

Presentation by **Samantha A. Adalia**

"You're Not Armenian Enough"

The Diasporans' Journey Back to Armenia and Its Headwinds

Capstone Presentation

American University of Armenia | English & Communications | 2023

Abstract

This project explores the journeys of seven Armenian diasporans and diasporan-adjacent individuals who have left their host countries to move to Armenia, and the challenges they have faced and are continuously facing while adjusting to the local culture. I conducted interviews with these individuals, who range from the ages of 18 to 24, representing the Middle East, the Americas, Russia, Europe, Asia, and the Pacific Islands.

Their stories are depicted through the medium of the graphic novel in order to portray the visual and emotional elements of their narratives, which immerses the reader in their stories and enables them to empathize with the subjects.



Introduction

When I moved to Armenia, I could not fully grasp how different Armenian diasporans were from local Armenians until I made many diasporan friends at university. They told me about the experiences they had in their host countries and how they struggled with adjusting to the culture and society here. I found I could also deeply relate to them as a third culture kid and Filipino diasporan.

This project explores how these Armenian diasporans adjust to a new life in their homeland. To display their stories in a way that will engage both diasporans, locals, and international readers, the format of a graphic novel has been used.

My hope is that it will spark a dialogue between the two groups of Armenians, foster greater understanding in both audiences regarding the struggles of Armenian diasporans, and inspire Armenians to act upon solutions for the diasporans' challenges.



Literarature Review

01

In my literature review, I looked at the definition of “diaspora” and their relation to the homeland through the work of scholars like Safran, Anderson, Boym, Tsuda and Kasbarian.





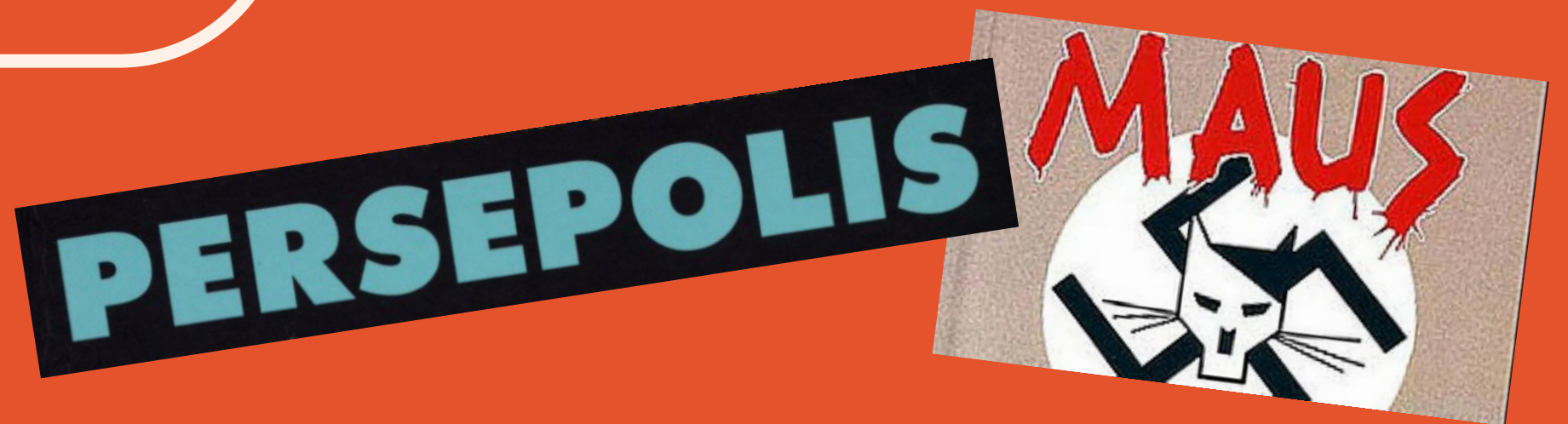
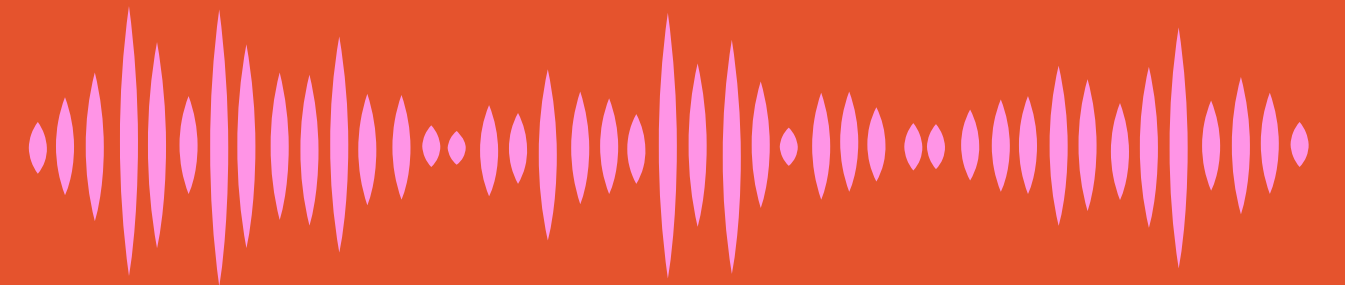
William Safran (2004) defines diasporans as “special kinds of immigrants because they have retained a memory of, a cultural connection with, and a general orientation toward their homelands[...] they relate in some (symbolic or practical) way to their homeland; they harbour doubts about their full acceptance by the hostland; they are committed to their survival as a distinct community; and many of them have retained a myth of return” (p. 10).

Literarature Review

02

I also use oral history 'as it deals with the "why and how" of documentary history, as opposed to the "when, who, and where," [which reveals] the reasons and motivations behind events and decisions.' (Hinkle, 2006, p. 49)
Understanding the diasporans' reasons and motivations adds a human aspect to the recording of history.

To express the diasporans' stories, the graphic novel medium has been used, as it has previously been employed to teach history to readers and inform them about social issues.





Svetlana Boym (2001) writes that immigrants “always perceive themselves onstage, their lives resembling some mediocre fiction with occasional romantic outbursts and gray dailiness. Sometimes they see themselves as heroes of a novel, but such ironic realizations do not stop them from suffering through each and every novelistic collision of their own life” (p. 254).

The act of drawing diasporans as characters in a graphic novel breathes life into Boym's observation and validates the diasporans' experiences, especially for those who are exiled from their first homes, i.e. their host countries, as it could help them process their traumas through speaking about them and seeing them portrayed in a narrative visual form.



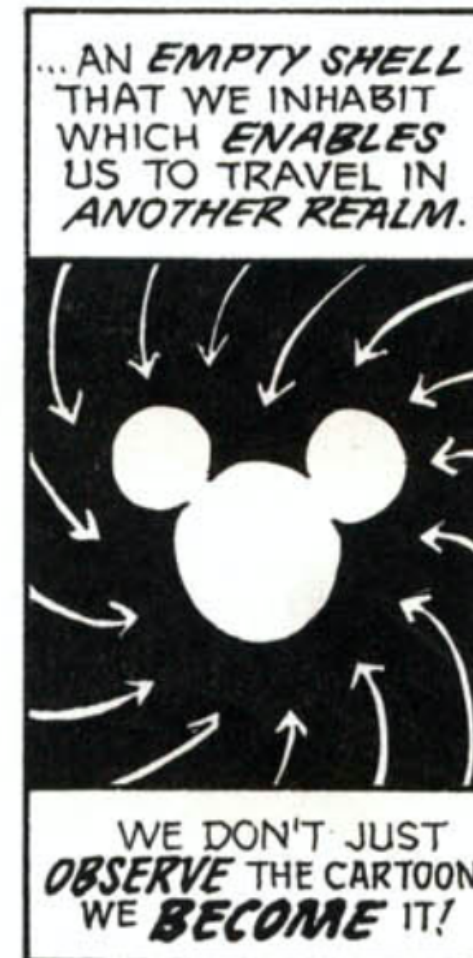
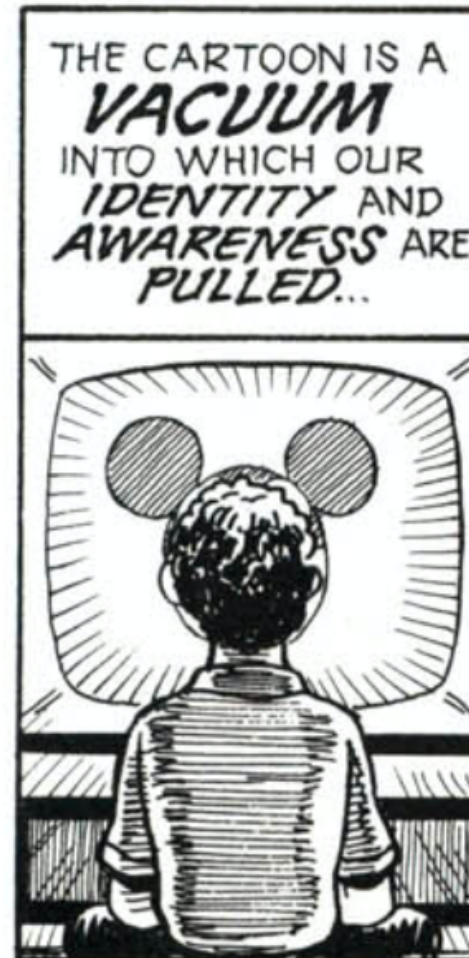
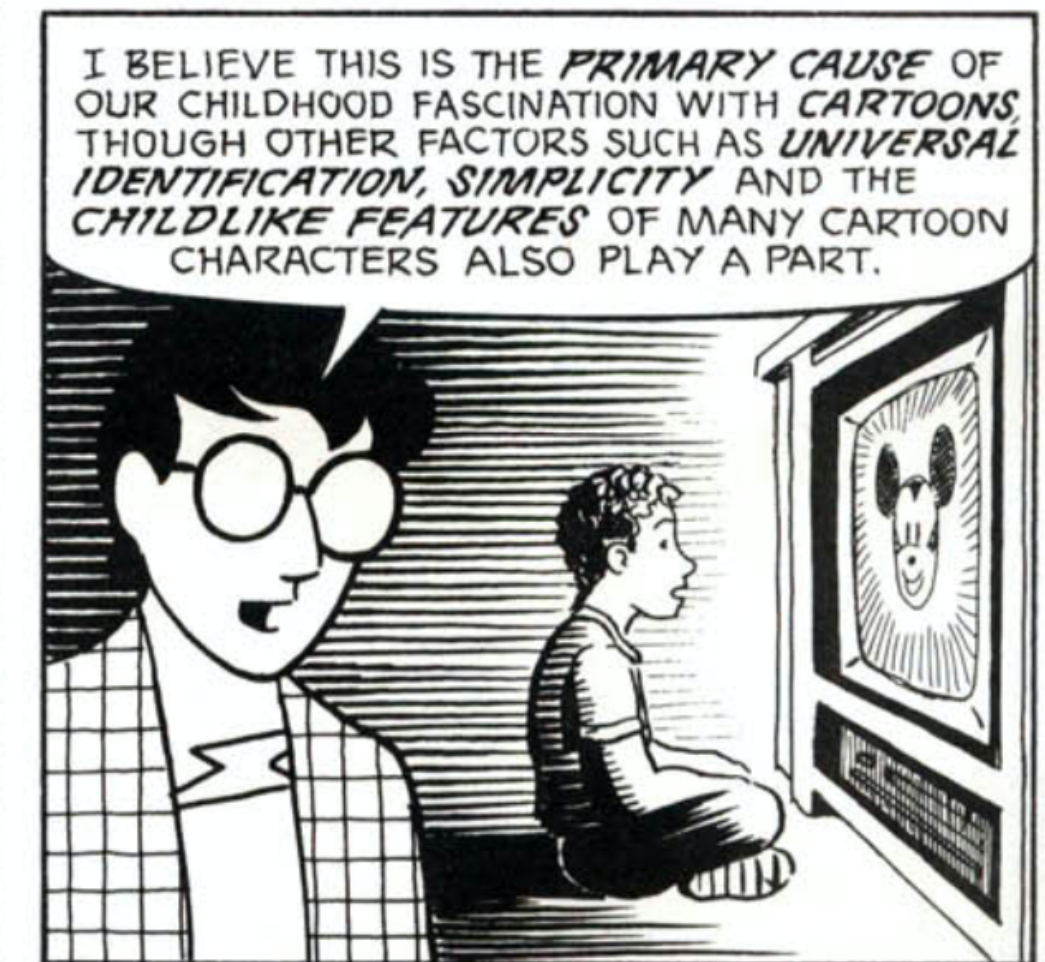
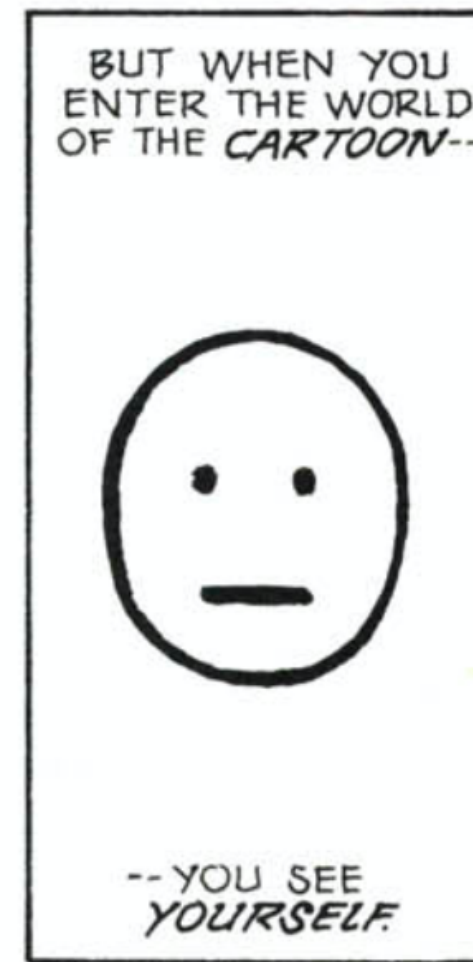


Boym (2001) also writes that “scientists of the eighteenth century [...] proposed that **poets and philosophers might be better equipped to analyze nostalgia**, [and] some psychologists of the early twentieth century, including Freud, suggested that **artists and writers have a better insight to the dream and dread of home**” (p. 251). Thus, art is highly useful when examining an emotional, personal, and cultural experience.



The medium can also be used to allow local Armenian readers to empathize with the “othered” diaspora - who are different from them - by depicting diasporans as comic figures with simplified designs.

Scott McCloud in his *Understanding Comics* (1994) writes about how the simplified human figure in the form of the cartoon is a “vacuum” that we can inhabit and live through the comic’s narrative vicariously (p. 36).

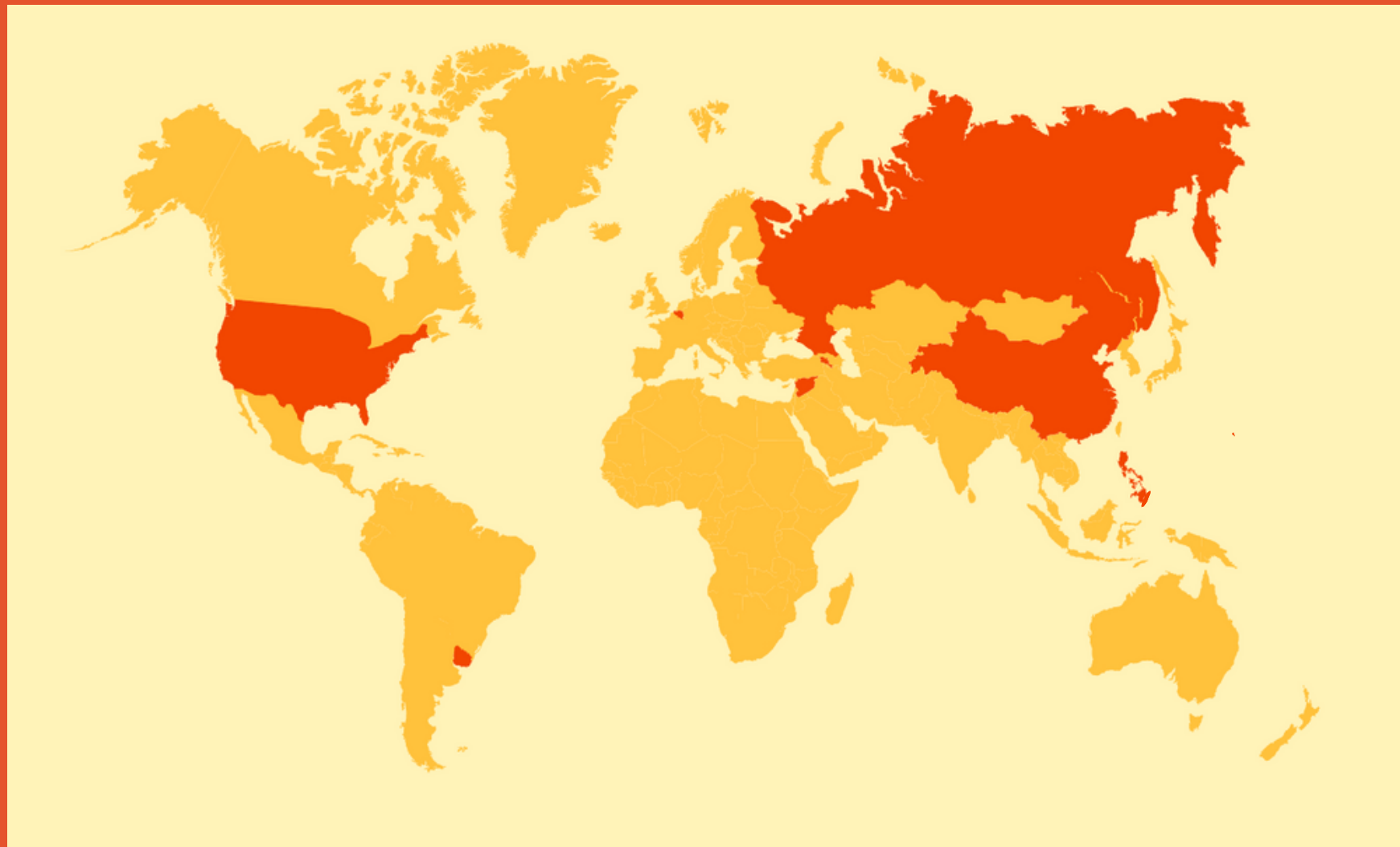


Creative Goals

The main goal of this project is to discover the challenges of Armenian diasporans upon moving to Armenia (Hayastan) and to present the results in a narrative using the medium of the graphic novel.

The graphic novel strings the diasporans' anecdotes together into an **overarching narrative** that is composed of the **common themes** around their **challenges upon coming to Armenia**. I have used characters with the same names and likenesses of the interviewees, except for one who did not want to disclose their name for the project and is instead given a pseudonym. I have also included myself as a character.

Methodology



Choosing the interviewees

Interviews were held with Armenian diasporans who have moved to Armenia, as well as diasporan-adjacent individuals, from ages ranging from 18 to 24. The diasporan demographic included those who lived in Syria, America, Belgium, Russia, Uruguay, Saipan, Philippines, and China. These diasporans have been living in Armenia for the past two to eight years.

I chose this young adult demographic because they are in a formative age of developing individual identity or have recently passed it, and it is fascinating to see how their Armenian identity factors into this metamorphic stage.

Methodology

The interviewees and their brief biographies:

01

Armen Torossian

Born in Aleppo, Syria, in 2000. Moved to a village in Aleppo and Latakia following the Syrian War in 2011. Moved to Armenia with his family for a more secure lifestyle and for him and his brother to get a better education.

02

Davit Hovakimian

Born in Evanston, Illinois, U.S., in 2000. His father was a diasporan from Iran and his mother was a diasporan from Uzbekistan and Armenia before they moved to the U.S. He moved to Armenia to pursue his bachelors' degree at AUA.

03

Anita Akopian

Born in Moscow, Russia, in 2000. Her father had been living and working in Russia. Her family would visit their province, Martuni, in Armenia every summer. She then moved to Armenia in 2017 to begin her university studies at AUA.

Methodology

The interviewees and their brief biographies:

04

Goharik Martirosyan

Born in Yerevan, Armenia, in 1998, to parents also from Yerevan. Her family moved to Montevideo, Uruguay, when she was 15. She pursued a degree in architecture at a public university. In 2021, she decided to study in Armenia and moved here.

05

Stephanyl Marashlian

Born in Kidapawan City, Philippines, in 2001. Her father is an Armenian from Syria, while her mother is a Filipino. Stephanyl spent most of her childhood in the Philippines and lived in the U.S. for two years. Her family then moved to Armenia when she was 15. Here she is now pursuing a degree in medicine.

06

Keghani Chaparian

Born in Garapan, Saipan, in 2004. Her father is an Armenian from Syria, while her mother is a Chamorro-Filipino. She spent most of her life in the American commonwealth of Saipan then moved to Armenia in 2021 to be with Armenian family.

Methodology

The interviewees and their brief biographies:

07

Artyom Stepanyan

Born in New Delhi, India, in 2001. His parents were from Armenia and have been working as diplomats. He lived in the U.S., China, and Belgium. Moved to Armenia for a few years in between his parents' assignments. He moved back to Armenia as a 17-year-old and attended high school for a semester here, before entering university in 2019.



Including myself as a character in the graphic novel

I included myself as a character because I play the role of mediator between the interviewees and the readers, and I also play the role of subject, since my experience is similar to that of the diasporans. I act as a sort of glue between the characters, making connections between their stories. Instead of having an unnamed narrator making these connections, like someone from a documentary, I make this process more personal or personified, adding a human guide for the readers, with my own acknowledged biases.

(Image: a panel from my first comic, Third Culture Kid, 2021)



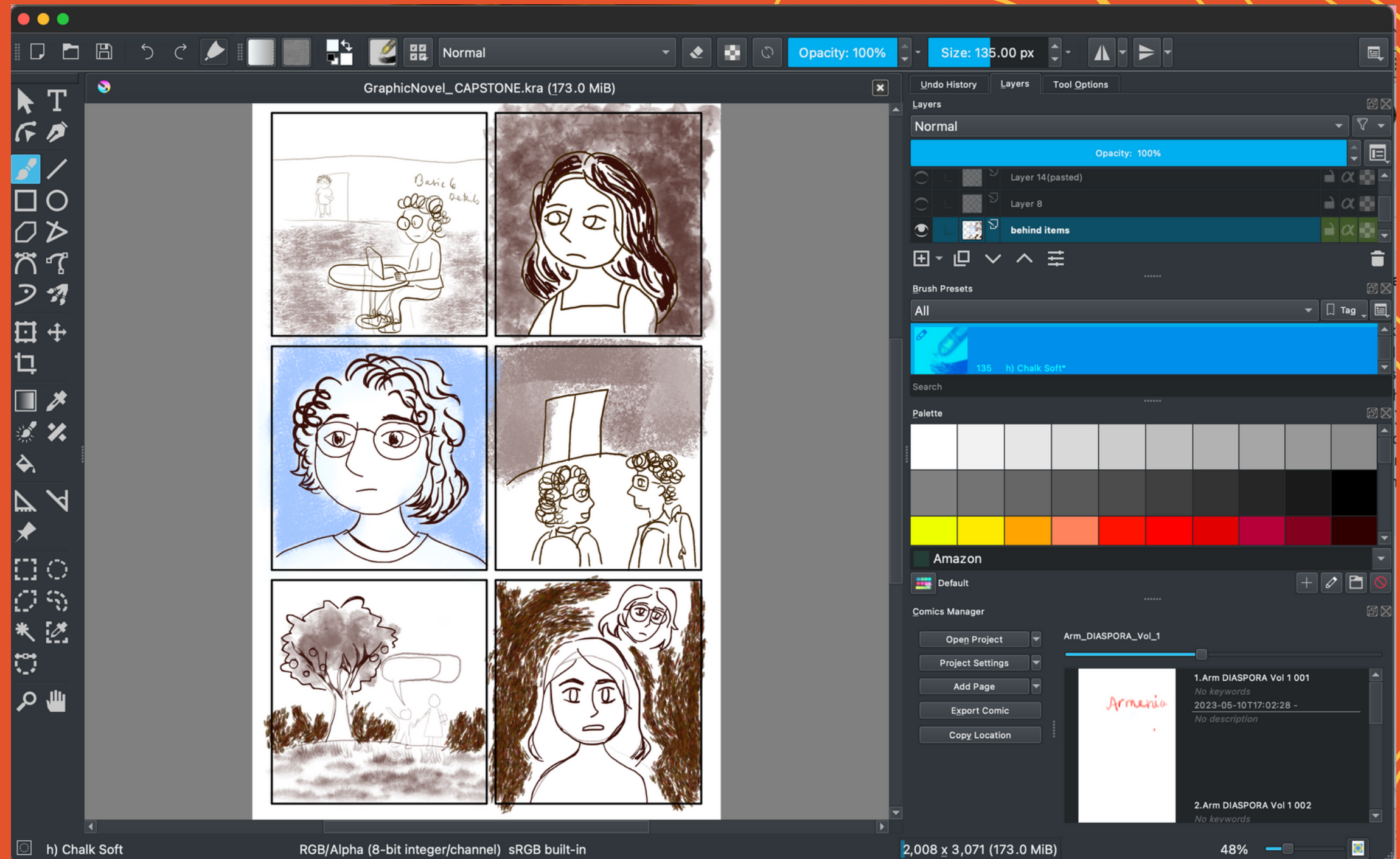
Methodology

The artistic process

As for the creative project, the medium used for the graphic novel is digital,

- using Krita software
- Wacom One drawing pad,
- Initial sketches were done with paper and pencil and on the Paper app by WeTransfer on the iPad.
- I chose to do most sketches with a 2B mechanical pencil for finer lines and the ease of use.
- Hand-drawn storyboards and written and typed plot outlines were used in the preparation for the graphic novel.

(Right: Practice panels on Krita software)



Methodology

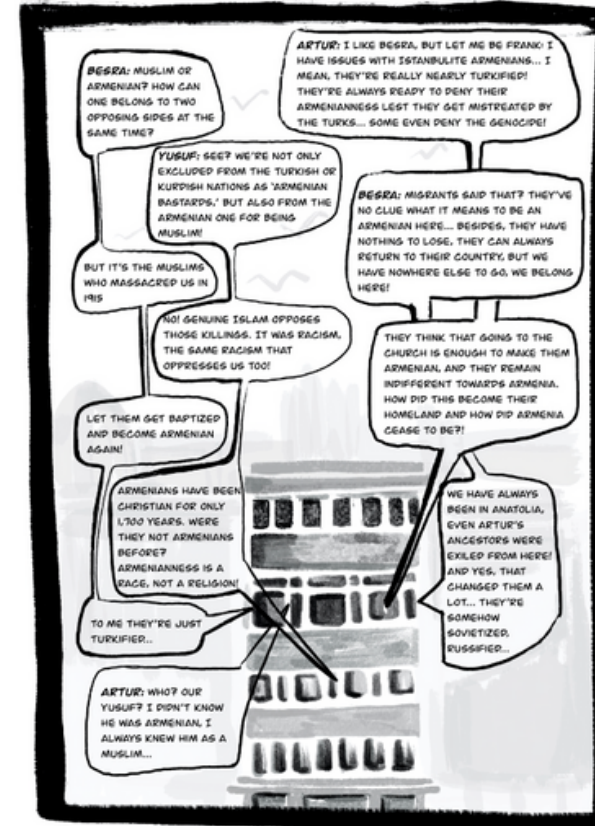
The artistic process

Inspirations:

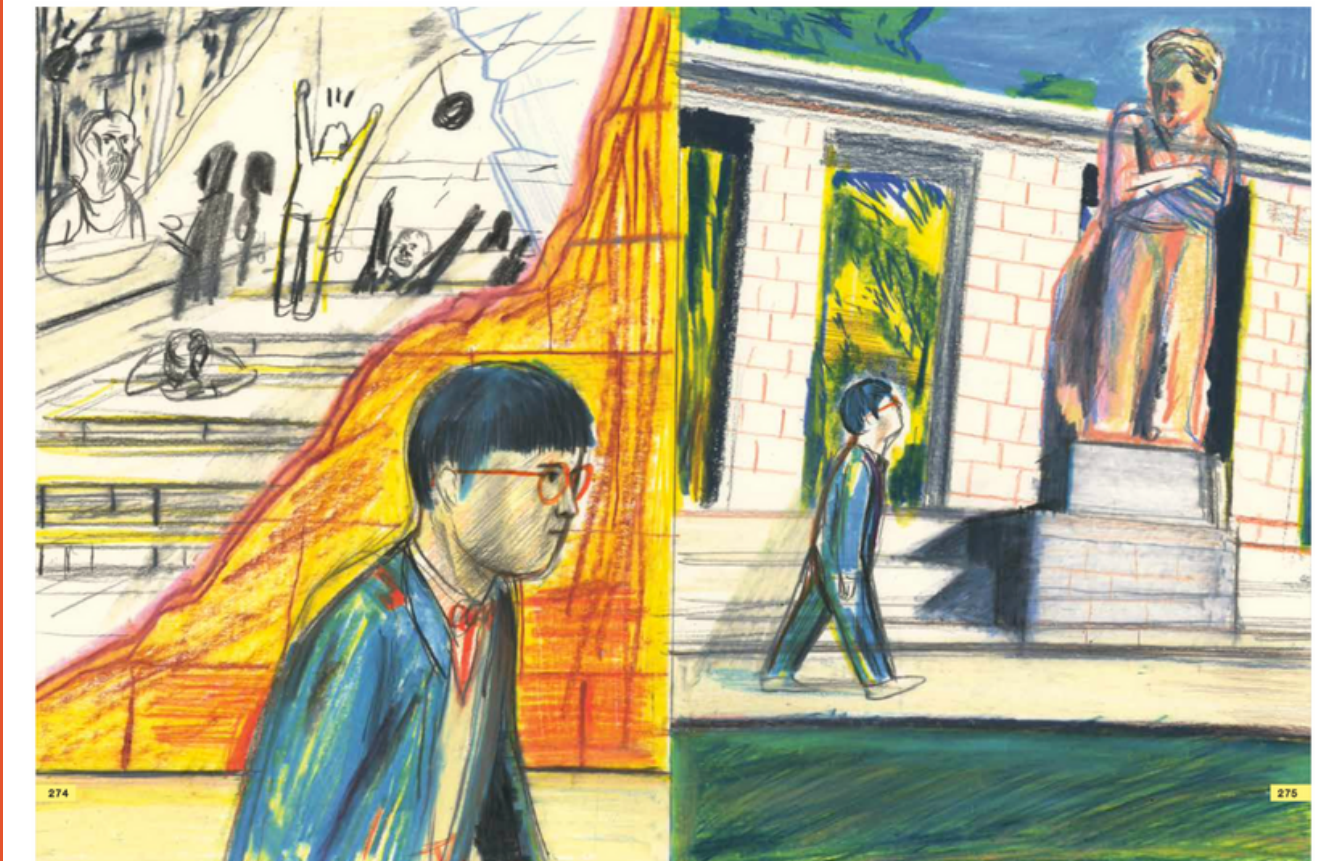
- Tintin panels by Hergé
- "The Structure is Rotten, Comrade, written by Viken Berberian and illustrated by Yann Kebbi" : Armenian locations
- Riad Sattouf's use of colors in his autobiographical graphic novel, "Arab of the Future, Vol. 1"
- Word bubbles in Armenians and Other Armenians in Turkey, a comics rendition of Hrag Papazian's research illustrated by Nooneh Khoodaverdyan



Fig. 1: *Tintin in Tibet*, pg. 15



(Fig. 6: Word bubbles from Armenians and Other Armenians in Turkey)



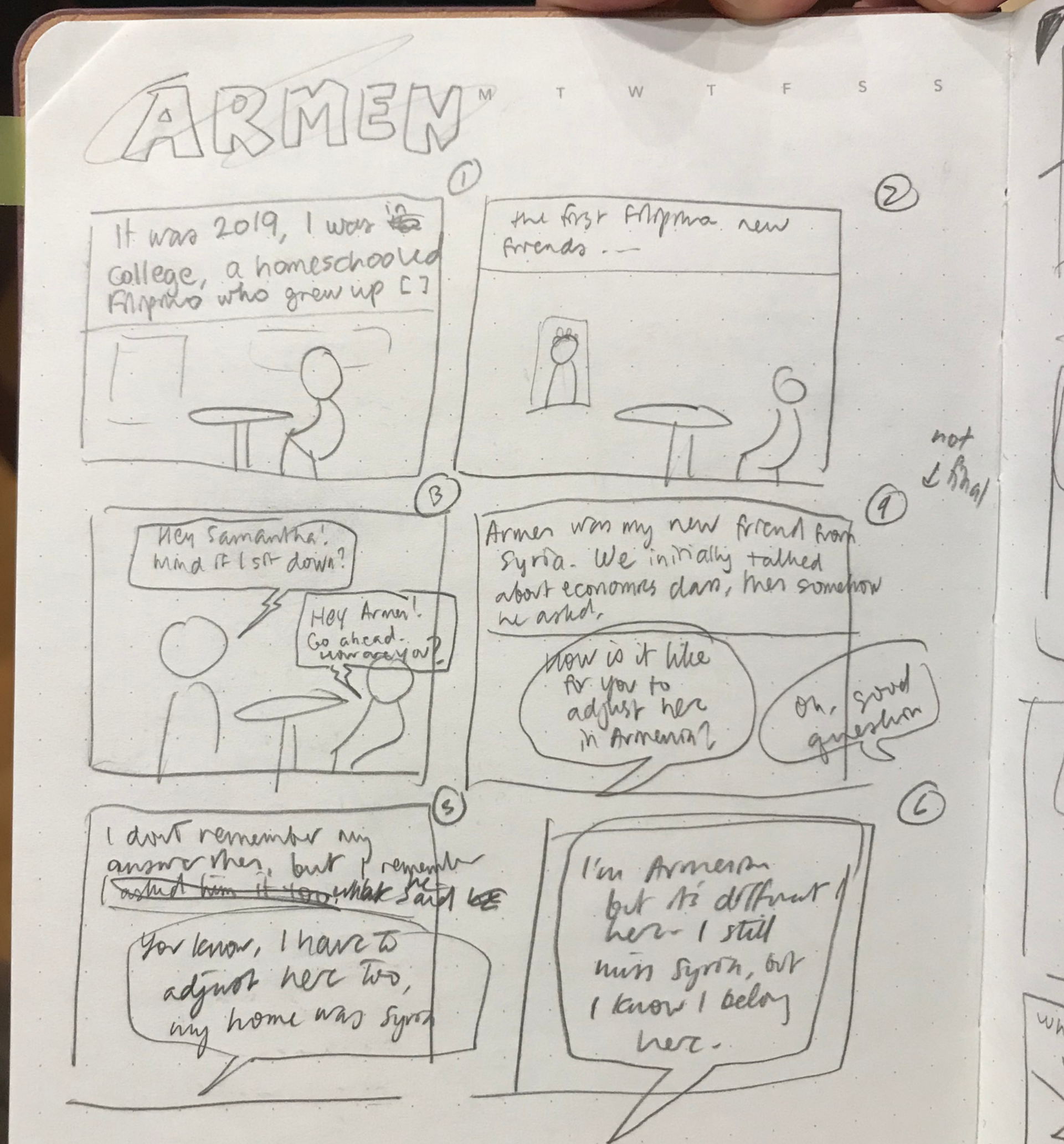
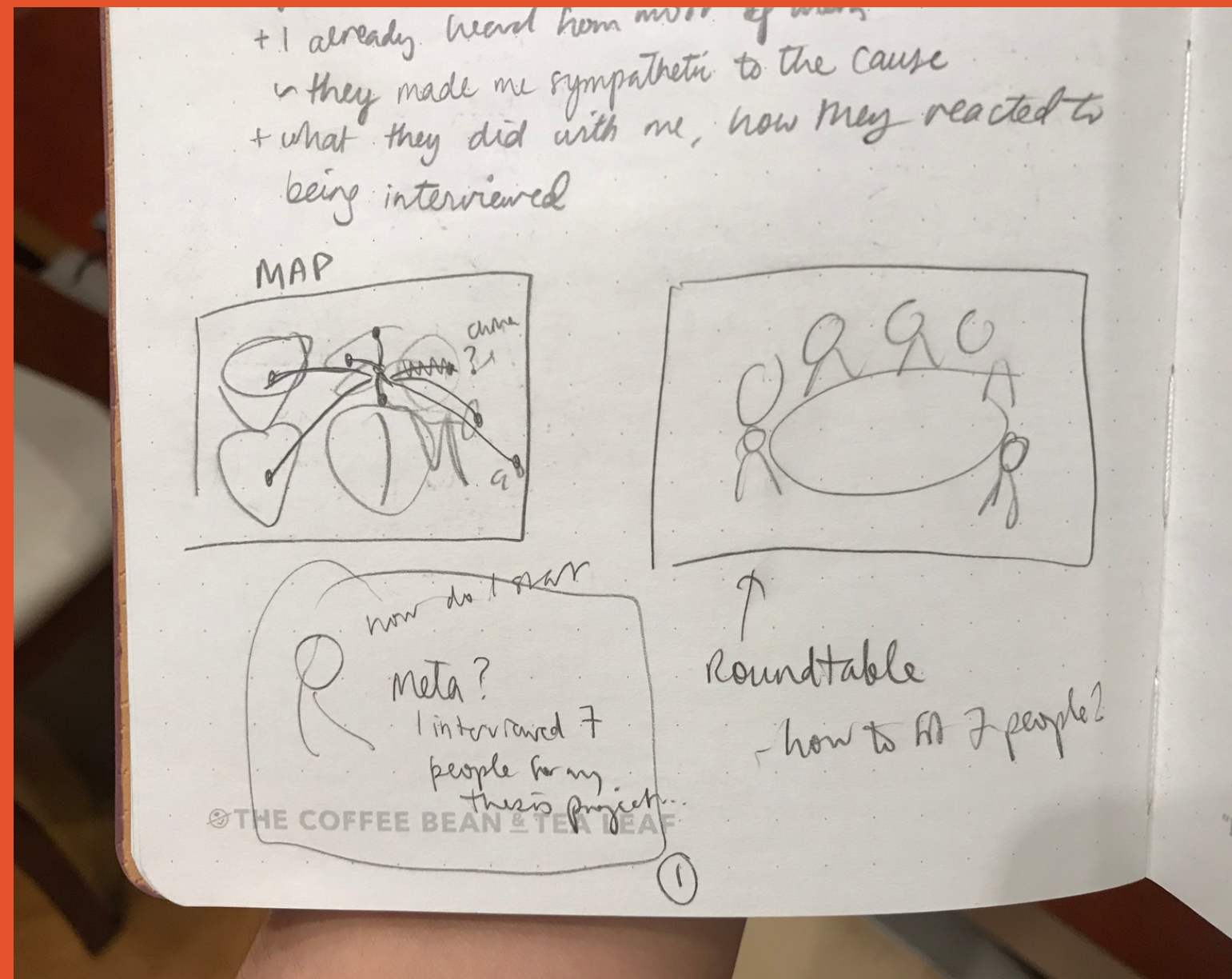
(Fig. 3: Illustrations from *The Structure is Rotten, Comrade* pp. 274-275)



(Fig. 4: Illustrations from *Arab of the Future, Vol. 1*)

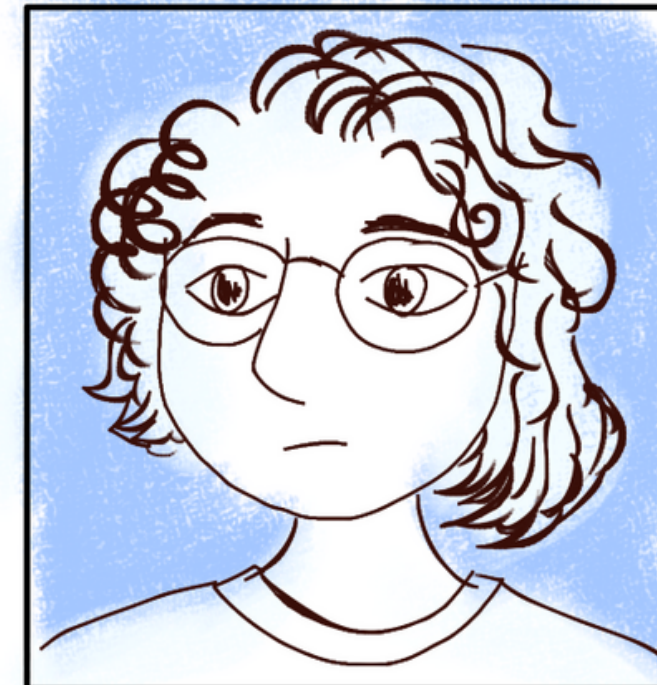
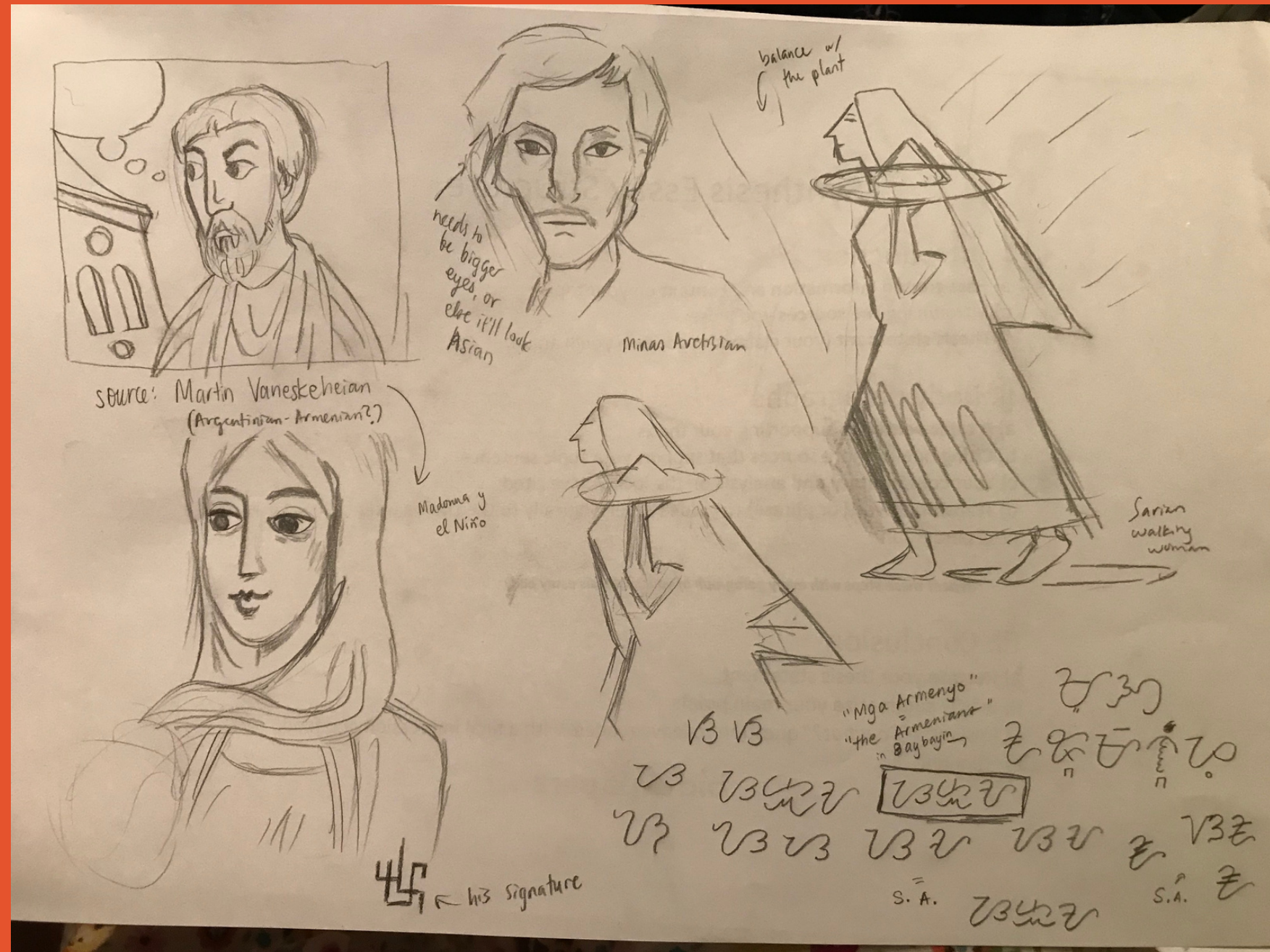
Methodology

The artistic process: Storyboard samples



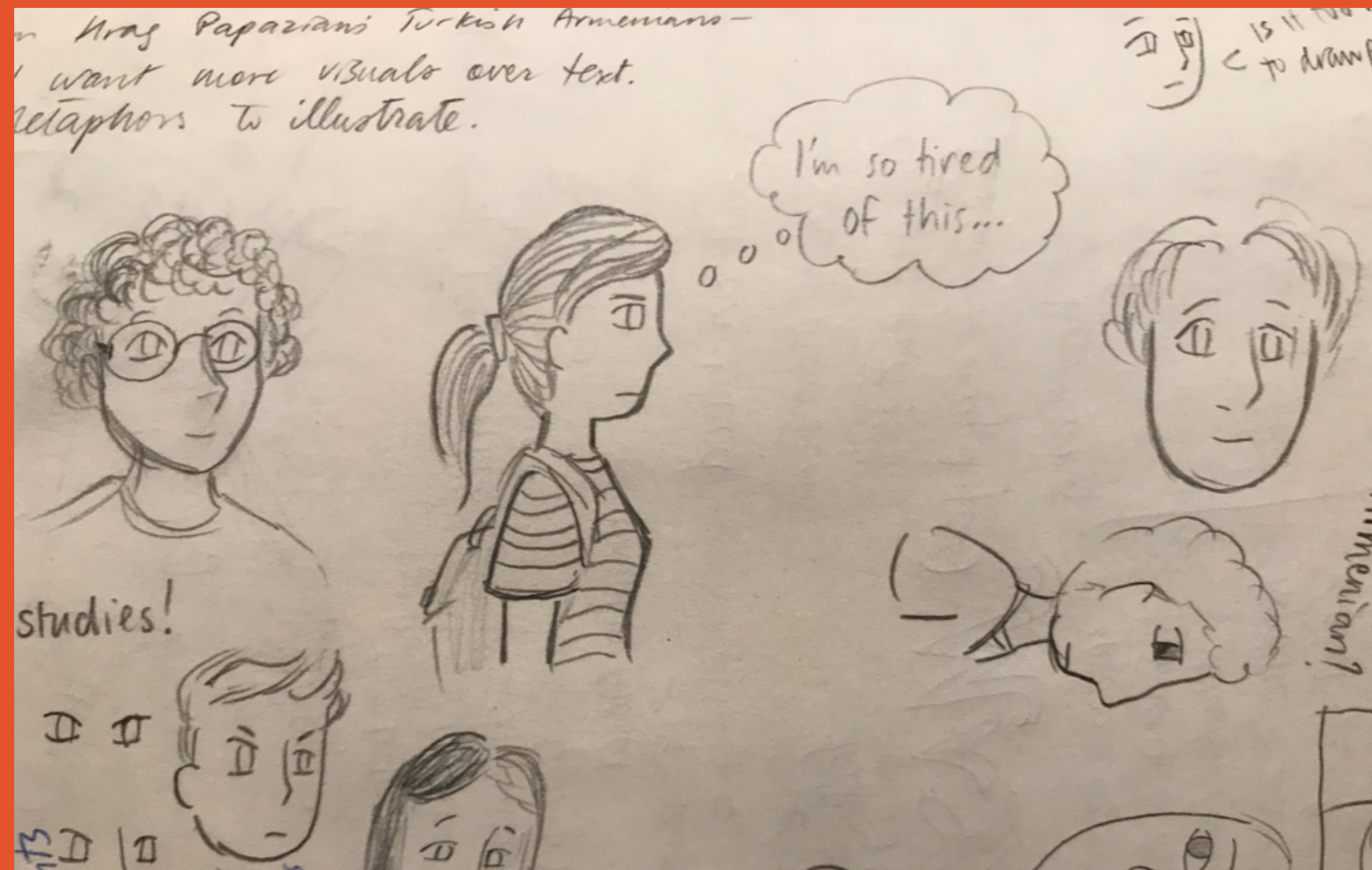
Methodology

The artistic process: Getting into the feel of Armenian art + experiments with brushes in Krita



Methodology

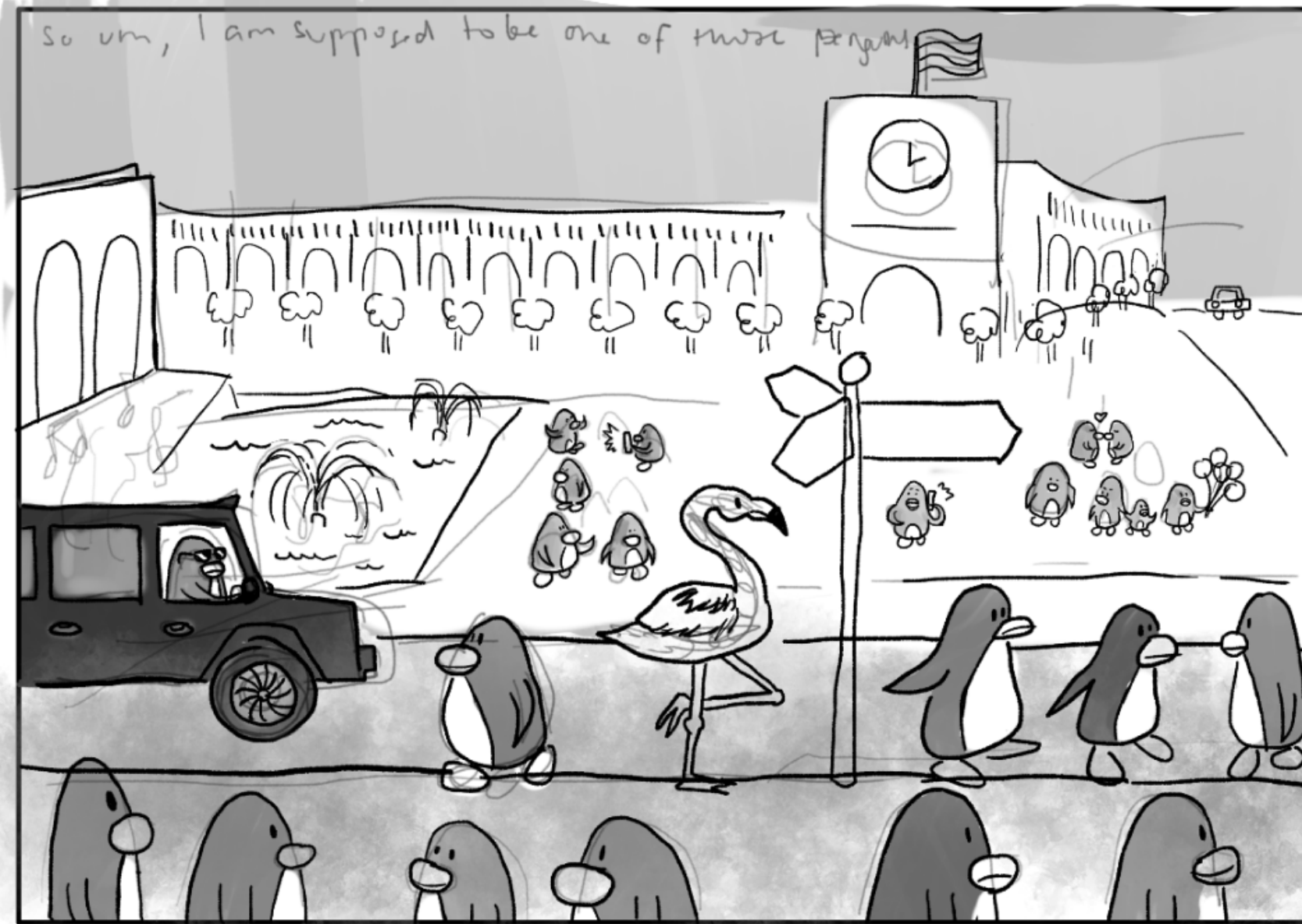
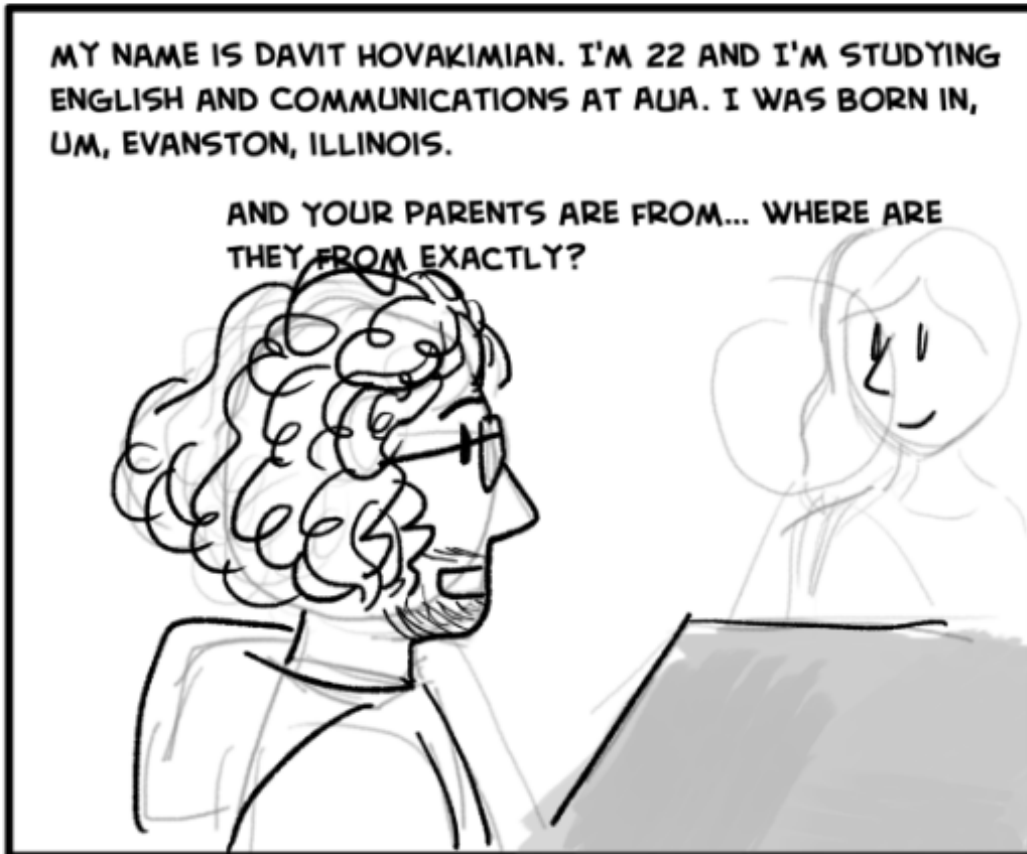
The artistic process: Character design



Methodology

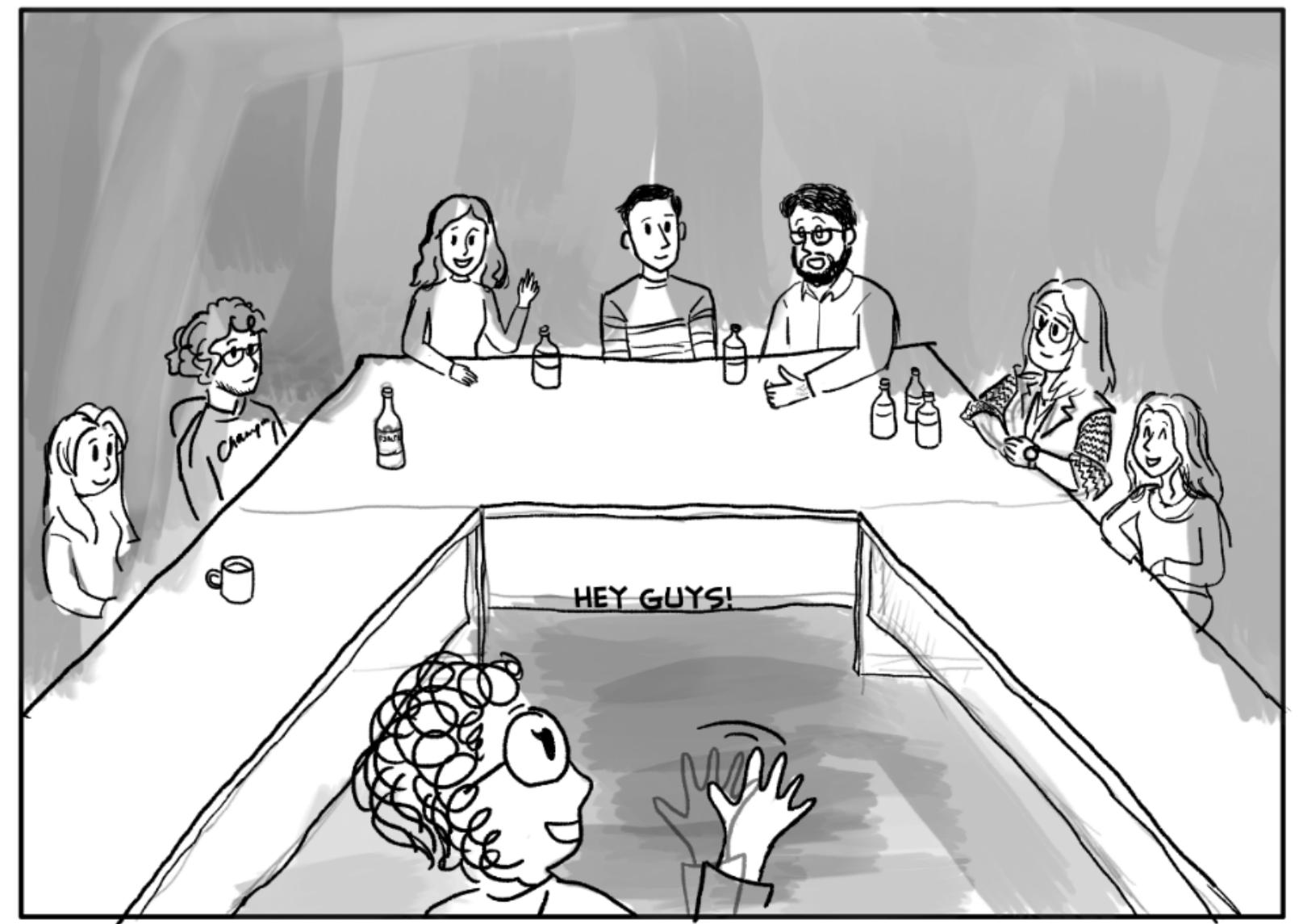
The artistic process: Draft panels

I WEIGHED IN MY MIND HOW BLASPHEMOUS THIS WOULD SOUND TO A TYPICAL ARMENIAN - BUT I UNDERSTOOD HER YEARS OF FRUSTRATION AND HURT, SO I JUST ACCEPTED THIS. AND WITH ALL THESE THINGS RUNNING IN MY HEAD, I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY, EXCEPT TO ASK WHY.



Methodology

The artistic process: Draft panels



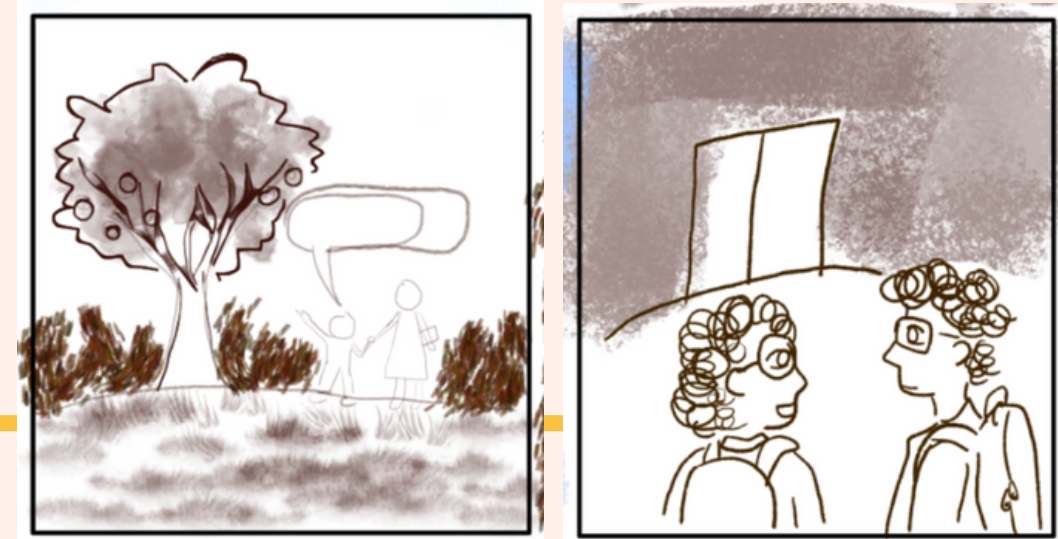
Artist Statement:

As a third culture kid, I found unlikely allies in the Armenian diasporans I befriended as a university student in Armenia. I've always been someone who doesn't fully fit in wherever I've gone, with my experience as a Filipino from Manila, Philippines, who moved to Nepal and then to Armenia. Although I look very different from the Armenian diasporans and our histories and languages are from two very different parts of the world, I found that I could connect deeply with them.

For this project, I chose interviewees in hopes to represent different kinds of diasporans from a wide geographical area. I have represented the "traditional" diaspora (with people from Syria and America), "internal" diaspora (with an interviewee from Russia), "new" diaspora (with an interviewee who moved from Armenia to Uruguay), half-Armenians (from Saipan and the Philippines), and diaspora-adjacent people who feel like in-betweens.

They shared their stories of home, their life stories that could be funny at times and heartbreaking at others, and how they grapple with questions of identity. They spoke of their deep appreciation and pride for being Armenians, and their different types of pain from being misunderstood, misrepresented and separated from the homeland and their people.

Hopefully, this project will help local Armenians understand and empathize with their diasporan countrymen more, and to support them as they work to overcome the challenges they face here. I also hope other diasporan or third culture kid readers - not just from Armenia, but from anywhere in the world - will find themselves in these pages and know that they are not alone, as I myself had felt.



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**Thank You
So Much!**

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