher of a label, collective, or scene, but a cypher on the basis of *ethnicity*. This is what Armin meant when he said that he tries to build a scene, where it is ambiguous whether or not there is a scene. There are certainly many Armenian rappers in Los Angeles, but most of them are either part of local, multi-ethnic scenes, or transnationally embedded in the post-Soviet scene of Yerevan. The cyphers are attempts to, at least once a year, generate a scene.

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[50] Harut Sassounian in the California Courier, March 31st, 2015.
http://www.thecaliforniacourier.com/armenian-vendors-sue-americana-for-violating-their-civil-rights/

The 2015 edition[51] was recorded on Winona Boulevard in Little Armenia, in front of the side wall of an Armenian bakery, situated only a few minutes' walk from the newly minted Armenian Genocide Memorial Square from which the March For Justice started. The wall features a large mural painting dedicated to the memory of 1915 by an artist who goes by the name ArtViaArt. From the left to the right, stretching about sixteen by four meters, the mural shows five main elements, over a dark and hilly background that slowly turns from pine trees into crosses on a graveyard. First, a row of four flags stacked on top of each other: the Armenian, Greek, Assyrian and Israeli flags, which the artist integrated to show solidarity with other nations that have been victims of Genocide. Secondly, the Tsitsernakaberd hill in Yerevan with the Soviet-era genocide monument, consisting of a pointed stele and a circle of obelisks with an eternal flame in the middle. On top of the stele is the slogan that is also found on Armin's t-shirts: "2015: We Are Still Here," with the year in red and the text in white. The third and central element of the mural is an elderly woman, gagged and handcuffed, whose mouth is covered with a red piece of cloth on which is written in black letters: 1915. Upon closer look, there are dim outlines of 1945 overlaid on 1915, which the artist integrated to communicate his belief that non-recognition of the Armenian Genocide made way for the Holocaust, a claim that is often made with reference to Hitler's famous rhetorical question recorded in 1939, before the German invasion of Poland: "who remembers now the annihilation of the Armenians?"[52] In her cuffed hands, the woman holds a phantom of Mount Ararat. The Soviet-era genocide monument and the phantom of Mount Ararat are connected by a trail of smoke coming from the eternal flame, which also connects to the fourth and final part of the composition. This final element is a depiction of death, which is showed in a transitory form, from the desperate faces of the living who are locked up and try to get out, to the skulls of those who have already been massacred. The smoke dissolves over a graveyard at the mural's edge.

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[51] Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_-ujrueMTc
[52] Kevork Bardakjian (1985) has shown, in a short book examining the context of this phrase, that Hitler was indeed well aware of the precedent of the Armenian Genocide.

Figure 2.3. Still from Armenian Emcee Cypher 2015 music video: Rapper BlackJack performs in front of '2015: We Are Still Here' Mural by ArtViaArt

The cypher recorded in front of this mural is a vivid illustration of the multimodal, polymedia nature of the Open Wounds 1915 movement, illustrating how it uses the viral and accelerationist potentialities of decentralized social media campaigning over institutionalized power to spread the message of the Armenian Genocide. The mural artist had already painted another mural the year before with the theme "Our Wounds Are Still Open," on Alexandra Boulevard, but he had done so entirely independently of Armin and his crew. What they had in common was their autonomy from the exilic institutions, as neither was the product of the Armenian private schools in Los Angeles or a direct descendant of Ottoman Armenian genocide survivors.

For ArtViaArt, who was born in Yerevan and had just arrived to Los Angeles after spending a decade in Salt Lake City, the phrase had become autonomized of Armin's rap song. It was simply a part of the community's repertoire of slogans for genocide recognition, of which this happened to be the one which resonated most strongly with him. He had not met Armin or his colleagues of *shop1915.com* when he painted the mural, which is rather like a graffiti, since he did not ask for permission before painting it. It was only with the 2015 mural that he made his work an integral part of the Open Wounds 2015 movement, by addition of the phrase "2015: We Are Still Here" to the 2015 mural after it, upon request by Armin and his colleagues. His second mural soon went viral through online circulation and remediation, and the elderly woman, which the artist modeled after a digital photo of his own grandmother, ended up tattooed on the arms of several diaspora Armenians. Only a small handful of the eleven lyricists in

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the cypher video, which mostly features rappers who are less known than Armin, makes explicit references to the Genocide in their rhymes, but the rappers showcase the products sold by the Open Wounds movement, and the video has itself become another promotional form of the publicity campaign.

2.1.2. Circulations of Woundedness, from Los Angeles to Yerevan

Since he started the Open Wounds initiative in the spring of 2013, Armin has established ties with Armenian organizations around the world, from youth organizations to schools and churches, many of whom also became vendors of his merchandise. He has sometimes been accused of making money out of the Genocide, but he stressed that he always gives generous deals to diaspora organizations, which allows them to reinvest the profits they make selling Open Wounds merchandise in various community activities. Furthermore, he emphasized that he has also given much time, energy and products away for free, for example by sending t-shirts to celebrities and asking them to post pictures wearing it on social media. Those who have posted pictures of themselves wearing Armin's shirts include not just Armenian diaspora figures like Serj Tankian, but also non-Armenians such as the popular Black rapper The Game, who is followed by seven million people on Instagram as of 2017.

In the spring of 2015, many print shops in Yerevan were copying the Open Wounds 1915 design without asking for permission, which surprised Armin, who had only visited Armenia once in his life at that point. He remembered the difficult economic situation the country found itself in back when he visited in 2001, as water and electricity were only available in Yerevan at limited hours. In light of such hardships, he understood that people would copy the t-shirt design for some extra money. "At the end of the day, as long as the message is spread, it's cool." As of late 2015, the Open Wounds movement had located around fifteen different illicit types of copies and variations of their merchandise in Armenian communities across the world.

The red centennial in Los Angeles was characterized by a strong inflection of social justice, as is also reflected in the official name of the event uniting all diaspora organizations: the March for Justice. It takes from the institutional history of the diaspora the trope that to be Armenian is to be a survivor, with the responsibility to seek external validation of the foundational injustice that lies at the roots of its genesis. But

its orientation is an interethnic, horizontal one in public life in Los Angeles in the present, rather than an investment in the past as homeland. It is decentered, and for the most part, the Republic of Armenia hardly features on its moral horizons. Through immersion in interethnic popular culture in Los Angeles, it creates more emotive resonances with past and present struggles of African-American and Latin-American populations than with the present-day problems of Armenia.

Having conceptualized the red centennial as composed of the residual element of the exilic institutions with their myth of return, and the dominant element of localist recognition politics, it is interesting to note that in the summer after the centennial, Armin for the first time traveled to Armenia to perform as an artist. This already exemplifies the emergent part of the red centennial: a new, 'Armenia-centric' version of the struggle for justice. As we shall see, when transplanted to Yerevan, the centrality of struggles for justice to the survivor identity of the Los Angeles diaspora get resignified and given local meanings, retaining the discourse of survivorship but increasingly shifting in emphasis from recognitive to redistributive justice (Fraser and Honneth 2004). But to understand the relation between the two centennials, I first turn to the state's purple centennial campaign, designed by a public relations agency in Yerevan. Its keyword, as we shall see, was unity, rather than justice.

2.2. The Centennial in Purple: Branding for Unity

The purple centennial campaign in Yerevan was in many ways a capitalist reiteration of the 1965-1967 state socialist campaign. It used transnational recognition politics to route the struggle for justice at the heart of post-genocide diaspora identity through the cultural circuits of the post-Soviet state. To understand this linkage, it is insightful to start from the commemorative mural in Little Armenia (Figure 2.3) discussed in the previous section. The trail of smoke depicted on the mural emerges from the eternal flame of the Soviet-era genocide monument on the Tsitsernakaberd hill in Yerevan. This iconic monument is unique as the only Soviet-era Armenian structure that is commonly depicted in diasporic public culture[53], which otherwise remains invested

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[53] A good measure of this is the trade in heritage souvenirs on the Vernissage market. Of all Soviet-era structures, only the Genocide Monument is commonly given the form of ceramic or wooden micro-reproductions, or depicted on large paintings.

mostly in the imagery of ancient monasteries. In the Los Angeles diaspora, the Genocide monument has even been remediated into a virtual replica that runs on smartphones and tablets, where one can leave flowers by tapping on a touchscreen.[54]

Although the monument's exterior shows unmistakable similarities to that of World War II monuments built in the 1960s throughout the Soviet Union, its topical symbolism, with twelve obelisks dedicated to the Ottoman provinces lost to Turkey surrounding an eternal flame and a 44-meter high stele signifying post-genocide national rebirth, ensures that it is not perceived through the lens of Cold War divisions. This is significant, as the monument was commissioned with the stated purpose, used mostly as a pretext, of easing hostile relations with the diaspora and to provide legitimacy to Soviet Armenia as a spiritual homeland of all Armenians.

The continuing appeal of the Tsitsernakaberd monument in the diaspora emerges not primarily from the top-down meanings that officials ascribed to it in the Soviet context, but rather from the widely known acts of popular resistance that preceded it. In the early 1960s, the First Secretary of Soviet Armenia was Yakov Zarobyan, a genocide survivor who had lost both parents when his family was deported from Anatolia. In the context of improved freedoms of the Khrushchev Thaw era, and the global spread of Raphael Lemkin's genocide concept after it became a part of UN law in the late 1940s (De Waal 2015: 132-139), the First Secretary had begun to lobby to Moscow for a public acknowledgment of the Armenian Genocide, which had been taboo under Stalin. The rhetorical figure of the anti-Soviet diaspora served as a useful tool in this quest, as Zarobyan argued that the neglect of the memory of the mass killings lied at the root of the hostile attitude of "the reactionary forces of the Armenian Diaspora" towards Soviet Armenia. The legitimacy of the Soviet Union, he argued in a letter to Moscow from 1964, could be greatly improved, and the commemoration could take shape in a manner that does no damage to its diplomatic relations (Marutyan 2014: 65).

Yerevan's Republic Square, Opera and Cascade and the Sardarapat independence monument at most end up on kitchen magnets.

[54] Available for iOS, the Genocide Monument app is the initiative of Alex Nisanian who set up a crowdfunding campaign for the project, designed its graphics, and had it coded by a group of young programmers in Yerevan. Besides laying flowers, it also allows its users to send local politicians a pre-composed message informing them about the importance of genocide recognition, and unlock achievements of activism.

This plea was persuasive to the central leadership in Moscow, in no small part because it fit the Soviet ideological trend of using the newly minted genocide concept instrumentally to denounce imperialist powers (De Waal 2015: 138). The year 1965 saw a great number scientific conferences and reports dedicated to the previously tabooed topic, as well as the decision to construct the official monument that was inaugurated two years later to coincide with the fifty years anniversary of the Russian Revolution. On the Commemoration Day of the semicentennial, on April 24th, a small gathering was held at the Opera House in Yerevan for the intelligentsia and the nomenklatura of the Communist Party. What was not anticipated is that this day also saw the most significant outburst of nationalism in the history of the Soviet Union until perestroika, with large masses on the streets calling for justice, not in the form of the recognition declarations that would become an Armenian trademark in the 1980s, but by demanding the actual return of ancestral lands, from Eastern Turkey to Soviet Azerbaijan's Nakhichevan and Nagorno-Karabakh regions (De Waal 2015: 126-148).

At the inauguration ceremony of the Tsitsernakaberd Genocide Monument two years later, in 1967, little could be seen of this nationalist sentiment. During the formalities the idea was expressed that Soviet Armenia was nothing less than a post-genocide resurrection of the Armenian people, symbolized by the fire of the eternal flame, which had come from the workers. If the traumatic memory of 1915, which many inhabitants of Soviet Armenia at the time had experienced in person, still made people demand closure half a century later, it was communicated that an Armenian socialist republic on the road to full communism already *was* that closure. This notion, congruent with the Soviet attempt to maintain friendly ties with Turkey, was enacted through an elaborate dramaturgy. The fire that lit the monument came from the Kirov Chemical Factory of the present-day Shengavit district in southwest Yerevan, where the workers followed a sequence of motions scripted for the occasion: they lit a torch light using the factory's furnace, and transported it in an armored vehicle to the Tsitsernakaberd hill, where the light of the workers was handed to Anton Kochinyan—the new First Secretary of the Armenian Central Committee of the Communist Party, after Zarobyan was removed from his position due to the mass protests of 1965 (De Waal 2015: 145).

The timing was no coincidence. It took place in 1967, fifty years after the October Revolution and on November 29, the day when the short-lived First Armenian Republic

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(1918-1920) had surrendered its sovereignty to the invading Soviet Army. As the First Secretary ignited the eternal flame, he paid lip service to official rhetoric: the monument represented "not only a condemnation of the past, but also of the imperialist politics of the present." He stated that the memorial complex bears witness to a tragic past, but also "symbolizes the socialist rebirth of our people," citing the demographic growth of the republic's population and the post-World War II repatriation of genocide survivors. "At this solemn moment we can say that such a tragedy will never happen again in the history of the Armenian nation," he proclaimed, because "the brotherly Soviet nations are already with it."[55]

2.2.1. From Soviet to Post-Soviet Commemorative Iconography

In the spring of 2011, Armenia's president Serzh Sargsyan, much like Zarobyan before him in the early 1960s before the semicentennial, took the initiative to form a state committee with the task of devising the shape and content of the centennial commemoration events. The Armenian Genocide Centennial Committee consisted of the presidents of Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, the Catholicos of All Armenians (of the Holy See in Echmiadzin, Armenia) and the Catholicos of Cilicia (of the Holy See in Antelias, Lebanon), and many prominent figures from the main political parties and philanthropic organizations from the diaspora. Compared to similar pan-Armenian structures, such as the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund that will be examined in the next chapter, the initiative was relatively decentralized: regional committees were formed by diaspora communities across the world, and these could decide to what extent they followed the Yerevan-centric vision of the event or went in a more autonomous direction. There was however one element that was standardized across the Armenian world: the color purple and the forget-me-not flower logo, with a short slogan translated into dozens of languages: "I remember and demand."

Just as in the early 1960s after permission was given to construct the monument, a public tender was held for a commemorative design, with the abovementioned state committee deciding on the winning submission. If the Soviet-era tender saw

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[55] The procedure of the inauguration ritual and the text of the First Secretary's speech are taken from the report "Aprilyan yegherni nahatakneri khnkeli hishatake haverzhatsnogh hushardzani batsume," *Echmiadzin-Vagharshapat*, December 1967.

submissions come mostly from architects and other members of the intelligentsia[56], in the post-Soviet competition it was advertising and public relations agencies that were the main players. In the first round, all submissions were rejected, but after the second round, a winning design was chosen, albeit only after further negotiation. To the critics of Serzh Sargsyan's regime, it came as no surprise that it was Sharm Holding, a Yerevan-based advertising and public relations company with an almost complete monopoly on promotional campaigns for the government, that won the tender.

This campaign, in any case, turned out to be an unprecedented success. It managed to craft a new national symbol from scratch that was widely adopted by Armenians around the world in a matter of months. When I interviewed Hayk Demoyan, the secretary of the Genocide Centennial Committee, he downplayed the accusations of nepotism vis-à-vis Sharm Holding. No matter the tender procedure, he stressed that the committee had not blindly accepted the design that the public relations company had offered them.

As an historian specializing in genocide studies, the director of the Armenian Genocide Museum Institute, and a published author on the historical continuities of Armenian symbols, Demoyan is a widely respected authority on the nation's iconographic and heraldic traditions. Perhaps because of these credentials, or simply to leave a personal mark, he felt it necessary to safeguard a continuity with earlier symbols. Being a strong believer in an 'Armenia-centric' vision of the diaspora in which the state is the guarantor for the survival of Armenian culture worldwide, he proposed to integrate Yerevan's landmark monument of national awareness in Soviet Armenia, the 1967 Genocide Monument, into the pan-Armenian logo. He retold how he personally negotiated with the PR agency to have them include the Soviet obelisks, emphasizing his relative autonomy from the government's committee members. The obelisks of the memorial complex ended up as an integral part of the floral design (Figure 2.4).

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[56] An article in the April 2015 issue of *Yerevan Amsagir* discusses the alternative monuments of which miniature models were presented to the committee in the House of Architects in Yerevan in 1965. One of the designs featured a giant cross dug into the earth into which people could descend, over which a Vardan Mamikonyan statue looks from the ground. As in 2015, the committee didn't want the commemorative design to denote suffering, but rebirth and the unity of the Armenian people.

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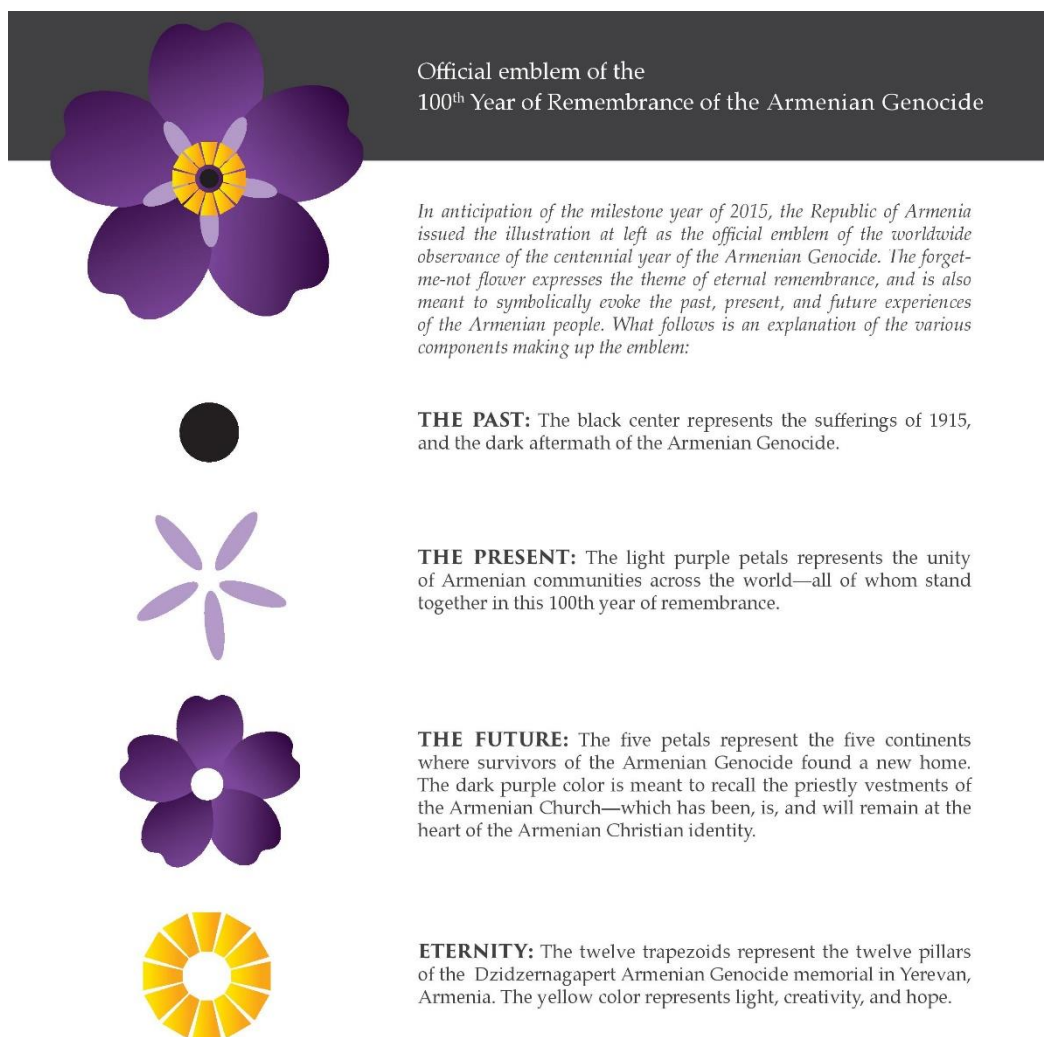
Figure 2.4. Explanatory flyer of the 4 layers of the official logo of the Centennial, as interpreted by the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Figure 2.5. Three images circulating as profile pictures on social media platforms in spring 2015 with the Centennial's forget-me-not logo. The official slogan 'I remember and demand' is replaced with texts such as 'I'm a genocide survivor' and 'I [logo] Armenia'. Collected in April 2015.

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The design was presented by Sharm Holding in a video with the following voice-over:

> This symbol has been chosen for its power to connect our past, our present and our future. …. The five petals of the flower symbolize the five continents to which our compatriots who survived the Genocide fled, giving birth to the Great Dispersion. Today, there are people all over these five continents who recognize the Genocide and accept the following slogan: "I remember and demand." The forget-me-not symbol consists of four different colors: dark purple, bright purple, yellow, and black. …. The color black symbolizes the horror and the memories of the Genocide. Bright purple stands for the unity of everyone who participates in the event. Dark purple has been chosen because it is the traditional color of the garments of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the basis of the self-awareness of the Armenians. Its stands for the future. Yellow is the color of sunlight. …. The yellow ring symbolizes the twelve pillars of the Tsitsernakaberd genocide monument [representing the twelve Ottoman provinces lost to Turkey]. It symbolizes eternity.[57]

By early spring 2015, the purple floral design was everywhere in Armenia: on the suits of public servants, on shop windows, on the balconies of apartment blocks. As April 24 approached, a purple centennial fashion emerged, especially adopted by women, with some families even crafting a special purple centennial outfit for their pets. There was a continually expanding market of forget-me-not stickers, forget-me-not umbrellas, forget-me-not socks, forget-me-not t-shirts, forget-me-not jewelry, forget-me-not clocks, forget-me-not phone covers, forget-me-not hair clips, forget-me-not necklaces, forget-me-not cakes and countless other products. It became difficult to keep track of discussion threads on Armenian pages on social media, since almost inevitably the majority of all participants would have a variation on the same profile picture (Figure 2.5). Intellectuals soon derided the phenomenon as a mania. Some felt it trivialized the legacy of 1915, and many were puzzled by its success. After all, it was the first time since independence that the state managed to launch a new symbol on such a scale. Its viral pace of acceleration was simply unprecedented.

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[57] Video footage available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6wWnrwUHfo

This success was largely due to a highly synergistic interaction between top-down state promotion initiatives and a grassroots, participatory 'privatization' of state imagery (Özyürek 2004). All children attending elementary school and high school in Armenia were obliged to create no less than six forget-me-not flowers from paper, according to a centrally designed folding and coloring scheme. Children were instructed to write their name and place of residence on the back of these paper flowers, to symbolize that for every victim of the Genocide a new child has been born. These flowers were distributed on the centennial day to visitors, diasporan and non-diasporan, from across the world at the Tsitsernakaberd Genocide Monument.

Although the most common estimation of the Genocide's death count among historians outside Turkey and Armenia lies at around one million casualties, the Armenian consensus lies at 1,5 million victims (De Waal 2015: 34-35). Therefore, a total of 1,5 million paper flowers were distributed—one for each victim of the Genocide. This figure was used in many typographical designs, where the '1' and '5' of 2015, 1915 and 1,5 million were overlaid to get across particular associations and effects. It was also the number that was central to the canonization ceremony of 1,5 million martyrs that was performed by the two catholicoses of the Armenian Apostolic Church on the evening prior to the Centennial Day, with a commemorative silence at exactly 19:15.

On a global scale, the main top-down initiative of the purple centennial was the state committee's decision to send a genocide-themed entry to the 2015 Eurovision Song Contest. The song, a dramatic rock ballad initially titled "Don't Deny," but soon renamed "Face the Shadow" after being threatened with disqualification by the European Broadcasting Union for its overt political overtones, brought together five singers from five continents to symbolize the global dispersion of the Armenian people that followed the Genocide. The singers, all dressed in purple, performed a choreography on stage that visualized the state's official floral logo for the centennial.

While these initiatives were all designed from above, the general display of the official logo of the centennial was a contradictory mix of not only calculated state coercion but also a display of mass voluntarism; of individual citizens buying and bringing the stickers, pins and pieces of clothing to their homes, vehicles and workplaces, propelled by the 'invisible hands' of the state committee and the market. Esra Özyürek (2004)

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aptly describes this process as the privatization of stage imagery, a process in which the miniaturization of images of state ceremonies and public monuments produces objects that people can buy to decorate their houses, shops, and other spaces of everyday life. By purchasing and displaying such objects, the coercive power of the state is transformed from something imposed from outside into a voluntary personal choice.

If on the one hand there was a large informal market for centennial products, sold mostly in an improvised fashion by sub-proletarian street vendors who have no steady source of income (see Derluguian 2005: 150-154), such as herb and flower sellers, this went hand-in-hand with philanthropic branding initiatives by companies that were not in an immediate urgent need of extra money. For instance, the Yerevan dental clinic VT-Dent dubbed its purple charity campaign for the centennial '1,500,000 Smiles', offering free dental treatments for a limited period of time—one free dental treatment for every victim of the Genocide. When this initiative became subject to ridicule and criticism from the self-proclaimed cultured classes of Yerevan for its perceived trivialization of the legacy of the Great Catastrophe, the owner of the dental clinic felt compelled to post a defense of the campaign on its Facebook page. He emphasized the need to unite as one nation with gestures of compassion against economic hardships, and he emphasized the real benefits of free dental treatments for disadvantaged groups:

> Before criticizing the campaign, it would be correct to acquaint oneself with the past charity efforts of our company, from children to pensioners …. [M]any pensioners have received free prostheses. Karabakh War veterans [*azatamartikner*, lit. 'freedom fighters'], families of victims, the disabled and pensioners always receive a 30% discount on all our services. The clinic is participating and will continue to participate in many charity events. The '1,500,000 Smiles' campaign is one of them, which many have already used and they now have a beautiful smile. … The Genocide belongs to us all, and regardless of one's political views, it will always remain our shared pain. But that does not mean that we have to live in perpetual pain and sorrow. The purpose of the campaign is to give people a beautiful smile and to ensure that the next centennial will be full of smiles. …. The number 1,500,000 is symbolic,

to show the enemy that in spite of everything we could live happily, because our enemy's main purpose was to see us in mourning.[58]

The owner of the dental clinic locates the legacy of the 1915 Genocide not in the struggle to heal the moral wound of non-recognition of the past, but in a need for redistribution to those who struggle to survive in Armenia in the present. The Genocide is here not a universal lesson for humanity that crosses ethnic boundaries and resonates across them, as in Armin's connections to Black and Latino populations in Los Angeles through his genocide hip-hop and fashion, but a *national* tragedy that "belongs to us all." This frame of a national tragedy is expanded to encompass the socioeconomic collapse of the transition years, having made access to health care difficult to many of the poorest. In this reading of 1915, the most acute injustice the Armenian nation faces today is not the tragedy of non-recognition, but of economic non-redistribution.

VT-Dent ստոմատոլոգիական կլինիկան, հարգելով ցեղասպանության զոհերի հիշատակը, 1 500 000 հայերի տրամադրում է 100% զեղչ ատամնաքարերի մաքրման և ատամների սպիտակեցման ծառայությունների համար

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Figure 2.6. Social media campaign by Yerevan dentist: "VT-Dent dental clinic, with respect to the memory of the victims of the Genocide, is offering a 100% discount to 1,500,000 Armenians for dental plaque removal and teeth whitening services."

2.2.2. "In Yerevan They Remember, in Los Angeles We Demand!"

In spite of the forget-me-not's success in painting the diaspora in the colors of the republic, some diasporans *did* sense the publicity campaign to be too openly 'Armenia-

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[58] Source:
https://www.facebook.com/vtdent.stomclinic/photos/a.144621079025716.31993.1445 24639035360/444061435748344/

centric'—if only because it originated in the president's appointed committee. As can be expected from both its US-specific Cold War heritage and the broader legacy of its general anti-Soviet attitude (Chapter 1), the Armenian Revolutionary Federation in the United States[59] was the faction that resisted the state committee's perceived attempt to appropriate the moral wound of the diaspora for its own agendas the most. In the view of the Dashnaks[60], it is the diaspora and not Yerevan that has worked incessantly to 'deliver the goods' of recognition resolutions in parliaments across the world. It is therefore mistaken to view the post-Soviet state as the center of the pan-Armenian struggle for genocide recognition. "People have asked me why I didn't go to Yerevan for the Centennial," the Los Angeles executive director of its lobbying body, the Armenian National Committee of America, told the audience during a conference I attended in 2015. She asked the audience whether they remembered "that slogan that came from Yerevan" as a part of the purple centennial. She suggested that the pan-Armenian rhetoric of unity in the event was mistaken: "Over there in Yerevan they may remember, but it is here in LA that we demand!"

This reluctance to adopt image flows coming from Yerevan illustrates a larger point. William Mazzarella argues that the commodity images of advertising campaigns are perpetually being "reopened and reworked" whenever they touch down in particular times and places; "its elements are sourced from an existing repertoire of resonances and meanings, and after being 'produced,' it continues to be made and remade through its public career" (Mazzarella 2003: 21). This is certainly also a fitting description for the two centennial campaigns we have looked at. The forget-me-not campaign reworked the resonances of the Soviet semicentennial, ostensibly designed to win the sympathies of the 'reactionary bourgeois' forces of the diaspora, into new forms that make Armenia appear as the center of the global struggle for genocide recognition. On the one hand, it firmly consolidated the symbolic power of the state—a power which,

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[59] Here a distinction should be made between the East and West coast diasporas in the United States, as the ARF is a much stronger voice in Los Angeles than it is around the Boston/Watertown area. Armenian-Americans of the East coast are for the most part of an earlier generation and lack the exilic nationalism that was kept vivid in Middle Eastern communities that arrived to LA in the 1970s and 1980s. The more assimilated East coast diaspora is the object of Bakalian's landmark study (1993).
[60] Supporters/members of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation are referred to as Dashnaks, from the Armenian word for federation/alliance (*dashnaktsutyun*).

as Pierre Bourdieu reminds us, is "a power of 'world-making'" (1989: 22). But the affective resonances of a Cold War legacy which holds that what comes from Yerevan is perceived with suspicion is difficult to control by the Armenian state.

As I already mentioned, the official commemoration for the Soviet bureaucrats and intelligentsia in Yerevan in 1965 found its counterpoint in the largest grassroots nationalist protests in the history of Soviet Armenia until the perestroika era, which called for justice, revenge and return of lands, as opposed to the official discourse of finding redemption in the mere existence of Armenia. To some extent, the genocide commemorations in Yerevan have always been composed of both a grassroots element, more similar to the diasporic emphasis on social justice, and a top-down aspect focused on pan-Armenian unity, as seen in the purple centennial. Having looked at the origins of both the red and the purple repertoires of the centennial, I now turn my attention to the refractions of 'red' recognition struggles in the context of 'purple' Yerevan, with particular attention to the iconic appeal of diaspora celebrities.

2.3. Red Refractions in the Purple Centennial

Since the late 1990s, the Armenian-American metal band System of a Down has sold more than 20 million albums worldwide. Popular songs, such as 'Holy Mountains' and 'P.L.U.C.K. (Politically Lying, Unholy, Cowardly Killers)', have brought the cause of genocide recognition into the cars, living rooms and rock pubs of millions of unwitting, mostly non-Armenian music aficionados in the United States and beyond. The band members, all born in Syrian-Armenian and Lebanese-Armenian families but raised in the Armenian community of Hollywood, have impeccable credentials for serving the Armenian Cause. All four of them were raised in the ARF faction of the LA diaspora, going to a Prelacy[61] school, and have raised thousands of dollars for genocide recognition efforts of the Armenian National Committee of America, the lobbying wing of the nationalist political party. The band's message is one of justice through recognition, which, combined with the fact that the band members can be seen wearing the genocide fashion of the Open Wounds 1915 movement in public appearances, makes them an integral part of what I have called the 'red' centennial.

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[61] In the Los Angeles context of the Apostolic church split, ARF faction schools are 'Prelacy' schools and Echmiadzin faction schools are 'Diocese' schools.

In an interview given in the spring of 2015, the band's lead singer Serj Tankian explained why he continues to organize tours, write songs and speak out on the topic of the Armenian Genocide: "We still see them happening. I read in today's press that they discovered a mass grave in Deir Ezzor in Syria of ISIS massacres of this one tribe there, and it reminded me of all the bones that are under those sands in Deir Ezzor from the first genocide of the 20th century in the exact same place," the singer stated. "If that's not symbolism, I don't know what is."[62]

If the Open Wounds 1915 movement use the aesthetics of African-American and Latin-American pop culture to advocate its cause, System of a Down fights for recognition by presenting it with reference to Bosnia, Rwanda, ISIS, and other global 'trauma icons' (cf. Darieva 2008). In recent years, however, Serj Tankian has shown increasing interest in the Republic of Armenia, even engaging in a public exchange of letters with president Serzh Sargsyan. The band's fanbase is huge in Armenia, including among those otherwise not interested in metal music—arguably through a recognitive dynamic, as its international exposure provides an existential validation of the nation that it *matters*.

The band's 2015 tour, titled 'Wake Up the Souls' was not the first tour to be explicitly dedicated to recognition of the Armenian Genocide. But for the first time ever, the band had agreed to give a concert in the Republic of Armenia. It took place on Yerevan's central square on the night before Centennial Day, with free entrance as part of the official events. Although the band had always cited logistical complexities whenever asked why they would not perform in Armenia, some of those from Yerevan with whom I went to the concert did take offense that it took them so long. "It's always genocide this, genocide that, genocide… it's like we don't exist for them, the people in Armenia today mean nothing to them," Lilit, a graphic designer from Yerevan in her mid-twenties told me. "Even now, the Genocide is the only reason they have come to Armenia. Without it, I'm pretty sure that we would have never seen any Kardashians or System of a Down come to Yerevan," she asserted bitterly.

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[62] https://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/system-of-a-down-serj-tankian-armenian-genocide-new-album-20150108

Tankian seemed aware of this difficult conundrum. "Genocide has become the defining factor of the Armenian character worldwide," the singer told an audience of undergraduate students during a Q&A session at the American University of Armenia[63], on the day prior to the concert. "That is both a good thing and a bad thing. No people want to be known as victims forever," he concluded. At the event, one of the local students invited him to use the lessons of 1915 to speak out against present-day 'crimes' against Armenians. The question of the student was put as follows:

> In your documentary about the Genocide[64] you told us that we should all be screamers. Many people refer to the situation in Armenia today as a *white genocide*. What do you think? Is the situation of a white genocide going on inside Armenia today? If so, would it be possible for us to produce a scream loud enough to wake up the world, which is mostly asleep when it comes to the issue of the recognition of the Armenian Genocide?

The singer had visible difficulty formulating an answer to this question, asking the moderator of the discussion to clarify the precise meaning here of the concept 'white genocide'—a term that in the language of the classical Armenian diaspora refers to assimilation and intermarriage (more commonly *spitak chard*, 'white massacre'), rather than depopulation and mass emigration. In the student's take on the lessons that can be learned one century later from the 1915 Genocide, the pedagogy of what is "still happening right now" is not what happens to Syrians in Deir-Ezzor, but what happens to the surplus population in the post-industrial rural areas of Armenia—a nation forced to leave its homes again, this time fleeing a collapsed economy.

Like the precarious vendor of centennial pins at the metro underpass who had asserted to me that the diaspora has to recognize that president Serzh Sargsyan is committing a genocide on the population of Armenia (Chapter 1), the genocide concept was here reformulated from an instrument for cross-cultural comparison of crimes against

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[63] Armine Ishkanian (2005) has shown how the origins of the American University of Armenia, an institution affiliated with the University of California that relies on a cooperation between diaspora funds, private donors and government support, lie in the humanitarian reorientation of the diaspora after the 1988 earthquake (126-128).
[64] The 2006 documentary *Screamers* directed by Carla Garapedian follows the band on one of its tours dedicated to genocide recognition, interspersed with interviews with scholars and reflections on links between non-recognition and future genocides.

humanity, to one of crimes against the nation that require a *different* recognition. In both cases, the centennial's potential for affective resonance was seized to express the grievances and hopes of the present-day population of the country, expressing hopes for mechanisms of redistribution that could stop the exodus from the country. To see how this theme developed further, I turn my attention to the band's Yerevan concert.

The System of a Down metal concert was expected to be one of the largest public events to have ever taken place in post-Soviet Armenia. For this reason, complex crowd control measures were enforced by the police and the municipality. Most of the streets surrounding Yerevan's Republic Square were blocked from noon onwards on April 23rd, and the police had issued a statement, widely shared online, that only one road gave access to the free concert, through which all attendees have to pass. There would be a bag check to make sure there are no glass items that could cause accidents.

To be sure of being able to attend the concert, which was scheduled to start in the evening at 8 PM, music fans were instructed to make it to the square as early as 4 PM. This scheduling put the purple and red centennial together into one sequence, since the Armenian Apostolic Church's canonization ceremony of 1,5 million martyrs was scheduled to start at 5 PM and would be relayed to Yerevan prior to the start of the System of a Down concert. Large video screens were installed to broadcast the canonization ceremony live, with the entire transnational elite of the Armenian world, including the purple centennial's committee of president, church leaders and diaspora figures, attending the church events in the 'Armenian Vatican', Echmiadzin, 30 kilometers outside Yerevan. At the symbolic moment of 19:15 sharp, a minute of silence was prescribed to commemorate the 1,5 million victims of 1915.

As I waited together with friends and tens of thousands of strangers on Republic Square for the concert to start, it soon became clear that there were few *Yerevantsis* who acknowledged the sanctity of the canonization ceremony and its martyrs. As dark clouds gathered over the masses stretched out over the large space, few cared to follow the rituals shown on the video broadcast. Many were seeking shelter from the rain under sheets of plastic and umbrellas, and preferred instead to chat and socialize with friends and strangers, sharing the excitement that one of the most famous metal bands in the world had finally come to Armenia. Every once in a while, while the Catholicos of All

Armenians in red and gold and the Catholicos of Cilicia in a purple and gold garb could be witnessed on screen, the impatient crowd released a crescendo calling for the Los Angeles band to come on the stage: "System! System! System!" One of my interlocutors even questioned the decision to turn *all* victims into saints: did being killed by the Turks necessarily make one into a virtuous person?

When the band finally came on stage, the atmosphere was certainly more a festive celebration than a solemn commemoration or an expression of indignation. Unlike at the traditional April 23 evening event that would in previous years be organized in Yerevan by the youth organization of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, no Turkish flags were burnt.[65] Of course, Serj Tankian asserted that the Turkish denial of the nation's past tragedies cannot continue. But he also praised the courage of civil society in Turkey that has begun to speak openly in the last decade, some of them even no longer fearing the use of the 'G-word'. "My grandmother has been saved by a Turkish mayor during the Genocide while she marched to the desert," Tankian told the audience in between songs. Moreover, he stated that Turkish denial is not the only injustice that Armenians are facing in the present. He urged Armenia's government to stop hindering civil society from flourishing as freely as it could, and warned that Armenia should not become a client state of Putin's Russia. Lastly, he told to the cheering audience that it is the responsibility of the Armenian government to stop the depopulation that has seen so much of the population leave the country since 1991.

Tankian's holding the government responsible for the depopulation crisis during the concert seemed to answer the student's request to the Los Angeles singer to recognize injustice *in Armenia in the present* and voice a "scream loud enough to wake up the world" to the suffering of her fellow citizens. It could indeed reach much of the world because of the event's complex media geography. Fans of the band from across the globe followed the event through a live stream facilitated by Rolling Stone Magazine, one of the largest popular music publications in the United States. The audience for the first homeland concert of the Los Angeles metal band consisted not merely of an estimated 100,000 people in Yerevan, but also of a large number of diasporans, many

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[65] This annual ritual, without a doubt the most popular public outing of the ARF in Armenia since the country's independence, was moved to the next day, April 24.

of whom rejoiced that the 'red' moral standard of using the legacy of 1915 in struggles for justice was being extended to the government. But at the same time, diaspora churches had organized gatherings for watching the live broadcast of the official 'purple' canonization of genocide victims. Since both of these attempts at transnational synchronization were ultimately made possible by the state committee's organizing efforts, it was quite striking that Tankian criticized the very elites that had allowed his band to perform as part of the official centennial events.

"Let these gentlemen open bank accounts in Armenia," Hranush Hakobyan, the Minister of Diaspora told a journalist from the independent A1+ broadcaster who caught her on camera in the hallways of parliament several days after the System of a Down concert. "After all, why are our compatriots leaving the country? If people had higher wages, they would not be leaving," she explains to the reporter. "If a million diasporans open a bank account in Armenia, and put 1000 dollars on it, that amount will grow, and we will see that the economy is going to flourish."[66]

This unofficial government response to Tankian's holding the oligarchic state responsible for the emigration crisis was widely shared on social media, and infuriated many. It revealed the state's attempt during the centennial to promote Armenia on an international media stage and to appropriate the moral wound of non-recognition from diaspora Armenians across the world to be a delicate matter. System of a Down's first ever concert had been a free, state-sponsored event, and it is understandable that government officials were not pleased to be criticized in an event that was supposed to unify all Armenians through a commemoration of the shared traumatic past. But to suggest that the diaspora celebrities should perform their art, give money, and otherwise shut up, as the Minister of Diaspora had done, putting the burden of redistribution on the diaspora, was considered disrespectful by many.

When I discussed this turn of events with one of the leading members of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation in Los Angeles, he stated that the System of a Down incident once more proved the complete illegitimacy of the Ministry of Diaspora. Minister

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[66] "Hranush Hakobyani koche SOAD-in." *a1plusnews*, 27 April 2015. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vMICi8r2Lw

Hakobyan is sometimes considered one of the only two female oligarchs in the country (Antonyan 2016: 118), and she is also disliked by LA diasporic elites for what is perceived as her Soviet style of comportment[67] and the ministry's privileging of the Armenians in Russia over more traditional diaspora communities, which is often ascribed to her past as a Komsomol leader. The ministry as a whole is often considered tainted by a Soviet mentality in Los Angeles, expressed in its penchant for organizing medal-awarding ceremonies and rigidly orchestrated dance events, echoing traditions of the 'friendship of nations' institution of Soviet times (Cavoukian 2013).

"I don't care if Hranush Hakobyan feels that I should deposit a thousand dollar in some accounts for Armenia to be able to provide jobs," the ARF member stated. "What I care about is how much money Hranush Hakobyan and her cronies are taking from various companies, for instance Carrefour coming to Armenia[68], or the myriad other examples that are happening. That's what I care about." As already hinted at in Chapter 1, most of the Russian-Armenian communities that the ministry deals with are not even a diaspora for the ARF, having fled mere economic hardships rather than the Armenian Genocide. The red and the purple centennial thus remained in a tense and dynamic relationship to one another even in those moments when their iconic repertoires coalesced in the same time and place. Although few in the LA diaspora view Armenia as the center of the struggle for genocide recognition, the hardly noticed source of the omnipresence of its symbols and slogans in Los Angeles and the wide interest in LA celebrity appearances in Yerevan do illustrate the increasing entanglement of the two.

2.4. Conclusions

The public culture of the 2015 Genocide Centennial saw a dialectical interplay between two contradictory forces in the Armenian world: a struggle for justice, most visibly articulated by the LA diaspora, and an aspiration towards unity, rooted in a Yerevan-initiated publicity campaign. Like the first official commemoration that took place in

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[67] This includes the fact that she doesn't appear to speak any foreign language other than Russian.
[68] Between 2013 and 2015, the attempt of the French supermarket chain Carrefour to enter the Armenian market was repeatedly reported to be barred by a coalition of oligarchs headed by Samvel Aleksanyan, a controversial MP and entrepreneur who owns Armenia's largest supermarket chain Yerevan City (see Adriaans 2017a).

Armenia in 1965 at the height of the Cold War, the 2015 Armenian Genocide Centennial was not just a major event in remembrance of the victims of 1915, but also an exercise in public diplomacy. The state campaign explicitly targeted both the international community and the diaspora, mobilizing Los Angeles celebrity power and the reputation of 'the unrecognized genocide nation' for public relations purposes.

The post-Soviet state's approach to the 2015 centennial shared a number of striking similarities to the 1965 and 1967 campaigns. While only time can tell whether the 2015 iconography can match the longevity of the iconic monument introduced in 1967, both the semicentennial and the centennial launched a new all-Armenian symbol into public culture. Indeed, the 1967 Genocide Monument and the 2015 forget-me-not are among the few symbols that nearly every person of Armenian descent will recognize. As had happened half a century earlier, the state sought to legitimize itself as the homeland of all Armenians to the diaspora, although no longer versed in the language of a battle against reactionary bourgeois forces. The portrayal of the diaspora by state representatives, such as the Minister of Diaspora's negative portrayal of System of a Down, also exemplifies the persistence of the Soviet-era perceptions in Armenia of the diaspora as unfairly critical of the homeland rulers.

The 2015 centennial also repeated the notion of a universal lesson for all of humanity, already present in the 1965 Pravda interpretation[69] and the 1967 First Secretary speech, but now no longer in a Cold War rhetoric. This was evident in the president's 2015 speech, which sought to reinforce the resonance of 1915 with similar tragedies by noting that "April is also the month in which the perpetration of the Holocaust, and crimes of genocide in Rwanda and Cambodia commenced," and expressing "May there never again be a need to erect a memorial to commemorate new disgraceful chapters of

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[69] An article was prepared in Yerevan in 1965 to be published in Pravda under the title "Genocide: The Gravest Crime Against Humanity." The version appearing in print under this title on April 24 bears little resemblance to the prepared text, as most of the material on the Armenian Genocide was removed by the Moscow editorship of Pravda. The final text mentions US atrocities in Vietnam, racial discrimination in South Africa, colonial violence in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea, using the Armenian tragedy of 1915 as a propaganda tool to stir up Cold War sentiments (Marutyan 2014).

history anywhere in the world! May there be no more need for a new Tsitsernakaberd, Yad Vashem, Killing Fields, and Gisozi!"[70]

There were, however, also a number of remarkable differences. Whereas the events of 1965 saw a proliferation of grassroots protest, including the largest nationalist demonstrations in the Soviet Union to that date, in 2015 the commemorative practices displayed on the streets of Yerevan reproduced rather than challenged the political hegemony of the state. There was, of course, no longer a need for Armenia's citizens to call on their own government to recognize the mass killings of the Ottoman past. But the 1965 protests were not merely about making a repressed memory public, but also an outburst of grievances against the Soviet regime. Its demands were not only answered with the 1967 monument, but also with a wider, general loosening of the state's repression of nationalism. By contrast, the space for dissent and the ability to organize such mass mobilizations against the state was limited in 2015.[71] The voices that translated the struggle for recognition into demands of redistribution of the wealth of oligarchs were a subdued counterpoint to the official events, more likely to be heard from taxi drivers and street vendors than from any organized movement.

The public career of the 2015 forget-me-not campaign continues to this day, making visible how the emergent has become a subtle component of symbolic domination in the present. President Serzh Sargsyan wears the purple centennial pin in all his public appearances to this very day, including in his international appearances at the United Nations—an unmistakable claim to represent not just the citizens of Armenia on the world stage, but also the diaspora. And within his party, the Republican Party of

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[70] I first encountered this quote in Sossie Kasbarian's article (2018) on the centennial. The full text of the speech can be found online at http://www.president.am/en/press-release/item/2015/04/24/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-Genocide-April-24/

[71] The militant opposition movement The Centennial Without the Regime, an offshoot of the Sardarapat Movement composed of Karabakh War veterans and nationalist intellectuals (see Adriaans 2017a), had for months announced its ambition to organize non-stop protests to overthrow the government on April 24th. Their stickers, flags and social media campaigns also sought to create an affective resonance between the present, the 1965 protests and the memory of 1915 by incorporating the monument into its logo, with the pointed stele and the circular obelisks expressing the number '100'. In the end, they managed to mobilize only a few dozen supporters, friends and relatives on the centennial day. After a failed armed uprising in 2016 (see Ishkanian 2016b) many of its members remain in detention as of late 2017.

Armenia (HHK), the forget-me-not pins nowadays function as a sign of loyalty to power, worn by those who want to rise within the ranks of the party apparatus.

The dichromatic, dual voicing that I have foregrounded throughout the chapter should not be reified into two monochrome essences of diaspora versus homeland, victimhood versus redemption, or grassroots versus top-down, but rather be treated as mutually constitutive, shifting spectrums, which at times diverge, but at other times are quite similar. On the stage of foreign politics, for example, a decentralized, networked campaign saw an unprecedented level of cooperation between state and diaspora organizations, delivering the result of a dozen countries, including such key powers as Argentina, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Germany, and the Vatican, issuing declarations of recognition prior to the centennial (Koinova 2017: 121-122). But the willingness to cooperate of Los Angeles institutions was compromised on multiple levels. After all, the unequalled turnout to the March for Justice, combined with the domination of the Yerevan events by LA Armenian celebrities, proved to elites of the old institutions that it is today neither the state nor the earlier diaspora capital Beirut, but Los Angeles that is now the legitimate center of the global recognition struggle.

If Serj Tankian's holding the oligarchs accountable during the centennial concert seemed a ritual of rebellion more than anything, it was nevertheless significant from the perspective of Los Angeles as a small shift towards an 'Armenia-centric', present-focused vision of diaspora. Such a vision inevitably brings questions of redistributive justice into its recognition paradigm: should it be the oligarchic state or the wealthy diasporans that lead the effort of making Armenia a more fair country? As we shall see in the next chapter, one alliance between the two already exists since the mid-1990s, harnessing the diaspora's wealth to improve the fate of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, channeled through a humanitarian wing of the state.

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3. Materializing an Unrecognized Republic

The commercial break is interrupted by an explosion. A wall of flames emerges, in front of which black and white photos of the victims of the Armenian Genocide are projected. A bright blue background appears, colourful scenes of folk dances and state celebrations, featuring children with the tricolour painted on their cheeks, are shown, metamorphosing into black and white footage of soldiers on tanks in the Karabakh War of the early 1990s. The video finishes with military drills in Yerevan with the nation's flag waving in the background. As these images appear on the Armenian television channels of Los Angeles, a narrator reads the following text:

> A hundred years ago, they destroyed us. They tried to make us go extinct. But we lived, we grew stronger and today we have a free and independent Armenia. Twenty-three years ago they came with a war. Again, they wanted to conquer our ancestral lands. But we won as a nation. And today, Artsakh [i.e. Nagorno-Karabakh] is ours!
>
> This year they tried to pierce through our borders. They wanted to provoke us. But the Armenian soldier protected our fatherland like a lion, and the enemy retreated in panic!
>
> Me! You! Every Armenian is responsible for the fate of Armenia! Participate in the attempt to strengthen our fatherland. Join the national Telethon!
>
> Thanksgiving Day, November 27th, 8 AM on channel 17 in the Los Angeles area.
>
> Hayastan All-Armenian Fund. One nation, one fatherland.[72]

This promotional video advertises the Armenia Fund Telethon, a fundraising media spectacle that harnesses the diaspora's wealth for infrastructure projects in Armenia and, especially, the unrecognized de facto state of the Karabakh Armenians on the internationally recognized territory of Azerbaijan. If in the last chapter the legacy of the Genocide was used by the state to bolster its legitimacy, here it is dramatized to solicit

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[72] "Armenia Fund Telethon 2014 - One Nation, One Homeland." Online version available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQSvrXTghls

financial donations to the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund, a humanitarian fund presided over by Armenia's president. Referring to both Turkey and Azerbaijan in a single breath as an unspecified "they," and listing Karabakh frontline shootings that took place in 2014 in one series with the 1915 Genocide, the video presents the two neighbouring countries as a single timeless threat to the nation. Only by paying ones dues in a redistribution of wealth from diaspora to homeland, it is suggests, can this looming danger be averted; only by participating in the event can the heroism of the Armenian soldier continue to safeguard the hard-won victory over Azerbaijan.

While this promotional video is being circulated on diasporic television channels, children and teenagers in the dozen Armenian elementary schools and high schools in Los Angeles are preparing for the annual event. They participate in bake sales and dance contests, collect money, and sign up as volunteers to handle phone calls during the broadcast. In some classrooms of these private schools, a designated donation box has been placed for the Telethon, decorated by pupils with flags and texts such as "Karabakh is ours!" and extra credit is given by teachers for Armenian language classes if at least three donations are made before the holidays. On the campus of UCLA in Westwood, members of the university's Armenian Student Association have proclaimed an 'Artsakh[73] Awareness Week', displaying facts and patriotic trivia for the students passing by to inform them about the existence of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and the Armenian victory in the war with Azerbaijan—the most celebrated martyr of which remains Monte Melkonian, an Armenian-American who studied archaeology at UC Berkeley (see Melkonian 2005 and Chapter 1).

The Armenia Fund Telethon is the signature event of the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund, founded in 1992 by decree of Levon Ter-Petrosyan, the Syrian-born first president of the Republic of Armenia. Modeled after similar institutions such as the Jewish National Fund (see Lainer-Vos 2013; Galai 2017), the fund is for all practical purposes a

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[73] Artsakh is the patriotic Armenian name in common usage for Nagorno-Karabakh since the war, avoiding the 'tainted' Russian, Persian and Turkish etymology of the latter by adopting a name from medieval times. Although most Armenians in the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic still refer to their territory simply as 'Gharabagh', the LA diaspora has a strong preference for the patriotic 'Artsakh'. The NKR government has also long attempted to make the population adopt Artsakh—most recently in late 2017 by changing the official name of the de facto state to the Artsakh Republic.

humanitarian wing of the state that seeks to engage the diaspora's wealth for development projects in the homeland. It was initially launched as a part of the Foreign Ministry of Armenia, which at the time was led by Raffi Hovhannisian, the Armenian-American lawyer who had repatriated from California to Armenia after independence (see Chapter 1).[74] While the fund at first suffered from its government affiliation due to the Ter-Petrosyan regime's conflictual relations with the diaspora[75], by the mid-1990s the fund was nominally separated from the government and the Los Angeles diaspora became firmly integrated into the fund. In 1996, the annual Armenia Fund Telethon on Thanksgiving Day was established—a recast, post-independence continuation of the fundraising efforts of the transition years (Chapter 1).[76]

The most important projects of the fund's early years were the Goris-Stepanakert highway, at the time the only road to connect Armenia to the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) through the Lachin Corridor, a depopulated six miles area mostly inhabited by Kurds before the war, and the North-South Highway in Nagorno-Karabakh built in the early 2000s. As of 2017, the organization has affiliate offices in 20 countries, which are responsible for a variety of fundraising tasks, from gala dinners for donors to phone marathons and cultural events. Besides funding road construction, the fund is responsible for electricity networks, water irrigation systems, schools, hospitals, and in the past has provided benefits for widows and children of Karabakh War victims. But the main endeavor of the fund remains the construction of roads, one of the more profitable sectors of post-Soviet enterprise, as it claims to have funded more than 480 kilometers in Armenia and Karabakh.[77]

From the perspective of institutional links between elites in the South Caucasus and Southern California, the annual Armenia Fund Telethon is one of the most significant of the new moral appeals and cultural forms to have emerged in Los Angeles since

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[74] Those who donated more than a million dollars at this stage received the honorary title of belonging to the 'President's Circle'. See 'Announcing… The Armenia Fund for Foreign Affairs' in the July 1992 issue of *Armenian International Magazine*.

[75] As already mentioned in the introduction, the Ter-Petrosyan regime initiated a crackdown on the Armenian Revolutionary Federation in 1994, outlawing the largest political party in the diaspora as a terrorist entity.

[76] The fund's telethons also draw on another Jewish diaspora example in Los Angeles, as they are made with the same production team as the Hassidic Chabad Telethon.

[77] http://www.himnadram.org/index.php?id=4 accessed 23 June 2016.

Armenia's troubled independence. It is the duty of *every Armenian* to secure the nation's fate by participating in the event, the fund states in its promotional videos and during its visits to the private diaspora schools of LA. But how 'all-Armenian' is the Armenia Fund Telethon really? And how does the construction of diaspora-funded infrastructures on the internationally recognized territory of Azerbaijan reconfigure relations between recognition struggles and redistributive issues among Armenians?

With these questions, I do not only return to the state discourses of unity of the previous chapter. I also expand on the overall theme of the thesis by exploring the interplay between media technologies, circulating image repertoires and post-Soviet socioeconomic collapse. I take the Armenia Fund Telethon's repeated call to 'build the homeland together' in Nagorno-Karabakh, having staged no less than 17 out of 20 editions with a Karabakh theme[78], to exemplify an alliance of the recognition-driven and the developmental diaspora, from which the relations between ethnicity, money and non-recognition can be explored. Noting that de facto states such as the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR), their localist rhetoric of territory and self-determination notwithstanding, are in fact very much a product of globalization (Caspersen 2009: 54), I explore links between the materiality of unrecognized statehood and structures of feeling in the diaspora (Werbner 2000). If the affective appeal of non-recognition may seem quite harmoniously interwoven with a redistributive ethos in the event, the Telethon is in fact increasingly contested by activists in Los Angeles who argue that it is the oligarchs in Armenia whose wealth should be redistributed through taxation.

The chapter unfolds in five steps. First, I explore how the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund's humanitarian media repertoires relate to the former developmental role of the state. In the second part, I examine how a variety of media rituals surrounding the event establish a "transformation of the scale of ethical reflection" (Couldry 2012: 28) for diasporans. The third section zooms in on the 2013 and 2014 editions, dedicated to the Vardenis-Martakert highway connecting Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh. Here, I inquire into how the relational work of building 'together' with the diaspora through

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[78] The Karabakh theme is, however, often part of a larger 'all-Armenian' discourse. The amount of funds that actually go to Nagorno-Karabakh are also lower than what one would assume on the basis of its ideological overperformance, as many of the fund's less publicized projects are in fact realized in the Republic of Armenia.

media rituals produces infrastructures that appeal to distant addressees. The fourth and fifth section examine the Pan-Armenian Tell-A-Thon, a competing activist broadcast that sought to politicize the Armenia Fund's "peace roads" by pointing to the business interests of oligarchs with close ties to Armenia's government in their construction. I explore why this parallel telethon found some resonance among newcomers from Armenia but failed to persuade traditional institutions with its call for a boycott.

3.1. Diasporic Humanitarianism after the Developmental State

The origins of the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund lie in the transition period of the late 1980 and early 1990s. This era can be characterized as a humanitarian epoch in the diaspora, as a series of catastrophes opened up Soviet Armenia to a wide variety of charity initiatives from abroad. This period was characterized not only by war with Azerbaijan, economic blockades from Turkey and Azerbaijan and the aftermath of the catastrophic earthquake of 1988 that wrecked much of the northern part of Armenia. It was also the beginning of the era of neoliberal shock therapies and privatization (Ishkanian 2008: 110), which did not bode well for state investment in infrastructure.

Several initiatives at the time sought to create a pan-Armenian institution to use the diaspora's wealth for the country's recovery. As we have seen (Chapter 1), the aftermath of the 1988 Spitak Earthquake, in particular, saw many initiatives. But this period also saw increasing tensions between the different factions of the diaspora over what many saw as the ineffective manner in which the money was gathered and spent. While initially, the most significant and broadly supported attempt to overcome these divisions was the United Armenian Fund, a collaboration between Armenian-American billionaire Kirk Kerkorian's Lincy Foundation and six diaspora organizations[79], a different initiative emerged when Armenia gained independence.

Headquartered in a government building in central Yerevan, the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund can be most aptly described as a quasi-NGO. The fund sometimes presents itself as an entirely non-political entity, but the Board of Trustees that decides

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[79] "The United Armenian Fund: A Vision is Launched." *Armenian International Magazine*, December 1993, 20-21.

on the projects and programs undertaken reads as a veritable 'who's who' of the post-Soviet state's and diaspora establishment's elites. It looks as follows:

> Under the Fund's charter, the Armenian president is the President of its Board of Trustees. The Board comprises the Catholicos of All-Armenians, the Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia, the Catholicos Patriarch of the Armenian Catholic Church, the President of Nagorno-Karabakh, the prime ministers of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, the chairman of the RA Constitutional Court and the Central Bank, the Speaker of the National Assembly, the heads of the three main Armenian political parties and of major benevolent institutions such as the AGBU [Armenian General Benevolent Union], ARF [Armenian Revolutionary Federation], the Armenian Congress of America and other outstanding benefactors and public figures from Armenia, Artsakh and Diaspora.[80]

Most of the entities of the fund's board make an appearance during the annual broadcast, but the manner in which they appear differs markedly. In an interview with the executive director of the Armenia Fund U.S. Western Region, the broadcast was described to me as seeking the least offensive common denominator capable of mobilizing Armenians worldwide. "Every organization, celebrity or politician wants to have its few minutes, but in the Telethon it's not about their individual message," he stated. "It is about forgetting all those things that otherwise divide us, to show that we can be united once a year for a common cause."

There is nevertheless some space for the entities on the board to circulate ideological claims, as some are more likely to be considered inoffensive than others. Whereas the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, perceived in the diaspora as having transformed Armenia from a victim nation into a victorious nation (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2012: 144), gets its political and clerical elite flown to Los Angeles to appear on stage, and many diaspora organizations have their say, the Armenian government, which in stark contrast to the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic is widely perceived as corrupt, is absent.

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[80] http://www.himnadram.org/index.php?id=2 accessed 23 June 2016.

Thus, the president of the NKR informs the public about the year's situation on the frontline and expresses the gratitude of the Karabakh Armenians to everyone who makes a donation. The archbishop of the Western Diocese in Los Angeles establishes divine approval of the event by proclaiming participation "a noble duty" and "putting our faith in action."[81] The more divisive political entities on the fund's board do appear on stage but with a somewhat muted voice. The representative of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, the most influential but also most controversial political party in the diaspora, for example, weakens its usual militant-patriotic irredentism and simply refers to the Telethon as a necessary step to achieve "the common Armenian dream we all aspire to"—not referring explicitly to its divisive vision of a Greater Armenia. One exception to the Armenian government's absence is a short, annual pre-recorded speech by the president reflecting on the challenges and achievements of Armenians worldwide, stressing the need for pan-Armenian unity.

The Telethon borrows heavily from standards and conventions that have been developed in Anglo-American celebrity humanitarianism during the last half-century (see Kapoor 2012). In particular, as in many similar telethons around the world, the influence of the 1985 Live Aid spectacle and its 'We Are the World' all-star anthem can be felt. Although not every edition of the Telethon gets an anthem with a music video, the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund has commissioned a series of songs that have become some of the best-known post-independence Armenian pop songs. In recent years, criticisms have emerged that the music videos are always produced by Sharm Holding, the same PR and marketing company that was also commissioned by the state to design the iconography of the Armenian Genocide Centennial (Chapter 2).

It would be hard for anyone with access to Armenian television to have escaped the music videos of the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund's patriotic anthems such as 'We Are Our Mountains,' 'Hello Fatherland,' or 'I Love My Country,' which lyrically personify Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic as a unified diasporic homeland, while framing a donation to the Telethon as essential to peace and prosperity. The hardships that the country has gone through are, if not kept entirely off stage, implied to be

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[81] All quotes of the archbishop of the Western Diocese are taken from 'Primate's Message for the participants of the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund Telethon 2013.' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEmjLnpXWI8 accessed 23 June 2016.

suffering without an 'internal' source. The responsibility for the collapse of the developmental state, which in Soviet times made a habit of building ambitious large-scale infrastructure projects, is left out of the picture. Those who have privatized much of the country's resources and remodeled the state after neoliberal examples, disinvesting from infrastructure projects, are invisible. In their place appears the difficult yet heroic, redemptive quest for an all-Armenian Karabakh.

The songs, music videos and other cultural products of the fund also circulate as physical objects to reward diaspora donors. For many years, those who have given a minimum donation of $365 received a CD or DVD with the anthems to the Hayastan-All-Armenian Fund, or a DVD titled 'Welcome to Nagorno-Karabakh' that promotes diaspora tourism to the unrecognized republic. Such circulating audiovisual texts are indicative of a wider, year-round transnational affective geography that sustains the de facto state as an integral part of the identity of Armenians all over the world.

For example, the 2004 anthem 'A Fortress of Stones' portrays the fortress of Shusha, the formerly majority Azerbaijani-populated cultural and religious center of Nagorno-Karabakh, in a special metonymic relation to all Armenians across the world. The music video cuts between a pantheon of pop singers, footage of Karabakh folklore, the Shusha fortress and white peace doves. The song's lyrics, written by Shushan Petrosyan, nowadays a Member of Parliament for the ruling Republican Party of Armenia (HHK), describe the beauty of the nature through which 'the road' passes, simultaneously referring to the North-South highway in Nagorno-Karabakh that the diaspora was asked to fund at the time, and the Armenian nation moving through time (cf. Anderson 1991), until reaching the following climax:

> Our love is for our fatherland,
> For our faith and our monasteries,
> Armenian nation, you source of light,
> Surrounded by mountains,
> You are a fortress made of stones,
> Land of the Armenians, our Armenia.

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This music video, produced in Armenia for the humanitarian organization dominated by a transnational elite incorporating church, state and diasporic establishment, frames a monument on the internationally recognized territory of Azerbaijan as the essence of the land of the Armenians. Being directed first and foremost at the diaspora to solicit funds for infrastructure projects of a kind formerly taken on by the state and using Nagorno-Karabakh to stage its appeal, it shows that the Armenia Fund Telethon is a cultural form indicative of a spatializing post-Soviet state that operates as a kind of ethno-business (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009).

While humanitarian spectacle and voluntarist ethics are not uncommon vehicles for outsourcing government tasks under neoliberal capitalism (Muehlebach 2012; Longmore 2016), the particular form this takes in the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund is the result of a historically produced commensurability of money, philanthropy and ethnicity (see Tölölyan 2000). It combines the legacies of post-Soviet oligarchic state formation, war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, and multiple histories of diasporization, as the global center of the diaspora that resulted from the 1915 Genocide gradually moved from Beirut to Los Angeles since the mid-1970s.

It is this transnational assemblage that I propose to capture with the term diasporic humanitarianism, differing from its non-diasporic counterpart in rescaling its object from 'global humanity' towards 'all compatriots', while retaining humanitarianism's moral appeal, aesthetic of development realism (Abu-Lughod 2005: 81-108), and peace discourse centered on the alleviation of suffering. Framing Armenia's problems of poverty, unemployed surplus populations and armed conflict as capable of being solved through a mix of popular compassion and the 'direct action' of donations, an incentive is circulated not to politicize these problems. If Armenia was once part of a Soviet developmental state that its mixed its authoritarian rulership with relatively ambitious investments in large-scale modernization programs and public service provisions, its collapse was accelerated when, in comparison to the capitalist states of the West, it could "no longer deliver on the main legitimating promise of progress and national development" (Derluguian 2005: 73). The leadership of the post-Soviet state now invites the diaspora to take on its earlier role of funding the developmentalist project.

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The ethos of diasporic humanitarianism displays similarities to what Tsypylma Darieva (2011) describes as diasporic cosmopolitanism. It combines "nationalist notions of symbolic repossession of the lost land," found in the promise of furthering the recognition of Armenian claims in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, with "a progressive ideal of a shared global future for the inhabitants of the earth," seen in its combination of a peace discourse with the promise of the alleviation of suffering through the redistribution of financial resources (ibid. 504). While the contradictions between ethnic particularism and global universalism are never fully resolved, this is in fact only a slight reconfiguration of the general paradox of all-encompassing ethos versus selective praxis present in any humanitarian endeavor (Fassin 2012). Having outlined the key relations and representational practices of the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund, I now turn my attention to the ethical work of Telethon participants.

3.2. Media Rituals as Participatory Materialization

Politicians, clergy and celebrities feature prominently in the Telethon. But the event ultimately depends on the participatory practices of a wide range of diasporic subjects, or as the rhetoric of the event puts it, on 'all Armenians.' In the words of the archbishop of the Western Diocese in Los Angeles, there is a need to "rebuild our motherland together, hand in hand, with our beloved brothers and sisters, be it in Armenia, in Artsakh or in diaspora," because this motherland is "a mission, which God has graced upon us so that we may take it, as a gift from heaven, and a legacy to be entrusted." What is meant here with 'building together' is not a matter of bricks, mortar or asphalt (cf. Dalakoglou 2012), but a performative gifting practice that invests attention, affect and money in the improvement of precarious lives in a conflict zone. Through these practices, the moral horizons of participants in Los Angeles shift from the everyday status quo in which diaspora and homeland are little connected except on the level of remittances, telecommunications or tourism, towards a transnational redistribution of wealth that claims to enable 'all Armenians' to thrive.

In a recent book, Liisa Malkki describes global humanitarian practice as being constitutive of a transnational ritual sphere in which representations of a common humanity in need of long-distance care and compassion circulate (2015: 77-78), for example when hand-written letters or knitted dolls circulate between aid recipients and

donors. Central in humanitarian ritual are 'figurations of the child' (ibid. 77) that embody 'innocent, timeless, ultimate, cosmological truths' about the essential sameness and goodness of all people (ibid. 99). Here, I find it useful to adopt Malkki's concept of a transnational ritual sphere but with a slight modification, as diasporic humanitarianism oscillates between a universal humanity and a particular identity. And as the fundraising initiatives in schools demonstrate, in the Armenia Fund Telethon children are both 'figurations' and active participants constructing a transnational sphere, guided by the mix of calculated coercion and mass voluntarism that we have already seen in the last chapter in the folding of all-Armenian 'forget-me-not' icons. Through such practices as bake sales and dance contests, a routinized occasion is inserted into the liturgical calendar of the diaspora to instruct the diaspora's youngest generation about the plight of their co-ethnics in the Caucasus, sending some of them to announce on live television how much money their school has gathered for the cause. Having encountered many such examples during my fieldwork, I propose a practice-oriented perspective on the transnational ritual spheres of diasporic humanitarianism by linking them to the concept of media rituals.

Media rituals, in the words of Nick Couldry, are practices surrounding media that "construct not only our sense of a social 'centre', but also the media's privileged relation to that 'centre'" (2003: 56). Such practices are always organized around "media-related categories and boundaries," but they do not necessarily require the physical presence of media technologies (ibid. 29). A child who participates in a dance event to raise funds for Nagorno-Karabakh may or may not watch the broadcast, but such a practice is a media ritual as it affirms the Telethon's privileged relation to what matters in the diaspora at a particular time. Such media rituals construct not just a mythical mediated center but also a geographical center of affect, as Nagorno-Karabakh appears as an 'existential location' at the heart of diasporic life (Karim 2003). The outward-looking character of the mediatized household, in which a constant flow of televised images provides a background to the intimacy of the family, is given direction and coherence through media rituals, renewing ties of solidarity while redistributing the wealth of Armenians worldwide (Moores 2000: 98).

Perhaps the most typical Armenian-American media ritual is the diasporic family tradition of having a yearly Thanksgiving dinner with the Telethon's mix of televised

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images of poverty and progress in Armenia, patriotic music videos and pedagogical trivia on Nagorno-Karabakh's history running in the background. In a seminal book examining how media technologies integrate households into symbolic formations such as the nation, David Morley (2000) mentions the ritual nature of the Thanksgiving meal, quoting a study by Janet Siskind (1992):

> [I]n exemplification of Benedict Anderson's phrase about the confidence that the members of a nation should have in each other's continued existence, 'each household [knows] that all other households [are] celebrating in the same way at the same time'. …. Participation in this ritual 'invests the value of family ties with an aura of religion and patriotism' and allows its participants to connect themselves back to the cultural history of the 'founding' of their nation. (Morley 2000: 19)

In many households, donating during the broadcast has become a tradition given little thought, but spectators still find joy in recognizing the names of relatives, friends abroad and public figures in the list of people and families that runs on the screen for the entire broadcast. In the Los Angeles context, it also commonly involves spotting a family member who has left the dinner table for the studios in Burbank to represent a school or organization. One of the main festive joys of participating is the excitement of appearing on television from Australia and Switzerland to Lebanon and Argentina. In Armenia, where the Telethon is broadcast during the night because of the time difference, grandparents will sometimes stay up until the early hours of the morning to catch a glimpse of their grandchildren when they appear on the show to represent their school. Here, teachers and parents have a special role here in creating the sense of wonder that compatriots around the world are watching and joining for the common cause, effectively rescaling the moral horizons of diasporic subjectivity.

Another example of a media ritual can be found in the gala banquets that are organized in the Glendale Hilton[82] where many of the people who appear on the set during the event can be met in person and where pledges for the fund are made. Connected to this

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[82] As already mentioned, Glendale is the specific city within Los Angeles County considered the capital of the Armenian diaspora, a position that was taken until the 1970s by Beirut. For a short history of the Armenians in Glendale, see Fittante 2017.

transnational elite are 'auditing trips' to the homeland organized by the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund which mix diaspora tourism with the ethical labor of inspecting and verifying that the projects are indeed of the quality presented in the pedagogical video clips broadcast during the Telethon. For those LA Armenians who are not among the elite with access to the gala dinner, the less high-end restaurants in this area of Glendale become a site for transnational 'celebrity spotting'. People will post on social media that they have seen the president or archbishop of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, or shoot selfies with celebrities who are flown to Los Angeles for a live appearance and circulate them online with hashtags such as '#ArtsakhStrong'[83] and '#NKpeace'— echoing an all-Armenian solidarity with the most embattled part of the nation's desired territoriality and, somewhat puzzlingly, framing maximalist claims in which no concessions are done to Azerbaijan as a will to peace.

The annual Telethon is used to solicit not just financial donations but also ideological performances, for instance when children learn to draw the flag of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic or memorize patriotic statements for recitation live on air. However, as in the purple campaign for the Armenian Genocide Centennial, the efficacy of this mix of calculated coercion and mass voluntarism should not be overstated. In the Los Angeles diaspora, the media event's appeal is largely a matter of demographics: while participation among the older, institutionalized diaspora was at one point almost universal and remains high, the newer waves of Soviet and post-Soviet arrivals participate in much lower numbers. Some are downright suspicious of the government's involvement and participate not out of conviction but due to the fact that it is initiated through the schools and not donating would reflect negatively on their children. As we shall see, in 2013, a campaign was even launched calling for a boycott of the Telethon, with a counter-telethon calling on the government to collect taxes from oligarchs, not from the diaspora. Here redistributive justice is not seen as a matter of diaspora charity for the homeland, but of holding accountable within Armenia itself the ruling elite of tax-avoidant oligarchs who have amassed enormous wealth during the transition years. While this initiative, as I explain in more detail later in this chapter, found a receptive audience among Soviet-era and post-Soviet migrants, the diasporic establishment

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[83] The hashtag '#ArtsakhStrong' was launched by the Armenian Youth Federation, the youth wing of the irredentist Armenian Revolutionary Federation.

overseeing schools and churches remains firmly dedicated to the Armenia Fund. In this sense, media rituals are not only about internalizing beliefs but also about creating a geography of habits, inserting diasporic subjects into an institutional logic through which participation is routinized.

From the perspective of the elites of the Los Angeles diaspora, the respatialization of moral horizons that takes place during the Telethon is nevertheless exceptional, as it overcomes its internal contradictions for a common cause and takes 'direct action' to improve the nation as a whole. The event's construction of a transnational ritual sphere, whether or not participants adopt its discourse wholesale or not, ensures a real redistribution of money and a spatialization of morality in which Nagorno-Karabakh becomes an 'existential location' generating relational subjectivities in diaspora households (Karim 2003) while the main institutions of the Los Angeles diaspora appear on a public stage as the conscience of the nation that appears to achieve change *without the state*. In the festive celebration of the Telethon, questions such as the responsibility of the Armenian state for building roads, hospitals and schools are 'taken in one's own hands', showing the state that it can do better without it, moved by an apparent pure voluntarism and superior morality (cf. Dayan and Katz 1992).

The merger of popular entertainment and ostentatious giving in the event is itself not a novelty in the Armenian diaspora—this, in fact, is a key element in the life of the community and, more importantly, in its reproduction (Bakalian 1993: 440-441; Libaridian 1999: 119-148). Political parties depend to a large degree on fundraising events that combine concerts of patriotic singers or folk dance performances with displays of financial sacrifices to the national cause. In between songs at such events, a master of ceremony announces the names of those in the audience who have pledged to donate to the national cause, as well as the amounts they agree to give. The continuous presence on screen during the 12 hour broadcast of a list of names and locations of donating diasporans in the Telethon is only a remediation of this practice.

This moral-financial resonance of national virtues and monetized values, staging in public the commensurability of money, philanthropy and ethnicity, is perhaps most explicitly performed on stage whenever the money is counted on a large video screen during the broadcast. During these moments the warrior dance *yar khushta* from

Sassoun, a region in present-day Eastern Turkey considered the most resistant and heroic of pre-genocide populated Armenian-populated areas, can be heard. This dance is performed to this day by soldiers before they leave to fight the Azerbaijanis (Adriaans 2016, 2017a). The novelty of the practices surrounding the Telethon, then, is in its rescaling the radius of action to produce a transnational ritual sphere, its being co-opted by a pan-Armenian elite to realize its agendas, as well the enactment on a global media stage of the diasporic penchant for ostentatious financial sacrifices.

How do these practices of participatory materialization in Los Angeles relate to the lived realities in the de facto state of Nagorno-Karabakh on the other side of the planet, and to the Armenian state? In the next sections, I explore this question through a particular case study: the 2013 and 2014 editions of the Telethon, dedicated to a new Vardenis-Martakert highway, running through the formerly Azerbaijani and Kurdish populated Kelbajar region—one of the most disputed territories in peace negotiations.

3.3. The Varieties of Infrastructural Promise

"Has it ever crossed your mind," a voice in a promotional video for the 2013 Telethon asks its audience, "that one centimeter can be decisive for the fate of an entire nation— that is to say, for all Armenians?" The audiovisual presentation calculates that the length of a new road, optimistically referred to by the narrator as "the road securing long-lasting peace," is roughly 100 kilometers or 10 million centimeters, and that there are approximately 10 million Armenians in the world. Therefore, if all Armenians donate money to build one centimeter, the new road, running from Vardenis in Armenia to Martakert in Nagorno-Karabakh can be built. The promotional video educates the public about the planned construction, running through the Armenian-controlled Kelbajar district of *de jure* Azerbaijan.

Although mostly inhabited by Azerbaijanis and Kurds before the war and not a part of the Armenian side's initial territorial claims, the de facto state nowadays portrays such areas, surrounding the Soviet-era Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), as an integral part of its territory (Figure 3.1). A moving satellite map of the world is shown with Armenian flags planted every few hundred miles to mark the ubiquity of diaspora populations, as if to remind viewers that only three out of those ten million

Armenians live in the homeland. "Let's build the road together! Let's build it with the whole nation!" the narrator concludes the video with a crescendo.

Figure 3.1. Hayastan All-Armenian Fund map of Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR). Districts are renamed with redrawn boundaries to incorporate the territories between Armenia and Soviet-era NKAO, as well as surrounding areas. Azerbaijan's Kelbajar district roughly overlaps with NKR's Shahumyan. Hatched parts remain under Azerbaijani control. Three roads built with Armenia Fund Telethon donations are shown: Goris-Stepanakert (1996-1998), Martakert-Hadrut (1999-2004) and Vardenis-Martakert (2013-2014).

"People just didn't believe that this highway would be built until they watched the 2013 Telethon and realized that the worldwide Armenian community is ready and willing to support the project." According to Babken Sargsyan, the Armenian mayor of a village named Yeghegnut (Azerbaijani: Qamışlı) in the occupied Kelbajar region, people are becoming "eager to make investments and start businesses, in anticipation of the economic boom that the highway will usher in." (Hayastan All-Armenian Fund 2014:

18).[84] A similar sense of anticipation was expressed on the other side of the planet by Los Angeles mayor Eric Garcetti who appeared in the 2014 Telethon with the following statement on the Vardenis-Martakert highway, seemingly sidelining US foreign policy's official support for the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan[85]:

> I'd like to speak to all the people of Glendale and Southern California. If you have to give to any organization, this is the time and this is the place. I've been chairman of the MTA [Metropolitan Transportation Authority] in Los Angeles and one of the things we do is build highways. It's gonna give hundreds of jobs to the locals, and they can multiply that money. It's gonna open the critical routes.[86]

The consensus between the mayor of Yeghegnut, a village of 200 settlers in a 'make-believe space' (Navaro-Yashin 2012) subject to the competing claims of Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the mayor of metropolitan Los Angeles, fits recent anthropological literature that has explored road construction as materializing hopes for a better future (Harvey and Knox 2012; Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012). While the recurring themes of speed, integration and connectivity in this literature can be summed up as the infrastructural promise of mobility, the Telethon-funded road also delivers a strong promise of *immobility*: ensuring the suffering yet heroic Karabakh Armenians remain in their 'proper place' and do *not* become displaced like the diaspora.

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[84] The mayor's quotes are from the richly illustrated 2014 *Annual Report* of the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund (Yerevan: Tigran Mets). The imagery of these reports provide further clues to the fund's appeal to diasporic sensibilities: the opening pages are illustrated with imagery of diaspora visitors making a circle around the Armenian Genocide Monument at Tsitsernakaberd in Yerevan, firmly grasping each other's hand—symbolizing union in spite of the 1915 Genocide's catastrophe of dispersion.
[85] While no country, including Armenia, has recognized the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic's claim to independent statehood as of 2016, on a sub-national level the state of California has accepted a resolution that supports and encourages "the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic's continuing efforts to develop as a free and independent nation" in May 2014. See http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201320140AJR32
[86] This quote is from the 2014 broadcast of the Armenia Fund Telethon, as broadcast on October 27th between 10.00 and 22:00 local time in Southern California on the USArmenia television channel.

The promise of infrastructure here moves from redistribution, making it easier for settlers to stay put, to recognition, presented as securing territorial gains that benefit all Armenians. The anticipation of stimulating the disputed territory's economy by offering new jobs in road construction echoes the vision of the diaspora as the 'money-multiplying' long-distance entrepreneur that the Los Angeles mayor portrays in his address, providing employment imbued with an all-Armenian significance. Thus, co-ethnics in the Caucasus, who might at times feel doubts about living in an underdeveloped conflict zone, are implicated in the transactional logic of a diaspora gift reciprocated by staying put and fulfilling a demographic duty for all Armenians.[87]

The Hayastan-All-Armenian Fund has long integrated into its mode of humanitarian governance the insight that infrastructures can function 'as concrete semiotic and aesthetic vehicles oriented to addressees' (Larkin 2013: 329). Targeting heritage tourism from the wealthiest sectors of the diaspora, the Vardenis-Martakert highway passes some of the most legendary medieval monasteries that were central to the historiographical conflict between Armenian and Azerbaijani historians that preceded the Karabakh War (De Waal 2003: 145-158). Perhaps the most scenic monastery along the new road is Dadivank, situated just outside the Soviet-era boundaries of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast in the Kelbajar district. The de facto state's government has redrawn and renamed the districts in such a way that this fact can no longer be found back on its maps (Broers and Toal 2013), and the road serves as an additional means of communicating its legitimate possession.

Additionally, signs are installed alongside all the Telethon-funded roads in the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic that proclaim both in English and in Armenian that the roads are 'built with the help of All Armenians', putting the sacrificial ethos of the diaspora on display. These signs appear prominently in the music videos and other promotional materials circulated by the fund. If infrastructures produce reality effects, the perception of territories currently claimed by the NKR as Armenian is "an effect both of the circulation of the population around the sacred landscapes and national monuments of the community and simultaneously, of the circulation of those images,

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[87] The 2015 Armenia Fund Telethon added an even more explicit incentive to instill a sense of demographic duty for all Armenians, as it was dedicated to the provision of free housing to families in Nagorno-Karabakh who produce at least five children.

in mediated form, in the lives (and homes) of the population"—for the Telethon-funded roads this includes the homes of diaspora Armenians worldwide (2000: 35).

Another example of a conscious design of infrastructural promise can be found in the fact that the roads are given names with inflections of humanitarian discourse such as 'Lifeline Highway' and 'Backbone Highway.' Such names frame Nagorno-Karabakh not as the object of competing political territorializations but as a weakened organ in the nation's collective body, requiring emergency care in order to survive. At the time of the first Telethon dedicated to the Goris-Stepanakert highway, this was also a rather acute reality, as the road in the Lachin Corridor was needed to secure the transfer of goods to the post-war population. Throughout the decades, however, the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund has frozen the representational style of this early state of emergency into a permanent aesthetic, as underdevelopment in the two Armenian republics is still portrayed as a humanitarian catastrophe, although one might two decades later argue that much of this is now a result of internal political choices.[88]

Figure 3.2. Logo of the 2013 Armenia Fund Telethon, with the flags of Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic as wings connected by the new road to form a white peace dove.

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[88] It should also be noted though that, due to the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic's unrecognized status, few international humanitarian organizations provide it with aid.

While the road's construction reflects the diaspora's humanitarian ethos in asphalt, it also refers to a second group of absent addressees: the international community. Its appeal is at the same time a promise to the diaspora of the international recognition of the territory that it is most passionately invested in due to its redemptive quality of a victory over 'other Turks'—as the first video put it, the same "they" destroyed "us." This promise of recognition is made explicit in another promotional video from 2013. This short video features an actor who plays the role of an OSCE[89] negotiator driving in a car on the diaspora-funded roads in the unrecognized republic, with a voice-over asserting that "when he [the diplomat] sees the signs that say the roads are built by all Armenians, he will realize that Artsakh belongs to us." Here, infrastructure is imbued with a promise of nothing less than legal recognition by the international community.

During an interview in the head office of the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund in Yerevan, I was told by a representative that the fund cannot wait for the peace negotiations to finish before developing infrastructure in the occupied areas outside the former NKAO, since these emptied territories need to be populated with Armenians in order to make a persuasive claim not to return them to Azerbaijan. In promotional materials, the road is also portrayed as contributing to a 'long-lasting peace' that requires no territorial concessions from the Armenian side (Figure 3.3).

Here it must be noted that the Kelbajar region is an area with a rather liminal status in the OSCE-led peace negotiations. The wartime depopulation of Kelbajar has given birth to a large refugee population that remains in exile in Azerbaijan to this day, and one might assume that it is therefore difficult to argue for its Armenian annexation in any redrawing of the internationally recognized map. But, because of its strategic importance for the security of the Karabakh Armenians, its return to Azerbaijani jurisdiction is considered a long-term issue in the phased withdrawal of Armenian troops envisioned in the OSCE-negotiated Madrid Principles, treated separately from the return of regions to the south and east of the former NKAO (Broers and Toal 2013: 23).

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[89] The OSCE is the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Taking this nuance into account, the slightly fantastic scenario of the promotional video, in which a diplomat decides to take 'the Armenian side' after seeing the diaspora-funded roads, gains more strategic realism. It suggests that infrastructure is an instrument through which a previously uncontested region that began its political life as a bargaining collateral for the Armenian side might, with the help of the diaspora, be transitioning into a contested space on par with the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast and the Lachin Corridor. The varieties of infrastructural promise in the Telethon, in short, consist not only of generating an increased quality of life for the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic's population, ensuring it stays put to perform its demographic duty for the donating diaspora, but also of increasing chances for a maximalist territorial conception of the de facto state in the 'recognition game' (Caspersen 2009) played at the international negotiation table.

Even among those who do not participate in the Telethon, few would argue in principle against a redistribution of wealth benefiting Armenian-occupied territories outside the NKAO, which are increasingly referred to as 'the liberated territories' in popular discourse and symbolize a resurrected nation. Recent years, however, have seen increasing criticism of the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund for its integration with the government, with more and more voices asking aloud whether the diaspora should really be 'paying taxes' in Armenia. It is to these critical voices that I turn now.

3.4. Contesting the Armenia Fund: the Pan-Armenian Tell-A-Thon

In the weeks prior to the 2013 Telethon, reports appeared on diasporic television in Los Angeles arguing that the new road that the diaspora was asked to fund is neither a peace road nor a road to irredentist success, but instead, an oligarchic 'business road'. Circulating these critical reports was the initiative of two middle-aged Armenian-American entrepreneurs. Each of them hosts a weekly Los Angeles cable television show on Armenian topics, titled 'Return to Armenia' and 'The Truth Must Be Told' respectively, which broadcasted reports made by independent journalists in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh to argue that the Vardenis-Martakert highway is primarily an instrument for the accumulation of resources by oligarchs. Instead of collecting a 'tax' from the diaspora, the two hosts argued, the government should do something about the large-scale tax evasion by its ruling oligarchic elites. Stating their belief that the

Telethon donations *sustain* homeland inequality rather than decrease it, they called for a boycott of the Telethon. During these broadcasts many viewers called in to join the debate on the boycott of the fund, most of them sympathetic voices from the new diaspora, which had arrived to Los Angeles from Armenia since the 1980s.

One report showed a settler surrounded by goats in the mountains of Kelbajar, with imagery cutting to the transport of raw materials from mines, giving a monologue explaining why the planned route of the road does not serve the desired Armenian repopulation of the area. Juxtaposed with commentaries from the hosts, an argument was made that the main purpose of the new road is the transport of copper, gold, molybdenum and coal from Karabakh to Armenia, with new mines recently opened in Kashen and Maghavuz near Martakert. Texts by investigative journalists from Armenia were read on air to fortify the claim that the business transporting the raw materials is owned by the president's brother's son, Narek Sargsyan. The hosts also played interviews and reports on environmental activism. These reports highlighted the toxic pollution caused by the mining operations of the Vallex Group, the company behind the new venture in Karabakh. In particular, they exposed the bad track record of the Vallex Group in the exploitation of the Teghut mine, protests against which had become a potent symbol of resistance for a generation of anti-mining activists and civic initiatives in the homeland (Ishkanian 2014; 2016a). As the momentum of the boycott campaign grew, a town hall meeting was organized in the Glendale Public Library to discuss the philanthropic tradition, during which Zaruhi Postanjian, an opposition MP from Yerevan, joined via Skype to voice her support for the activists.

To understand how this culminated in a competing Thanksgiving broadcast that called for a boycott of the regular Telethon, it is necessary to take a closer look at the media practices of one persistent activist agitating against the fund. Activist media practices, as defined by Mattoni and Treré, are "creative social practices" that engage media objects, "such as mobile phones, laptops, pieces of paper" to disseminate its messages of contention, as well as "interactions with media subjects," such as journalists, broadcasters and public relations managers, who can open up the media realm to activists to spread their content (2014: 259). As we shall see, the boycott campaign in Los Angeles featured both practices, as it did not merely to relay video messages from

Armenia to diasporic television, but also drew on participatory digital media to turn interactions with persons personifying media power in LA into mobilizing messages.

Born in the United States, the human rights activist Ara Manoogian lived for almost a decade in Nagorno-Karabakh, migrating to the unrecognized republic in the early 2000s. Manoogian is widely respected as the grandson of Shahan Natalie, the principal organizer of the campaign in the 1920s to assassinate the perpetrators of the Genocide who had fled Turkey after being sentenced to death (Derogy 1990). Already an active blogger while living in Karabakh, Manoogian has been an especially prominent media producer since his return to Los Angeles, using his on-the-ground connections to gather data with which to inform diasporans about the political realities of the South Caucasus. He has also organized protests, debates and even a hunger strike in response to political developments in the homeland. The most relevant of his many projects for this chapter is a periodically updated white paper on corruption in the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund, titled *To Donate Or Not To Donate*[90], which argues for the complete separation of state power from the charity organization.

In late November 2013, Manoogian attempted to distribute printed copies of this corruption report at the Glendale Hilton—the hotel in which a large number of honorary guests, including the de facto president and the archbishop of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, were staying to take part in the Armenia Fund Telethon. As he entered the hotel lobby together with his young son, Manoogian encountered the permanent representative of the unrecognized republic for the United States and Canada, as honorary guests were just leaving the fund's annual gala banquet dinner.

When the sheriff's deputies in charge of securing the de facto state's politicians began to question Manoogian about his presence, the activist sensed that trouble might start and, as is his usual practice when confronting those in power, he began to make audio and video recordings of the unfolding situation. He was almost immediately ordered to leave. "We know who you are. People say you're here to create problems," a sheriff's

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[90] The latest version of the Armenia Fund white paper can always be found, both in Armenian and English, on Manoogian's website: http://www.thetruthmustbetold.com

deputy told him. Asking for clarification, he was accused of trespassing and of threatening the representative of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.

Countering that these charges were made up, Manoogian continued recording and calmly explained that he was only in the hotel to inform people about corruption and tax evasion by the politicians governing the Armenia Fund. In response to this, one of the sheriff's deputies made a surprising formulation: "Our job is to protect *our president* [i.e. Bako Sahakyan, president of the de facto Nagorno-Karabakh Republic]. We're not saying you are armed, but we know your file. You tried to disturb the All-Armenian Fund's functions!" The video also shows a woman from the gala banquet trying to make Manoogian leave with reference to kinship codes: "You are dishonouring your family's reputation by coming here. Please protect the honour of your grandfather and your grandmother. We revere them!"—a reference to his grandfather's organizing of the assassinations of the Ottoman triumvirate.

After being threatened by one of the sheriff's deputies that he will be sent to jail for trespassing and will have his son taken away from him as soon as the Glendale police arrives, Manoogian kept recording but finally left the hotel, which had flags of the United States and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic waving in unison. The video footage shows no less than five police cars arriving to the hotel.[91] The following day, the activist returned to the Glendale Hilton after having booked a room for the purpose of doing an on-site live broadcast of his television show, but he was again forced to leave before he could set up his equipment, this time by the hotel manager.

By creating recordings of these tense encounters, Manoogian sought to challenge the media power of the transnational elite of the Armenian world, lifting the polite veil of patriotism and apolitical humanitarianism from its annual Telethon. The central claim these recordings carried is that the post-Soviet state's power to mute, censor and intimidate civic initiatives is no longer limited to the homeland (see Adriaans 2017a: 153-155), but now also reaches the heart of the diaspora. His capturing how he was

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[91] "Human Rights Activist Threatened By Persons Claiming To Be Sheriff's Deputies." Video available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s35QWLAxBXk

hindered from handing out corruption reports by a public servant of the California state who refers to the de facto state's president as "our president," juxtaposed with footage of the flags of the United States and the NKR waving in unison, seemed to suggest as much. "This is happening in Glendale! This is not Yerevan!," the diasporic activist stresses with a sense of distress when broadcasting such material on his show.

As is not uncommon in human rights media, the diaspora activist's stylistics of representation uses video as a technology of witnessing (McLagan 2003, 2006), the confrontations being partially sought after for their media appeal. "Go ahead, arrest me for trespassing!" Manoogian tells the sheriff's deputy in the video, evoking in the viewer anticipation of further escalation and a curiosity just how far these powers will go to silence their critics. Together with the homeland witnessing videos, such as those of the Kelbajar settler denouncing the highway as a business road and environmentalists testifying to the risks of mining, these tense mediatized encounters are part of an affective pedagogy that seeks to inculcate an ethos that is more politically informed about the political alliances of diaspora elites and less mediated by state power than the ritualized Telethon engagements allow (Razsa 2014: 497).

Employing the persuasive appeal of his recordings, Manoogian called in the help of a fellow host of a cable television show, and of the owner of Armenian Media Group of America (AMGA), one of the channels that was scheduled to broadcast the official Armenia Fund Telethon on Thanksgiving Day. Emerging from the collaborative efforts of unaffiliated broadcasters in the 1980s, AMGA has the reputation to be an independent Armenian cable television channel in Los Angeles. It belongs neither to the political faction-dominated outlets of the older diasporic mediascape nor to the newer post-Soviet networks such as USArmenia (this will be examined Chapter 5).

In the weeks prior to the 2013 Telethon, the station had received anonymous calls criticizing its broadcast of activist material promoting the boycott campaign. When it became clear last minute that AMGA had not yet received the 12,000 U.S. dollars from the Armenia Fund for relaying its Telethon, the owner decided to sell the broadcast time to the boycott campaign instead if the activists were capable of paying such a sum. Their negotiations led to the ad hoc production of a twelve-hour 'Pan-Armenian Tell-A-Thon'—a simultaneous, parallel Thanksgiving broadcast urging the Armenians of

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Los Angeles *not* to donate to the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund's event shown on all the other diaspora channels. People who expected to tune in to the official Telethon's celebration of diasporic humanitarianism were treated instead to discussions of oligarchic corruption and environmental problems in the Caucasus.

During this Pan-Armenian Tell-A-Thon, viewers incessantly called in to express their agreement that the Telethon is but a smoke screen for the attempt of the governments of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh to consolidate their power. The discourse of those who joined the discussion had two recurring themes: firstly, a claim that the 'old diaspora' is falling for the Armenia Fund Telethon because it lacks genuine insight into the political and economic situation of the homeland, and secondly, a criticism of the ritualized nature of participation in the media event, particularly by children. One activist made a statement live on air combining both critiques, addressing the diasporic establishment's complacency with the oligarchs with much agitation:

> We all know how you operate. You are bringing some innocent children from our Armenian schools to your Telethon and force them to say that 'we love Armenia!' But what do these children know about Armenia? What do they know about what is happening there!? Why do we continue to give ten, twenty or thirty dollars to our children when they go to school? Isn't it just for your oligarch rulers to run their mines and put this money into their own pockets? This is not a matter of twenty dollars, or even a hundred dollars. This is a matter of dignity (*arzhanapatvutyun*)![92]

The accusation that those who participate in the Telethon are clueless about what is happening in Armenia was not only directed at the children. Although the 12-hour broadcast was hosted by a Lebanese-born and an American-born diasporan whose family had come to the US via the Middle East, the guests and callers were all, with few if any exceptions, LA Armenians from Armenia. The majority of them were first-generation diasporans and during the call-in sessions, among the dozens of agitated

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[92] "Hamahaykakan Khosaton - Mas 3-rd." Video recording of this segment of the broadcast is available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-jq297nKCI

calls with fiery anti-government rhetoric, a few of them hinted at the discrepancy between the wealth of the older diaspora and their relative ignorance about the situation in the homeland. One of the callers explained that her children born in the US do not know Armenian. She stated that instead of providing money for business roads for oligarchs, the diaspora would better redistribute its money in such a way that at least all Armenian children growing up in the United States can learn the Armenian language—a reference to the prohibitive tuition fees of the Armenian day schools. A guest in the studio vocalized the perceived differences among the older diaspora tracing its roots to the Middle East and the newer, post-Soviet generations as follows:

> Never in my life have I made a distinction between Western Armenians [from Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq, Turkey], Eastern Armenians, Iranian-Armenians or Armenian Armenians. In every Armenian I see only the Armenian. But those of you who are born here in the diaspora in Los Angeles, how is it possible to be so uninformed about what is happening in the homeland?! You know nothing about the realities of Armenia, and yet you believe that the government there is doing a great job. If you seriously believe this, why don't you go live in Armenia? I need to say this because when you go to Armenia as a tourist, you see nothing of the reality! To go sightseeing in Garni-Geghard[93], Lake Sevan or Karabakh does not show you what the real situation is like!

The twelve-hour broadcast saw a continuous flow of call-ins from viewers who expressed their appreciation of the surprise broadcast, all stating their profound discontent with the Telethon, with the recurring critical idiom that it is shameful form of beggary (*muratskanutyun*). The message was such that if one wants to help the homeland beyond the immediate level of remittances, one must first educate oneself about the political and economic situation in which the country finds itself. There were occasionally also more negotiated[94] positions: viewers who agreed that the presence of

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[93] Garni and Geghard are two popular tourist sites that can be visited on a day trip from Yerevan, consisting of a pagan temple and a medieval monastic complex.
[94] Stuart Hall (1973) famously distinguishes between dominant/hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional positions of media spectatorship. The negotiated position is an intermediate position combining elements of reproducing and contesting hegemony.

oligarchs on the fund's board is problematic, but that it is nevertheless the duty of every diasporan to contribute to safeguarding the security of the Karabakh Armenians.

This idea of a responsibility to educate oneself presumes that participation in the Telethon is the result of rational deliberation. But as we have seen, it is often more a matter of the semi-coerced, semi-voluntary insertion into the event's transnational ritual sphere, which links diaspora institutions across the globe. If the Pan-Armenian Tell-A-Thon could counter the Armenia Fund on the level of discourse, it lacked the institutional network to persuasively ritualize its message in recurring practices. This became even more obvious in the edition the year after the 2013 activist Tell-A-Thon.

3.5. The Affective Resonance of Homeland Violence

If the promotional video with which this chapter began solicited donations from the Los Angeles diaspora with stock footage of explosions and flames, public life in Yerevan during the 2014 Telethon was interrupted by real explosives. As Armenian-American children left their family's Thanksgiving dinner table to represent their school in the television studios, citizens in Yerevan were posting pictures on social media of the seven cars owned by well-known activists and opposition members that had been firebombed during the night.[95] One young activist was beaten up by masked men on the street.[96] As such attacks have not been uncommon during the civic initiatives challenging state power in recent years (Adriaans 2017a: 153), the consensus among the activists posting from Yerevan was that the government was to blame, using such attacks to intimidate civil society. The news of the attacks was mostly spread online, as broadcast media usually do not report on such events.

The timing of the attacks allowed the transnational activist group Armenian Renaissance, an offshoot of a Yerevan-based nationalist group initially known as the Sardarapat Movement (Adriaans 2017a: 146), to target the diaspora with a call for another Telethon boycott. Warning against falling victim to "fake patriotic slogans,"

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[95] Aslanyan, K. 2014. "Yerevanum hrkizum en enddimadirneri yev qaghaqatsiakan aktivistneri meqenanere." *Azatutyun*. November 27. https://www.azatutyun.am/a/26713666.html

[96] Movsisyan, H. 2014. "Hardzakman e yentarkvel Nakhakhorhrdarani andame." *Azatutyun*. November 27. https://www.azatutyun.am/a/26713947.html

the group stated that the diaspora would better provide donations to support activists in the homeland in their attempts to improve its political situation. "We hope that our compatriots, instead of donating their funds to the Pan-Armenian Fund, serving the corrupt dictatorial regime," an announcement posted on numerous activist Facebook groups (such as Diaspora Armenians Support The People's Movement, Armenian Renaissance Los Angeles Chapter and The Centennial Without the Regime) asserted, "will support us and transfer their funds to the Rights and Support Foundation, which will be able to compensate the losses of the citizens who suffered as a the result of these terrorist acts and to ensure the further struggle of civil society."[97]

In spite of this strategic attempt to use the coinciding of the violence against activists with the Thanksgiving broadcast, the impact of these calls for solidarity was almost negligible in Los Angeles, reaching no more than a few dozen shares within a familiar, pre-structured sphere of circulation. Unlike in 2013, AMGA returned to broadcasting the regular Telethon, as the fund overbid the activist attempt to get air time for another counter-telethon. It should be noted here that the demographic most critical of the Armenian government in Los Angeles consists not of tech-savvy youth, but of middle-aged migrants and first-generation pensioners whose internet usage has long been mostly limited to Skype calls with relatives abroad.[98] Whereas the 2013 Pan-Armenian Tell-A-Thon circumvented this by having hosts who act as 'cultural brokers' (Andén-Papadopoulous and Pantti 2013) between independent online media from Armenia and diasporic television in Southern California, the lack of broadcast time in 2014 made it difficult for them to overcome the diaspora's digital divide.

The affective resonance of homeland violence in the diaspora was a different matter when the armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan reignited during the Four-Day War in the spring of 2016. With an estimated death toll of no less than hundred on both sides and fears that the de facto state would suffer significant losses to Azerbaijan, the scale of circulation for this violent episode outreached that of the firebombing of

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[97] https://www.facebook.com/Jirayr.Sefilian/posts/656488341136126

[98] This provides a quite sharp contrast to the online Eritrean diaspora studied by Victoria Bernal (2014). Bernal argues that for diasporic nations the internet is "a political game changer," opening spaces of citizenship and discourse that span "across institutional barriers social boundaries, and geographical distances" (171).

cars and the beating up of an activist in Yerevan by far. This most dramatic escalation of the Karabakh conflict since the Telethon began in 1996 delivered acutely felt shocks, exemplifying the immediacy of mediation (Grusin 2015). And the 'peace road' from Vardenis to Martakert became a strategic asset to transport military personnel and arms. It thus became hard for the media activists of the boycott campaign to argue that the road was *exclusively* a 'business road', no matter the profits reaped by oligarchs from their mining ventures in Karabakh.

When after a few days a new ceasefire had been negotiated, a special emergency Armenia Fund Telethon was soon organized in Los Angeles to help reconstruction efforts in the de facto state.[99] This time the event's diasporic humanitarianism was supplemented by inflections of militarism. One woman representing the Armenian Relief Society, a charity organization affiliated with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, told viewers that she hopes the Karabakh Armenians will not invest the funds solely in reconstruction efforts, but will also use keep some of the money to buy better arms. Unlike at the annual Thanksgiving telethons, there were no gala dinners for the transnational elite of the Armenian world to parade at, and the boycott campaign remained silent. The decreased receptivity for grassroots media initiatives against the Armenia Fund Telethon in Los Angeles thus correlates, on the one hand, with the increased real security risks to Nagorno-Karabakh, and on the other hand, the sense that when the homeland is in crisis, one cannot do nothing. In this situation, the media event's mix of humanitarian and nationalist elements was reconfigured, muting the internal conflicts of the diaspora as well as the problems of homeland state repression and oligarchic accumulation by an encompassment in external conflict.

3.6. Conclusions

The Armenia Fund Telethon exemplifies how media technologies and mobility reconfigure the relations between the international non-recognition of a de facto state and the redistribution of wealth between the global Armenian diaspora and the South Caucasus. The event is a veritable form of diaspora governance (Ragazzi 2009; Gamlen

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[99] This 'Help Artsakh!' emergency Telethon took place on May 14 2016 and gathered 1,1 million dollars. Source: http://asbarez.com/150645/armenia-fund-raises-1-1-million-during-emergency-artsakh-telethon

2014), in the sense of a kin-state governing non-citizen subjects abroad by interpellating them as a diaspora with a moral-financial responsibility for the fate of the homeland. At the same time, the Hayastan All-Armenian Fund is an institution exemplifying *diasporic* governance, as the diaspora becomes a key player in the Armenianization of the internationally recognized territory of a neighboring country. None of this, however, is commonly perceived as political, due to the construction of a transnational ritual sphere of media practices that transcends everyday political divisions and turns state formation in the de facto state into an all-Armenian cause.

Several years before the first Armenia Fund Telethon on Thanksgiving, Anny Bakalian described holidays of Armenian-American families as significant for being "flavored with connotations of Armenianness*, although there is often nothing Armenian about them* except maybe a dish or two on the menu" (1993: 441-442, italics added). For Bakalian, there is an inevitable movement towards a de-institutionalized form of diaspora that she diagnoses as symbolic Armenianness, in contrast to a more authentically Armenian 'behavioral ethnicity' of the past. Her study is focused on the East Coast diaspora, which in comparison to Los Angeles is more assimilated, and was undertaken a few years prior to independence, which may explain her conviction of a one-way movement towards symbolic ethnicity.

In contrast to subjectivist accounts in which the 'real', material Armenia was believed to be always retreating from the radar of the diaspora, this chapter has examined the emergence of practices, routines and infrastructure projects that construct Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic as materially diasporic and the diasporic self as objectively tied to the unfolding histories in the homeland, albeit with varying degrees of awareness and differing views. In the Telethon's participatory materialization, diaspora identity is constructed not through the transmission of symbolism from an imaginary past but, instead, through a redistributive ethos that inserts the diaspora into national history as it unfolds materially in the present. The event suggests that the spectacular ritualization of transnational flows of finance through media events and material infrastructures can generate more-than-virtual homelands for diasporas—a form of material Armenianness, if ever there was one. Even if it is only through continual remediations of 1915 ("A hundred years ago they destroyed us…") that the

diaspora's wealth is activated in the media spectacle, routinized participation is nevertheless a synchronization with the actually existing homeland's present time.

The Pan-Armenian Tell-A-Thon has shown the difficulties encountered in attempting to politicize this humanitarian constellation. The rise of online journalism in Armenia has led to an increasing availability of critical accounts of the media spectacle, which, coupled with activist media practices in Los Angeles, energizes attempts to deritualize the post-Soviet state's transnational media power. But the affective resonance of the 2016 Four-Day War in the diaspora made the 'invisible hand' of the government, always already hiding behind music videos and the excitement of school children announcing their collected donations, even less apparent than it already was in the regular telethons. The media shocks overwrote the question of redistributive responsibilities of oligarchs with the more immediate suffering of the victims of armed hostilities by an 'enemy nation'. The shock waves sent by the homeland violence thus consolidated the transnational ritual sphere that turns the interests of the oligarchic state and its diasporic allies into an all-Armenian humanitarian cause.

The efficacy of the Armenia Fund Telethon does not primarily derive from the transnational flow of images that animates the screens of hundreds of thousands of households, although the fact that almost without exception Armenian television channels across the world broadcast the same footage for 12 hours is in itself a significant centralization of symbolic power. It is, instead, the mix of an appeal to compassion and a gentle coercion to perform media rituals by a global network of diaspora entities that mediates the participatory experience of materializing a better future for all Armenians. Against such a global constellation of mobilizing forces, the attempt to reveal the event to be a cynical tool of oligarchic elites employing instrumental reason does not reach far beyond the first-generation migrants who are acquainted enough with the geography, political factions and economic developments in the homeland to believe this grassroots media initiative to be 'telling it like it is'.

In the next chapter, I turn my attention from the redistribution of wealth from the diaspora to Armenia to a different mode of developmental diaspora: physical relocation to the homeland. This too, we shall see, is a phenomenon mediated by images. But here, as we shall see, the legacy of 1915 becomes less central to identity.

4. The Homeland as a Really Broken Down Bus

Few places are as popular among young diasporans in Yerevan as the craft beer pub Dargett. Established in early 2016, it isn't the first of its kind in the Armenian capital. But none of its competitors can match its almost two dozen home-brewed beer varieties, from dark ales and IPAs to wheat beers and an Armenian-themed apricot brew.[100] The bright building in which it is housed, with transparent glass walls, contrasts sharply with the surrounding tufa buildings and wider brutalist cityscape.

I first attended the pub, or 'craft brewery' as it calls itself, a few hours after a hiking excursion in the countryside with a group of young diaspora volunteers from Europe and the US. For much of the hike in the snow, I had been conversing with them about their lives in Armenia, their vision of the country's development, as well as their use of digital media in communicating their experiences to friends and relatives abroad and to each other. After the excursion I was invited to join them to eat pizza and try beer varieties at Dargett, where they were also meeting friends, all diasporans too.

"These Soviet buildings often remind me of dark science fiction movies. They're just so massive and impersonal," tells Narine, a journalist in her late twenties. "At first I even found them a bit scary, but I got used to them eventually." As a cellphone is passed around our table displaying one volunteer's Instagram photo feed, the nighttime view of worn down socialist-era blocs and neon signs in the Armenian alphabet is likened to the 1982 film Blade Runner, about a posthuman, dystopian future of Los Angeles. The volunteers discuss that the capital's architecture is not necessarily beautiful. But it is most certainly *interesting*. "If you grow up in America like us, you've probably never seen a Soviet building before in your life," explains Sahak, a video game developer from Texas. "It's all new and different. So that makes it interesting already."

Most of my interlocutors were volunteers affiliated with Birthright Armenia (Arm.: *Depi Hayk*, or Western Armenian: *Tebi Hayg*), an organization established by an

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[100] Apricots and pomegranates are considered the two quintessentially Armenian fruits. The orange color in the Armenian tricolor is not orange (*narnjaguyn*) but apricot-color (*tziranaguyn*). Some argue that the fruit is even 'scientifically Armenian' due to its Latin name: *prunus armeniaca*.

American-Armenian philanthropist from the East Coast in the early 2000s. 'Birthrighters', as the participants in the program are colloquially called, are diasporans who spend anywhere from three weeks to two years in Armenia. They intern at IT companies or human rights NGOs, give English language instruction, move to rural areas to participate in agricultural work, or learn traditional crafts. They receive travel grants, get free Armenian language instruction, and are expected to take part in regular discussions on the country's past, present and future. They can also join weekly excursions. The volunteers, steeped in a discourse that mixes heritage with a humanitarian spirit, brings us back to the last chapter's theme of a developmental diaspora intervening after the collapse of the Soviet project. But if in the previous case diasporans contributed financial resources while staying physically outside Armenia, here primarily *human* resources are redistributed to the homeland.

On this Saturday afternoon, prior to the evening gathering in the craft beer pub, the Birthright Armenia hike took us to the snowy ruins of Teghenyats, a 12th century monastery destroyed by an earthquake, to make a fire and roast marshmallows. On the way back we also visited a village museum named Levon's Divine Underground (*Levoni astvatsayin getnapor*), exhibiting the creations of an eccentric visionary who spent two decades of his life building a cave structure underneath his house. As with all excursions organized by the diasporic heritage organization, the trip was meant to show the *real* Armenia, as opposed to the familiar clichéd sights of Garni-Geghard.[101]

As we entered the tour bus, Tigran, a local tour guide with an impressive beard and a convincing American accent, told us the safety guidelines. "Rule number one: don't die! Rule number two: if you do die, be sorry, because we're gonna have to kill you!" While newcomers laughed at Tigran's dark humor, the Birthright veterans stared out of the windows of the bus with bored glances upon hearing the same old jokes. Once the bus hit the road our guide outlined the full itinerary. "Oh man, don't tell me we are going to visit a ruined monastery *again*?!" Sahak exclaimed upon finding out about the program, as he had hoped for something more adventurous like cross-country skiing. "Of course we're visiting a monastery, what did you expect? T.I.A.!" a voice from

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[101] As mentioned in Chapter 3, these are two popular sites that can be visited on a day trip from Yerevan, consisting of a pagan temple and a medieval monastic complex.

another row in the bus responded. "Totally T.I.A.!" a third voice echoed.

"T.I.A." I soon learned, is an expression borrowed from the 2006 Hollywood movie Blood Diamond featuring Leonardo DiCaprio, set during the civil war in Sierra Leone. Characters in the movie use the acronym to express the notion that Africa never changes: "This is Africa!" For diaspora volunteers in Armenia, however, the acronym's meaning has been slightly adjusted: it stands for "This is *Armenia*!" Young diasporans use "T.I.A." as a caption on Snapchat, a hashtag on Instagram, or as a spoken interjection in conversation, to characterize what is at once typical and strange, both exotic and to be expected in a developing country. Whether it is trash blocking the corridors of a building, a person rudely cutting the queue in a shop, or being fed an umpteenth portion of food and drink by a host family after rejecting another round of servings, "T.I.A." sets the frame. On the tour bus, it expressed that there is not much to see outside Yerevan other than ruins and ancient monasteries.

The catchphrase "T.I.A.," at once a hashtag and an everyday interjection, is a vivid example of the developmentalist gaze of diasporic youth from the Global North who move to Armenia for extended periods. The passing references to two film scenarios, the one a thriller depicting the lives of Western NGO workers in civil war-struck Africa, the other science fiction set in the dystopian future of Los Angeles, raise a number of questions on the links between post-Soviet collapse and new imaginaries of the 'old' diaspora. How do these young diasporans, immersed in the actually existing homeland, signify collapse and theorize its causes and solutions? What is the role of histories of embodiment in wider iconographic economies and media ecologies in transforming the affective charge and symbolic meanings of experiences that they undergo in Armenia? How does the commonly felt realization of these diasporans that they are, in an immediate, dispositional sense, *foreign* to the ancestral[102] homeland generate new dilemmas and tensions of identity, and how are these resolved?

Inspired by Sossie Kasbarian's striking formulation that, for diasporic sojourners, "the homeland of longing and dreams has to be *edited and rewritten*" (2015: 361, emphasis added), I examine diasporic heritage trips in relation both to pre-existent image

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[102] Of course, for most this ancestral homeland also covers today's Eastern Turkey.

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repertoires and new practices of image-making. As in all cases, the internal/external dialectic (Jenkins 2008) remains crucial: as the likening of Armenia to a variety of movie scenes reveals, the homeland is never an entirely 'internal', autochthonous iconographic production.[103] Rather, it is constructed from a number of sources, both from local observations and globally circulating symbolic repertoires. Conceiving of the homeland as a frame capable of encompassing a variety of images and theories, I move from a focus on media as a technological domain in society to the Hegelian concept of mediation as a general condition of social existence (Mazzarella 2004).

The chapter unfolds in five main parts. In the first two sections, I contextualize the Birthright volunteers in a wider scene of ethnic return migrants, and explore the role of participatory visual media in their everyday lives (Belting 2005; 2012). The third and fourth sections explore how traveling memory images are resignified in visions of Armenia's collapse and future development. I reflect on tensions between the images that both diasporans and anthropologists, such as myself, project of their experiences and how locals want their country to be represented abroad. Taken together, this leads me to reflect on the links between memory, alterity and recognition (Fabian 1999)

4.1. The Developmental Diaspora in Repatriate Yerevan

The excursion and the craft beer pub table each brought together a variety of diasporic identities in Armenia. A number of my interlocutors considered themselves not just temporary volunteers but *repats*, a recent shorthand for repatriates that resonates with imaginaries surrounding the 'expat', the wealthy, high-skilled metropolitan migrant who embraces an identity distinct from that of *immigrants* (Croucher 2012: 4). A degree of voluntarism and privilege is central to this category; Syrian-Armenian refugees are not usually considered repats. Like the expat, the concept of repat in Armenia represents a structural position of the socioeconomically privileged but culturally excluded outsider, which derives from a combination of habitus and local perceptions of diasporans as foreigners. Those who adopt the term repat describe their experience as a return to ethnic *identity*, but in practice, this identity is constructed from a mix of civilizational *alterity* and a developmental 'will to improve' Armenia.

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[103] This is, of course, also true for structural features of both the nation and the state, as in Anderson's notion of modularity (1991) and John Meyer's work on the transnational origins of standardized models for the modern nation-state (1999).

Among the Birthrighters, it was the *alumni* who had stayed after their volunteering period ended, many of whom continue to participate in the organization's activities, who insisted on the repat self-designation. Current volunteers were more divided on how accurate this term was to describe their status. Due to the increase in well-paid jobs in NGOs and tech companies and the rise of the mobile freelance worker, there is also an increase in 'repats' who move for extended periods to Armenia without prior interning or volunteering, sometimes after period of extensive online consultations. Most are of a well-off, middle or upper class background, showcasing the general pattern that it is those who possess considerable social and cultural capital who can "exploit advantages both in the US and in their homelands" and use this to "choose transnational lives" (Levitt 2009: 1238).[104] But quite many have not been firmly integrated into diaspora institutions—exemplifying the 'silent majority' of diasporans, either due to coming from places with a small Armenian presence or because they or their families felt unable to identify with the ideologies espoused by diasporic elites.

The term repat has in recent years become especially popular due to the outreach work of an NGO named Repat Armenia, which promotes a model of the 'high impact' ethnic expatriate.[105] The organization's discourse frames the virtues of moving to Armenia in terms of both challenges and satisfactions. Its website, for instance, combines the typical guidance on housing, unusual cultural norms and attractive leisure options found on any 'expat' page, but adds testimonials on the spiritual and psychological benefits of ethnic return. Birthright Armenia, an organization housed in the same office building in central Yerevan, deploys tropes of adventure, exploration and discovery, which are also visualized on its Instagram account.[106] Of these two organizations, Repat Armenia offers professional advice on Skype to potential repatriates and facilitates the exchange of experiences in its Facebook group. Unlike in the classical myth of collective return, to move to Armenia is here not presented as an inevitable move, but as an experiment

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[104] As is common in the terminology of literature on transnational migration, Levitt (2009) uses the word 'homeland' for the country of the origin of ancestors, whereas the country of primary residence and, usually, citizenship becomes a 'host society'.

[105] The executive director of Repat Armenia explained this to me as a choice of quality over quantity: bringing foreign-born middle class 'innovators' to the country is considered to have a higher impact than resettling those who left more recently.

[106] https://www.instagram.com/birthrightarm/

that requires preparation to succeed. In the view of its advocates, Repat Armenia is the *real* Ministry of Diaspora (see Chapter 2).

While the diaspora volunteer and the repat are distinct as categories of practice, they are also often temporal stages of a shared identity, as Birthrighters who extend their stays multiple times will gradually begin to refer to their stay as a form of repatriation. Both categories are used to describe a form of ethnic migration to Armenia that is experimental and exploratory in nature, and rooted in a mix of a developmentalist ethos and romantic imaginaries of homecoming (cf. Darieva 2011). The length of stays is highly indeterminate and, importantly, *stays* indeterminate. This is not just because diasporans from the Global North have an exceptional freedom of movement due to their citizenship status and capital, but also because, unlike in other forms of migration, assimilation hardly takes place. Some repats can live in Armenia for many years without, for instance, making long-term commitments such as mastering the local language. The decision to return to the *other* home country can always be undertaken quite spontaneously. For these reasons, I concur with Kasbarian (2015) that such self-designations as 'repatriation' here should not be taken at face value, and that a more accurate characterization of these forms of settlement is diasporic *sojourning*.

The prominence of tours and excursions shows that distinctions between migration and heritage tourism are blurred in the lives of diasporic sojourners, particularly in the earliest stages. Although craft beer pubs and co-working spaces may seem a far cry from the elderly who move to warmer climates after retirement, the repat shares key features with the *residential tourist*—a concept that refers not just to pensioners but also to more economically active people, such as peripatetic freelance workers and entrepreneurs who manage businesses from holiday homes (O'Reilly 2003: 303). For diasporans from Southern California, what is self-identified as repatriation is often a seasonal return that avoids Yerevan's cold winters, seeking short-term employment or volunteering to give a purpose to return in warmer seasons. The social scene of sojourners in Yerevan thus resonates with key observations from the recent literature on privileged mobility (Croucher 2012). This literature, invoking terms such as lifestyle migration, residential tourism and privileged migration, seeks to capture the mix of comforts and challenges experienced by those who travel from the economic and political centers of the world system to cheaper places in the developing world.

There is however one essential difference with other types of privileged mobility. The diasporans come to live in a semi-peripheral country about which they have already, in one form or another, been educated throughout their lives. No matter how strong or weak the ties to diaspora institutions, they have all been raised in families where narratives, images and vernacular theories about Armenia and its predicament have present throughout their lives. As the first generation to be born during or after Armenia's troubled path to independence, the question of whether Armenians have an actually existing homeland is not an issue for these young diasporans. But, as very few of those who enroll in programs such as Birthright Armenia are *Hayastantsi* diasporans from families with recent personal or close cultural ties to Armenia, most sojourners have not grown up with living exemplars of post-Soviet Armenia. How then, do you they perceive Armenia when they move there to 'develop' the country?

4.2. Image, Homeland, Embodiment

The title of an online photo series depicting Yerevan's Soviet-era, brutalist and quasi-brutalist[107] blocks exemplifies the sense of alienation that is oftentimes felt by diasporans when they first encounter the material remnants of Soviet Armenia: "The Unbearable Grayness of Buildings." Published in *The Armenite*, an online magazine about Armenian culture and politics edited by a young sojourner from Los Angeles, the clever pun on the title of Milan Kundera's famous novel is no joke. The editor instructs his diasporan readership that Soviet-era buildings are "as fascinating as they are monotonous; they are eerie and *devoid of aesthetic*" (italics added). The editor, in his commentary, uses the metaphor of time travel, a trope that we have already seen used earlier for media connectivity (Chapter 1). But here it used in a less optimistic manner: "It is only with the appearance of the trappings of a modern society – like satellite dishes – that we can be sure we have not traveled back in time."[108]

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[107] The term brutalist is usually reserved, per the etymology of the word, for concrete buildings, whereas Soviet architecture in Yerevan is divided between buildings made of the local tufa stone, concrete structures, and buildings of tufa that mimic brutalism.
[108] http://thearmenite.com/2015/02/unbearable-grayness-of-buildings-soviet-architecture-in-armenia-photo-tatevik-vardanyan/
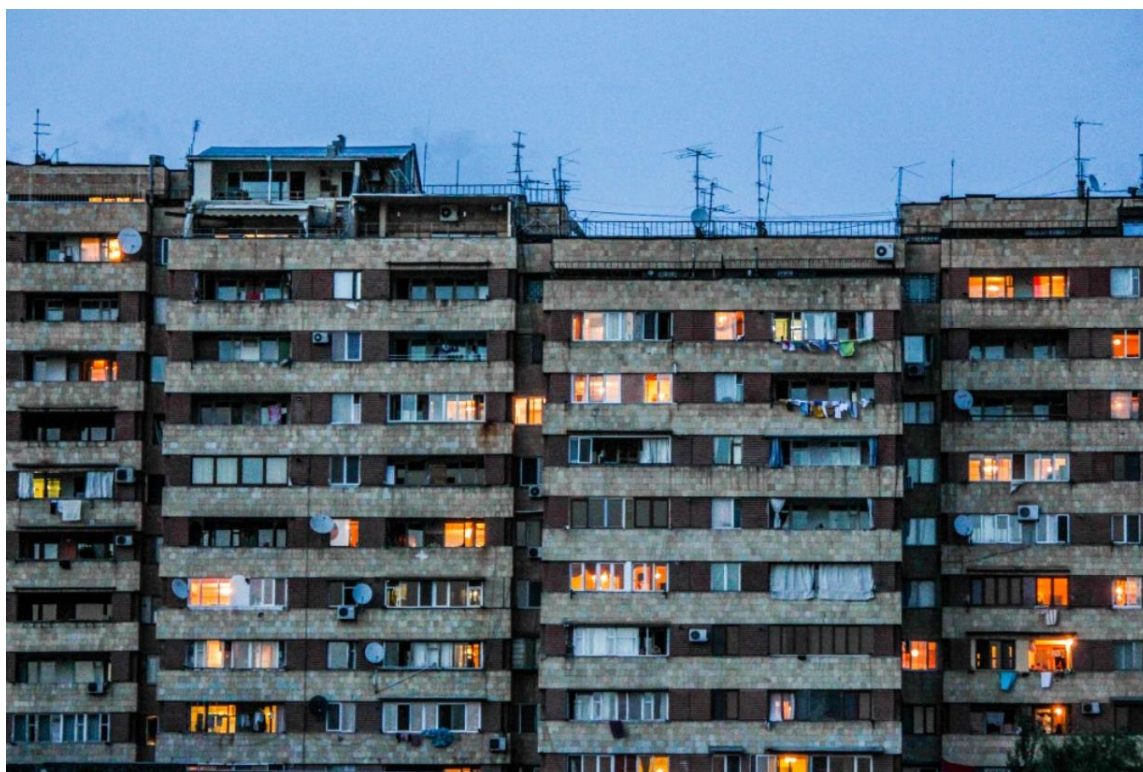
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***Figure 4.1. "Who's Home" from The Unbearable Grayness of Buildings, The
Armenite. Photograph by Tatevik Vardanyan.***

This diasporic commentary, framing the homeland as frozen in another time and
redeemed for Western modernity only by *satellites*, brings us back to the issue of
coevalness I first raised in the introduction to the thesis. The AT&T satellite and the
logo of the telecommunications company on Armenia's first post-Soviet stamp
(Chapter 1) expressed hopes of independence in images of connectivity and modernist
pride. But if journalists at the time optimistically wrote of Armenia leaping seven
decades into the future, today's diasporic sojourners in Yerevan continue to look at their
surroundings as haunted by the specter of Soviet times. "Look, I am *facetiming* from
the Soviet Union,"[109] one volunteer told her friends back in California while showing
them the apartment in which she was staying during her Birthright trip.

It is thus not only images and tropes from media texts, such as the aforementioned
movies, but also imaginaries of communism and habituation to everyday surroundings
in the United States that mediate between the experienced, unsettling strangeness of the
'homeland' and the familiarity of lived home. While these histories of perception may

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[109] FaceTime is a video telephone application for Apple devices, not unlike Skype.

seem to work only to distance the volunteers from their surroundings, they are also crucial in transforming an initially alienating alterity into an expanded notion of the diasporic self. This is so because sojourning thrives on the trope of discovery and, indeed, the process of *self*-discovery in difference, a difference to be made into identity, which requires the homeland to have unexpected and exotic qualities.

This interplay between familiar images and unexpected occurrences at odds with the habitus of diasporans raised in the Global North was visible throughout the Birthright excursion. As we walked through the snow for an hour and a half, suddenly the sky cleared and a majestic view of sun-lit Mount Aragats appeared, upon which nearly all participants took out their phones to take a picture. As the highest mountain within the present bounds of Armenia, the view was likened to the quintessential image of Mount Ararat, the most common depiction of the homeland that many had seen every day as they grew up, on portraits on living room walls. Such 'Instagram moments' turned the excursion into a transnational image exhibition, as the most picturesque homeland moments multiplied on the screens of friends and relatives across the globe.

The technological mediation of heritage trips in Armenia, transforming sights into circulating images, adds a 'liveness' and an audience to homecoming imaginaries. This duty to display to friends and relatives in the *other* home turns the sojourner into a kind of iconographic ambassador that is akin to the ethnographer's responsibilities to report back a slow process of getting used to alterity. An interesting temporal disjunction is generated in the process: while those left behind experience a sense of synchronization with an actually existing Armenia they are mostly unfamiliar with, those who are physically there feel temporally out of sync with their immediate surroundings.

In the excursion it became obvious that the sojourner acts as a gatekeeper who feels responsible to ensure that the country is not depicted as *too* backwards. For instance, an unexpected sight occurred when the fire was started in the ruins of Teghenyats monastery, and our local guide began to throw the empty plastic bags in which our lunches had been packed on the campfire. "It's flammable so we put it, come on guys, *this is Armenia*!" the local tour guide said, appropriating the T.I.A. meme of rueful self-recognition with which diasporans typify Armenia. Basking in the aromas of wood turning to charcoal and the toxic fumes of burnt plastic, some volunteers questioned the

guide's ecological reasoning. I was told that this is the type of behavior that gives Armenians from Armenia a bad name in the United States, demonstrating a Soviet mentality at odds with the community ethic of the old diaspora. But moments like this are not publicly relayed by volunteers through their kinship and friendship networks of Facebook or Instagram, although they might be shared on the more intimate sphere of Snapchat, on which images melt into thin air as soon as they are viewed.

In his attempt to devise an iconology for the digital age, the visual culture theorist Hans Belting argues that mental/internal images (e.g. the 'Sovietness' of the locals) and media images (e.g. romantic depictions of Armenia's mountain landscapes) should not be rigidly opposed to one another. Conceiving of acts of looking as involving "our entire knowledge about images (*Bildwissen*)" (2012: 187), Belting urges us to think of media images as more than representations or 'extensions':

> Since Marshall McLuhan, it has been part of general knowledge that media function as extensions, prosthetic devices of the insufficient body. But this rigid dualism between the competence of media and the incompetence of bodies misrepresents the matter. Naturally, bodies need media as tools, and they improve their perception with media. But bodies also cooperate with media to produce images. Opposing internal (mental) to external (media) images obstructs access to the processes of perception and imagination … (ibid. 188)

This 'cooperation' of media and body is highly relevant in the age of digital culture, in which image-capturing devices are continually worn on, or at a few inches from the body. The diaspora volunteers on the excursion were constantly looking at the world surrounding them through the affordances of digital platforms, as the incentive to 'share' certain moments had become second nature. This was so even when no actual device was present, but hashtags were uttered to characterize a situation. Of course, feminist scholars have long argued that perception, imagination and desire are mediated by media images and themselves generative of new mental images, as in the male gaze and its modes of objectification (Mulvey 1975). What is new in the age of participatory media is that those who consume images also incessantly *produce* them.

For the young diasporans I met in Yerevan, everyday image production for a variety of

social media platforms played an integral role in turning a foreign place into a home away from home. They were engaged in an incessant production of future memories. But these memories, central to the production of locality (Appadurai 1996) were often based on perceptions that locals were unlikely to share with them. One sojourner mentioned the ruins in the dystopian landscapes that he photographed, from overgrown socialist-era amusement park rides to dysfunctional fountains and broken benches. "It looks like if you put some zombies in there, it's a zombie apocalypse," he told me when I asked what fascinates him about such sights. But for many locals the ubiquity of worn down Soviet-era infrastructure is a source of frustration, a symbol of abandonment after the end of a state that, for all its flaws, *did* invest in large, ambitious public projects.

Depending on the platform, audiences varied from friends and relatives abroad to close diasporan friends with whom everyday life was shared in Yerevan. In many cases, negative takes on local realities were not widely circulated. Instead, they were posted on Snapchat. A 'snap', consisting of an image or a short video with optional layers of text, drawings and filters added, is a multimedia message that disappears after a single viewing. Its content melts into thin air right as soon as it reaches its recipient, much like the words uttered in a regular offline conversation. It was the platform on which to circulate slightly embarrassing images of Dionysian bacchanals of drink and dance, as well as for making fun of the locals, for instance by imitating their accents and commonly uttered phrases. Here, media images are transformed into mental images only for the small group that would get the insider references, making the homeland generative of new forms of cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 2005).[110]

If Snapchat is celebrated by diaspora sojourners for this liberating ephemerality, the curation of content on a Facebook or Instagram profile took a less intimate form of semi-public permanent exhibitions. Picture albums on Facebook would have the widest audience, usually including many relatives and acquaintances from older generations, who were not thought of as the Instagram audience. On both platforms, content was much more 'tourist-like' and less personal than on Snapchat. Sometimes platforms overlap; a scenic image of Mount Ararat visible from a Yerevan balcony, for instance, could certainly be shared on any platform. But it was primarily on Snapchat and, in an

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[110] The topic of diasporic cultural intimacy will be examined at length in Chapter 5.

even more sheltered digital locus, in group chats with close friends and family members, that bafflement with the locals and the expression of a contradictory sense of estrangement and identification were emphasized. The homeland thus becomes an increasingly layered and dynamic notion, in a process that illustrates Susan Pattie's description of the Armenian homeland as "a contested and evolving notion" that is inevitably "shaped by personal memories and experiences, ambitions and hopes of people at particular times" (1999: 82).To understand how this layeredness emerges gradually, I now turn to the temporality of heritage mobility.

4.3. The Homeland as a Frame Without a Fixed Image

In my conversations with diasporans living in Yerevan, there was a recurrent awkward moment when I asked one particular question: "do you have any local friends?" Sometimes, I phrased the question in an unclear manner that was perhaps misunderstood: "Do you have any *Hayastantsi* [Armenians from Armenia] friends?" But once it became clear that I did not refer to Armenians from Armenia in the diaspora, an uncomfortable silence would often follow. Perhaps this was shaped by the implicit subtext that no doubt characterized my question on some level: "*shouldn't* you have local friends if you consider this country your homeland?" They all certainly had local *acquaintances*: work colleagues, familiar faces they would talk to in pubs during a night out, or connections to a former host family. But few, including among those who had spent years in Yerevan, maintained close friendships with locals.

The many times I heard the answer 'no' or 'not really' to the question of local friends initially surprised me. This was particularly so if it would come after long lists of what it was that my interlocutors loved about Armenia and how they could imagine living there for a longer periods. As I personally have maintained close friendships with Armenians from Armenia since my first fieldwork in 2009, I found the trope of a Soviet mentality an unconvincing explanation. But after getting acquainted better with many sojourners and their stories, I began to understand that for many of them, diasporic self-isolation was not the path of least resistance but in fact the result of a long initiation rite, oftentimes marked by serious challenges, trials and hardships.

This was particularly so for those who had come with Birthright Armenia with limited

language skills upon their arrival. Take, for instance, Levon, a young photographer from the East Coast. Until his volunteering period, he had only once been to Armenia on a guided tour with his family, staying in a luxury apartment. Through his contacts in an Armenian church he discovered about the possibilities of volunteering. He described the sense of unsettlement of how he was first taken straight from the airport to a temporary host family, before starting his volunteering in Gyumri, as follows:

> It was literally my first time in a stranger's house in a country that I felt like I've never been before. Suddenly I'm in somebody's life. And it's not exactly a glamorous life either. …. That first morning I just slept and slept and slept. I was afraid to leave my room. I almost didn't speak any Armenian at all. I was like '*barev*' [hello] and that was all I knew. I was really anxious, I wasn't aware of what I was supposed to do. I didn't know how to interact with these people. And then, they were nice and fed me. I'm like: okay, I'm okay. And then it just goes from there. That very first step. To open the door and go sit with that host family.

Levon had an emotionally confronting first-hand experience with the collapse of Armenia of the transition years. He volunteered for a media company in earthquake-struck Gyumri (see Chapter 1), and soon learned that the city had never been fully rebuilt. The country-wide transformation of workers into surplus populations of sub-proletarians forced to improvise a living (Derluguian 2005) became an intimately felt experience. Levon only met the head of his host family as a moving image on Skype, as the family's father, following the typical scenario, was away working as a seasonal migrant laborer in Russia to make ends meet. He discovered that many relatives and friends of the host family were still living in emergency housing built after the 1988 earthquake. This made him realize intuitively that many of the families did not host the Armenian-Americans on their 'journey of self-discovery' out of a curiosity vis-à-vis the diaspora, but rather out of sheer economic necessity. At present, he rents a flat in the center of Yerevan, as do most of his friends who began the Birthright program.

If males could sometimes stay up to a half year with a host family before deciding to rent their own place, females often give up their attempt to integrate with a host family within a matter of weeks—sometimes to the unease of the families that had hoped to

gain extra money from hosting the young diasporans. Lusine, a 24-year old Birthright volunteer from Orange County who worked as an intern in a co-working space for start-up companies in Yerevan, felt she had to leave after two months:

> They were really great to me. But over time, our cultural differences came out, and by the time I moved out, those differences seemed to have created a distance between us, no matter how much I tried not to do this. Because I really tried to respect them in every way. But they have an extremely misled perception of what America is, who Americans are, what America represents. The mother of the host family didn't expect me to come home late all the time. I felt it's just something they would rather not deal with. So in the end I felt more comfortable leaving, especially since she took my key away in the end.

The mother of the host family told Lusine that she didn't take her key away because of her coming home late, but because she repeatedly forgot to turn off the heating after leaving the house. She also once accidentally left the water faucet open for several hours, which, as in many districts of Yerevan, is not running between midnight and the early morning. In the end, Lusine was unsure whether her key to the house was taken away as a repercussion because of the difficulty the family had paying heating and utility costs, or that she was being disciplined and punished for the fact that she, as an unmarried single woman, went out to party and drink with other diaspora volunteers until after midnight on most days of the week. But she felt quite certain—and, it seems to me, quite likely rightly so—that a male of the same age would not have had imposed on him the same limitations to freedom of movement.

The unsettlement and alienation experienced in such confronting encounters with the harshness of life for the locals and their real differences generates serious dilemmas. The anthropologist Karolina Pawlowska has described this in terms of moments of 'culture shock' (2017: 103-104) in which diasporic sojourners are forced to make a choice: either leave Armenia, or reimagine one's role in the country. The latter is a process of distancing and adjustment in which, as several authors argue (Darieva 2011; Kasbarian 2015; Pawlowska 2017), development imaginaries play a central role. But I have found that there is also another temporal development through which the distance between the locals and diasporans is transmuted into a more positive source of identity.

This is the practice of adopting a folkloristic gaze of rueful self-recognition to aspects of the homeland that are found challenging (Herzfeld 2005).

It is here that the "T.I.A." meme gains its full meaning. In the frames that diasporans deploy in their interactions, they adopt a flexible and playful homeland *stance* toward Armenia rather than a fixed notion of the homeland (cf. Brubaker 2005). Precisely by embracing ambiguity rather than seeking to avoid it, the unsettling differences and challenging experiences of underdevelopment can be integrated as a source of the self. This is also why Snapchat is the more important medium for the sojourners: it is about developing a collective commentary on immediate perceptions, adding text and soliciting shared takes on forms of alterity that are otherwise difficult to integrate. The centrality of this dynamic, which happens both offline and online, leads me a conceptualization of the diasporic homeland as a frame without a fixed image. The images that are assembled in this frame by the sojourners do not just combine very different times and places of origin, but are also layered in various degrees on a scale between repatriate intimacy and the reproduction of iconic forms for public display.

Perhaps the clearest example I encountered during my fieldwork of this was when Levon, the photographer and his friend Sahak, the video game developer, together threw a Halloween party in which they dressed up as local *qyartu* men. The *qyartu* man, nearly always dressed in black, and the associated 'oriental' *rabiz* music culture, has long been a negative lower class stereotype in Armenia, originating not just in the transition years but also in the large-scale urbanization of Yerevan since the 1960s and the Soviet criminal world (Jaloyan 2013; Fehlings 2016). The costumes consisted of black Adidas tracksuits with big, dark aviator sunglasses, as well as performing a typical melodramatic slang and squatting poses. Like the *gopnik* of Russian pop culture, the *qyartu* is a primary icon of what Georgi Derluguian describes as the "awkward 'non-class' of sub-proletarians" in the Caucasus—people who did not find regular employment and instead depend on a variety of informal coping mechanisms to get by (2005: 17). In the popular imaginary of liberal citizens in Armenia, a *qyartu* man is the quintessential backward, rural fossil of failed urbanization and transition, with a mix of a strict honor code and a sentimental predisposition (Adriaans 2018).

Dressing up as a local *qyartu* man for Halloween would have almost certainly not

passed in the host families in which these diasporans were initially staying. Its mimicking and making fun of the locals could have been perceived as offensive, or else it would have simply fallen flat, as the feel for ironic, rueful self-recognition that these youth display is too strongly dependent on their distance from lived realities to be shared by most locals. In this sense, it can be seen as epitomizing the last stage in the temporal trajectory of diasporic homecoming: Levon and Sahak were now living in their own places in the center of Yerevan, keeping the discomforting conservatism and poverty of the locals at a distance safe enough that no local could take offense.

In this last stage of diasporic homecoming, the locals have already become an image that is almost no different in function from the Ararat portraits or movie scripts: an autonomized icon that mediates the imagination of a home away from home and is not essentially a part of embodied interaction. But this iconization also comes with a call to action for social change: it is precisely the 'backwards' mentality that the *qyartu* stands for that developmental diasporans want to help the country overcome. In this, they are not alone: many locals in Yerevan would also like Armenia to be more modern.

4.4. Sub-Proletarians in the Hinterlands of Public Culture

"Hey brother! You can't photograph this!" a grey-haired, male meat vendor in a black leather jacket shouts at me as he stands on the iced pavement outside a market hall on Yerevan's Tigran Mets avenue, gesticulating agitatedly in my direction. "You can't take pictures!" the man repeats himself as he approaches me. I had just left the GUMI market hall, a late Soviet-era premise owned by possibly the wealthiest winner of the transition, the oligarch and former arm-wrestling champion Gagik Tsarukyan, where I bought nuts coated in grape syrup as well as some fresh vegetables. It was a picture from the open air meat sale behind the GUMI market hall that upset the middle-aged man, taken as I strolled around to explore the market's surroundings.

"Brother, please erase this picture! Erase it (*djndji*)!" the man insists. Feeling caught in a minor misdemeanor, I open the gallery on my phone as the man now, imposingly, stands right next to me. Out of embarrassment, I don't dare to enlarge the picture to show it to him. But I do obey his command: I demonstratively tap 'delete', 'OK'.

What iconographic crime had I committed here? I had taken a photo of the open trunk

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of a snow-covered, white Lada Zhiguli, in which lied the carcass of a butchered cow. To be sure, the sight was not the most hygienic thing I had ever seen, as it looked as if some of the car's upholstery was exposed to the meat. And yet its stark contrasts captivated me, appealing to my long-standing appreciation of surrealist imagery: the brutal immediacy of the flesh with a counterpoint of what were, to my foreign eyes, nostalgic hues of Soviet design, all set in a soft and gentle winter setting.

Not satisfied with the mere deletion of the image, the vendor asks me for the rationale behind my behavior: why had I taken a picture of this? Having difficulties expressing the complexity of what I felt while questioning myself about my sense of entitlement, I mumble that where I come from, such a sight is simply very unusual, and that the composition was interesting to me. This answer was clearly not satisfactory.

"We know that you do not live like this in Europe," the man told me, "but do you think we *want* to live like this?" He continued: "do you understand what happens if you spread such images on the internet? Your friends back home will see it on their computers and think: 'oh, so this is how they live in Armenia: everything is dirty, they live like pigs!'" Stating that I had never meant to suggest that Armenians live like pigs, the meat vendor insisted that there is no need to pretend that differences in the standards of living between countries in the West and Armenia aren't real.

The meat vendor's indignation was a poignant reminder of the anthropologist's responsibilities for representing places at the periphery of the global world system. Perhaps because of my foreign appearance, I was already framed as an ambassador for the international image of the nation even before I had revealed that I am an ethnographer from abroad. The intervention revealed a stark awareness of the external moment of the recognition dialectic—the image-shaping powers of 'outsiders' that impact the way 'insiders' are perceived and, in some cases, self-identify (Jenkins 2008). The vendor had prevented the autonomization of the moment, as my snapshot would have indeed ended up on my Instagram profile; non-Armenians would have certainly seen it. What happens in Yerevan stays in Yerevan, his intervention ensured.

Having been 'caught' aestheticizing what the meat vendor considered a sign of embarrassing poverty, I felt that I belonged to the long, questionable lineage, going

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back to colonial times, of ethnographers who portray the people they study as being not quite contemporaneous with the supposedly modern world from which the anthropologist hails (Fabian 1983). But discussing my iconographic crime with the diasporic sojourners alleviated the strong embarrassment I had initially felt. For them, it was a typical "T.I.A." moment, and I was told that many would have undoubtedly taken the same spectacular photo. On the other hand, some might have kept it in the local sphere of Snapchat and not on the more public exhibitions on Facebook and Instagram, which are more dedicated to preserving the honorable, prefabricated ideal picture of the diasporic homeland for distant relatives and non-Armenian friends.

Sahak, the video game developer, didn't see a problem in my photo. "Repats all take photos of stuff like that, I do it all the time." He mentioned sights of unintentionally humorous signs, or withered Soviet cars that have been filled to the brim with apples or tomatoes—a common sight of informal trade. "Or I will take pictures of a really broken down bus, parked in the city center," he continued. "It's all stuff that locals when they see it, they don't even think about. They might even find it embarrassing," he added. He could empathize with the vendor's asking me to delete the photo in order to not make Armenia look bad, but he believed it was ultimately based on a misunderstanding. "If I saw the carcass in the car in a country that is not Armenia I wouldn't think 'Oh, what a bad place!' I would think 'what an interesting place!'"

There remains a certain puzzle to be solved here. What is that makes both the spectacle of *qyartu* masculinity and the sight of informal meat trade catch the attention of both diasporic sojourners and anthropologists? To understand this, Derluguian's notion of the sub-proletarians of the Caucasus (2005), which I have already mentioned in relation to the iconic nature of *qyartu* men and the host father who was away working in Russia, needs to be unpacked further. Essentially, it is about a much wider formation shaping how the Western world looks at post-socialist transformations across Eurasia.

While they have always existed due to the Soviet state's inability to proletarianize the entire population into steady wage laborers, Derluguian notes that the 'non-class' of sub-proletarians has become an ever larger and more visible presence in public life since the transition years (2005: 150-155). Precarious sub-proletarians, such as the father of the diasporic sojourner's host family who was only seen on Skype due to his

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peregrinations to Russia, lack a steady economic position and need to continually improvise and manage risks for the sake of social reproduction. They do not only offend the tastes of local middle classes, but can also fascinate with the exoticism that their unpredictable lifestyles bring:

> Today in the Caucasus the empirical markers of sub-proletarian membership might include the chicken roaming in the backyard of a nominally urban house; a street stall at the front gate from which the old men or women sell cigarettes, chewing gum, or homemade pies; and the presence of many women and children of different ages. Sub-proletarians are not necessarily paupers from shanty towns, though certainly many are desperately poor. Today on the outskirts of any big city in the Caucasus, one sees ostentatious new houses with Mercedes-Benzes in the driveways. …. Sub-proletarians catch the eye of foreign visitors who then tend to overgeneralize the spectacle in exoticized ethnic terms (2005: 152, 153).

As we have seen, it is not just foreign anthropologists but also diasporans on whom the spectacle of the sub-proletarianization of Armenia exerts its charm. This is both the case, as we will see in the next chapter, in Los Angeles, where the sub-proletarians become an icon of the entire subethnic group of *Hayastantsi* diasporans, and among the sojourners examined in this chapter. These commonalities beg further reflection.

No matter how much they aspire to represent the local realities, the diasporic sojourners' middle class habitus, and the tensions between the physical proximity to and lived distance from the 'natives' in the homeland, reveal a position of structural outsiders (cf. Naficy 2001: 70; Tsuda 2009: 328). But this outsider position can become part of the very appeal of cyclical returns to Armenia: it is only a small number of fellow diasporans, mostly centered in the center of Yerevan and living in spaces of the nation's imagined futurity such as offices for social entrepreneurship or information technology companies, who 'get' their way of being Armenian.

The fact that I often found myself taking pictures similar to those of diaspora sojourners suggests that a similarity in levels of education, socioeconomic class and language capacities correlates to quite similar ways of seeing. The propensity of both the anthropologist and diasporic sojourner to be captivated by everyday things that locals

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find unremarkable or embarrassing is worth pondering over in the light of the 'scandal of the exotic' that haunts anthropological self-scrutiny since the last decades of postcolonial critique of the discipline's history (Kapferer 2013). If anthropologists have been right to denounce the romanticizing and at times racist past portrayals of remote places, the discipline no less remains built on a paradox of the exotic. After all, many if not most anthropologists continue to examine what is, to them, different, strange or astonishing, oftentimes attempting to reformulate received wisdoms of the sociocultural locations from which they have arrived to their field sites (ibid. 818).[111]

One might argue that Armenia stands in a similar exotic relation to sojourning youth from the Armenian diaspora as it does to the ethnographer. Like anthropologists, they spend periods of immersion that challenge the given wisdoms they grew up with. As we have seen, they do not 'go native'. Instead, they cultivate an interstitial position, developing original ways of seeing and vernacular theories that challenge both the locals and the received wisdoms of the places they grew up in. The crucial difference, however, is that the self/other relation for diasporic sojourners is modulated by the homeland frame. This entails that alterity is incessantly transformed into identity, even if it is done through rueful self-recognition. It is this frame, that the uncovered astonishing differences are *somehow* already a hidden part of what the diasporic self was all along, that provides sojourners with the entitlement to dress up as *qyartu* locals—mirroring the living images of the self that, as unknowing icons of nationness for diasporic sojourners, are walking, squatting, enjoying *rabiz* music in Yerevan. The negation of backwardness implied in the process hints at a developmentalist gaze and a sense of embodying the future of the nation, which is what I will examine next.

4.5. The Soviet Past; the Californian Future

One of the key themes that inevitably came up across my interactions with diaspora sojourners is the country's untapped potential for development. A common trope was that the locals don't see the many opportunities that they are surrounded by, all of which could make the quality of life better in the country. The following quote from Lusine, the volunteer who interned at a co-working space during her stay in Armenia, is an apt

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[111] Kapferer (2013) calls for a recuperation of the exotic by de-territorializing the concept: "Everything and anything is potentially in an exotic relation. Nothing is intrinsically exotic except through the relations into which it is drawn" (815).

illustration of this developmentalist gaze:

> I once took the metro towards Shengavit[112] and I hadn't taken the metro in that direction yet. It was nice that it comes up above the ground, whereas the other direction is totally underground the whole way. So that was nice. But then when I got to the station, it was just so grey and dark and *cinder-blocky*. It spelled cold and sad, there were machines. It looked like they hadn't been replaced in God knows how long! So I'm like: 'wow we should change this!' There's just so much potential and *we see it*. Birthrighters, walking down the street we point things out. We identify things that Yerevan doesn't have, being the capital, being the place that receives the most tourists, we see things it *should* have.

The unrealized potential for the development of the country is in the last few years increasingly deliberated in a diasporic public sphere in central Yerevan: coffee places equipped with power sockets for laptops, offices dedicated to social entrepreneurship, French bakeries, wine bars and craft beer pubs are all key here. Certainly, there have been Middle Eastern restaurants run by diaspora Armenians before, and bohemian pubs and night clubs in Yerevan have long had a large number of Lebanese-Armenian and Syrian-Armenian owners.[113] The new spaces, however, are diasporic not necessarily in terms of their ownership, but primarily in terms of the crowd that populates them: young diasporans from the Global North (and not the Middle East).[114]

This is increasingly the domain in which everyday life unfolds. These spaces are oozing with development discourse and imagery, centered on Armenia's future (see Darieva 2011)—from sustainability models found in the sale of locally produced organic honey

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[112] Shengavit has already been mentioned in previous chapters as a former center of chemical industry. It includes an area known as 'Yerrord Mas', associated with the post-WW II urbanization of Yerevan and widely known for its conservative, and since the transition years increasingly sub-proletarian culture (see Fehlings 2016).

[113] The diaspora ownership of bohemian pubs reflects the liberal middle class backgrounds of these communities. Diasporans from Beirut or Aleppo are often surprised to learn on first arrival that being seen in a pub rather than a café often comes with a stigma in Armenia, especially for unmarried women.

[114] The new spaces initiated during the same period by Syrian-Armenian refugees are also popular among sojourners due to their closeness to an otherwise absent Western Armenian culture.

to the honoring of models of Californian techno-capitalism in the naming of new IT initiatives after Silicon Valley. Interestingly, these spaces also allow their dwellers to live a middle class lifestyle that has often become difficult to maintain in the *other* home, as regulars tend to come from countries that since the global financial crisis of the late 2000s have provided decreased career opportunities.

Moreover, these spaces also serve as conduits for diaspora investment. Indeed, the respectable salaries of many sojourners who stick around are paid by diaspora donors who themselves live in the United States—albeit more often, it should be noted, of the 'developmentalist' Echmiadzin faction than the 'recognition-driven' ARF faction.[115] As in the previous chapter, the conversion of money into philanthropy and ethnicity is promoted. But where the Armenia Fund requests its funds with dramatic remediations of the traumatic past, here it is optimistic visions of the future that are used to solicit donations. This became apparent from the moment I landed in the middle of the night at Yerevan's Zvartnots Airport in early 2017 for my last fieldwork trip, and waited in line for the passport check. Ads on flat screens immediately appealed to the generosity of English-speaking diaspora visitors, calling on them to donate to a crowdsourcing campaign. "As the world shifts to knowledge-based economies," the appeal stated, "it's not enough to simply have resources or labor to produce products, we need to have an educated population that is *consistently innovating*." The ad continued by emphasizing the redemptive potential of IT: "With 3000 vacancies in the sector, there is no reason that 30% of the population in Armenia are living below the poverty line. There is so much untapped potential. And YOU have the ability to unleash it."[116]

The purpose of this crowdfunding campaign was the provision of centers for IT education across the country. Many similar diaspora-funded technology projects have increasingly mushroomed since the early 2010s. The most prominent such initiative is no doubt the 'center for creative technologies' TUMO, a free-of-charge digital media learning center providing schoolchildren with courses in topics from film editing to 3D

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[115] The latter can be explained by the fact that the Echmiadzin faction was already engaged in development projects in Soviet times—for instance the AGBU funding projects such as the museum of relics in Echmiadzin (Abrahamian 2006: 310). The ARF faction's animosity towards the Soviets prevented similar engagements.
[116] Since it's not possible to take photos at the passport check, I took this text from the website of the organization behind the ads: https://onearmenia.org/hye_tech_kids

animation. In the words of Artyom, a Russian-Armenian who teaches digital journalism in TUMO, it is not primarily the content of the courses that will ultimately transform the country. It is rather the affirmative new role models that it provides to the local population. "TUMO is the kind of place where a teenage girl can dye her hair green, and everyone will be completely okay and accept it. Such a place did not exist in Armenia before," he told me. "When I ask my students what they think a true hero is, most of the boys still name Russian gangsters, that's their role model." Under the influence of diasporan educators in technology centers such as TUMO, Steve Jobs is emerging as an alternative hero to aspire to for local youth, especially since it became more widely known that his adoptive parents were Armenian-Americans.

For Richard, a 23-year old programmer from the San Francisco Bay area, who provides teenagers in Yerevan with free education in a number of code languages, new role models were central too. But if for Artyom, who had experienced the transition years in Russia with a nuanced take on the mix of vices and virtues of the Soviet past, for Richard everything that hinders Armenia's development was framed as a Soviet legacy—a vision not unlike that of many foreign donors of NGOs (Ishkanian 2008). He believed that Armenia's redemption can only lie in modeling itself after a Californian IT model of development, for which a new entrepreneurial mentality will prove crucial:

> It has to get to the point where you get into the cab, and the cab driver will say 'Did you see it? The Google stock went up.' And the locals who get into that cab will know what the hell that means. Getting to that level may still seem like a kind of Star Trek future now. But it's certainly not a Star Trek future. I've been *in the trenches* and I can see what could really make this country good.

Here, then, we have two different icons that come together in the lives of diasporic sojourners: on the one hand, the sub-proletarian who embodies an underdevelopment that should be overcome, and on the other hand, the successful tech entrepreneurs of Silicon Valley whose models some believe to be replicable in the rather different political economic context of Armenia. The uncanny alterity of Armenia, its non-identity with the ideal homeland, here becomes paradoxically a source of identity, due to its energizing power to be transformed into visions in which the young diasporans themselves become a role model for the nation-in-becoming. The unsettling ruins of

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Soviet times and the lack of knowledge about tech companies of cab drivers are all integrated into this generative absence, in a drive for upending asynchrony that would ultimately lead to an Armenia in which locals and diasporans both overcome their ruptures to live in a shared time. But how does this mediation of heritage mobility by images of the nation's past and future fit into an ethnography of non-recognition?

4.6. Recognition and Remembrance: Between Memory and Alterity

In an article examining the writings of 17th and 18th century colonial explorers, Johannes Fabian (1999) highlights the proliferation of meanings that occurs when translating back and forth between the German word for recognition (*Anerkennung*) at the root of the Hegelian recognition theory and its English counterparts. This exercise generates three interrelated meanings: not only *Erkennen*, or cognition ('I know what it is when I see it') and *Anerkennen*, or acknowledgment ('I provide it with the due recognition it deserves'), but also *Wiedererkennen*, or memory ('I know it because I remember it') (ibid. 53). In contrast to the common coupling of memory with identity, Fabian foregrounds the 're' in recognition, i.e. memory, in its relation to *alterity*.

This tripartite concept of recognition, bridging cognition, acknowledgment, and memory is then deployed by Fabian in readings of the diaries of colonial explorers, highlighting moments in which Europeans sensed a common humanity with the Central African peoples they encountered. In a close reading of these writings, he finds that moments in which colonial prejudice is temporarily suspended tend to mobilize memory images from 'home' as a foundation for recognition of the colonial Other—albeit in brief, incomplete and provisional forms. Blacks are seen as sharing an equal humanity with white Europeans when something in their customs or appearance reminds them of Europeans. Memories of landscapes and climatological features become part of recognitive processes, such as when a Belgian writer claims to witness "a real Belgian rain" in the Congo (ibid. 58). But memory can also be a resource for *withholding* recognition, as when apparent recognition is immediately followed by vernacular iterations of colonial-era theories of racial difference.

Fabian's notion of recognition, exploring the links between memory and alterity, as opposed to memory and identity, is insightful in theorizing homeland encounters of

diasporans. There are more parallels than may be apparent at first.[117] Of course, the diasporic sojourners are not colonial-era explorers, although, as I already suggested, they do often stand in an exotic relation, familiar to anthropologists, to the homeland. The two main organizations that promote ethnic return, Birthright Armenia and Repat Armenia, each in their own way echo the spirit of the age of exploration. They brand extended stays in Armenia as adventurous journeys of discovery—*self*-discovery— that reveal a *real* Armenia beyond the familiar contours known to the diaspora. The uncertainty of what will be encountered—the expectation that *anything can happen*, that the process may be a long one that takes learning—energizes their appeals.

If colonial-era explorers brought with them theories of race to explain erratic forms of behavior, we have seen that diasporans draw on vernacular theories of Soviet culture, often with unmistakable Cold War inflections, to explain behavior at odds with the expected or desired homeland. In terms of Fabian's triad of cognition, memory and acknowledgment, these stances simultaneously reproduce a sense of temporal distance and acknowledge the *potential* of Armenia to be coeval with the societies from which diasporans hail, often by mobilizing the memory images of what sojourners consider more developed cityscapes. As we have seen, the sojourner's identity is increasingly rooted in the participatory materialization of such images of development in Yerevan, leading to a veritable proliferation of new diasporic social spaces. This all adds to the dynamism of the homeland frame: mediating between the remnants of post-Soviet collapse and a vision of the country filled with co-working spaces, wine bars and craft beer pubs, all proof of the assertion that this is "not your grandmother's Armenia."[118]

4.7. Conclusions

Imagined from a distance, diasporans often picture Armenia either as the frozen remains of an idyllic, distant past, or as a site of poverty and misery without any clear, preconceived image. Encountered from nearby, the homeland reveals highly visible

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[117] The mediation of place by images of other places is also common in the opposite direction, and was so especially in an earlier stage of the post-genocide diaspora. It is a common legend that Armenians settled in large numbers in Fresno because the landscape reminded them of Eastern Anatolia. The fact that LA Armenians largely settled around the Verdugo Mountains is sometimes explained in similar terms.
[118] "The Vision Thing: Dream and Reality in Armenia." *Armenian International Magazine*, May 2002, page 12.

traces of the seventy years during which Armenia was a Soviet republic, as well as of the collapse of the developmental state during the transition years. Socialist-era architecture, infrastructure and material culture form an obvious remains of a history that is very rarely depicted in diasporic iconography, as the whole range of icons depicted on calendars or souvenirs remains focused on ancient monasteries and idyllic nature scenery. Those who grow up in an assimilated US environment with a strong liberal ethos or cultivate a Western Armenian heritage entertain notions of Armenian culture that differ markedly from the majority of those living in present-day Armenia.

The existing literature on ethnic return migration and diaspora volunteer programs in Armenia has already noted the difficulties encountered by diasporans when they try to adjust to modes of life in the homeland. My contribution to this literature lies in demonstrating how this unsettlement can be redeemed through mediating images and frames, from exoticizing takes on everyday phenomena in Yerevan, exemplified by the ubiquitous sub-proletarian, to utopian visions of Silicon Valley techno-capitalism. As for colonial-era explorers, for the diasporic sojourners "preexisting images, preconceived ideas, and prefabricated theories (lodged in their memories)" serve "to make sense of unfamiliar sights …, beliefs and practices" (Fabian 1999: 52). In the process, the negativity of a relative lack of lived interactions with locals is transformed into a positive source of diaspora identity and a meaningful notion of homeland.

It is through the mediation of perceptions of Armenia by images and assumptions accrued over a lifetime *elsewhere* that a place thoroughly different than expected can nevertheless become a potent source of identity. The homeland itself is here not so much a phantasm with substantive content as a frame that transforms the affective charge and symbolic meaning of experiences undergone in Armenia. My findings thus suggest that there is nothing immediate about 'being there'. Even the most intimate moments of submersion in Armenia are colored by scripts from elsewhere; being physically *there* is predisposed by the affordances of particular technologies of the imagination (Sneath et al. 2009). To use a Lacanian neologism, the intimacy of diasporic homecoming is always already a form of 'extimacy', a term indicating the "essential identity between the dual terms of the outside and the deepest inside, … the outer world and the inner world of the subject" (Pavón-Cuéllar 2014: 661).

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In this chapter, I have moved beyond the institutionalization of symbolic power found in alliances between the state and diasporic elites by turning to everyday participatory practices of image production. The sub-proletarian phenomenon of the squatting *qyartu* men, it should be noted, is not found merely in Yerevan. Ever since the late Soviet migration waves to Los Angeles, *rabiz* culture, of which the conservative *qyartu* in black is the most stereotypical expression, is also a prominent element of the diaspora in places such as East Hollywood, Glendale and the wider San Fernando Valley area where Armenians live today. A few words on *rabiz* culture are in place before I move on to the next chapter. This might help to fully appreciate how iconic forms gain new meanings as they circulate between various settings in Yerevan and Los Angeles.

The cultural phenomenon *rabiz*, from the Russian *rabochee iskusstvo* (worker's art) or *rabotniki iskusstva* (workers of art), emerged during the 1960s in Soviet Armenia as the country's first large-scale popular music culture. Integrating the experiences of returnees from Soviet prisons and gulags with the culture of rural newcomers to Yerevan, as well as a wide range of musical repertoires from abroad, *rabiz* has long been denounced, both by Soviet intelligentsia and today's nationalists, as anti-modern (Jaloyan 2013). It is tainted by a conservative ethos linked to late-Soviet urbanization and "oriental," especially Azerbaijani musical elements. It is also stigmatized as detrimental to civic virtues. But in post-Soviet Armenia, it is also the most popular soundtrack for many everyday occasions, from public transport to weddings, as it is also in much of the diaspora (Adriaans 2017a; 2018). Many of its most popular singers have moved to Los Angeles since the 1990s, where the previously examined sub-proletarian *qyartu* stereotype and the mentality associated with it have become a symbol of 'fresh off the boat' newcomers from Armenia. In the following chapter, I focus on the stigmas and stereotypes ascribed to this new diaspora, and explore how the proliferation of participatory visual media transforms them.

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5. Intimate Stereotypes in Los Angeles

In the autumn of 2016, a smartphone application was launched by a young Armenian-American woman from Los Angeles: Armoji. The name of the application is a play on 'Armo', a colloquial slur used since the 1980s for Armenians in Los Angeles that many believe started as a variation on 'Latino' and 'Negro', and *emoji*, the Japanese term for the ideogrammatic icons used in text messaging and online chats, in recent years also used as a synonym for emoticon. The idea behind Armoji is simple: once downloaded onto a telephone or tablet, it allows users to choose from a number of icon banks to insert Armenian-themed images into any text message or conversation.

An online advertisement for the app shows an image of a white iPhone, on the display of which are shown two squatting young men who wear black jackets, black pants and black leather shoes with pointy noses (Figure 5.1). Some forty of the application's icons are clustered around the drawing, depicting what its developer considers typical Armenian symbols. The $1,99 app is marketed with the following text: "Do you want to be true to your Armenian self? Download ARMOJI, BE YOURSELF!"

The icons featured in the application include a blue street sign with the text 'Little Armenia', the shield of the 405 interstate highway, a red logo stating '1915: Never Again', the 13th century Armenian monastery Noravank, the traditional woodwind instrument *duduk,* ruling party mascot HHK Tati[119], the famed *rabiz* singer Tatoul Avoyan, reality television star Kim Kardashian, the 2015 Genocide Centennial's purple forget-me-not logo (Chapter 2), 4-wheel drive cars, the wedding tradition of showering paper money, pomegranates, apricots, and waterpipes. Other icons depict a hand offering a glass of vodka, oriental coffee poured from a *cezve*, the sweetbread *gata*, and the Georgian egg-and-cheese pastry known as Adjarian *khachapuri*. There are also colored text balloons with not just Armenian phrases, but also Russian and Turkish interjections commonly used by different Armenian subethnicities, such as the almost synonymic '*davay*' (used by the post-Soviet diaspora) and '*haydeh*' (used by the post-genocide diaspora from the Middle East). Furthermore, there is a black text balloon

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[119] HHK Tati, meaning the 'Grandma of the Republican Party of Armenia', whose real name is Susanna Sargsyan, is discussed in more detail in the conclusion.

with the text 'Beemve'—the Armenian pronunciation of the German car brand (BMW) with which the Los Angeles diaspora is widely associated in the Californian cityscape. There are also faces of men and women who are most likely recognizable only to a few of the app's customers. This is true, for instance, for the imago of 'Gago', a mentally impaired young man wearing dark sunglasses and black clothing, who lives in Armenia, but became a viral internet sensation among Los Angeles-Armenian youth in the early 2010s when YouTube recordings of his *a capella* performances of *rabiz* songs were remediated into image macros with humorous texts as well as short, looped videos by local diasporic meme artists.

The first costumer review in the App Store clearly pokes fun at both the American advertising tradition of promising life-changing wealth and success, and the perceived penchant of Los Angeles Armenians for conspicuous consumption and fast cars. "I was down and about, lost my job, gf, and couldn't find my direction in life," the review states, giving a five-star rating. "Ever since I downloaded this app, my whole life change. Now I'm a multimillionaire with a trophy wifey driving a Lambo in my [G]lendale apartment." The review looks too hastily and carelessly composed to ascertain whether the poor grammar is on purpose for comic effect, or accidentally, but the references to a 'Lambo', i.e. Lamborghini, and a 'trophy wifey', i.e. femininity valued only for its outward appearance, clearly play on the same stereotypes as the application itself: Armenians as a people of materialism, vanity, patriarchy and conspicuous consumption. Another, less sardonic feedback message also gives five stars, stating: "I use Armojis all the time, even with my non-armo friends. They are the coolest & funniest emojis out there, and they show our Armenian spirit."[120]

Both the app's name Armoji and the reviewer's use of the phrasing '*non-armo* friends' to refer to non-Armenians signal a change in the ethnonym of choice for youth in the LA diaspora, for whom 'Armo' has ceased to be a stigmatizing slur. "Don't be such an Armo" is a phrase still used by diasporans to police behavior considered at odds with modernity or 'the American way of life'. But in many contexts of everyday interaction the word is no longer considered offensive.

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[120] https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/armoji/id1136626165?mt=8

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Figure 5.1. Promotional picture for the Armoji smartphone application

The Armoji app presents a microcosm of national symbols that appears postmodern in its disregard for distinctions between high culture and the everyday debris of popular culture. It is an exemplary manifestation of a fascinating shift in the dialectical interplay between processes of internal and external depiction of Armenian identity in the Los Angeles diaspora (Jenkins 2008: 46). 'Armo', originally a pejorative, stigmatizing name for Armenians, is adopted here as a positive self-designation; externally reflected images of materialism and vanity are integrated into the repertoire of self-identification. Innocent national symbols commonly found on kitchen magnet souvenirs are juxtaposed with controversial cultural forms from across the Armenian world, from the stigmatized *qyartu* sub-proletarians of post-Soviet Armenia (who are referred to as *rabiz* in the United States context) to the Kardashians of Los Angeles.

The app's simultaneity of identification and ironic distancing, its interplay between stereotyping and being stereotyped, vividly illustrates what one may call the intra-ethnic recognition politics of the diaspora—the expression and celebration of subethnic and generational differences that are at the same time a common subject of both intra-

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ethnic and outsider stigmatization. With a focus on the grassroots cultural production of the Soviet and post-Soviet newcomers, whose arrival to LA since the 1980s was not always welcomed by the post-genocide diaspora elites (Chapter 1), I now turn my attention from the mediated gaze of diasporans in Yerevan to parallel processes of iconization afforded by digital media in Los Angeles. I focus on forms of stereotyping, both among Armenians and in relation to 'outsiders', in order to rethink the layeredness of diaspora through the twin perspectives of recognition theory and theories of cultural intimacy and public display (Shryock 2004; Herzfeld 2005).

A vast majority of the new symbols one finds in the Armoji app has emerged in one particular subculture: that of internet memes circulating on the image sharing platform Instagram and, until late 2016, on the video clip sharing platform Vine, the short, six-second looping videos of which continue to be referred to as *vines*. This theme is covered in the bulk of this chapter. First, though, I start with a broader overview of how the new diaspora of *Hayastantsis* (Armenians from Armenia) came to dominate the diasporic mediascape in Los Angeles, as far as television and online youth culture is concerned. The older diaspora often denounces cultural forms circulated by these newcomers as degrading, stigmatizing and/or kitsch. In the second and third section, I narrow my focus to the intimate public dedicated to the circulation of LA Armenian-themed memes and vines. The final section compares this digital culture with the old diaspora's investment in respectable representations in mainstream public culture.

5.1. Subethnic Dynamics in the LA Armenian Mediascape

The first recurrent Armenian television broadcast in Los Angeles was a weekly program named Armenian Time, later renamed Armenian Teletime, started in 1979 by Sarky Mouradian. Born and raised in Lebanon, Mouradian is not only a television pioneer but also a widely respected film director and music composer. He first came to the United States in 1956 as an exchange student to study music in Boston, and ended up writing pop songs for many Lebanese-Armenian singers in the 1960s. In the early 1970s, he began to produce Armenian-language movies in the Los Angeles area, which were mostly screened in the Middle East, the largest diaspora market for Armenian movies at the time. When the Civil War broke out in Lebanon in 1975, the opportunities for profitably distributing his movies there were diminished, and Mouradian turned his

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efforts to television in the United States. Initially, the broadcasts, often hosted by future Glendale mayor Larry Zarian, were three hours per week, but they soon became daily on cable channel 18, known as KSCI TV—the channel that, with a Californian penchant for spiritual capitalism, had at the time just changed its profile from a non-profit dedicated to the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's philosophy of Transcendental Meditation to a multiethnic for-profit broadcaster.

The transformation of cable channel 18, home to Armenian content for three decades, mirrors important changes in the demographics and power dynamics of the Los Angeles diaspora. It did not take long for Armenian television to become the subject of heated contention crystallized along the lines of some of the oldest divisions in the community. By the late 1980s, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation used its political and economic power against Mouradian to take over the time slot of Armenian Teletime, which had a more pluralistic approach, with its own program, named Horizon, which later became a 24/7 channel. Nowadays, channel 18 has gone digital and is sliced into multiple subchannels, including several Armenian ones. Horizon TV has long lost its hegemony, in no small part due to the influx of both post-Soviet migrants and new channels from Armenia. Mouradian these days works for USArmenia, a popular offshoot of a private television conglomerate originating in Yerevan. Mouradian's trajectory highlights how the post-Soviet diaspora's easy access to content from Armenia, particularly soap operas and crime dramas, combined with the influx of Eastern Armenian speaking newcomers[121], has swept the post-genocide diaspora to the margins of the mediascape it painstakingly established decades ago.

Among the older diaspora, one can often note considerable hostility to the productions of the new *Hayastantsi* media producers since their take-over of the diasporic television mediascape.[122] Without a single doubt the most controversial new show in the 2010s

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[121] As already mentioned, Eastern Armenian is the official language of the Republic of Armenia, spoken across the former post-Soviet space and by Armenians from Iran.
[122] For the post-genocide diaspora, there is a sense of their culture being a force in pushing away Western Armenian, the endangered version of the language still taught in most private Armenian schools in LA, by the Eastern Armenian speaking newcomers. But discontent is also found among first generation Soviet-era migrants, who see in the channels the downfall of the power of the intelligentsia in Armenia.

has been USArmenia's *Glendale Life*, a reality show that depicts the lives of young Armenians in Los Angeles. Modeled after the LA Iranian show *Shahs of Sunset* about the wealthiest inhabitants of 'Tehrangeles', and also drawing on *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, the storyline of *Glendale Life* revolves around a group of friends who ostensibly try to establish careers in professions such as beautician, limousine driver, DJ, fashion model and *rabiz* singer. But in practice, they are depicted as engaged in little else than taking narcissistic selfies, going to pool parties in hillside villas, and having heated fights over friends and sexual partners.

The show explicitly engages the subethnic diversity of Armenian life in Southern California, with actors ranging in backgrounds from the Republic of Armenia and diaspora communities in the Middle East to long-settled American-Armenians, all speaking a mix of English, Eastern Armenian and Western Armenian. Much of the show's screenplay is structured around unmistakable product placements and promotions for Armenian businesses in Los Angeles, from plastic surgeons and nail salons to limousine rentals and legal offices, which are also advertised on the Instagram channel of the show. Many consider the show offensive and stigmatizing, not only due to its perceived vanity and materialism, but also for openly discussing sexual themes— the latter being especially controversial due to the traditional taboo, in some circles, on premarital sex for females (see Poghosyan 2011).

"This show will do nothing but slander and deprecate the memory of each and every one of the 1.5 million men, women and children who died for our heritage. Please sign this petition to stop this show from being aired," reads an online petition that was signed by 2,000 and offered to the USArmenia channel and to Zareh Sinanyan, the Mayor of Glendale. "We are more than this," the text continues. "We will not be made a mockery of for *their* monetary gain."[123] Within a matter of days after the trailer for the show first went online, two competing Facebook groups named 'Stop Glendale Life' and 'Start Glendale Life' appeared. In each of these groups, arguments for and against the reality show were passionately deliberated for about two weeks.

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[123] https://www.change.org/p/armenian-community-stop-production-distribution-of-the-television-show-glendale-life

The petition from late 2014 was echoed in a similar petition in Armenia a year later, when one of the channels of the public broadcasting agency, H2, decided to broadcast *Glendale Life* as well.[124] In Armenia, the show has amplified the common perception of Los Angeles as being home to an excessively materialistic and superficial Armenian community—in the view of several of my friends from Yerevan, without a doubt "the most *rabiz* place on the planet." *Rabiz* here refers not to the genre of music but to the mentality associated with the squatting men who are believed to listen to it, mixing a conservative ethos and lack of civic virtues with a penchant for conspicuous consumption. Citizens of Armenia often view the global diaspora as having an ambassadorial duty to project a positive image of the country's civilizational credentials to the outside world; *Glendale Life* surely failed to live up to this duty.

During my fieldwork, I befriended a woman in her 70s named Margarita who was one of my neighbors in Little Armenia. Margarita was born in Bulgaria but lived in Soviet Armenia between 1946 and 1979, when many of the Soviet repatriates were given exit visas to travel to the United States. One day as we discussed Armenian television over a coffee in the garden of her white wooden house, she told me that, of course, her favorite channel is USArmenia. "Oh yes, Glendale Life, the program with the *Parskahay* [Iranian-Armenian] girls! To be honest with you, I do watch it the show, but I really have no respect for these *Parskahay* Armenians. They have no *amot* [shame]. *Hayastantsi* [Armenian from Armenia] girls have *amot*, they have clear moral boundaries that they will not pass," she insisted. "But *Parskahay* women just have no shame, and that explains why that program is so outrageous." When I asked whether she interacts much with Iranian-Armenians, she admitted that she doesn't see them in East Hollywood anymore, as they nowadays live mostly in Glendale.

Her identification of the entire program, which features young men and women from a variety of subethnic backgrounds, with the purported loose morals of Iranian-Armenian women, is emblematic of one of the central discoveries of my fieldwork: that the unrivaled diversity of Armenian life in Los Angeles makes for a vibrant laboratory of subethnic stereotyping. Indeed, whereas the *Hayastantsi* views Armenians from Iran as

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[124] The petition in Armenia was the initiative of a youth movement named "Let's Clean Up the Television Airwaves," which has long mobilized against 'immoral' soap operas and crime series.

being overly materialistic and having loose sexual morals, the post-Soviet LA Armenians are themselves also viewed as conspicuous consumers. The *Hayastantsi* team that produced *Glendale Life* was viewed particularly by middle class, assimilated diasporans who had come to the US several generations ago as an embarrassment, in spite of being similar to many non-Armenian shows produced in Los Angeles. But in the end, outrage about *Glendale Life* managed to transcend subethnic and generational divides, uniting critics from different backgrounds in fear of what non-Armenians might think if they happen to tune in to the show.[125]

The *Glendale Life* debates took place in a moment of already increased concern about the public image of Armenians in Los Angeles. While the older concern of Armenian-Americans' involvement in gang violence of the 1990s had resided as gang wars had become much less dramatic in general, there were other stigmas lurking in the background. Even before I began my fieldwork, a non-Armenian friend whom I told about my interests had sent me viral videos of an Armenian driver from LA. "I am Vardan Aslanyan from Hollywood, California, Yerevan," a 29-year old man with wide-pupiled eyes tells a reporter in one video, having come to a standstill after a police chase in which he hit no less than five cars with his Mercedes on the LA freeway. It was the young man's response "I got *swag*, I wanted to make it look good," upon being asked why he decided to drive dangerously and ignore the police chasing him, that made the young man a viral internet sensation.[126]

"Armenians are the most reckless drivers in LA," I was told by Uber and Lyft drivers of a variety of ethnic backgrounds upon explaining my research whenever I used these ride sharing services to get around. In the spring of 2014, newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times* reported on research stating that Glendale is the city with the most expensive car insurance rates in the entire state of California.[127] Although none of these articles mentioned Armenians, online exchanges between Armenians and non-

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[125] To complicate things further, the *Hayastantsis* also tend to believe that, among their own group, those who arrived after Soviet times often lack *kultura* (culturedness)—echoing a discourse of old intelligentsia versus rural newcomers.

[126] "What is Drugs," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kan_FWhjrMw

[127] http://www.latimes.com/tn-gnp-glendale-burbank-insurance-rates-among-the-states-highest-20140318-story.html

Armenians commenting on such articles expressed a heated atmosphere of negative prejudices regarding the driving style of Armenian-Americans.

The fact that already in the third episode of *Glendale Life*, a character named Edgar, a newcomer from Armenia who works as a limousine driver, gets into a car accident, is one example of how the use of negative stereotypes in the series mirrors back pejorative images to its viewers, a typical impulse for a recognition struggle (Taylor 1992: 24). But *Glendale Life* in fact has more complexity than its critics give it credit for. One of the recurring motifs is a pedagogical narrative that holds that Armenians take care of one another no matter what happens, which is also the case in the car accident. When Edgar tells his friends that he does not have the $1,500 required to fix the limousine, they have it done free of charge in an Armenian-owned car repair.

More generally, the *Hayastantsis* are shown in a complex relation of virtue and vice vis-à-vis the older, post-genocide diaspora, who show much curiosity about what life in the country is like. In one episode, a group of female friends initially makes fun of Nadia, a post-Soviet newcomer who works as a model, for her shyness to speak openly to them about sex. But once Nadia states that she had only lost her virginity upon marrying her husband, the group unanimously expresses its respect for this traditional approach to sexuality. If the pedagogy of the series consists of the old diaspora educating the newcomers to integrate into Los Angeles, here the newcomers are presented as embodying virtues from which the old diaspora has much to learn.

What makes *Glendale Life* both an unrivaled success and an unmatched controversy is its spectacular remediation of everyday life in the Los Angeles diaspora through broadcast images to which its viewers can relate easily. This is a diasporic reality that has increasingly lost its ties to the traditional institutions. In the early stages of diasporic television, the life of the community was deliberated on air through show formats that resemble call-in radio more than anything, with local content serving the incorporation of viewers into the structures of institutions. With the dominance of the *Hayastantsi* segment in the mediascape, this has largely been replaced with content produced in Yerevan. On channels such as USArmenia this is complemented with entertainment shows and music videos produced in Los Angeles, although traditional institutions such

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as the Armenian Apostolic Church do still get some broadcast time even on *Hayastantsi* channels such as USArmenia.

The novelty of *Glendale Life*, then, was in its extension of the condition of de-institutionalization to all different subethnicities: it is true that the post-genocide diasporans in the series mention the Armenian schools and organizations to which they went, but other than that their lives are shown entirely in extra-institutional spaces. In this sense, it captures a similar moment as does the Open Wounds 1915 movement, with its autonomization of the wound that used to be managed by LA's diasporic elites and institutions (Tölölyan 2000). However, in spite of the show's use of social media to promote the real career trajectories of its characters, the series itself remained a traditionally top-down produced one. This is rather different in the *participatory* production of representations of everyday life that is the focus of the next sections. Here, I show how young second-generation diasporans engage in the remediation of everyday life worlds, through internet memes that create feedback loops between the Armenian geography of Los Angeles and their identity. Here, the production of diasporic iconography is thoroughly interwoven with everyday life.

5.2. Memes and Vines in the San Fernando Valley

"Compared to other great cities, Los Angeles may be *planned* or *designed* in a very fragmentary sense (primarily at the level of its infrastructure) but it is infinitely *envisioned*," writes Mike Davis in his classic, critical take on the metropolis (1990: 23). The city's inexhaustibility for spawning visions and dream images to cover its endlessly homogeneous suburban sprawl is perhaps nowhere more visible than among its social media-savvy Armenian youth. At any given moment, in contexts ranging from traffic jams and schoolyards to coffee shops and gatherings of friends, young Armenian-Americans in Los Angeles will check their social media feeds and animate the city through the latest installment of freshly produced diasporic iconography.

With already well over 10,000 LA Armenian-themed internet memes available online at the time of my fieldwork, the diversity of depicted elements and audiovisual literacies that come together in such moments is almost endless. An image may portray drivers in their BMW or Mercedes vehicles on parallel lanes sharing a *nargileh* waterpipe

through their car windows, with a caption proclaiming that this is how Armenians drive on Glenoaks Boulevard.[128] Or a six seconds video of friends in a car passing a drive-thru fast food restaurant window, making a prank order 'one Armenian coffee, please', then laughing at the response—"Armenian coffee? What is that?"— through the intercom speaker. Or a picture of mustached man with a telephone riding a donkey, stating that this is what Uber drivers look like in Armenia.

Such everyday moments are the lifeblood of a thriving youth culture of mostly *Hayastantsi* Armenian-Americans that has taken root in the LA diaspora since the early 2010s. The social media page Armo Memes, curated by two young men from Burbank on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, is widely considered to have been the initial driving force that gave birth to this new youth culture. The vibrant life surrounding this page forms a vivid illustration of Limor Shifman's compelling assertion that internet memes "can be treated as (post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artifacts such as Photoshopped images or urban legends" (2014: 15). There were certainly Armenian internet memes in Los Angeles that played on local stereotypes before Armo Memes began in 2012, such as the 'Rabiz Razmik' image macros depicting the Yerevan-born singer-comedian Grisha Aghakhanyan (figure 4.2).[129] But it is the Armo Memes page that gave the phenomenon a name, coining a recognizable genre, and introducing a hashtag inviting others to participate and produce new content: #armomemes.

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[128] Glenoaks Boulevard is a road connecting Glendale to Burbank. It is popular topic for self-deprecative jokes about driving habits, courting rituals and *rabiz* culture.
[129] The *rabiz* parodies of Grisha Aghakhanyan are discussed by Levon Abrahamian in a section of his book that is co-authored by Hripsime Pikichian (2006: 103).

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Figure 5.2. Original CD cover of New Armenians and Grisha Aghakhanyan and early LA Armenian image macros, anonymous authorship, from 2011.

As already noted, the name Armo is a pejorative name that has been adopted by the youngest generations of Los Angeles Armenians as a positive self-denominator. The fact that the generic name and hashtag for the memes became #armomemes and not, for instance, #armenianmemes, anchors the sphere of circulation firmly within Los Angeles, as few Armenians outside the LA context would refer to themselves as 'Armo'. Like the Armoji app, which is itself a product of the accelerating visual production of this youth culture, Armo Memes plays with stereotypes to generate reflexive feedback loops between media representations and everyday life in diaspora.

Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of this new youth culture, initially centered around the online circulation of internet memes but stretching out into ever-more diverse forms, is its independence from traditional diaspora institutions. It signals a shift in diasporic cultural production on three levels: generation, subethnicity, and class

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(but *not*, as we shall see, gender). Its popularity is wide among all strata of Armenian youth in the age range from late teens to early thirties, but most notable among *Hayastantsis* at the community colleges of the San Fernando Valley. Many of its producers come from blue collar or lower middle class backgrounds; they work in tobacco shops, in car repairs, in restaurants or have entry-level office jobs. In its approach, this youth culture shares similarities to the USArmenia shows, in the sense that everyday life in the lived spaces of the new diaspora, such as homes, roads, coffee shops, banquet halls, colleges and parks, are depicted in a manner that makes them quintessentially Armenian, while the old diaspora's scouting clubs, folk dance groups, churches and political organizations are absent. But whereas the script of *Glendale Life*, driven above all by its narrative moving from one sponsor to the next, proclaims to be depict a glamorous reality, in the intimate public that I examine here, it is subtle distanciations from and reflections on negative stereotypes that are central.

The memes youth culture started online, but has gradually transformed into offline manifestations and more mainstream online venues. Its current spectrum ranges from fashion designs and animation videos to comedy nights and the Armoji app. In Glendale, many of the most popular *viners*, producers of short videos in which they perform typically Armenian situations and accents, are regularly approached by strangers as local celebrities when they are spotted in public, a phenomenon I have observed repeatedly. Popular meme artists also design t-shirts that are worn by their fans, such as the Armenian Apparel designs that refashion the logos of emblematic brands, replacing Adidas with the transliterated Eastern Armenian-language text '*Xorovatz*' ('barbecued meat'), or Starbucks with '*Kofeh dir*' ('pour me coffee'). These t-shirts are sold offline in the Armenian *ponchik*[130] bakeries of Los Angeles.

During my fieldwork in Los Angeles, I have met a total of seven prolific Armenian meme artists and *viners* in person, mostly after contacting them on Instagram. The artists and curators behind other accounts turned out more difficult to meet in person, although I have managed to gather some information about these accounts, such as Armo Memes, by exchanging online messages. To provide an overview of the main

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[130] The *ponchik* or 'Polish donut' is one of the main contributions of the Armenians from the post-Soviet space to diasporic cuisine in Los Angeles.

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themes of diasporic memes and vines and how they relate to socioeconomic and subethnic backgrounds, as well as to the everyday lives of young LA Armenians, I now turn to short portrayals of three popular and prolific meme accounts[131], the creators and curators of which I have interacted with both online and offline.

5.2.1. Juxtapositions of Pop Cultures

@kayfavat_memes, an account run by two male cousins from Burbank, is known for its creative juxtapositions of popular culture from the Republic of Armenia with icons from the global cultural industries. At the time when I met them, their most popular video was a 10-second fragment of a music video by the popular rapper Drake, where the soundtrack is replaced by a *rabiz* song by "Spitaktsi" Hayko about *khorovats,* the national barbecue tradition, and an animated *manghal* grill inserted into the video to make it seem like the global pop icon is fanning the flames of Armenian cuisine. It had gathered around 40,000 views in less than a week. But perhaps their most original contribution to the LA memescape is a series of 'Armenian Super Mario' videos. In one of them, the Armenian flag is raised as soon Super Mario finishes a level from the 1985 Nintendo video game, after which the game hero enters a castle where Armenian *rabiz* music is playing. A second video is a montage of two segments, 'American' Super Mario and 'Armenian' Super Mario. In the former, Super Mario is shown as usual, except that cheerful marching music is playing. In the latter, Super Mario is riding a black SUV, running over enemy creatures rather than jumping on top of them, getting an AK47 and shouting "*es ov a, ara*?" (Armenian for "who the hell is this?") before shooting them from the SUV window. The music in the 'Armenian' Mario is, again, *rabiz*, albeit this time to the rhythm of traditional folk dances.

The cousins of @kayfavat_memes grew up in families that emigrated to Los Angeles from Armenia during the late Soviet period, and come from working class backgrounds. They both started working full time jobs immediately after high school. The older cousin, in his early thirties, used to work in a car repair and nowadays works in construction. The younger one, in his mid-twenties, does administrative work for an entertainment payroll company. Both of them affirmed that the production of

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[131] Although the accounts of my interviewees are all publicly available, I follow the convention in digital anthropology of safeguarding anonymity for public content not intended for mass circulation. The account names, therefore, are pseudonyms.

Armenian-themed memes is a highly addictive practice, especially because of the hopes that each new post will generate more views, likes and comments than the previous one. They usually come up with ideas for memes over the course of a work day, and sometimes they send each other texts with new ideas during work time. As they insist on one original upload per day, they meet multiple evenings per week at the older cousin's house to explore how they can realize their artistic ideas with video and photo editing software.

Such creations are a very contemporary instance of the infamous diasporic penchant for cultural hybridity (see Gilroy 1993; Clifford 1994; Ang 2003). The cousins' creations have an air of exuberance to them, celebrating the pleasure of simultaneous immersion into a multiplicity of pop cultures; a plural cultural literacy that can always signify media texts in multiple ways. In the 'comparisons' between American and Armenian versions of a particular cultural text, the Armenian one inevitably comes out as the preferred one, no matter how primitive, brutal or degrading the self-stereotypes. But in the memetic appeal it is inevitably implied that the creator and the viewer are both just a *bit* closer to the American side of the medal than what is depicted as the most quintessentially Armenian version. It is thus not only ethnic difference that is celebrated, but also intra-ethnic difference: the viewer is positioned as having acquired the reflexive sensibilities that other Armenians are still lacking.

The cousins felt like they participate in a collective comedy that young Armenians in LA tell about themselves through social media, to which everyone can add new characters and plot twists. The quintessential characters in this story are the *rabiz* male and the *kukla* [Russian for 'doll'] female, at the time of my research usually referred to as Gago and Ani, respectively. When I asked them to tell more about these characters, they characterized them as follows:

> *Kuklas* are the *prima donnas* of the Armenian community. They are the spoiled and conceited girls who get a BMW or Mercedes from their parents. They smoke hookah, they are too good for everybody. They spend huge sums on maintaining their beauty and they expect to be pampered by everyone around them. We don't know who started the Ani thing, it's probably Armo Memes.

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But the *kukla* is a figure that every Armenian here knows. Just walk into any
Starbucks in Glendale and you'll see that it is a real thing.

And Gago, he is the typical *rabiz* guy. He is doing insurance fraud, identity
theft. He's like "I don't want to let my girlfriend go anywhere without me." He
wears Ferrari shoes, the *tzitzak* [pepper shaped shoes], you can see him squatting
on the parking lot in front of 7-Eleven. He races on Glenoaks [a boulevard
connecting Glendale to Burbank]. Of course not every *rabiz* guy is like this. But
they do exist, and that's the type that we make fun of.

The cousins disagreed as to whether the memes have an element of cultural critique in
them. The older cousin responded that he is "in it for the likes" only, memes being mere
entertainment. But the younger cousin felt that there is a message to their digital
productions. "Women shouldn't be locked in the house by their husbands, the fact that
this still happens among Armenians here in LA is horrible. So I do want to create
awareness that this type of situation exists and perhaps then it will change," he stated.
"Perhaps if some real-life Gago sees our memes about these issues, he realizes that it's
really not cool to act like this, and then he will start to change his behavior."

5.2.2. Gender Inequalities and the Critique of Hypocrisy

The account @armogirl818, run by a woman in her mid-twenties from Pasadena, is
especially known for the short videos that depict her impersonating typical domestic
situations in the community. As one of the few prolific female artists, and as someone
who addresses hypocrisy and absurdity whenever she encounters it, she has become a
symbol of empowerment to young Armenian-American females who are fed up with
the patriarchal family traditions in which they are raised. When I interviewed her, she
described the relation between her videos and the community as follows:

There is a lot of girls here in America that are Armenian. They have been
chasing the degree for a while and they're smart girls but just because they may
not have a boyfriend or they're not married, they're considered *tune mnatsats*
['stuck at home', a stigmatizing term for an 'unmarriable' woman]. I think that's
absurd. So I'm like, I need to speak up on that. I have this one video where a

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girl is like 'Mom I just got my degree, I graduated!' And then mom is like: 'So what?! Kim got married and has kids, what have you got?'

The punchline of @armogirl818's video, which led to much hilarity among its many viewers, hinges on the realization that the implied Kim who is praised by mom is none other than controversial reality television star Kim Kardashian. The Armenian-American 'queen of Instagram' has long been controversial not only due to the sex tapes of her that have been circulating online, but also due to her marriage to the African-American rapper and singer Kanye West. The dialogue suggests that two of the biggest taboos in the community, public exposures of female sexuality and intermarriage with a person of color, are ultimately overruled if a woman takes up a traditional mother role. In comparison to the college degree of an unmarried woman, even the motherhood of such a taboo-breaking figure is still more valuable. @armogirl818 summarized the attitude she brings to such videos as daring to speak out on "all the uncomfortable shit that no one wants you to say."

Like @kayfavat_memes, the @armogirl818 account is run by a young second-generation diasporan. Her family arrived to Hollywood in 1979, during the first large migration wave from Soviet Armenia, and she grew up in Pasadena. Unlike the @kayfavat_memes cousins, she studied at a community college. She has a full time office job in medical records and billing, but her true passion lies in her career as a stand-up comedian. She is part of the small group of meme artists who also perform live on stage for Armenian audiences in Los Angeles, and in contrast to many others, she already had stage experience prior to launching her social media persona.

When discussing the wider Los Angeles memescape with @armogirl818, she tells me that she finds the attitude towards gender in the majority of the Armenian memes disappointingly juvenile and, at times, downright upsetting. She has gotten into a conflict with the curators of the most popular account, Armo Memes, after they posted what she considered to be a highly disrespectful meme. The image showed a screenshot of Google Maps displaying Los Angeles, with a notification "*makur axjik* not found"— the search term *makur axjik* meaning literally a 'clean' Armenian girl, with connotations of sexual purity and virginity. "It really upset me. When we all complained they took it down. But then they put up another meme, a bunch of women screaming

with a text like 'this is what happens when you post a meme about women.' I didn't complain, I just did my own meme, a map of the LA Zoo with '*karkin txa* ['decent guy'] not found' and tagged them."

Due to her increasingly regular performances as a comedian, @armogirl818 felt that she had a relatively clear idea about the audience for her videos and images: young *Hayastantsis*, i.e. the new diaspora from Armenia. During these Armenian comedy performances in Los Angeles, the audience is sometimes asked at the beginning to identify what subethnic group of Armenians they belong to, and inevitably it is the new diaspora of Soviet and post-Soviet Armenians that make up the vast majority. But perhaps due to the wider relevance of the patriarchal family issues and forms of hypocrisy she addresses in her work, @armogirl818 has also become celebrated by young Los Angeles Armenians from Middle Eastern and other backgrounds. Indeed, several of those I met who generally found the common memes about *rabiz* men and *kukla* women to be juvenile, or lacked the familiarity to post-Soviet Armenian pop culture to appreciate Armo Memes, were nevertheless appreciative of her work.

5.2.3. Surrealist Bricolage and the Multi-Ethnic Fabric of LA

If @kayfavat_memes are masters of creative juxtaposition, and @armogirl818 excels in her perceptive parodies of Armenian domestic life in Los Angeles, @sevuk_apo, a 21-year old male who works in a tobacco shop in the San Fernando Valley, is the great improviser and surrealist bricoleur. Like @armogirl818 and @kayfavat_memes, @sevuk_apo too comes up with ideas for new memes during work time. But he takes it a step further. In his tobacco shop in Northridge, he regularly asks his customers of various ethnic backgrounds to participate in the production of Armenian memes:

> One day, I was so tired, and one of my customers, he's an African-American male, he comes into the shop. I'm like: "*Ara* [hey man], what do you want?!" He goes "*Ara*!" And I'm like "Say that again?!" He says again: "*Ara*!" So every time he enters the shop, this African-American male, he speaks Armenian, "*Ara, ara*!" So I was like 'you know what? I'm gonna record it!' And he was OK with it. So I made him say "Follow @sevuk_apo, *vorovhetev mer shat lav aperna* [because he is our very good friend]." I said *aperna* instead of *akhperna* because

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they have troubles with the letter *kh*. It's a really strong sound. I tried to bounce it out and he picked up fast. He really picked up fast, I was so surprised. After he picked it up, I recorded it and put it online. And a lot of people liked it so I was like: "You know what? Next time he comes I wanna do another video."

And this one time he came back, and he was with four of his friends. He was like: "Hey, when are we gonna record again?" I told him: "You guys all wanna record something in Armenian?" So I was like "OK, let's do this!" I made them say things like "*lav es, tsitik?*" ("how are you, little bird?"), "*aziz, hamard inch a*" ("honey, what's your phone number?") and other funny stuff. Of course I told them what it means and they thought it was funny. They gave a shout out to all the Armenians in LA, which I also put in my video. It was cool man, them being so comfortable. Because they're African-Americans, and we're Armenians. We're two different peoples, but at the same time, we're people.

This series of videos ultimately became @sevuk_apo's most popular memes, going viral not just on Instagram and Vine but also on Twitter. It also became a new genre in the LA Armenian memescape, as others began to ask people of different ethnic backgrounds to record Armenian phrases. When I asked @sevuk_apo why people love to hear non-Armenians speak Armenian, he told that it is because Armenians are a small nation and many diasporans don't even know the language. He also told me that he finds it interesting that there is an increasing number of Black Armenians in Los Angeles, such as his own cousin who is Jamaican-Armenian. He felt that such new identities are a beautiful thing, although most Armenians are not yet used to it.

@sevuk_apo was one of the youngest, and no doubt the most experimentally inclined of all the meme artists I met during my fieldwork in Los Angeles. The memes he created, up to five or six per day, stood out because of their originality. To give only a short sample of @sevuk_apo's creations: a 6 second video in which, for a split second, a blonde young female in lingerie is shown, with a hoarse voice that says 'Welcome to the Armenian Adult Friend Finder' (taken from an advertisement for a porn site), after which the triangle under the woman's chest morphs into the masonic symbol of the eye in the pyramid, and the theme song from the X-Files, the popular science fiction series about extraterrestrial life from the 1990s, starts playing. Or the soundtrack of a

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commercial for an Armenian tourist agency in Glendale, a cheerful, *rabiz* song repeating the company's name, 'Hambik Tours', with video footage added of a bus lifted from the ground during a tornado in East Asia. Or footage of a talk show from a Yerevan TV channel with a bald, muscled man saying "Your moustache looks funny! Did you grow it to make people laugh?" interspersed with video footage of the goateed Los Angeles television host Stepan (see Chapter 1) in his satirical tricolor outfit.

When we met, I asked @sevuk_apo about his alias, which literally means 'blackish Apo'. He explained that his cousin gave him this nickname because he looks and talks like an uncle who goes by the same nickname. "My uncle, he's very dark and he's a cigar smoker. So, every time he smokes cigar and speaks his Armenian slang, it's like a mixture of *rabiz* and a Black guy from a ghetto hood," he explained. "All my aunts and uncles called him Sevuk Apo. And my older cousin, he's like 'you just always remind me of him!' I know, the name is maybe not so P.C.[132], but that's how I got it."

It was his talent as a cultural broker, capable of building rapport with a wide spectrum of ethnic and racialized groups in Los Angeles, that enabled him to create his popular videos with his customers. @sevuk_apo explained that he does not intentionally imitate African-Americans, but cannot help but keep picking up the accents of his customers in the tobacco shop. "If I talk to an Asian customer, I will talk with an Asian accent. If it's an Arab, I add 'my friend' after every sentence: 'How are you my friend?' or 'Yeah get this, it's a good price my friend.' So I always have my own little slangs, I have accents lined up," he told. "But there's no disrespect in this."

For @sevuk_apo, the Los Angeles Armenian meme scene was one of the few things that made him feel connected to a larger Armenian community outside of his immediate circle of relatives and friends. He sometimes met up with other meme artists to play *blot* (poker) together. In his everyday life, both in his work and in community college, he was continually part of the city's multiethnic fabric, interacting as much with Black, Asian and Hispanic Angelenos as Armenians. Through intersections of class and ethnicity, he could find a common language to represent Armenianness to non-Armenians with similar socioeconomic positions. It was this outsider position that made

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[132] "P.C." is, of course, short for politically correct.

him a prolific producer of new iconography. If traditional accounts would expect that those who live their lives outside the diaspora institutions lose their Armenian identity faster to assimilation pressures, here it appears to be rather the opposite—showing how encounters with others propel identity performances (cf. Barth 1969).

5.3. Reflexive Self-Stereotyping and Diasporic Cultural Intimacy

The young diasporans behind these accounts share strikingly similar social backgrounds. They all grew up in migrant families that arrived to Los Angeles in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet era. Their arrival, the old diasporic elite in the 1980s proclaimed, went against the hopes and dreams of that segment that considered and continues to consider itself the true diaspora—having fled genocide and war, rather than poverty in the homeland. As already noted (in Chapter 1), the newcomers were stigmatized almost as soon as they arrived, for their modest socioeconomic positions, e.g. working in car repairs or grocery stores, or for being too eager to seek welfare.

"These people have no clue how to maintain a culture in the diaspora. They could always take their Armenian identity for granted until they came here," one middle-aged intellectual born in Lebanon told me as we discussed my research at one of the community colleges of the San Fernando Valley. "They are here now twenty, thirty years, but what institutions have they built during all this time? As far as I can tell, their only institution is the banquet hall," he concluded on a rather sardonic note.[133]

There was a point to the assertion that these newcomers were not integrated into the traditional diaspora institutions. None of the meme artists I interviewed had attended the costly private Armenian day schools, considered the hallmark against assimilation of the traditional diaspora institutions. But all of them *did* for some part of their youth attend weekend classes in church to study language and history, and spoke the language with family at home. They were in fact very gifted and creative heritage speakers, capable of performing in a variety of Armenian dialects, although few had mastered the

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[133] The sardonic tone aside, much of the new diaspora politics in Los Angeles is indeed a civil society of banquet halls, due to the lack of other spaces. It is only in these spaces that I have witnessed opposition groups of *Hayastantsis* gather during my fieldwork, from the nationalist Armenian Renaissance movement (Chapter 3) to a meeting with opposition politician Nikol Pashinyan during his visit to Glendale.

alphabet. Dedicating much of their daily lives to creating content that samples and reframes Armenian music and visual culture, they were interested not primarily in how to *maintain* a fossilized Armenian culture. Rather, their interest lied in how to develop it in new and unexpected directions that are relevant to everyday life in Los Angeles through remixes, montages and experimental hybridizations.

A few questions need to be addressed to understand this new form of diasporic youth culture. First of all, why is there such a focus on negative stereotyping? Can we really speak of a new kind of Armenian culture when these young diasporans depict their own ethnic group mostly as backwards, fraudulent sub-proletarians obsessed with conspicuous consumption? The fictional folk heroes of the memescape, *kukla* Ani and *rabiz* Gago, not to mention the Kardashians of the popular reality television show, might seem like awkward additions to the Armenian canon of national heroes. And yet, those who circulated memes about these characters all stated that these are typical characters one commonly encounters in Glendale, East Hollywood and across the San Fernando Valley suburbia. In their view, they merely emphasized for humorous effect cultural peculiarities that every Armenian in Los Angeles should be able to recognize.

In order to unravel the full complexity of these dynamics, I find it helpful to make use of a key concept in the anthropology of nationalism: cultural intimacy. For Michael Herzfeld (2005) every national culture is driven by struggles over the external image that is projected of that nation in encounters with foreigners and on international stages. Cultural intimacy refers to the "privacy of nations" (ibid. x) that is excluded from such external images, at the same time as it provides insiders with a sense of community. The key example Herzfeld uses to explain the concept is the sharp tension between the commonly practiced Greek tradition of smashing cheap china plates at various festive occasions, and the vehemence with which the idea that this could represent Greece to the outside world is rejected by Greeks. A similar tension was at stake in the struggle over the Glendale Life reality series, where iconic forms of conspicuous consumption integral to self-recognition in Los Angeles were strongly rejected as candidates to represent the nation in public culture to outsiders.

In the early 2000s the anthropologist Andrew Shryock edited a volume titled *Off Stage/On Display: Intimacy and Ethnography in the Age of Public Culture* (2004) in

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which he reformulated Herzfeld's notion of cultural intimacy for the anthropology of media. In his introduction to the volume, Shryock argues that "whenever 'culture' is not the kind of thing one can showcase, in a generically positive way, in mass-mediated forms, then odds are good that, like Greeks smashing plates, it is the sort of thing Others should not be allowed to see" (ibid. 14). Shryock and his colleagues thus translate cultural intimacy into a notion of the 'back stages' of media culture. In a series of ethnographic studies they explore the backdrops of a wide range of large-scale media productions, showing the complexities involved in negotiating what is chosen for public display.

It should be clear by now that analyzing the linkages between media and cultural intimacy through this lens of *mass* mediation is no longer a self-evident choice. As Daniel Miller et al. (2016) have cogently argued, the link between the public and the private is profoundly reconfigured through social media, giving birth to what they describe as scalable sociality. If there were few scales of technological mediation between the dyadic intimacy of a telephone conversation and the mass publicity of radio or television before, the present-day global media ecology is epitomized by a proliferation of participatory spaces of interaction that lie halfway between intimacy and publicity, shifting in scale as circulating media texts go viral or lose momentum.

The playful circulation, and at times even downright celebration of negative stereotypes shows a movement from cultural intimacy to public intimacy (Soysal 2010), as the mediatization of intimate stereotypes becomes the focal point of producing Armenian identity. Although all the content that circulates on the social media accounts of meme artists can be openly accessed by anyone from around the world at any time, the dense intertextuality as well as the use of the Armenian language in their content makes them unlikely to gain traction among non-Armenians. This explains why negative self-stereotyping is not considered a problem in this context, and sub-proletarian 'trickster' behavior and petty crime such as insurance fraud and credit card fraud are here even celebrated as a symbol of Armenian identity. If in Shryock's interpretation of the link between media and cultural intimacy (2004) sources of collective embarrassment would be guarded and held 'off stage', for the LA Armenian meme artists it is the public intimacy generated through the reflexive circulation of embarrassing 'cultural stuff' that establishes affective resonances between media, identity and everyday life.

This form of Armenian culture is a far cry from that which I have portrayed in the chapters on pan-Armenian campaigns for 1915 and Nagorno-Karabakh (Chapter 2 and 3). These meme artists are very far removed from those who take selfies with the new heroes of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and circulate them with the hashtag #ArtsakhStrong—a new media practice associated with a youth organization of the old diaspora. In the next section, I explore how the three meme artists and the images and videos that they circulate nevertheless relate to diasporic recognition struggles. In particular, I look at how their media practices are cross-cut by issues of race and class.

5.4. Race, Respectability and the *Homo Postsovieticus*

Each of the meme artists I portrayed above positions Armenians somewhat ambiguously in the racial landscape of Los Angeles. All three of them have created memes that provide a take on the marriage between Kim Kardashian and Black rapper/singer Kanye West, a development that, as already noted, touched upon taboos on both female sexuality and interracial marriage. During the visit of these celebrities to Armenia for the Genocide Centennial in April 2015, dozens of memes and vines appeared that all centered around the same theme: portraying the Black artist as an Armenian. One of the most popular formulas was to use the music of a song by *rabiz* singer Tatoul Avoyan that starts with the lyrics "*Karapi lchi mot mi aghjik tesa*" ("I saw a girl at the Swan Lake…"), the location in Yerevan where Kanye West had given a surprise performance during their visit, and to overlay the video footage in such a way that it seemed that he was singing *rabiz* music in Armenian.

Certainly, there were many for whom such memes were fascinating due to being perceived as a surreal juxtaposition, with a sense of estrangement thriving on the distance between Blacks and Armenians. But there are also those for whom such distances are not a given, and to whom relations with Black Angelenos are no mere laughing matter. For @sevuk_apo, as for the rappers participating in the Armenian Cypher hip-hop videos (Chapter 2), it was highly significant that African-Americans publicly acknowledge Armenians as a kindred ethnic group in the Los Angeles cityscape. It is no coincidence that @sevuk_apo's montage of footage in which young African-American men exclaim Armenian phrases culminates in them giving 'shout

outs' to all the Armenians in Los Angeles. For these young diasporans displays of respect for Armenians from Blacks are important as an acknowledgement of a similarity of fates and struggles, just as it was for Armin who asked the popular Black rapper The Game to wear his Open Wounds t-shirt and post the image on Instagram, exposing it to hundreds of thousands of his seven million followers.

At the same time, for these meme artists there are certain ethnic and racial thresholds that should not be crossed. A favorite object of ridicule is the LA Armenian rapper, actor and Latino gang member Mr Kro, a muscular male who cultivates a stereotypical *cholo* look. Mr Kro's body is covered in tattoos of the 18th Street Gang, a transnational criminal organization that was started in Los Angeles but at present operates across Central America. One of @sevuk_apo's videos remixes footage from Mr Kro's music video 'Latin Bitches', in which the rapper throws young Latina women into a swimming pool. "When he tosses his hand up in the air with a fist after he throw the girls in the pool, it's like he accomplished something. I felt it was a Rocky moment," the young meme artist told me. To make fun of the exaggerated masculinity of the rapper, he added the music from this vintage action movie. The 'Armenian' Super Mario created by @kayfavat_memes also evoked the atmosphere of street gangs, with Mario shooting an AK47 from a black SUV. Here too, LA Armenians who imitate a racialized underworld were more ridiculed than celebrated.

Regardless of the diversity of positions taken in relation to racial dynamics in the Los Angeles cityscape, the mere fact that post-Soviet youth are positioning themselves into the multiethnic fabric is, again, an example of the wider turn from an exilic towards a horizontal outlook in the diaspora. It also exemplifies how the struggle for recognition of Armenians in this multiethnic fabric takes on a decidedly different shape for working class youth than it does for the middle classes of the older generations, a point which will be explored in more detail below. Precisely due to their subordinate class position, seen as the undesirable *homo postsovieticus* by the older diaspora, the life worlds of new diasporans resonate more strongly with subaltern imaginaries than those of the wealthier and more educated co-ethnics who arrived to Los Angeles earlier. It is thus not surprising that the forms of respect they aspire to from non-Armenians differs from

the middle class respectability and the 'neutrality' of whiteness[134] aspired to by the former. To give a fuller picture of this contrast, I end this chapter with the older institutions, which use new media as a tool for impression management, regulating images of the nation in public culture.

5.5. Armenian Coffee 2.0: The Starbucks Controversy

One of the most popular Armenian meme artists in Los Angeles also runs a t-shirt label, named Armenian Apparel. During the time of my fieldwork in 2015, the most popular product of Armenian Apparel was a t-shirt that depicts the logo of the coffee magnate Starbucks, with the company's name replaced by the phrase '*Kofeh Dir*'—a colloquial Eastern Armenian phrase, colloquially transliterated, meaning 'Put the coffee'. This imperative is a staple of Armenian households—addressed to the person, usually female, in charge of putting the *cezve* coffee pot on the kitchen stove to make oriental (i.e. 'Turkish') coffee. To understand why this is such a popular design, it is necessary to note not just the centrality of coffee to family life, but also to examine the iconic status of Starbucks for young Armenian Angelenos. The t-shirt design brings together 'typically Armenian' domesticity and an ethnically nonspecific public brand in one iconic image—resonating with the common idea that the Armenian diaspora lives its ethnic culture within the private confines of the household, while keeping an image of successful integration or assimilation for society's public stages.

The centrality of oriental coffee to Armenian hospitality, perhaps the nation's most universally celebrated self-stereotype, is also illustrated by a recurrent USArmenia TV item titled *Kofeh dreq, galis em* ("Put the coffee [on the stove], I'm coming!"). In these videos, part of a late night show, a female host rings the doorbells of randomly selected

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[134] The question of the whiteness of Armenians in the US has a long history, chronicled in detail by Aram Ghoogasian (2017). Ghoogasian recounts how a 1909 court proclaimed in a naturalization case that "Western Asiatics have become so mixed with Europeans during the past twenty-five centuries that it is impossible to tell whether they are white or should come under the statutes … applied usually to the yellow race." By the early 1920s, with figures such as the anthropologist Franz Boas weighing in in the debate in favor of the Armenians, the whiteness of the Armenian 'race' had become a legal fact. This recognition did not only make genocide survivors qualify for naturalization, but it also made them eligible for land ownership. This contributed to the eventual shift from the East Coast to the West Coast, where the Fresno area became a flourishing center for Armenian agricultural production. But the Armenians were also harshly stigmatized as 'Fresno Indians' (Ghoogasian 2017).

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homes in Los Angeles with mailboxes that indicate Armenian names, asking whether the people who live there will treat her to a cup of coffee on camera. The request is nearly always granted, except for those situations when the house is not in order, causing an embarrassment that viewers can easily relate to. While the coffee is being prepared by a housewife or one of her daughters, the television host comments on the interior to elicit stories and reflections on Armenian identity. Commonly, the focus is on the baroque furniture considered typical of national tastes, and on souvenirs from Armenia that are displayed on the walls or cupboards.

Young women in these videos are stereotypically framed as having domestic duties, in charge of traditions of preparing coffee and expected to make guests feel comfortable. But a rather different image of the young LA Armenian female in relation to coffee circulates in the diasporic memescape. As already explained by the cousins of @kayfavat_memes, females are inevitably portrayed as the spoiled, vain and intellectually void *kukla*—not unlike the white, upper middle-class Valley girl stereotype that emerged in Los Angeles suburbia in the 1980s. And it is Starbucks coffee that is the brand most commonly associated with the *kukla* female, seconded by Louis Vuitton, BMW and Mercedes. Images of complex coffee variations that involve different syrups, sugars and ice cream, consumed with a long thin straw, have become a key self-stereotype of Armenian femininity among young meme aficionados.

If young post-Soviet diasporans resignify the Starbucks brand in their everyday digital image production to comment on gender roles, public/private distinctions and consumption, the post-genocide diaspora institutions in the winter of 2015 found a rather different way to engage with the iconic brand. Whereas these diasporic youth use social media to create feedback loops with the present, the older generations remain strongly engaged with remediations of 1915. This was also the case this time, as the Armenian Revolutionary Federation managed to capture the imagination of its followers with a veritable 'Starbucks scandal', threatening the company with a pan-Armenian boycott of its stores. To understand what happened and the role of new media in it, it is necessary to go back to the moment when this controversy emerged.

On a Wednesday morning in February 2015, an uncanny sighting in Los Angeles was reported to several organizations affiliated with the ARF. The largest US Armenian

newspaper Asbarez was contacted, as were the lobbyists of the Armenian National Committee of America, who had just arrived to their office located less than a mile from the White House. Armenian-Americans sent e-mails to these organizations to communicate that the multinational coffee magnate Starbucks had put up insulting and defamatory posters in its shops. The posters were said to display women in Armenian folk costumes drinking Starbucks coffee under the crescent and star of the Turkish flag (Figure 5.3). Outrage quickly spread to social media, where many deliberated whether this might be the Turkish lobby's latest public relations stunt.[135]

Figure 5.3. Social Media Image Promoting ANCA's Starbucks Campaign

Some argued that the picture was an obvious photo montage, since no righteous Armenian would willingly appear under a Turkish flag to promote an American multinational coffee brand. Others called for caution, pointing out that Armenians and

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[135] There was a certain logic to these rumors. The Turkish lobby in the United States regularly engages in public relations campaigns that call for peace, reconciliation and mutual understanding, but without answering to the Armenian demands for genocide recognition. Such initiatives became especially prominent prior to the Centennial.

Turks sometimes have similar folk culture traditions. In the end, the interpretation of the image being a Turkish plot won the upper hand, and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation's lobbying organization circulated a call to action on its social media pages, urging its supporters to send messages to Starbucks threatening that Armenian-Americans will boycott the coffee magnate if the posters are not taken down. The initiative was promoted by the largest Armenian-American newspaper Asbarez with the hashtag #BoycottStarbucks. Before long, the appeal to join the campaign went viral, and Starbucks was flooded with messages urging it to take the posters down from the walls of its shops and to issue an apology to the Armenian community.

It took only a few hours for the company to take down the images and issue a public apology to the Armenian-American community. The creative director in charge of the Starbucks campaign clarified that no models had been used, nor were there Photoshop manipulations. The photo was simply taken at a national holiday in Turkey where various folk dance ensembles had performed. The Starbucks apology contained no clarification of the ethnicity of the photographed dancers. However, the very fact that the coffee magnate issued an apology was already a performative speech act, as all apologies are. It did not so much represent a pre-existent reality as transform it: for many of those following the controversy who were still unsure about the ethnicity of the depicted folk costumes, it was Starbucks' apology that made the depicted women Armenian. This, in turn, made the coffee magnate guilty, willingly or unwillingly, of a defamation of the public image of the nation. Its confession of wrongs led many participants in the campaign to celebrate their victory over a sinister Turkish plot.

In the period following the 'Starbucks scandal', as it came to be known, this victory was quickly incorporated in the mythology of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation in the United States. "Armenian-Americans are generally a highly networked community that follows Armenian issues closely and that is quick to react to misrepresentations in politics, media or advertising,"[136] Aram Hamparian, the executive director of the ANCA told a journalist. A call for donations was launched citing the case as a successful example of "challenging anti-Armenian bias and misinformation,"

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[136] https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/turkey-armenia-starbucks-discord.html

exemplifying the responsibility to "defend our honor as Armenians and prevent our enemies from negatively stereotyping us."[137] Social media platforms had become of such strategic importance, the statement continued, that it has decided to hire an IT specialist to manage its online relations. "We truly have an online army of activists," the letter to donors explained. "Given the vast reach of these platforms, the investments we make in this field are true *force-multipliers*" (emphasis added).

When I interviewed the Asbarez journalist who spearheaded the campaign, he admitted that ultimately, there was no way to be certain that the women under the Turkish flags were Armenian. Nor did he have any evidence of a Turkish plot. But he still felt that the ARF was right to celebrate a victory. He seemed upset when I told that a befriended ethnographer from Yerevan expressed doubts that the folk costumes were Armenian. "I don't care what other people feel out there. The reality is that we did a *movement*," he stated, justifying that the situation had been too urgent to research whether the costumes were really Armenian. "The fact is that Starbucks within an hour and a half of our call to action appearing on our Facebook page, and others organizations' Facebook pages, issued an apology and took those posters off. What is important is that it means that this community has some kind of a *voice*."

The ARF's iconoclastic campaign used social media to mobilize diasporans against an imagined Turkish plot to misrepresent the true nature of Armenians in the public spaces of Los Angeles. Like the unfiltered oriental coffee prepared in the *cezve*, referred to sometimes as Turkish and sometimes as Armenian coffee, the nationality of the folk costumes on the Starbucks posters was highly ambiguous. If the meme artists were mostly interested in engaging with negative or ambiguous stereotypes of the nation, here demands were for unambiguous, timeless positive depictions of the own ethnic group. The proximity of the Turkish flag in the image was upsetting, as it represented the very opposite of such a pure and unambiguous source of the self.

When I asked @sevuk_apo about his view on the scandal, he responded with surprise that he had completely missed the commotion. As I narrated the turn of events to him, he said that he sees no point in such campaigns, and that he had always been against

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[137] https://anca.org/why-donate/

similar campaigns such as the protests against basketball star Kobe Bryant doing commercials promoting Turkish Airlines. He felt that the animosity against the Turks living today makes no sense. "This [the Genocide] happened a hundred years ago. I know it's a tragedy, but now it's 2015. This was *a hundred years ago*. I understand, *our wounds are still open* and everything. But not every Turk hates Armenians."

The other young meme artists I met, all second-generation *Hayastantsis*, were either unaware of the Starbucks scandal, or felt that such iconoclastic mobilizations were pointless. One of my friends, who is not a working class *Hayastantsi* but a middle class graphic designer with family roots going back to the Middle East who grew up at a large distance from the Los Angeles institutions, even created a meme ridiculing those who participated in the ARF's campaign. His online persona, a fictional resident of Glendale known as '1915 Survivor Artist King Gevo', for which he created a prank Facebook page, instructed Armenians to tell coffee shop clerks to write on the paper coffee cup that the person's name is "Recognize Armenian Genocide" (Figure 4.4).
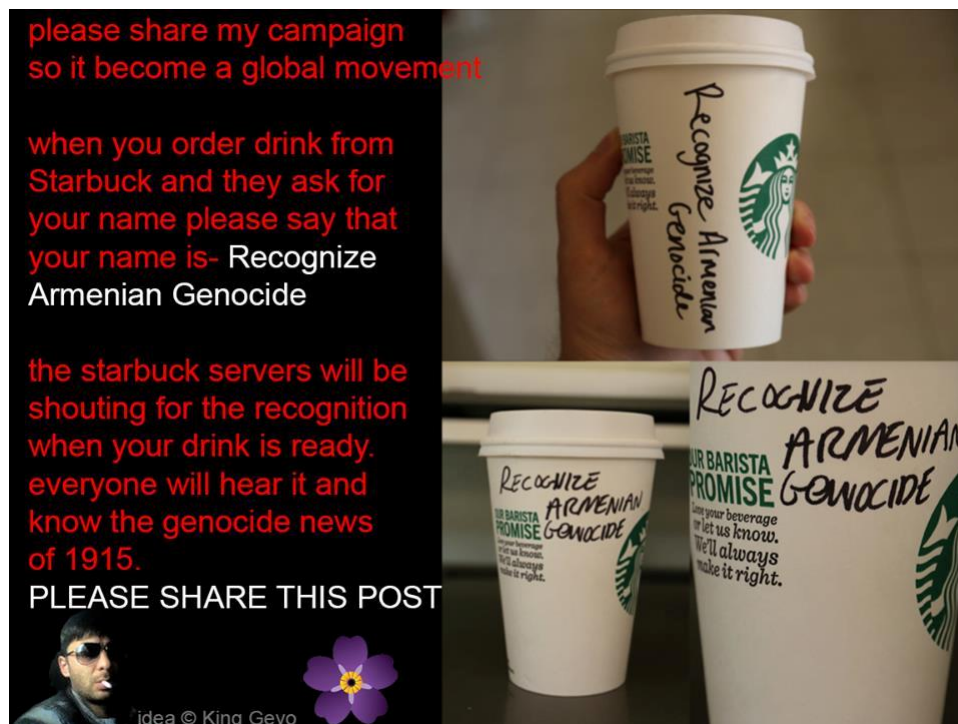

Figure 5.4. "Survivor Artist" King Gevo's parody of the Starbucks campaign

This illustrates how non-recognition is mediated through pedagogical translations to acquire its emotive force. For those who do not grow up with their lives organized

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around the old diaspora institutions and its incessant remediations of 1915 in the present, the Genocide is something that not only happened long ago in terms of historical time. It is also more distant in *lived*, affective time. But it is those who continue to center 1915 in the present who have the largest amount of symbolic power to intervene in the public sphere on behalf of Armenians. The ARF journalist's characterization of the apology as proof that Armenians have a voice also illustrates how, for the diaspora institutions, control over public culture *is* a form of recognition.

This case of public impression management may seem a far cry from the world of memes and vines of post-Soviet diasporans described in the previous sections. But it is in the juxtaposition of these two worlds of national iconography that the problem of representing the nation as a united entity, regardless of institutional, socioeconomic and geographic divisions, shows its full magnitude. After all, the ARF's institutions speak incessantly in the name of "Armenians," "the Armenian community," and "Armenian-Americans," and their supposed collective demands, feelings and desires.[138] In practice, as we have seen, their legitimacy is severely compromised—even among the post-genocide diaspora I have heard complaints that the ARF should issue an apology to Starbucks for misrepresenting its posters, rather than vice versa.

The young meme artists continually circulate images of Armenian identity that reflect and comment on the horizontal dimension of their everyday lives in a multiethnic metropolis. As such, they generate feedback loops between ethnic imaginaries and the unfolding present. The more assimilated old diaspora, by contrast, shows little interest in such an ongoing reflexive production of new images of Armenianness. Indeed, it was hesitant to embrace even the celebrity Kim Kardashian until she traveled to Armenia for the sake of genocide recognition. For this segment of the diaspora, it is positive representations of Armenians in mainstream American public culture that matter; such representations should not frame Armenians as similar to Turks.

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[138] Paul Gilroy describes a similar dynamic in the context of the African diaspora. The "lazy, casual invocation of cultural insiderism" by "uneasy spokespeople" of the diasporic middle classes, he argues, primarily expresses the contradictions of their privileged positions (1991: 5).

5.6. Conclusions

The large-scale influx of newcomers from Soviet and post-Soviet Armenia has generated a paradoxical situation in the diasporic mediascape in Los Angeles. On the one hand, it is now the *Hayastantsi* Armenians who control most of the content circulating on local diasporic television. In domains such as popular music too, exemplified by *rabiz*, it is this subethnic group that has become the dominant voice. And as we have seen, the diasporic meme public is a veritable laboratory for new forms of national iconography, in which everyday relations of generation, gender and racialization are reflected on through reflexive engagements with local stereotypes. Practices of montage generate a continual commentary on the tensions between the retention of cultural differences and the encouragement of assimilation into the wider Los Angeles ethnoscape. They also express a new orientation to time, as feedback loops to events unfolding in the present become integral to articulating identity.

And yet, it is above all the more institutionalized older diaspora, with its superior socioeconomic position and organizational apparatus transplanted from the Middle East since the decade prior to the Soviet influx, that has the symbolic power to shape and define the Armenians to outsiders. The Starbucks scandal is no anomaly in this sense. As recently as January 2018, the same organization, ANCA, attempted to unleash another round of social media commotion by demanding public apologies from Trevor Noah's late night show after the host made a joke live on air that used the phrase 'filthy Armenians' to critique US president Trump's racism and hypocrisy.

Much social theory of the last two decades has looked at recognition as a counterforce to stigmatization that is of equal importance to economic redistribution to emancipate the fate of subaltern groups (Fraser and Honneth 2004). The translation of this body of critical theory into empirical analysis is more recent, spearheaded by figures such as the cultural sociologist Michele Lamont, who speaks of a 'recognition gap' in the context of the United States, which she believes a progressive sociology should take as its task to dismantle (2017). Armenian diaspora organizations in the United States are invested not only in the recognition of historical truth or irredentist claims, but, as we have seen, also in positive representations in public culture. But in this case, the question of 'what is to be recognized' is much less clear-cut than in the more widely supported struggles for genocide recognition and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic's

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independence. After all, what is recognition of the 'true' nature of the Armenian people to one faction, generation, socioeconomic class or subethnic group, may be mere middle class respectability or a disputable aspiration to whiteness to another.

In a recent book titled *Recognition and the Media* (2014) the media scholar Rousiley Maia argues that a recognition theory approach to digital media should inquire into "how online interactions are linked to broader processes of socialization and individualization in a given society" (105-106). In my analysis of the everyday media practices of young post-Soviet diasporans in Los Angeles I have attempted to provide precisely such an approach. By highlighting how meme artists and their fans navigate their way between representations of Armenians in mainstream media as well as the socioeconomic and multiethnic worlds of their everyday surroundings, I have argued that a new relation between public stereotypes and collective intimacy has emerged in the diaspora. In the process, it becomes clear that, although genocide recognition is given importance across the subethnic and generational spectrum, different segments of the Los Angeles diaspora otherwise aspire to almost incommensurable forms of recognition as Armenians in the public cultures of a densely mediated metropolis.

Conclusion

As I write the final pages of this thesis, it has been almost a decade since I first visited Armenia. Whenever I have been physically absent from the country for an extended period, such as in the years preceding my doctoral fieldwork, I have tried not just to stay in touch with friends, but also to keep up with social and political developments in the country. One of the easiest ways to do this throughout the years, especially in time periods when my interest was fading, has been to watch political comedy shows. Uploaded twice a week on YouTube, the news commentary bulletins of ArmComedy have for years not just kept me aware of political trends in Yerevan, but also created mental images of the many iconic figures that populate Armenia's media landscape. The show's comedians are outstanding curators: in each episode, they bring together more than a dozen audiovisual ready-mades, showcasing the week's most important or most absurd developments. It is above all the proliferation of online news outlets in recent years, creating ever-expanding audiovisual archives, that facilitates the show's capacity to turn living people into icons of the times in which the country finds itself.

Perhaps no living person in Yerevan exemplifies this dynamic better than an elderly woman named Susanna Sargsyan, better known by her nickname HHK Tati.[139] The itinerant old lady with her walking stick, often dressed in a scarf with the red, blue and orange of the Armenian tricolor, is a common sight at protest initiatives, where citizens gather for causes ranging from the environment to rising utility costs. At such gatherings, the grandma inevitably tells youngsters to bring their 'indecent' public displays to a halt, to be grateful to the government of president Serzh Sargsyan, and to go home. Opposition journalists love to record her surreal monologues, uttered in a thick Gyumri accent, in which she praises the potbellied oligarchs of the ruling party for their honesty, philanthropy and patriotism. For those who follow politics closely, she has long been the unofficial mascot for the Republican Party of Armenia (HHK).

Circulating video recordings of the pro-government grandma's monologues have made her a local celebrity since the early 2010s, becoming more iconic and memetic every time footage of her was featured on television and shared online. No one, myself

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[139] HHK stands for *Hayastani Hanrapetakan Kusaktsutyun* ('Republican Party of Armenia'). HHK Tati is short for 'Grandmother of the Republican Party of Armenia'.

included, however, would have expected the woman to one day appear to millions on prime time television to a global audience scattered over dozens of countries across the world. To understand this shift in scales of exposure we need to leave behind Yerevan and switch on American television in early September 2015.

"There are tons of people waiting outside the hotel. And we heard that there is this older woman from Gyumri, the same town in Armenia that my ancestors are from. And she has been waiting for hours and hours. So I just want to go out and say hi," diasporan reality television star Kim Kardashian narrates to the camera, appearing to an estimated 2.5 million viewers across the United States, and millions more beyond. The 'Mother Armenia' episode of the popular reality TV series Keeping Up with the Kardashians documents the Los Angeles family's first ever trip to the Republic of Armenia for the occasion of the Genocide Centennial of April 2015. For many of its unaware viewers, her embrace of the elderly woman in front of the Marriott Hotel on the central square of Yerevan was the most touching moment of the entire episode.

The iconic embrace of the reality television star and the elderly lady captures many of the key themes and tensions that recur throughout the preceding chapters. First and perhaps foremost is a multiplication of forms of *misrecognition*. The chance meeting of the diaspora celebrity and the pro-government grandma, neither much aware of the meaning of the other in the context of origin, is not unlike the oftentimes similarly unreflective and unintentional embrace by traditional diaspora institutions of the post-Soviet state's ruling oligarchs. The influx of moral appeals and cultural repertoires from Armenia has, sometimes in spite, and at other times because of the increasing media connectivity and mobility between Yerevan and Los Angeles, not created a common ground for shared understandings across the vast distances between them.

Second, the celebrity visit illustrates discrepancies between the different forms of recognition that Armenians in Yerevan and in different diaspora factions in Los Angeles aspire to. As images of the two women (Figure 6.1), complimented by photos of Kim Kardashian in a red dress at the Tsitsernakaberd Genocide Monument, appeared on the pages of dozens of glamor magazines and celebrity news webpages, diasporic elites celebrated a major step forward for the Armenian Cause—that is, for genocide recognition. But in Armenia the visit was about more than the Genocide: it was an

unprecedented moment of nation branding that validated Armenia's very *existence*. For an instant, the country *was* a country, in spite of the common saying that it is not. "It is only because of her visit that yesterday the entire world press has acknowledged that *the Republic of Armenia exists*," opposition MP Zaruhi Postanjian said in a welcome statement to Kardashian during a session in Parliament. "That she has paid a visit to this country. And that this country has experienced a genocide."[140]

Figure 6.1. Susanna "HHK Tati" Sargsyan meets Kim Kardashian in front of the Marriott Hotel on Republic Square, Yerevan

A third theme is the interplay between Los Angeles as a center of symbolic power and the role of participatory media in creating new icons of the nation. Perhaps not unsurprisingly, the social media ecology of Armenia spawned numerous remixes of the encounter, in which the grandma's troubled attempt to give a compliment to Kim Kardashian in English and her surprising qualification of the Armenian-American sex icon as honorable were mocked. More generally, youth in Yerevan created telling new memes, for instance by creating photo montages in which the face of the enormous Soviet monument of Mother Armenia that hovers over the city, itself a Khrushchev-era replacement for a statue of Stalin, is replaced with a stylized image of Kardashian. And

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[140] The quote is from a report broadcast on April 9, 2015 on Public Radio of Armenia.

in Los Angeles, as already noted (Chapter 5), a drawing of HHK Tati became an *armoji* to add a flavor of typically Armenian qualities to everyday text messaging.

The fourth issue that was crystallized in the encounter is the question of the relation between the socioeconomic and the symbolic, or, as I have put it at several points in the thesis, between redistribution and recognition. Kardashian's endlessly remediated moment with the elderly woman was the only intrusion of the figure of the precarious sub-proletarian onto an otherwise polished show that kept the country's hardships off stage. Viewers could assume that she is poor, having few teeth (an issue I examined in the Yerevan dentist campaign for the Centennial in Chapter 2). Being featured on the pages of celebrity magazines did not assuage this predicament. How should wealth in the Armenian world be redistributed to change this: is it the ruling oligarchs, whom HHK Tati generally showers with superlatives, or the diaspora? In 2017 a journalist recorded a video in which the grandma pleads with Kardashian to send her a sum in order to buy a new apartment. In the poignant video she explains that she lives with seven relatives in a single bedroom flat. The journalist uploaded photos of her bank account details in case the celebrity would be moved to transfer her the money.[141]

Fifth and final is the related issue of the time of the nation. In began my inquiry with the assertion that the Armenian world shares no homogeneous empty time. It is, to the contrary, a heterogeneous time of ruptures, propelled by parallel historical legacies. Armenia as an actually existing homeland *in the present*, the visits of the Kardashian family and System of a Down showed, is still mediated by past ruptures, from the Genocide to the demodernization of the transition years. Resonant remediations of 1915, as in the catastrophes of the transition years (Chapter 1) and the fundraising spectacles for Nagorno-Karabakh (Chapter 3), remain the most powerful means to engage the Los Angeles diaspora for the post-Soviet republic. But this recognition-driven diaspora is increasingly supplemented and challenged by a young, emergent developmental diaspora (Chapter 4). The latter's geographical point of reference is not Western Armenia but Silicon Valley, and it produces diasporic identity out of the rift between homeland realities of underdevelopment and its own visions of futurity.

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[141] The video and photos are available at http://henaran.am/334510.html

These five points can be connected to two more general findings that, I believe, are also relevant beyond the Armenian cases studied here. The first one is that recognition struggles are increasingly more than solely a legal matter. They are also a thoroughly *iconic* cultural phenomenon, their logics of validation shifting from declaration to circulation. In an age of participatory media, characterized by the accelerationist logic of 'going viral', moments of recognition are increasingly produced in the interfaces between image production and technological mediation. This seems as true for the subaltern groups and minorities that traditionally form the object of critical theories of recognition as it is true in the case of Armenian diasporic nationalism. Secondly, the connections established in transnational circuits between radically unequal, conflict-generated sociocultural formations tend to remain haunted by ruptures that feed back into other times, instead of producing a synchronization of shared horizons and understandings. But this is counteracted by the capacity of participatory media technologies to create continual feedback loops between ethnic imaginaries and the unfolding present. The past as nation (Panossian 2002) can increasingly be challenged by the *present* as nation. Whether new Armenian iconic repertoires will be shaped by the visions of a recognition-oriented or a developmental diaspora, or, perhaps, lack any relation to normative concerns at all, is a question to which only time knows the answer.

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