“You’re Not Armenian Enough”: The Diasporans' Journey Back to Armenia and Its Headwinds

by

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Table of Contents

Abstract

Diasporan Armenians, who mainly reside in the United States, France, Russia, Iran, Syria, and Lebanon, constitute an estimated population of seven to nine million, as compared to the local Armenian population which is only less than three million. In the last century, the Armenians were dispersed to Middle Eastern and Western countries from their ancestral homeland in Ottoman Armenia due to the Armenian Genocide from 1915-1923, when about 1.5 million Armenians perished. More recently, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, there has been a lack of employment opportunities in the republic of Armenia, which has caused a growing trend of migration among the local population.

In the present day, there are diasporan Armenians who return to their homeland, yet they face challenges with reintegration, communication, (reverse) culture shock, and discrimination. They must accustom themselves to the norms and cultural elements of the local Armenians in order to fit in, while simultaneously retaining their unique worldviews and hybrid identities as diasporan Armenians.

This project explores the journeys of seven young diasporan Armenians 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. Their stories are depicted through the medium of the graphic novel in order to portray the visual and emotional elements of their narratives.

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"You're Not Armenian Enough"

When my Filipino family moved to Armenia in 2017, one of our first Armenian friends was a diasporan from Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, who had come back to Armenia to live, work and be present for her daughter and grandchildren. I also became aware of other diasporans through CNN's 2014 feature on Armenia where the director of Tumo, Marie Lou Papazian, and diasporan volunteers from Birthright Armenia were interviewed. Many of the nationals I met here would mention that more Armenians lived outside Armenia (10 million, they said) than those who live inside (which was less than three million).

After we had been in Armenia for about two years, my father told us about how he met an Armenian from Los Angeles who had just visited Armenia for the first time. My father recommended places in Armenia for him to go such as Gyumri and Dilijan, and the American-Armenian – who was not aware of those places – remarked, "You know my country even better than I do!" Then, when my family visited the United States in 2019, we even met the Armenian neighbors of our Filipino friend in Sacramento (they gave us a plate full of *ponchiks*) and also paid a brief visit to Glendale and its Karas restaurant, Armenian church, and the Armenian section of Barnes and Noble – all this a few weeks before I entered university back in Armenia.

Yet I did not fully grasp how uniquely different Armenian diasporans were until I began studying at AUA, where I made many diasporan friends and listened to the diverse experiences they had from their lives outside and how they struggled with adjusting to the culture and society here, since they carried different aspects of their

host country's cultures while having to adapt to a new life in Yerevan. Then, the diaspora became more than just a number for me.

Living outside of the Armenian homeland, diasporans generally go to great lengths to preserve their Armenian identity and culture: teaching their children about their history, language, and national symbols; joining Christian Armenian churches such as the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic or Evangelical churches; sharing their culture through food, events, and other elements; and supporting Armenian causes. Some local Armenians in the Republic of Armenia would even say diasporans are more nationalistic than those who live in Armenia because of their fierce devotion to their culture and heritage and how they actively preserve it.

However, the diasporan Armenians who do make the journey to present-day Armenia face challenges with reintegration, communication, (reverse) culture shock, and discrimination. Instead of finding a warm welcome, they tend to feel like outsiders. Since their cultural makeup is a synthesis of both Armenian and their host countries' cultures, their worldviews and cultural behaviors clash with that of the local Armenians, who are, in general, highly traditional and monoethnic. They must accustom themselves to the lifestyle, language, behavior, food, sartorial norms, and other cultural elements of the local Armenians to fit in, while, at the same time, retain their unique perspectives, cultural ties to their diasporan community and host country, and hybrid identities as diasporan Armenians.

This project explores how exactly these Armenian diasporans adjust to a new life in their homeland. Through interviews with a representative sample of young Armenian

diasporans residing in Armenia, this study delineates the major challenges the diasporans face while moving back to Armenia, as well as the strategies they use to adapt to them, all while maintaining their diasporan mindset and keeping ties with their diaspora community. In order to display these results in a way that will engage both diasporans and locals, I use the format of a graphic novel to tell their stories. The interviewees' stories and themes have been illustrated using this medium, which will hopefully 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.

Literature review

The definition of "diaspora" and the diasporans' relation to the homeland

Diasporans are defined 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. (Safran, 2004, p. 10)

The idea of homeland and how diasporans connect to it can also be examined under Benedict Anderson's definition of the nation as an *imagined community:* it is "imagined" because "the members of even the smallest nation will never [know or meet] most of their fellow-members… yet in the minds of each lives the image of their

communion" (Anderson, 1991, p. 6), and it is a community because, "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson, 1991, p. 7). Diasporans relate to other members of their nation by feeling a deep connection with them, regardless of whether they know them personally or not. Diasporans, regardless of socioeconomic background, also tend to form communities abroad in order to preserve their idea of belonging to the same nation that they are physically separated from. Their sense of belonging to a community is also part of why they desire to return to the homeland.

The idea of homeland and the sense of community shared through it becomes more acute when one is separated from it by distance and time, as Boym (2001) posits: "One becomes aware of the collective frameworks of memories when one distances oneself from one's community or when that community itself enters the moment of twilight" (p. 54). Diasporans then maintain ties to their nation or homeland through traditions and the keeping of symbols, which is what Boym (2001) defines as restorative or invented tradition, which is a "set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual of symbolic nature which seeks to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition which automatically implies continuity of the past" (p. 42). This is not a "pure act of social constructivism; rather, it builds on the sense of loss of community and cohesion and offers a comforting collective script for individual longing" (Boym, 2001, p. 42).

Diasporans also experience nostalgia, which is "an ache of temporal distance and displacement," and this displacement is "cured by a return home" (Boym, 2001, p. 44).

Those that do return to their homeland do so mainly because of a sense of loyalty to their nation and culture, external factors such as war or economic instability in their host countries, or both. Diasporans also seek to end the feeling of alienation that causes conflicts in their identity, and feel a sense of belonging to their homeland. "Homecoming – return to the imagined community – is a way of patching up the gap of alienation, turning intimate longing into belonging" (Boym, 2001, p. 255). Yet there are still numerous challenges regarding belonging due to the differences between diasporans and locals, as well as differences within different diasporas of the same ethnic group themselves.

Return migrants can be further categorized into two main types, as formulated by Tsuda (cited in Kasbarian, 2015): "the return migration of first-generation diasporic peoples who move back to their homeland (country of birth)" and "ethnic return migration, which refers to later-generation descendants of diasporic peoples who 'return' to their countries of ancestral origin after living outside their ethnic homeland for generations" (p. 364). Kasbarian (2015) highlights the importance of the phenomenon of diasporan return as it has been a recent focus in Diaspora Studies, Migration Studies, Ethnicity and Nationalism Studies, Citizenship Studies, and Cultural Studies.

Comparison of the Armenian diaspora experience with other diasporas

Historically, the Armenians, who comprise one of the long-established diaspora groups along with the Jewish and Greek diasporas (Kokot, et al. 2004), have been dispersed out of their homeland for centuries, mainly because of violence and conflict

(Bolsajian, 2018). This research focuses on those that 'return' to their present-day homeland in the Republic of Armenia (*Hayastan*). These returning Armenian diasporans mostly come from the Americas, the Middle East, Europe and Russia. There is a large group of diasporans whose ancestors come from Western Armenia, which was once located in the Ottoman Empire. Many of them fled Ottoman Turkey because of the 1915 genocide and the preceding massacres. Another group of diasporans come from Eastern Armenia, which is the present-day Republic of Armenia in the southern Caucasus. There are also other groups called the "internal" diaspora of Armenians based in post-Soviet states, which is composed almost entirely of economic migrants, and the "new" diaspora of Eastern Armenians who migrated to the West (Kasbarian, 2015). Additionally, the "classic" diasporans from Western Armenia and the "internal" and "new" diasporans can also be called "third culture kids". Third culture kids are people that interact with many cultures but do not have "full ownership in any", and yet they do not fully belong to their parents' home culture nor the culture(s) in which they grow up (Pollock & Van Reken, as cited in Hopkins, 2015).

Two diasporas that are similar to the Armenian diaspora are the Latvian and the Irish. The Latvian homeland, like Armenia, is also a post-Soviet state and their diaspora mainly includes those who avoided invasion by a foreign power – the Russians – and those who became economic migrants in Germany (Hinkle, 2006). As some Armenian diasporans are motivated to return by a sense of responsibility to rebuild the homeland (Kasbarian, 2015, pp. 374-5), Latvian-Americans also feel a duty to Latvia, although they do not personally return to settle in the country as much as Armenian diasporans

come to live in Armenia. Instead, they act upon this sense of responsibility to the homeland in other ways: Hinkle (2006) categorizes five ways migrants in America help Latvia: by investing, using organizations to sponsor projects in Latvia, working or volunteering there, sponsoring locals to study or work abroad, and interpreting between locals and Latvian-Americans (p. 63).

The Armenian and Irish peoples have common experiences in their history, as "both have seen their countries invaded and ravaged" (Hewsen, 2001, p. 8), with foreign invaders attempting to destroy their nations – the Armenians by the Turks and the Irish by the British; the Armenians lost a third of their population in the 1894-1921 massacres, while the Irish lost almost the same proportion of their people in the great famine of 1878; and "both peoples have been scattered… around the globe and have created far-flung diasporas" (Hewsen, 2001, p. 8). They are also both classified as 'victim' diasporas along with Jews, Palestinians and Africans (Pattie, 1999, p. 81).

The Irish and Armenian diasporans also share certain motivations to return to their homeland. Irish economic migrants who returned to Ireland beginning in the 1990s cited a reason for return, which was to raise their children in Ireland: they explicitly stated wanting their children to be "brought up Irish" (Ní Laoire, 2008, p. 8). As an Armenian parallel, Kasbarian (2015) notes that those Armenian diasporans with a nationalist motivation of diasporan return viewed it as desirable because 'their (future) children would be "brought up Armenian"' (p. 374). Some of the Irish returned to Ireland also because of the emergence of better economic opportunities back home (Ní Laoire, 2008, p. 5). In contrast, Armenians from the Middle East were forced to move to

Armenia because of civil war, political unrest or economic instability in their host countries (Kasbarian, 2015, p. 369).

While Irish return migrants are "a relatively invisible population, overshadowed in public consciousness by the apparent visibility of the non-Irish component of immigration" perhaps because of their "whiteness and English-speaking" (Ní Laoire, 2008, p. 3), Armenian diasporans stand out because of their different dialect or language (with the exception of those who can speak Eastern Armenian) and culture. This may cause a rift between the diasporan Armenians and the locals. Additionally, some Armenian immigrants from *Hayastan* who moved to the United States treated those diasporans who could not speak the Armenian language or were from mixed parentage as "lesser people" (Pattie, 1999, p. 86).

More generally, 'refugees and diaspora peoples are seen as somehow inherently "wrong" by many' (Pattie, 1999, p. 89). This rejection is also found in the Latvian diaspora, as Hinkle (2006) cites one Latvian diasporan who explained that "they could not return to Latvia permanently, because they are not accepted in Latvia, are not wanted, and feel rejected", perhaps due to unmet expectations regarding elected diasporan officials, as another diasporan observed (p. 56). Hinkle also brought the example of a Czech author's novel about a returned Czech emigre who "returns to her native country after twenty years of exile in Paris and finds that no one is interested in her experience" (p. 57), which is another type of rejection. The concept of having a hybrid identity for a diasporan could be a source of insecurity and confusion, and coming to the homeland amplifies it (Kasbarian, 2015; Pattie, 1999).

The thorny relationship between return diasporans and local Armenians can result in the diasporans feeling unwelcomed, excluded and only perceived as "endless source of resources for the homeland" by the locals, and the locals feel inferior to the diasporans (Kasbarian, 2015, p. 373). There is also a "local/*aghpar* (meaning 'brother' but used as a derogatory term for Armenians from abroad) split" that was created during the Soviet repatriation in the 20th century (Panossian, 2006, p. 362) – and this continues up to today, as I have heard the term "*aghpar"* from my diasporan friend as we discussed the discrimination he faces as a diasporan Armenian.

Reintegration programs for diasporans

Upon coming to Armenia, diasporan Armenians have the opportunity to take part in government programs or make use of assistance of NGOs facilitating the diasporan integration process. The Ministry of Diaspora is the government body responsible for the integration process of diasporans. They have programs such as *iGorts*, which supports diasporans to work in the Armenian government; the Employment Support Program for Lebanese Armenians (in cooperation with Repat Armenia Foundation); and the GovTech Launchpad bootcamp that supports startups that assist the reintegration of Armenian diasporans (Govtech launchpad, n.d.).

The two major NGOs that facilitate the integration of diasporans in Armenia are RepatArmenia and Birthright Armenia. RepatArmenia, founded by a team of diasporans in 2012, assists repatriates with integration in Armenia. They offer repatriation guides, employment support, networking events, and one-on-one consultations (RepatArmenia, n.d.). Birthright Armenia, founded by diasporan Edele Hovnanian, is an immersion

program targeted towards young diasporans and provides an avenue for them to volunteer and do internships, live with a host family, practice the Armenian language, and participate in forums and gatherings (Birthright Armenia, n.d.). They reimburse travel costs based on a specified time period of volunteering (Birthright Armenia, n.d.).

Birthright Armenia is based on the Israeli model and their programs to facilitate diasporan reintegration. The Israeli Ministry of Aliyah and Integration supports Jews returning for the first time to Israel by putting them into integration programs in which they learn the Hebrew language, become connected to a community of fellow diasporans, and and are assisted with living in Israel. They may receive financial assistance (for example, the government covers their living expenses for the first six months in Israel), study and work opportunities (such as six-month language classes), and different housing options - whether in an independently-chosen apartment, *kibbutz,* or temporary living quarters (Ministry of Aliyah and Integration, 2022).

Using oral history to gather diasporan stories

Collecting the experiences of people such as the diasporan Armenians using oral history is important "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, as it causes those who analyze it to relate with the subjects to some degree. Oral history also has "a valuable role not only in probing motivations, but also in émigré identity reevaluation and, in a small way, in processes of reconciliation and bridge-building" (Hinkle, 2006, p.

49). Life stories help "disparate groups", such as members of the diaspora and the locals empathize and connect, when they would not otherwise (Hinkle, 2006, p. 49). Since they have a different experience from those who were born and are living in the homeland, they do not feel like they fully belong to people there. The reception of experiences of the local from the diasporan could help facilitate healing and continue empathy. "Because trauma returns in disjointed fragments in the memory of the survivor, the listener has to let these trauma fragments make their impact both on him and on the witness. Testimony is the narrative's address to hearing […]" (Laub, 1992, p. 71)/

The graphic novel as a vessel for diasporan stories

To express the diasporans' stories, the graphic novel medium can be used, as it has previously been employed to teach history to readers and inform them about social issues (Davis, 2005). A didactic method can be seen in graphic novels like *Persepolis* (2007) by Marjane Satrapi, which teaches Western readers to have a more realistic (and relatable) image of the East and "un-demonizing" Iran by showing the ordinary lives of Iranians who are against the fundamentalist government and its ideals (Naghibi & O'Malley, 2005). Similarly, the more recent *Illegal* (2017) by Eoin Colfer and Andrew Donkin informs readers about the plight of illegal African immigrants through the story of two Ghanaian brothers who cross from Africa to Italy by a perilous boat ride. There is also an existing host of graphic novels dealing with diaspora, national identity, history and biography, some of which include the seminal *Maus* (1997) by Art Spiegelman, which "transformed the status of comics as a legitimate vehicle for the telling of history"

(Frey and Noy, as cited in Davis, 2005); the autobiographical *Arab of the Future* series by Riad Sattouf, a Syrian-Frenchman; *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home* (2019) by Nora Krug, which is a historical autobiography of a descendant of Nazis and her struggle to accept her German identity and history; and the recently-released *Halina Filipina,* which is about a half-Filipina, half-American from New York who visits Manila for the first time.

The graphic novel as a medium does not just teach readers but also challenges mainstream, hegemonic narratives and gives voice to the narratives of minorities, those whose alternative views have never been heard of before, or are being silenced. Traditionally, underground comix played this role in the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S. and U.K., with the emergence of indie comics that had explicit or implicit agendas. Davis (2005) cites Joseph Witek as saying that "comics [is] a readymade tool for critiquing and subverting the values of mainstream America" (p. 267) and writes that the experimental methods and views represented in "transcultural autobiographies" such as Satrapi's *Persepolis* are anti-hegemonic and allow for marginalized individuals to tell their stories and "challenge textual authority and prescriptive paradigms" (Davis, 2005, p. 264). The nature of comics as an anti-hegemonic medium and as a critique of mainstream values may also be used by diasporan Armenians to challenge the hegemonic view of the locals about them.

Regarding using art to portray diasporan stories and their experience of nostalgia and longing for home, Boym (2001) 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 useful to examine an emotional, personal, and cultural experience.

Characterizing diasporans in a graphic novel

Diasporans' stories make for compelling narratives, and as they go through unique struggles, they themselves have their own idealized versions of themselves in their minds. 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 to the previous phenomenon described by Boym 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. Freud (as cited in Boym, p. 54) also writes that "returning home" occurs through analysis and recognition of early traumas.

Leaving home and being separated from the homeland for long periods of time is also a form of grief. Freud (as cited in Boym, p. 55) defines mourning as "connected to the loss of... some abstraction, such as a homeland, liberty or an ideal." Using the genre of comics – which is closely connected to childhood – to portray the diasporans' stories can be a vehicle for reflective nostalgia and healing from the past. As opposed to restorative nostalgia – an idealistic form of nostalgia which seeks to restore and rebuild the past exactly as it was, reflective nostalgia accepts and lingers on the ruins of the past (Boym, 2001, p. 41), and is a "form of deep mourning that performs a labor of grief through pondering pain and through play that points to the future" (Boym, 2001, p. 55). While the diasporans ponder pain through the interviews and the graphic novel's narrative, they are also portrayed in comic-book form, and this becomes a reminder of childhood "play", which can enable them to make peace with the complicated, bittersweet difficulty of their pasts.

The medium can also be used to allow local Armenian readers to empathize with the "othered" diaspora – who are different from them due to their diasporan culture, behavior, and background – 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). This can be seen in Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2007)*,* where Satrapi draws her childhood self in a cartoonish, "naive, childlike" style and 'effectively "camouflages" the complex politics of identity and nation

Marji's story raises in the guise of simplicity and universal accessibility' (Naghibi & O'Malley, 2005, p. 234).

Hirsch (1997) also writes about the idea of placing ourselves in the shoes of someone who has experienced indescribable trauma as she examines the inclusion of a real photograph of Holocaust survivor Vladek Spiegelman in the graphic novel *Maus* (where characters are represented anthropomorphically). The photograph is one in which Vladek, after escaping Auschwitz, is wearing a clean prison camp uniform at a photo studio so that he can send the photograph to his wife, who survived the camp separately. Hirsch (1997) writes,

> Breaking the frame, looking intently at the viewer/reader, Vladek's picture dangerously relativizes the identity of the survivor. As listeners of his testimony, as viewers of Art's translation and transmission of that testimony, we are invited to imagine ourselves inside that picture. (p. 39)

As Vladek looks directly at us from his picture, we empathize with him. Hirsch then quotes Laub:

> "As one comes to know the survivor, one really comes to know oneself; and that is no simple task. In the center of this massive dedicated effort remains a danger, a nightmare, a fragility, a woundedness that defies all healing" (p. 39).

Though the trauma of a genocide survivor such as Vladek cannot be equated with that of the diasporan moving to their homeland (even those who came from war or other similar ordeals), I believe the act of catharsis found in the sharing of stories does offer relief and healing to the person who experienced trauma, and further opens the

listener to empathize with the speaker. The fact that there is also a listener on the other end - in this project's case, both myself and the future readers of the graphic novel - may also comfort the (diasporan) interviewees from the struggles they have faced and let them know that their voices are being heard. Furthermore, by representing the stories of diasporans in comics with characters in cartoon form, this may help local Armenian readers empathize with diasporans through the act of stepping into their cartoon selves' shoes, so to speak.

Research question

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.

Methodology

This graphic novel project, entitled "You're Not Armenian Enough", has created a space for diasporans to tell their stories, in order for them to feel that their voices are heard, and give them the avenue to share the changes that they want to see implemented regarding their integration to local Armenian society. 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.

Choosing the interviewees

Interviews were held with Armenian diasporans who have moved to Armenia, as

well as diasporan-adjacent individuals, with 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. The interviewees' transitions to living in Armenia also coincided with the teenage anxieties of fitting in and grappling with the increasing responsibilities of adulthood - making their experience a double struggle. Additionally, they still have not "fully flown the nest" and are still considerably connected to their families in Armenia and abroad, which influences the management of their Armenian identity.

I had tried to represent Armenians from most continents or major geographical areas on the globe in order to display the diversity of experiences and, as much as possible, to be inclusive of the cultures of different diasporas around the world. The interviewees represented some of the "traditional" diaspora – Syria, Russia, and America; the "internal" diaspora based in post-Soviet states, and "new" diaspora of Eastern Armenians who migrated to the West. Apart from these categories there are half-Armenian diasporans from Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands, as well as a non-diasporan who neither fully identifies with the diaspora nor the local Armenian community. These individuals were also chosen based on the stories they had told me prior to starting this project about their struggles with adjusting to life in Armenia,

experiences in their host countries, their origins, and their identity.

The question of disclosing participants' identities

The topic of representation in comics also raises the question of whether to illustrate interviewees with identifiable characteristics and retain their names and identities in the graphic novel, or, instead, to protect them by keeping them anonymous. Ní Laoire (2007) writes that the argument for anonymity is that the participants (interviewees) can be given a safe space to share their stories, minimizing the risk of sharing sensitive information and protecting their reputation. On the other hand, the argument against anonymity is that it reduces the authenticity of the story (Ní Laoire, 2007). In their research with Irish return migrants based in southern Ireland, anonymity was used in situations where the participants recounted recent events, told stories that had wider emotional resonance, and when participants shared experiences that challenged the dominant narratives (Ní Laoire, 2007). The aforementioned factors are more or less present with the Armenian diasporans interviewed.

However, I followed the approach of Ní Laoire's research team by giving interviewees the choice to stay anonymous or not, in order to play to the strengths of both sides of the anonymity debate recounted by Ní Laoire. One of the interviewees requested to stay anonymous and has been given a pseudonym, although they allowed me to use their likeness for the illustrations.

The interviewees' backgrounds

Armen Torossian was born in Aleppo, Syria, in 2000. His ancestors were survivors of the Armenian Genocide. During the outbreak of the Syrian War in late 2011, he and

his family moved to a village in Aleppo and eventually to the coastal city of Latakia. Following his father's passing in 2017, Armen, his mother and older brother moved to Armenia to get a better education.

Davit Hovakimian was born in Evanston, Illinois, U.S., in 2000. His father moved to the United States from Iran before the Iranian Revolution in 1979. His mother was born in Uzbekistan. moved to Armenia in the 80s, then emigrated to the United States. Davit moved to Armenia to pursue an education at the American University of Armenia in 2019.

Anita Akopian was born in Moscow, Russia, in 2000. Her father had been living and working in Russia before he married and moved his wife from Armenia to Russia. Her family would visit their province, Martuni, in Armenia every summer. Anita then moved to Armenia in 2017 to begin her university studies.

Goharik Martirosyan was 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 and also ran a bistro there to support her parents. In 2021, she decided to study in Armenia and moved here.

Stephanyl Marashlian was born in Kidapawan City, Philippines, in 2001. Her father is an Armenian from Syria, while her mother is a Filipino from the Tagum province. They both met while working in Kuwait. Stephanyl spent most of her childhood in the Philippines, although her family lived in North Carolina in the United States for two years. Her family then moved to Armenia when she was 15. She is now pursuing a degree in medicine.

Keghani Chaparian was 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 with her mother and two younger sisters, and also visiting her father in California several times. She moved to Armenia with her family, including her father, stepmother and sisters, in 2021 and is in her freshman year in the American University of Armenia.

Artyom Stepanyan was born in New Delhi, India, in 2001. His parents were born in Armenia and have been working as diplomats. In his early childhood, he spent a few years in Washington, D.C., in the U.S., as his parents were assigned there, and also resided for several years in Beijing, China, and Brussels, Belgium. They moved to Armenia for a few years in between his parents' assignments, where he attended elementary and middle school. He moved back to Armenia as a 17-year-old and attended high school for a semester here, before entering university in 2019.

The process of conducting interviews and the interview guidelines

I decided to use a one-on-one, in-depth interview format lasting from one to two hours because I wanted to gather the unique insights of each individual in order for them to explore and explain their struggles with living in Armenia as diasporans or diasporan-adjacent individuals, as well as to listen to their experiences in their host countries and how they define their own Armenian and personal identity.

As for the interview questions, I began with general demographic questions, including where their parents were from in order to get their diasporic background. While preparing for my second interview, I realized that I wanted the interviewees to

paint a picture of their lives in their host countries to include in my graphic novel, for the benefit of local Armenians who might have no idea or incorrect conceptions of the contexts in the diasporans' host countries. Thus, the rest of the interviews had that component. Then, I asked how their families and communities in the diaspora helped preserve their Armenian identity, what Armenian identity means to them, how they imagined Armenia to be before they moved here, and what their impressions were once they got here. Vital to my research question was to ask what their initial challenges were when they moved to Armenia and the continuous challenges they face up till now, so I asked specific sub-questions to glean a fuller understanding. I also asked if they faced discrimination as diasporan Armenians or Armenians from outside. Finally, I asked for their advice and recommendations to the government or to local Armenians regarding how they should treat Armenian diasporans, and what they would advise to diasporans who are considering returning here.

I contacted the interviewees through our social media correspondences (Instagram, Messenger, and Discord) and conducted interviews in AUA meeting rooms and classrooms and over Zoom. The interviews I conducted lasted from 1 hour and 12 minutes to 1 hour and 50 minutes. I transcribed the interviews mainly by using ExpressScribe and OTranscribe, with speech to text AIs from Google Docs and http://textfromtospeech.com/ to assist me with the last three interviews.

Extracting stories from the interviews

I decided to cull common themes from the seven interviews, starting with 22 themes and whittling them down to five, namely: childhood/origins, identity, adjusting

to Armenia, family relationships, and coming-of-age. Because of the overwhelming amount of data I still had under those five themes, I decided to prioritize two of those themes: identity and adjusting to Armenia. However, I also wanted to describe the lesser-known lifestyles of the people from Uruguay and Saipan and other relevant, surprising or important aspects from the other countries that would benefit the knowledge of local Armenian readers.

I had a difficult time deciding how to write the introduction, as the interviewees' stories and the order in which I would tell them were easier to arrange. I begin the graphic novel's narrative briefly with the story of how I came to Armenia and an interaction with Armen Torossian during our first year at university, which inspired my research question for the project. Also, I spent some time considering which people should speak first and how I should introduce the characters. For the former, I decided to introduce them according to how long they have lived in Armenia, generally. For the latter, I decided to frame the introductions through how I met each person because I want the readers to personally connect with them, and not see them just as random people I picked for the novel.

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, adding a human guide for the readers, with my own acknowledged biases.

My approach is informed by "Reading Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as postmodern ethnography" by Rosemary V. Hathaway (2011). Postmodernist ethnography is understanding how there is no one "truth" of an account and the ethnographer's bias influences the telling of the subject's story and yet it remains a functional and authentic story. Putting myself in the graphic novel as a character acknowledges any biases I, as the researcher, may have. I may also be biased in that I can relate deeply to the diasporans' experience, so I may "side" with them – although I have also struggled with accepting other Filipino diasporans, such as Filipino-Americans who I feel are not fully Filipino because of their accent (our previous colonizer's accent that somewhat makes me feel inferior). I have explored these inner conflicts in the portions of when my character interacts with diasporans.

The artistic process

As for the creative project, the medium used for the graphic novel is digital, using Krita software with a Wacom One drawing pad, and initial sketches were done with paper and pencil and on the Paper app by WeTransfer on the iPad. I have usually completed comics in the traditional format, but for the ease of editing and this project's time constraints, I went with the digital method. I did make initial physical sketches with pencil. Hand-drawn storyboards and written and typed plot outlines were used in the preparation for the graphic novel.

Panel format

The graphic novel mostly follows a traditional, lined comic-page nine-panel format inspired by the European *bande dessinée* due to its more rectangular format and amount of panels. I diverted to other panel sizes when narrative emphasis called for them.

For instance, I used wider panels, as seen in Hergé's *Tintin* series, to show distance and landscapes or half- to full-page panels to emphasize crowds or the important part of an interviewee's story.

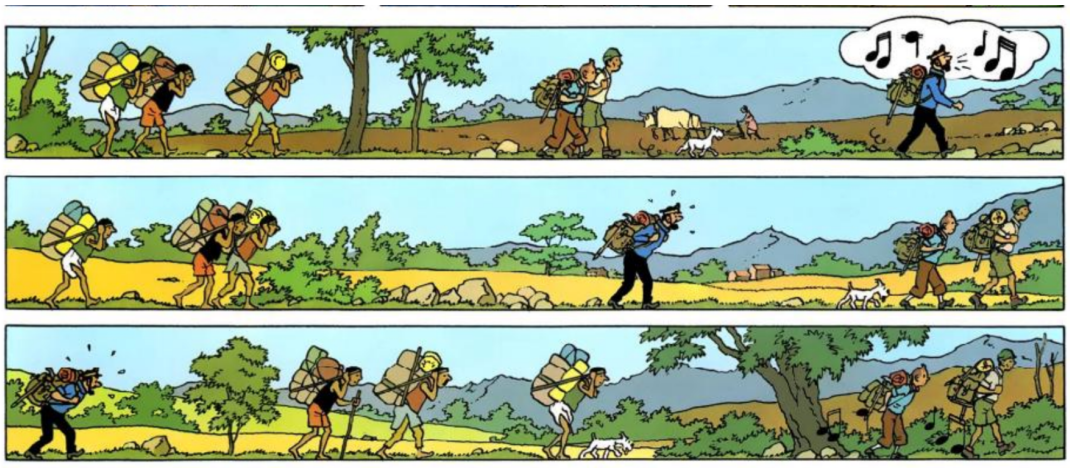


Figure 1 *Tintin in Tibet (1959)*

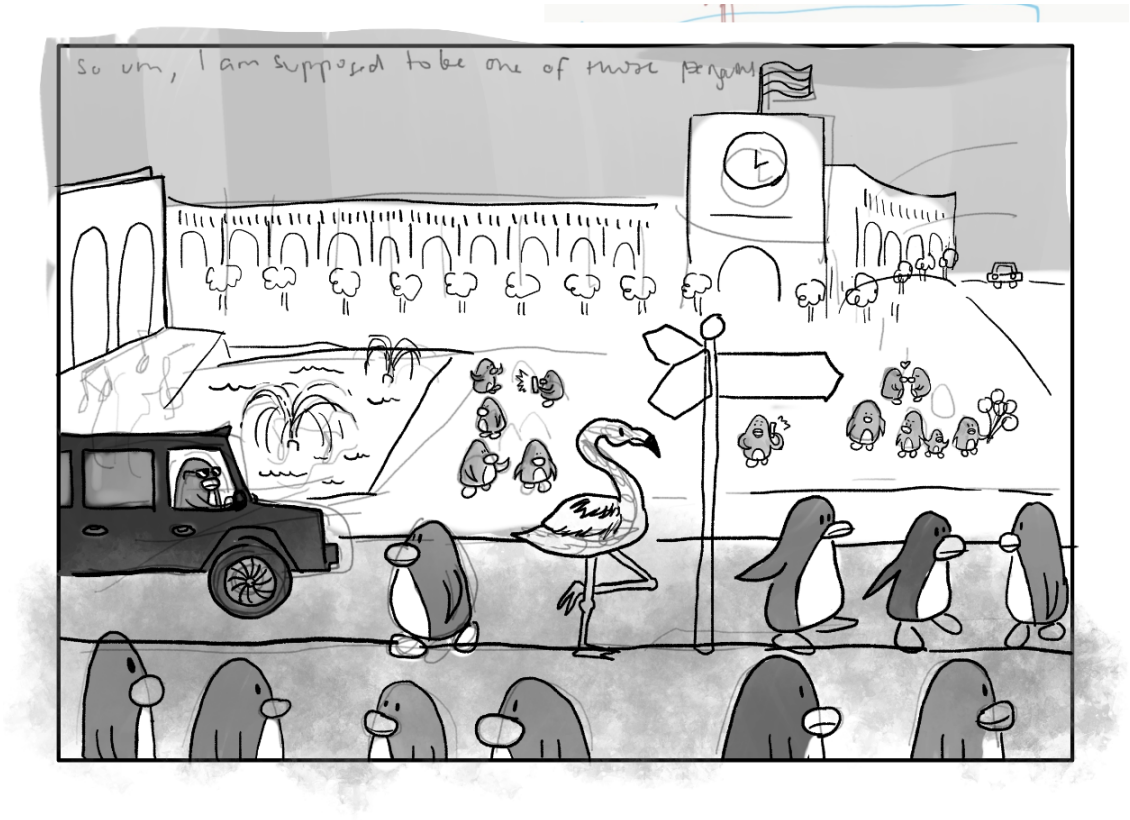


Figure 2 *A half-page panel draft illustrating a metaphor my interviewee used: she feels like a flamingo among the penguins.*

I have also been inspired by camera angles from filmmaking such as the two-person, close-up, and side profile.

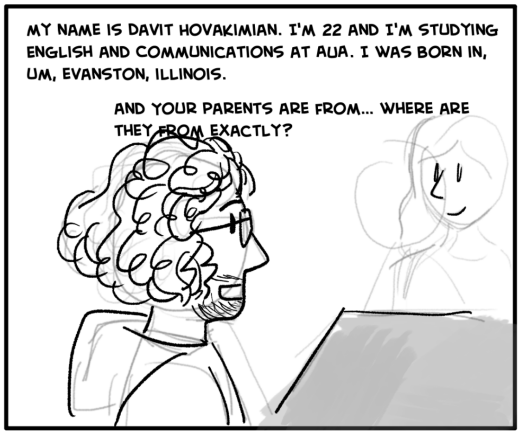


Figure 3 *An example of a side profile angle.*

This can make the graphic novel seem like a documentary but can also be used for comic effect as seen in the following:

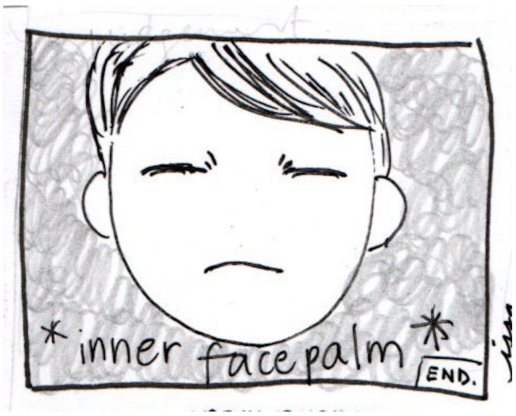


Figure 4 *panel illustrated by me for "The Graphic Novel" class*

Art style and content inspirations

For my lineart, I used a rough ink brush that evokes the hand-drawn pencils and pens I've used in my comics for our student magazine, *The Highlander.* I like to think that it also evokes the style of return diasporan Warren Manvelyan, who has been learning how to write in Armenian in his artworks.

As for the fonts, I chose "CreativeBlock BB" (regular and bold) by Blambot, which is free for use for indie comic artists. I chose it because it was the dialogue font in my childhood adventure game, Poptropica, which I played in all the countries I lived in.

Figure 5 *Example of the font from Poptropica and my character avatar with the vampire teeth*

My main inspirations for the graphic novel's aesthetic are as follows. *The Adventures of Tintin* by Hergé inspired me to seriously pursue making comics. I have had a couple of diasporan professors who turned out to be Tintin fans, as well as other diasporan classmates who are either fans or simply like the comics. This made me assume that it reminds many diasporans of their childhood.

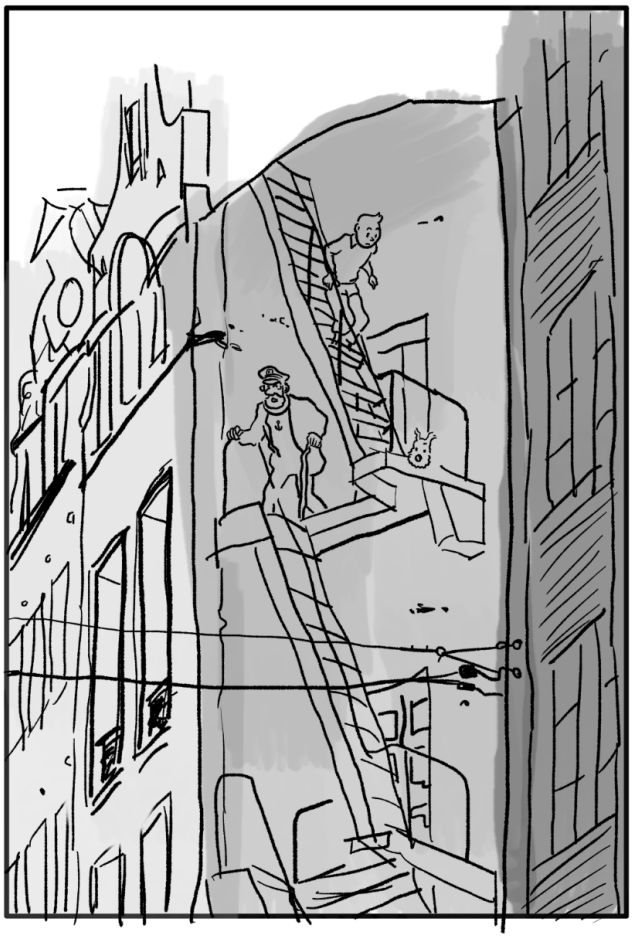


Figure 6 *one of my graphic novel's draft panels that shows a Tintin mural that my interviewee from Belgium sees on his walks in Brussels*

As I will be drawing in black and white for simplicity and time-constraint reasons due to my usage of traditional media (unlike Hergé's pastel color scheme), I am counting on the style to remind them of the idyll of childhood, which connects to the the diasporan search for the idyll of home.

I also like Hergé's attention to the settings of his stories, which probably lent itself to my tendency in past comics to draw detailed and realistic settings as well. I

have applied this treatment for many of my settings not only for my penchant to stay true to any realistic settings I'm illustrating, but also so that it will give readers a strong sense of being in the locations mentioned in the graphic novel.

To evoke Armenian culture through visual cues, I have included Armenian motifs from their art, culture, language, and history. When Armenians read my graphic novel, I want to make them think, "This is Armenian. This is ours." I want to make them feel that the art is theirs, that it is from their culture; that it looks very Armenian.

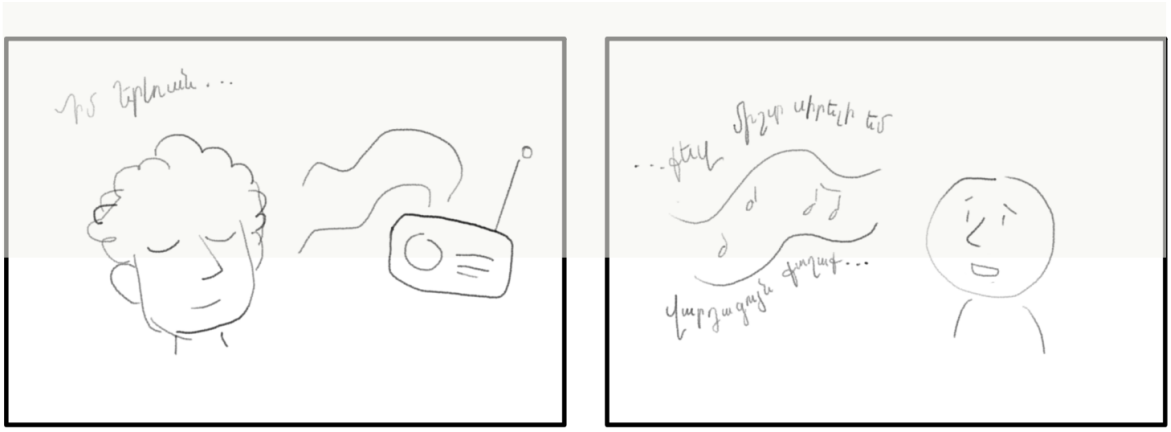


Figure 7 *Draft panels with Armenian lyrics*

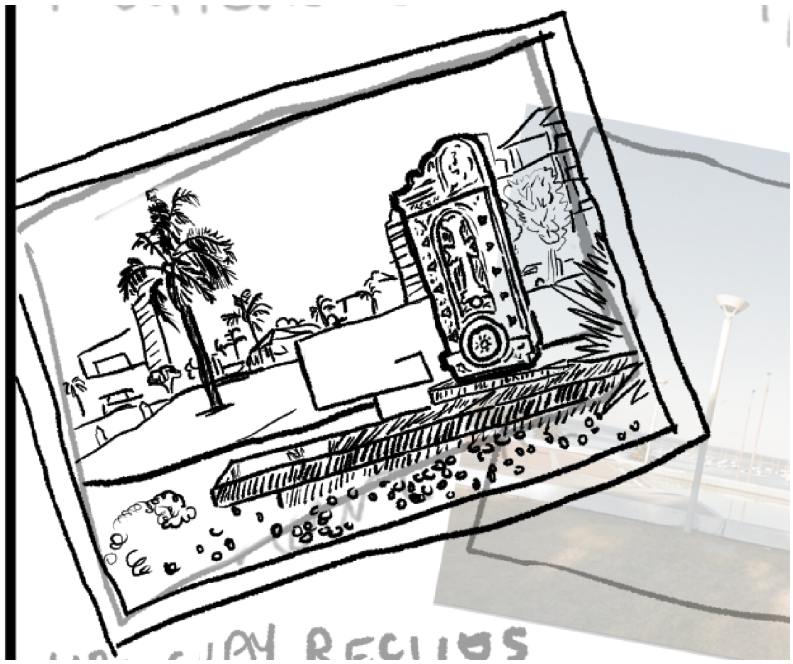


Figure 8 *A khachkar in Uruguay's* Rambla *Armenia (Boulevard Armenia)*

I also took some inspiration from Armenian art, and copying some works for practice from artists particularly from the diaspora helped me step into the Armenian diasporans' shoes:

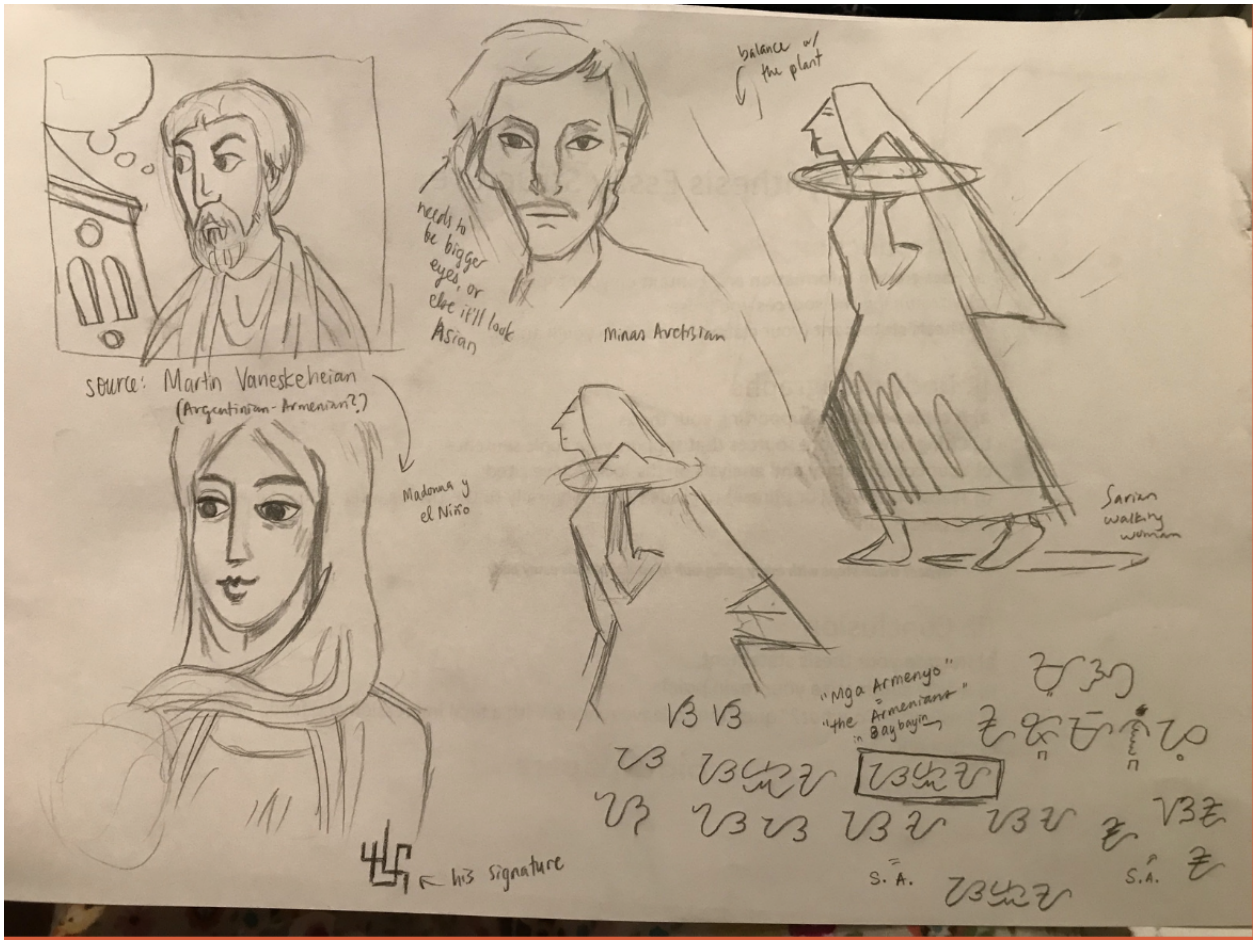


Figure 9 *My studies of Armenian artists' works*

Another inspiration is *The Structure is Rotten, Comrade* (2019) written by Viken Berberian and illustrated by Yann Kebbi, which illustrates Armenian locations very well (despite the fact that the illustrator has never visited Armenia). It shows a panoply of Yerevan landmarks such as the Zvartnots Airport, Cascade, the Prospekt *Shuka*, Parliament Building, and the Stepan Shahumyan statue. Following Kebbi's example, I have also illustrated landmarks like Hraparak, the old Soviet air traffic control tower at Zvartnots (which symbolizes the first point of arrival of diasporans and the Russian influence of the past that alienates some diasporans) and other places that simply represent Yerevan and my interviewees have resonated with. I have also illustrated

landmarks or environments from diasporans' home countries as I include their flashbacks (such as Belgium's Atomium and a beach in Garapan, a village in Saipan). To create the authenticity of the environment where I am meeting the interviewees, I included material elements of culture such as the AUA classroom, water bottle I gave each of them, and my notebook.

Figure 10 *Draft panels featuring an AUA classroom.*

The story is also close to my project's theme – the main character, Frunz, who has an Armenian father and a French mother, comes back to Armenia to work as an

architect but never fully integrates with the country and desires to change it. Some of my interviewees likely resonate with him.

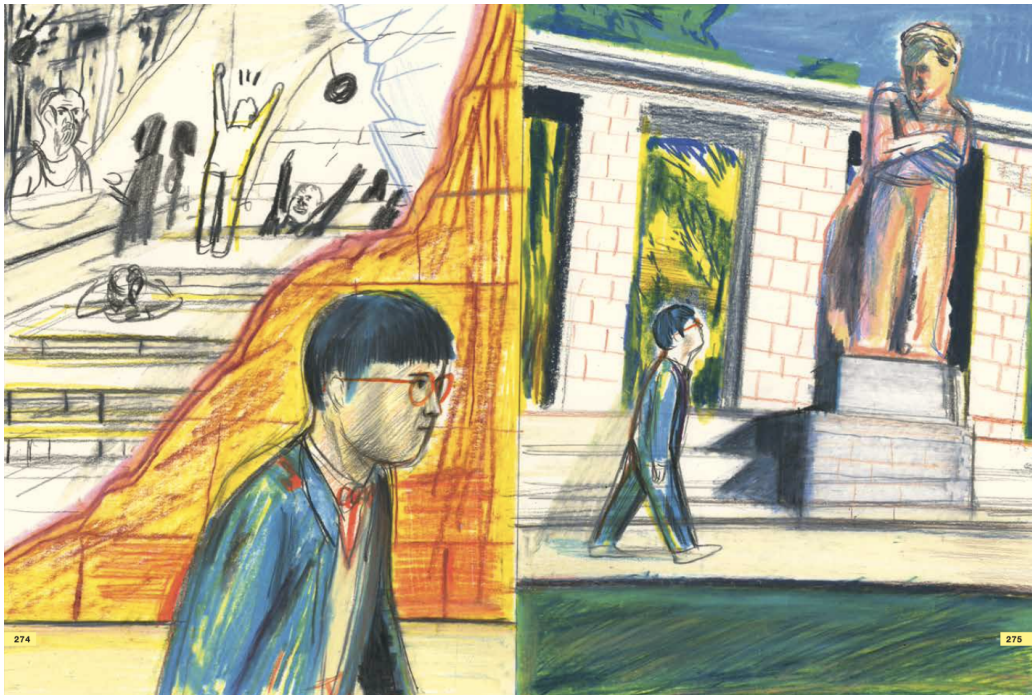


Figure 11 *Illustrations from The Structure is Rotten, Comrade (2019)*

I also illustrated maps of where the diasporan Armenians grew up and my own Southeast Asian place of origin as references for the reader, like the map of Beirut during the civil war that opens Zeina Abirached's graphic novel, *A Game for Swallows* (2012), which takes place in the city.

I also follow the structure of *Persepolis* (2007) by Marjane Satrapi, who tells her narrative in many anecdotes. Davis (2005) describes this:

> The structure of Satrapi's text is typical of most comic books – short titled narrative pieces that form a larger whole. Her chapters have simple titles: "The Veil," "The Bicycle," "The Water Cell," "Persepolis," "The Letter," "The Party," "The Cigarette," "Kim Wilde," among others. This ordering emphasizes breaks,

> beginnings and new beginnings, episodic structuring of lives and selves, inviting the reader to fill in the gaps, to find whole meaning from the fragments retained in memory and on the page. (p. 270)

Davis (2005) also points out that Satrapi also uses the format of Persian miniatures in the first page. Inspired by Satrapi's use of traditional Persian art in her panels, I have incorporated some Armenian symbols into my work, particularly in the chapter headings.

The chapters contain commentaries from the interviewees about their stories, inspired by Vladek's commentaries in *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. In Spiegelman's graphic novel, Vladek - Spiegelman's father - narrates his story over Spiegelman's illustrations of his flashbacks. Vladek's narrations sometimes include his reflections about his experiences, which is also implemented in my graphic novel as the interviewees reflect on their own experiences. To a small degree, I have also included my own comments about how I react and interact to their stories.

Figure 12 *A panel with my commentary.*

In *Armenians and Other Armenians in Turkey*, a comics rendition of Hrag Papazian's research illustrated by Nooneh Khoodaverdyan, the narrative ends with a full-page panel of the characters' conversations with each other, reflected in word bubbles that twist and turn depending on who is talking. The characters have different opinions about what it means to be Armenian and they share their critique and complaints about each other based on their views about Armenianness. It leaves the reader with no commentary or definite answer and leaves them to decide on their own what to think about the idea of Armenianness. I have taken a cue from the word bubble arrangement of the following page illustrated by Khoodaverdyan:

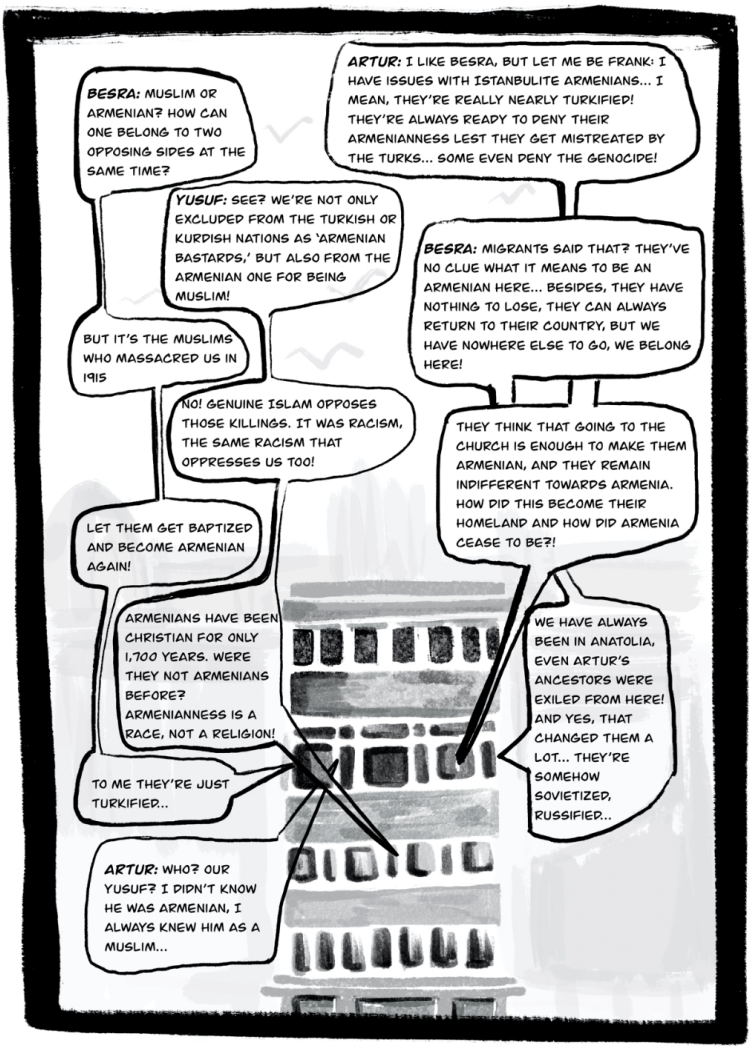


Figure 13 *Armenians and other Armenians in Turkey*

Character design

In terms of character design, I initially drew the interviewees in my simple comic style as closest as I could render them to their features and clothing during the time we had our interviews. I was less faithful to my own hairstyle as a character, opting to draw curly squibbles as in my old comics.

Figure 14 *Illustration from my Third Culture Kid comic*

Figure 15 *Draft panel from my graphic novel showing myself and my interviewee.*

I looked at *Persepolis* (2007) where Satrapi does not just use dots for eyes and

has a diverse range of hairstyles, which I take as a starting point. Khoodaverdyan also gives the characters their unique features, which I also did in my interviewees' close-ups or when I copied interviewees' expressions exactly from the videos I took during the first 15 to 30 minutes of the interviews. Those moments where I illustrate directly from the videos are moments where I wanted to be faithful to their reactions and not just use my own interpretation of their gestures for certain dialogues.

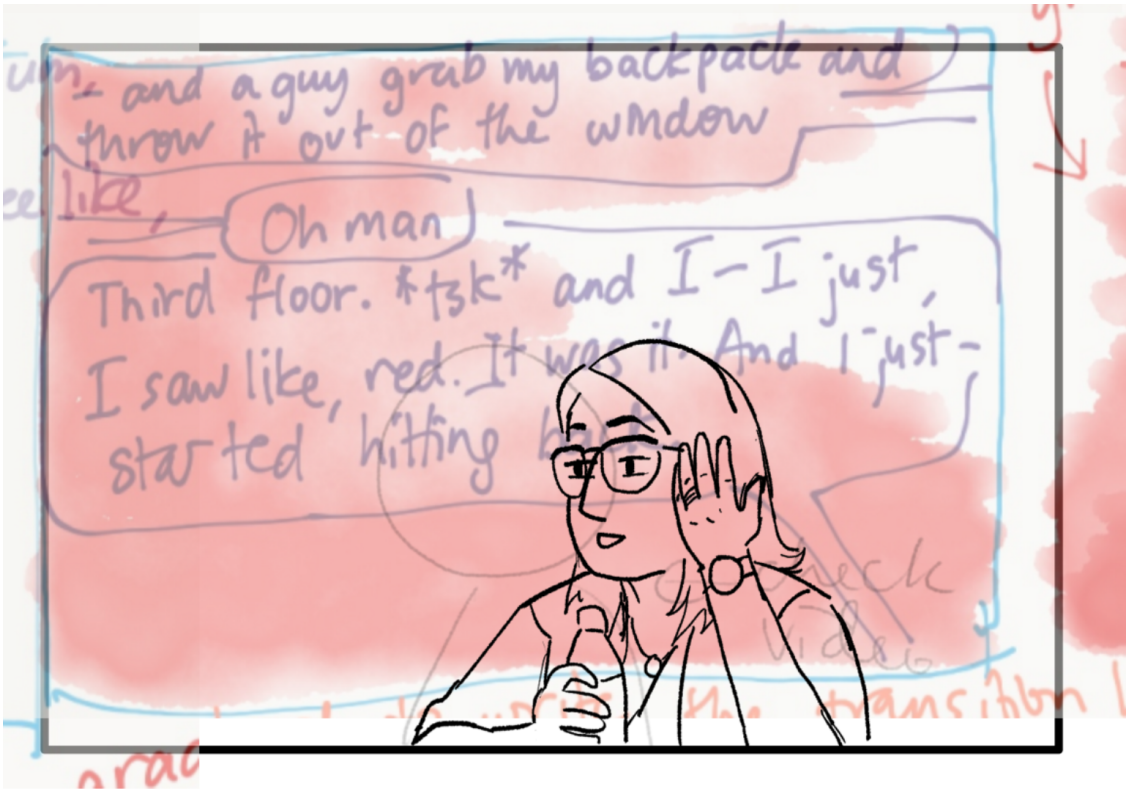
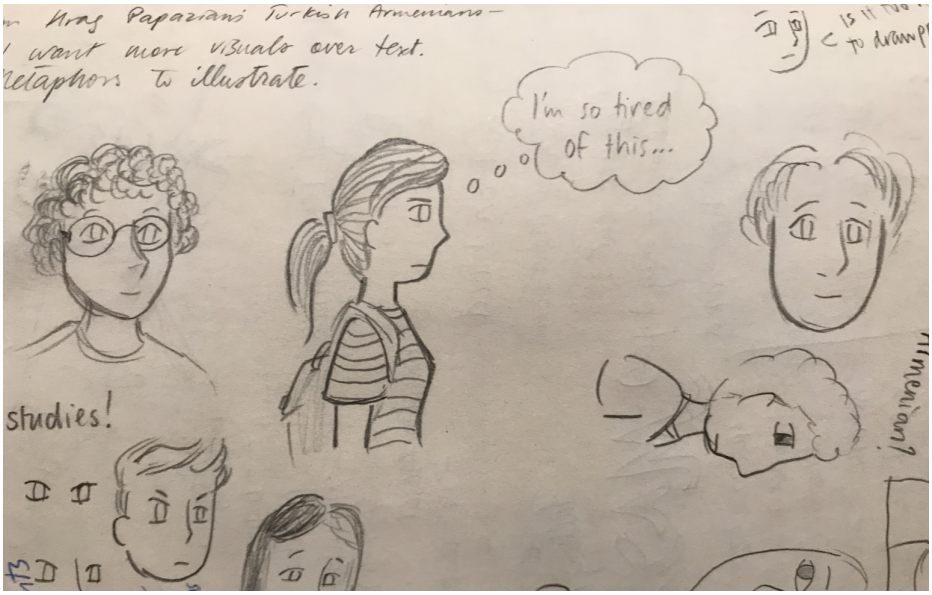
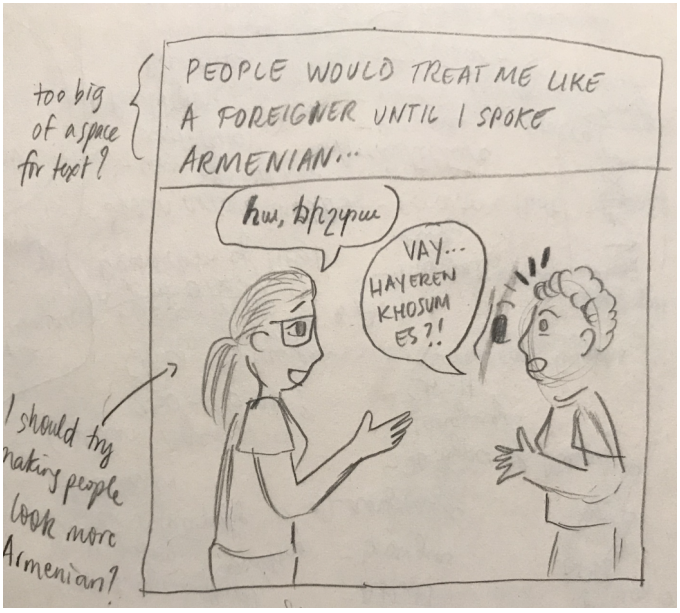


Figure 16 *A panel with the character's gesture and expression are directly copied from the interview video.*

Unlike in my previous comics, I have drawn noses on my characters, simply because I come from a different ethnicity (Southeast Asian) and Armenian noses are different from ours, and it's also a topic that comes up when Armenian physical features

are discussed. I also mostly draw black-colored eyes as most of my characters are brown-eyed, but for characters with lighter eye colors (like the green-eyed Armen and some Russians from Anita's school in Moscow), I've drawn them differently - inspired by the depiction of Marjane's Austrian boyfriend in *Persepolis (2007)* and my aforementioned penchant for realism.





Figures 17-18 *my sample sketches for this graphic novel project*

Figure 19 *Example of a draft showing a character's lighter eye color.*

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 as a 10-year-old and then to Armenia, as a 16-year-old. 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.

During one of my first weeks at university, I had a conversation with a new friend who was a Syrian-Armenian. He asked me how I was adjusting to life in Armenia, and mentioned that he also had some difficulties with adjusting here. Although he was

an Armenian and obviously considered Armenia his homeland, it was a different thing to live here, since he grew up in Syria and considered it his home. Later, I shared with him a blog post I wrote about missing my life in Nepal and how I grieved over it. I was surprised and grateful when he said that he could relate deeply to it. Our conversations made me realize that I had discovered a new group of people I could unexpectedly relate to in our frustrations about not being able to smoothly fit into our homelands.

At AUA, I also spent two years with a group of mostly diasporan students (including Armenian, Iranian, and Indian) as we studied Armenian Language & Literature and Armenian History. Throughout my classes, I also had many diasporan Armenian professors. Due to them, I learned more about the different experiences diasporans have, the challenges they had with adjusting to the local culture and language, homesickness, and their own search for identity. I gradually realized how resonant their experiences were with mine, and I sympathized and sometimes empathized with their struggles.

For this project, I chose interviewees in hopes to represent different kinds of diasporas or diaspora-adjacent groups 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.

To relay their stories, I decided to use the medium of the graphic novel. At university, I took a Graphic Novel class (also under a diasporan professor) where many of the books we read – such as *Persepolis* (2007)*, Maus* (1997)*,* and *Arab of the Future Vol. 1* (2015) – had stories similar to the diasporans. Following this, I decided to use the graphic novel medium to illustrate the stories of diasporans and the challenges they face when they come to live in Armenia.

Additionally, in my experience of being an illustrator of comics for our student magazine, I saw how comics and the graphic novel are forms that engage and disarm people, bringing them back to their childhood then making them think about their lives now. Besides entertaining readers and giving them an enjoyable time while reading my graphic novel, I aim to inform local Armenians about the diasporan experience. Hopefully this will help them 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.

Reflections on the process

Creating this graphic novel was harder than I expected. Nevertheless, I was motivated by the responsibility of representing Armenian diasporans with this project.

It was my first time working on a project with a drawing tablet and the Krita

software, so I had a learning curve to overcome in a short period of time, which scared me. But I did have fun experimenting with both, and my decision to use them proved to be more flexible than if I'd worked with pencil, pen, and paper.

Drafting the order of the plot and the panels on each page was a humongous task, since I had to tell eight stories - my seven interviewees' and my own. During the drawing process, I would sometimes get distracted by my own apprehensions of illustrating some interviewees, for fear of misrepresenting them. I also had to stop myself from spending too much time drawing detailed settings.

I could only accomplish so much in the seven months I had for the whole project. As a comics artist, I wish I had more time to experiment. Still, it felt empowering to actually create a graphic novel with the potential to reach and move a wide diasporan and non-diasporan audience. I presented my project at university where an attending Armenian diasporan professor shared how he could relate to my interviewees' stories and also expressed his eagerness to read the final work. One of the local Armenians in the audience even found something to relate to in the stories. My diasporan friends have also thanked me for doing this project. And now I get emotional whenever I encounter diasporans because I feel that I know these diasporans much more through this project. I look forward to hearing how future readers will interact with this graphic novel.

Creative Piece: "You're Not Armenian Enough"

You may read my graphic novel through the following link to this folder:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/178Ve5Fzni7TBHDvtMkb5-xxU05bGH8PL?usp=sharing

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Appendix A

Consent Form Template

CONSENT FORM
Consent to participate in a capstone project conducted at the American University of Armenia (AUA). This is to state that I agree to participate in the capstone project conducted by Samantha Isabella A. Adalia**.** The capstone director is Dr. Hourig Attarian of the College of Humanities & Social Sciences at AUA (tel.: 060 612769, email: hourig.attarian@aua.am).

PURPOSE: I have been informed that the purpose of the project is to explore the experiences of Armenian diasporans in Armenia. Within the bigger context of the project, the interview conducted by Samantha Isabella A. Adalia is meant to focus on collecting stories from Armenian diasporans residing in Armenia, in order to represent and illustrate them in a graphic novel.

PROCEDURES: I understand that the interview will be conducted in participants' homes or another appropriate place, and might be recorded on video. Alternatively, the interview may be conducted on Zoom or another online platform. As a participant, I will be asked to explore my lived experiences and the challenges I have faced as a diasporan Armenian upon moving (back) to Armenia. The interview will last from one to two hours, however, as a participant I am free to stop at any time, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the project at any given point. I understand that if I wish to extend the interview for more than two hours, I will be provided that opportunity.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: I understand that the interview involves the sharing of my personal views and opinions, which will be treated with the utmost care and consideration. I have been informed that I am free to stop, take a break or discontinue at any time. There are no risks involved in partaking in this interview.

CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION: As a participant, I will have access to all the recorded material for verification purposes. Throughout the project, if and when the material produced is in Armenian, I will have the opportunity to review and verify the English translations.

__ I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time without negative consequences.

__ I understand that the data from this project may be published in print or digital format for academic purposes.

In terms of **identification and reproduction** of my participation:

__ I agree to **disclose my identity**. I understand that my identity may be revealed in any publications or presentations that may result from this interview.

__ I agree to the reproduction of sound and images from this interview by any method and in any media for academic purposes (which may include webpages, documentary clips, etc.)

OR

__ I understand that my participation in this study is **confidential**. My identity will be concealed. I will be given a pseudonym in any publications or presentations that may result from this interview.

__ I agree that while data from my interview may be published, no sound or images from it may be reproduced**.**

When photographs, artifacts or documents are scanned or photographed

___ I agree to let the student researcher copy family photographs and documents for use in the student project.

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

INTERVIEWEE:
NAME (please print) _____

SIGNATURE_____ DATE _____

INTERVIEWER:
NAME (please print) _____

SIGNATURE_____DATE _____

If at any time you have questions about your rights as a capstone project participant, please contact Dr. Hourig Attarian of the College of Humanities & Social Sciences at AUA (tel.: 060 612769, email: hourig.attarian@aua.am).

Appendix B

Interview Guidelines

Interview Questions for Diasporans:

- General demographic questions
  - Full name
  - Age
  - Profession/area of study
  - Area in which they live in Armenia
  - Place of birth
  - Where their parents are from (parents' places of birth, previous places of residence, etc)
- What was your background (how did your parents/ancestors move to your 'host' country)?
- Do you identify as an Armenian diasporan? [Why? Why not?]
- What does Armenian identity mean to you?
  - How did your family and community help you preserve your Armenianness?
- How did you imagine Armenia to be before you moved here? /OR/ What was your idea of how Armenia was like before you moved here?
  - Also, what was your idea of life in Armenia like before you moved here?
- Why did you move to Armenia?
- How long have you been living in Armenia? (When did you move here exactly?)
- What was your first impression of Armenia?
- What were the first challenges you faced here as a diasporan?
  - How did you overcome them?
- What are the continuous challenges you are facing here as a diasporan?
- How do you adjust to
  - The language
  - Cultural idiosyncrasies (did you also carry over a habit from your host country - Naya, Laos)
  - Lifestyle (compare it with their host country)
  - Clothing norms
  - Food
  - Local mindsets
  - Work [expectations]
- Have you faced discrimination as a diasporan Armenian?

    - Are you accepted at your workplace in Armenia (if applicable)?
    - To the half-Armenians: Do you face discrimination based on how you look, on your mixed identity?
- Find out: If you lived in a Kentron/Masif neighborhood, do you think you would be treated differently?
- What do you think local Armenians can do about those challenges?
- What do you think the government can do about those challenges?
- What do you want to tell other diasporans about moving to Armenia?
- What changes do you want to see in the treatment of diasporans here, and how do you envision those changes taking place?