

**RETURNING TO ARARAT AND HOME AT LAST:  
WESTERN ARMENIAN DIASPORAN DISCOURSE  
ON RETURN TO ‘EASTERN’ ARMENIA**

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# Contents

Contents .....	i
List of Tables .....	v
List of Figures .....	v
Abstract .....	vii
Statement of Originality .....	ix
Acknowledgements .....	x
Chapter One: Introduction .....	1
1.1. Background .....	4
1.1.1. The Birth of a New Diaspora .....	6
1.1.2. Contrasting Narratives of ‘Armenianness’ .....	7
1.2. The Problem .....	8
1.3. The Question .....	10
1.4. Thesis Outline .....	10
Chapter Two: Literature Review .....	14
2.1. Return Migration .....	15
2.1.1. Usage of the Concept .....	15
2.1.2. Viability of the Study of Return Migration .....	17
2.1.3. Theoretical Dimensions of Return Migration .....	18
2.2. Ancestral Return .....	21
2.2.1. Usage of the Concept .....	21
2.2.2. Examples of ‘Ancestral Return’ Over the Past Decade .....	22
2.2.3. Why ‘Return’ to the Ancestral Homeland? .....	23
2.2.4. Involvement of State and Non-state Actors .....	27

2.3. Home, Belonging and Identity .....	31
2.3.1. What and Where is ‘Home?’ .....	31
2.3.2. A Sense of Belonging .....	34
2.3.3. A Differing National Narrative.....	37
2.3.4. Diaspora Group Identity .....	39
2.4. The Adjustment Process of Returnees.....	41
2.5. Conclusion.....	45
Chapter Three: Methodology .....	46
3.1. Research Problem and Questions .....	46
3.2. Theoretical Framework .....	49
3.2.1 Power and Hegemonic Discourse .....	50
3.2.2. Discourse Theory.....	51
3.3. The Research Method.....	54
3.4. The Participants .....	56
3.5. Limitations of the Study .....	61
3.6. Positionality of the Researcher.....	62
Chapter Four: Contemplating Homecoming.....	64
4.1. The Armenian Homeland .....	65
4.2. ‘Armenianness’ in the diaspora.....	82
4.3. Motivations for Return .....	87
4.3.1. The Relationship-building Process .....	88
4.3.2. Feelings of Patriotism .....	91
4.3.3. Independent Living.....	93
4.3.4. Commencing studies in Armenia.....	94
4.3.5. New Romances .....	95

4.4. Reactions Towards the Decision to ‘Return’ .....	97
4.4.1. Family reactions .....	97
4.4.2. Community reaction .....	99
4.4.3. Armenian friends .....	100
4.4.4. <i>Odars</i> (non-Armenians) .....	101
4.5. Conclusion .....	102
Chapter Five: Arriving in the Homeland .....	106
5.1. Background .....	107
5.2. Acceptance or Rejection? .....	108
5.2.1. A positive reception .....	108
5.2.2. Confusion With the Returnee’s Decision .....	112
5.2.3. Negative Reception .....	113
5.2.4. Conforming and Fitting-in .....	117
5.3. A Western Armenian-returnee or a Diasporan-returnee? .....	119
5.3.1. Local Opinions of Western Armenians .....	120
5.3.2. Local Opinions of Diasporans .....	124
5.4. Prejudice Towards Returnees .....	127
5.5. Conclusion .....	131
Chapter Six: Negotiating Identities in the Homeland .....	134
6.1. The Returnees’ Self-categorisation as a Diasporan and/or a Local .....	136
6.1.1. ‘I am a local now’ .....	137
6.1.2. ‘I am both a diasporan and a local’ .....	139
6.1.3. ‘I am still a diasporan’ .....	141
6.2. Western Armenian Language Use .....	142
6.2.1. Situational Awareness of Language Use .....	143
6.2.2. Language Maintenance .....	145

6.3. Western Armenian Historical Identity .....	147
6.4. Conclusion.....	152
Chapter Seven: Perceptions of ‘Other’ Language Use in Armenia .....	154
7.1. The Western-Armenian Language .....	159
7.1.1. Support and Encouragement.....	161
7.1.2. Confusion and Misunderstanding .....	163
7.1.3. Rejection .....	165
7.2. The Russian Language .....	168
7.3. The English Language.....	172
7.4. The Future of the Three Languages .....	174
7.5. Conclusion.....	176
Chapter Eight: Confronting a Contrasting Set of Societal Norms .....	179
8.1 Remnants of <i>Homo sovieticus</i> .....	181
8.1.1. Differences Between Generations .....	182
8.1.2. Effect of the Soviet Past .....	185
8.2. A New or Re-created ‘Armenian’ Ethos .....	189
8.2.1. Gender Inequality in Armenia .....	189
8.2.2. Societal Attitudes Towards Homosexuality .....	193
8.3. Conclusion.....	195
Chapter Nine: Adjustment and Acculturation—The Last Stage of Homecoming?.....	197
9.1. The Adjustment Process.....	199
9.2. Acculturation Attitudes .....	206
9.3. Eastern- and Western-Armenian Harmonisation .....	209
9.4. Conclusion.....	213
Chapter Ten: Conclusion .....	217

Bibliography .....	224
Appendices .....	237
Addendum.....	237
Appendix 1: Interview Questions .....	239
Appendix 2: Participants and their pseudonyms.....	243
Appendix 3: Ethics Approval .....	244

## **List of Tables**

Table 1.1: Commonly used words in Western Armenian.....	164
Table 1.2: Terminology in Western Armenian.....	164

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1.1: Distribution of Armenian dialects in the early 20 <sup>th</sup> century.....	5
Figure 1.2: Discourse theory and the power-discourse relationship.....	52
Figure 1.3: Country of Origin of Interviewees.....	58
Figure 1.4: Civil status of participants upon arrival in Armenia.....	59
Figure 1.5: Civil status at interview.....	60
Figure 1.6: Family composition on arrival.....	60
Figure 1.7: Image of Yerevan's Lenin Square (Soviet Armenia) .....	68
Figure 1.8: A Grade 10 Armenian History Textbook in Western Armenian.....	70



Figure 1.9: Coat of Arms of Soviet Armenia.....77

Figure 2.0: Coat of Arms of the Republic of Armenia.....77

## Abstract

Centuries of division under foreign rule led to the physical and linguistic separation of the Armenian nation into an eastern and western portion. The Armenian Genocide represented the final chapter in this division as the two components diverged further apart; the eastern component becoming an independent, then Soviet Armenia, and the western component constituting Eastern Turkey as its Armenian inhabitants were exterminated and deported, with those surviving forming the diaspora. Armenia's independence in 1991 presented its mostly Western Armenian diaspora with an opportunity to return to a homeland. However, upon return, diasporans were confronted with a contrasting eastern narrative of 'Armenianness', unlike the Western Armenian and hybrid identities they possessed. Thirty Western Armenian returnees were interviewed in Armenia, with each returnee's journey of homecoming analysed using discourse theory to discover the presence of power during interactions between returnees and locals, and to determine the returnees' ability to alter discourse away from a dominant Eastern Armenian narrative. Experiences show that returnees, unlike many of their generational predecessors, accept the Republic of Armenia as their homeland, relegating Western Armenia to symbolic history. As returnees adjust to life in Armenia, they switch their speech to Eastern Armenian as a sign of acceptance and integration. However, their past Western Armenian and diasporan identities are maintained, adding to the hybridity of their identity as a blended *Spyurkahayastantsi* (*diaspora* + *Armenian of Armenia*).<sup>1</sup> The process of homecoming for returnees is a negotiation of their past identity and the dominant Eastern Armenian narrative of the homeland. This negotiation results in an acceptance of the linguistic component of the homeland's narrative, a recognition of the dominant Eastern Armenian culture, and a hybridisation of their cultural identity. Armenia remains ill-prepared

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<sup>1</sup> The Armenian suffix *ts<sup>hi</sup>* denotes a geographical provenance, in this case the word *hayastantsi* signifies a person from *Hayastan* (the Armenian word for 'Armenia').

to welcome the diversity of the Armenian narrative presented by returnees, which in turn presents a challenge to attracting future returnees who require reasons other than patriotism to relocate to Armenia. Nevertheless, Armenia provides a home for returnees in the land not west, but east of Ararat.

## **Statement of Originality**

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

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Armen Samuel Karamanian

Date: 12 February 2019

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Research addressing *return migration* has for over half a century focused predominantly on the return of migrants to their places of birth, or to the places of birth of their parents (King, Christou, Goodson, & Teerling, 2008; Pelliccia, 2017; Wessendorf, 2007; Winland, 2007). The findings of this research led to a significant shift in peoples' understanding of migration, given the previously held popular belief that *return* is both 'illogical' and 'illusory' (Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004). However, more recently, a new form of return migration has come under investigation in academia, a migratory journey relatively unexplored by academics: the return of persons to their ancestral homeland. The ancestral homeland is for some a place from which their grandparents or great-grandparents originated, and for others, a territory and land with which they feel a sense of 'rootedness', a place that represents a link to their ancestors, to ancient landscapes and to cultural traditions. A steady, yet growing number of people have made the decision to return to the ancestral homeland, including Japanese-Brazilians (Tsuda, 2003); Kazakhs of Mongolia (Werner, Emmelhainz, & Barcus, 2017); and most relevant to this research, the Armenians of the diaspora (Lehmann, 2012; Pattie, 1999).

This growing trend in people undertaking *ancestral* return migration has been met with the growth of an emerging area of study in academia addressing the issue. However, research on the topic has revealed complexities associated with the returnees' integration and adjustment process in the homeland, complexities that were found to have been experienced relatively less by those returning to their countries of origin. In contrast to the place of 'nostalgia' returnees are raised to believe in, they instead confront a homeland with a differing narrative of identity, a place that represents 'exile' and 'alienation' (Christou, 2006, p. 830). Confrontations arise due to the returnees' choice of language, contrasting social norms, and a differing historical narrative, leading to rejection as well as acceptance.

For the Armenian returnees in this research, their ‘return’ to the Republic of Armenia is neither a return to their country of origin, nor is it a return to the land of their ancestors.<sup>2</sup> The Armenian returnees are descendants of Armenians from the Ottoman Empire who were either massacred or deported from their towns and villages in present-day Eastern Turkey. The cities, towns and villages of their ancestors are, for some, thousands of kilometres west of the present-day Armenian state (the Republic of Armenia), which was previously a part of the Russian Empire. However, this migration is classified as a ‘return’ due to the territory representing what remains of the Armenian homeland - the primordial entity of the Armenian people (Lehmann, 2012; Pattie, 1999).

There exists a significant amount of research on the topic of diaspora return in the Armenian context. However, much of this research is found to either explore return during the Soviet era (Lehmann, 2012; Pattie, 1999) or focus on the unsuccessful journeys of return (Kasbarian, 2015). These return journeys, past and present, although highly useful and relevant to the field of study, reveal an absence in literature exploring the experiences of present-day Armenian returnees who have permanently settled in Armenia. These experiences include the returnees’ pre-migration decision to return, the negotiation of their identities in the homeland, and their subsequent adjustment and acculturation process, all of which are crucial to understanding the process of homecoming and ancestral return migration. Many diasporans returning to Armenia, much like the participants of this research, identify with a Western Armenian linguistic and historical narrative, stemming from their ancestors who originated from Western Armenia (present-day Eastern Turkey), an identity maintained by the returnees and their families throughout their time in the diaspora. These returnees, whose ancestors fled during the Armenian Genocide (1915–1923), have chosen to leave behind their physical lives

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<sup>2</sup> Quotation marks are used to reflect the falsity of the return, given the journey to a place from which the individual did not return. The use of quotation marks is adapted from the work on Greek return migration by Anastasia Christou and Russell King (Christou & King, 2006).

in their countries of origin and settle in ‘an Armenia’ with a differing narrative of ‘Armenianness’: one dominated by an Eastern Armenian historical and linguistic narrative, putting into question the returnees’ hopes for rootedness and a feeling of belonging.

Both Soviet (1921–1991) and Independent Armenia (1991–present) have on numerous occasions welcomed members of their global diaspora. However, return to Armenia remains relatively unsuccessful due to reasons including a differing interpretation of homeland between the diaspora and society in the Republic of Armenia (Kasbarian, 2015; Panossian, 2002), the diasporans’ assimilation into the society of their country of birth/residence and their ‘cosmopolitan’ identities (Panossian, 2002), and the economic and social difficulties faced by society in Armenia. For these reasons, as well others that will be discussed throughout this thesis, welcoming the Armenian diaspora at a time when the homeland lacks social policies that would assist the returnee during their adjustment process puts into question the possibility of a future successful repatriation programme. Western-Armenian returnees have in the past encountered a society in the homeland that was mostly indifferent to their Western-Armenian and diasporan identities, as well as authorities hostile to their *Armenian* language and narrative (Pattie, 1999). Through the experiences, interactions and stories of Western-Armenian returnees currently residing in Armenia, this research aims to create meaning from the experiences and stories of migrants undertaking the journey of homecoming and the ensuing process of adjustment in the Republic of Armenia.

In order to address the recent phenomenon that is Armenian ancestral return migration to an independent homeland, this study seeks to understand the returnees’ journey of homecoming. An exploration of each returnee’s journey, from their time in the diaspora, through to having made the decision to return, to the particular experiences they encounter since settling in Armenia are analysed. Returnees provide responses to elements of their past narrative and



identity that are in contrast to those of the homeland, including their definition of homeland, their language, identity and *mentalité*.<sup>3</sup>

The returnees' differing narrative of 'Armenianness', a term used to represent the quality and state of being Armenian when in the homeland, exposes them to varying degrees of acceptance and difficulty. Throughout each chapter, the experiences and interactions between returnees and society in the homeland (the *locals*) are analysed through the lens of discourse theory. The insights, observations and experiences of returnees reveal a power dynamic between returnee and local, as power conflicts are able to take place at many different levels of society (Whisnant, 2012). It is through the discourse returnees observe that we are able to make sense of the ideas that structure the social spaces of the homeland and the small shifts in ideas, through the micro-power the returnees represent, that can lead to historical change.

### **1.1. Background**

For over half a millennium, following the collapse of the last Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia in 1375, the Armenian people were left without a sovereign homeland. Their native lands remained divided, the Ottomans in control of the lands to the west and the Persians, followed by the Russians, to the lands in the east. The division of the Armenian homeland by foreign powers led to what would historically be referred to as the provinces of 'Turkish Armenia' and 'Russian Armenia' (Suny, 1993). In the 19th century, the population of 'Turkish (west) Armenia' standardised the dialect of Armenian spoken in Constantinople, to be known as Western Armenian. The population of 'Russian (east) Armenia' standardised the dialect of the Ararat Plains, henceforth to be known as Eastern Armenian. A map of the Armenian dialects in the early 20th century shows those dialects corresponding to Western Armenian shaded in yellow and those to Eastern Armenian shaded in green (Figure 1.1).

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<sup>3</sup> The term *mentalité* was used by the Annales school of French historians to refer to the collective attitudes and mental outlook of a people.

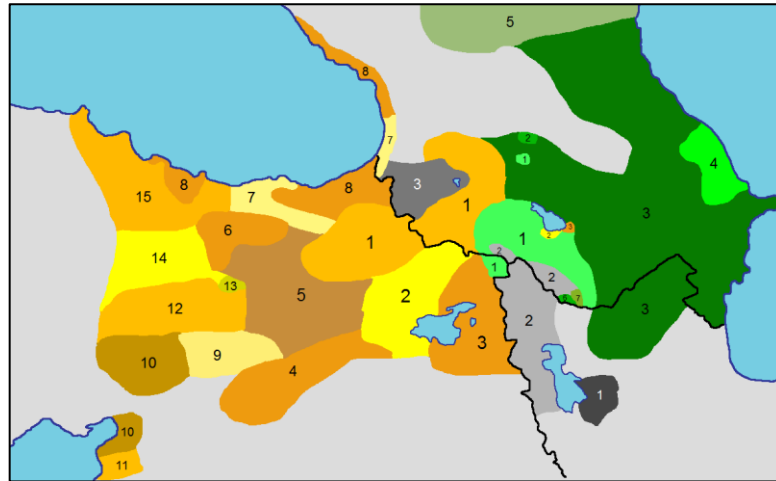


Figure 1.1: Distribution of Eastern and Western Armenian dialects in the early 20th century<sup>4</sup> (Source: Wikipedia)

Armenian writer and poet Vahé explains the terms ‘West Armenian’ and ‘East Armenian’ as originating from the end of the 18th century during the presence of two major demographic and cultural divisions (Oshagan, 1986). West(ern) Armenians included those living in the Ottoman Empire and west of it as far as the American continent; and East(ern) Armenians were those living in tsarist Russia, Persia, India, and the Far East. Following centuries of divide, the most profound act of horror the Armenian people had witnessed led to the permanent division and eradication of half the Armenian nation.

The Armenian Genocide (1915–1923), perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire, resulted in the destruction of all forms of Armenian civilisation from the territory of Western Armenia (Turkish Armenia) and the annihilation of over 1.5 million Armenian subjects of the crumbling empire, and the exile of thousands more. The Armenians lost the western portion of their historic territory. Those who managed to escape settled in what would become the various centres of the Armenian diaspora. To the east, the territory known as tsarist (Russian) Armenia declared its independence from the crumbling Russian Empire. Two short years

<sup>4</sup> Classification of Armenian dialects (Classification des dialects arméniens) by Hrachia Adjarian (1909) created by Wikipedia user Yerevanci.

later, the newly independent Armenia was forced to cede its territory to the advancing Bolshevik Army and was declared the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (Soviet Armenia).<sup>5</sup>

### **1.1.1. The Birth of a New Diaspora**

Armenians had resided in various parts of the world well before the Armenian Genocide that led to the creation of the new Armenian diaspora. Communities existed in such places as the Holy Land, Poland, the United States, Russia, and many more. However, the genocide led to the mass expulsion of thousands of Ottoman Armenian subjects. The Armenian refugees who managed to flee persecution sought shelter in areas such as the Middle East, France, and the Americas, while others sought shelter in the newly declared Republic of Armenia (1918–1920) or Soviet Armenia. This mass settlement in new lands resulted in the birth of a new Armenian diaspora, which would for the next seven decades recreate an Armenian identity for generations born outside the homeland.

For the purpose of this research, the term *diaspora* is, unless otherwise specified, used to refer to the Armenians who were exiled and survived the Armenian Genocide. More specifically, it is used to refer to those Armenians who resided in countries outside the former Soviet Union (1921–1991) and speak the western branch of the modern Armenian language, Western Armenian. The scope of the term *diaspora*, for the purpose of this research, does not include Eastern Armenian speakers, acknowledging that the diaspora is also made up of the Armenians of Iran who speak Eastern Armenian and, over the past half a century, Armenians from Soviet and Independent Armenia. This research focuses on the majority of the Armenian population residing outside the homeland during the Soviet era—the Western Armenians.

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<sup>5</sup> Armenia's occupation by the Bolshevik Red Army in 1920 resulted in the country's transformation to a semi-independent state (1920–1922) and was followed by its inclusion as part of the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (1922–1936) and lastly a Union Republic of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (1936–1991).

Armenian communities throughout the world established churches, schools, organisations and community centres with the intent of preserving and transmitting the Armenian identity to new generations. A large part of the diaspora continued to educate their children in the tongue of their ancestors, Western Armenian, and maintain a narrative of victimisation and persecution under the Ottomans, and a perceived occupation of the remaining homeland by the Russians (Bolsheviks) – a diasporan discourse that was confirmed by most of the participants.

### **1.1.2. Contrasting Narratives of ‘Armenianness’**

The Armenian communities throughout the diaspora developed a contrasting narrative of ‘Armenianness’ to their ethnic kin in Soviet Armenia and the communities of the Soviet Union. The Armenians of the diaspora mostly spoke Western Armenian, with the exception of the Armenian community of Iran. Soviet Armenia and the Armenian communities throughout the Soviet Union used Eastern Armenian. Ideology, language, and the understanding of the Armenian narrative continued to separate the two halves of the Armenian nation.

On 21 September 1991, Armenia officially declared its independence. Following centuries of imperial rule by foreign powers, a brief two-year period of independence (1918–1920), and seven decades of Soviet occupation (1921–1991), there emerged an independent Armenian state, the Republic of Armenia (1991–present). The new republic presented itself as the homeland of *all* Armenians, referring to the millions of ethnic Armenians spread across the world, known as the Armenian diaspora. The Armenian people, at last, had an independent homeland.

Armenia’s independence provided an opportunity of return for thousands of Armenians from throughout the diaspora. A return to the Republic of Armenia was the only viable option for the diaspora. The idea of return to the villages, towns and cities of their ancestors in Western

Armenia (eastern Turkey) is considered ‘not even an issue’ (Panossian, 2002, p. 138) and rather an ‘eschatological concept’ or ‘abstract myth’ (Safran, 1991, p. 94). However, a return to the Republic of Armenia is not simple. Haunted by the bitter experience of Armenian repatriation during the Soviet era (Shahnazarian, 2013) and having developed hybrid and cosmopolitan identities, heavily influenced by host societies (Panossian, 2002), diasporans did not return *en masse*. However, thousands over the past quarter century have migrated, ‘returning’ to what remains of the Armenian homeland. Their migration is not a return in the traditional sense as neither they nor their ancestors originate from the Republic of Armenia. However, it is an ancestral return to the primordial entity of the Armenian people, to what is today the homeland for many diasporans (Pattie, 1999).

## **1.2. The Problem**

An increasing number of people from different diasporan groups across the world are aspiring to or contemplating a return to their respective ancestral homelands. Such a movement is said to be a ‘counter-diasporic migration’ (King & Christou, 2008, 1), which supports the position of Cohen (1992, p. 160) that ‘original’ diaspora groups are characterised by conditions of estrangement and loss. Whether these conditions continue to be a characteristic of all contemporary diasporas or not, it is arguably a condition that continues to affect segments of diasporan populations who feel that ‘the heart is and, ultimately, can only ever be where the original home is or was’ (Cohen, 1992, p. 160). For Armenians in the diaspora, it is the practical commitment demonstrated towards the Armenian nation, in whatever form this may be described, that is what makes communities abroad a diaspora and not a minority ethnic group (Panossian, 2004).

The experiences of these migrants returning to their ancestral homelands have exposed a multitude of issues unexpected by the returnees. Greek (Christou, 2006), Croatian (Winland, 2007), and Japanese (Tsuda, 2003) returnees are but some of the peoples who have

experienced counter-diasporic migration to their ancestral homelands over the past quarter century. Reactions of dissatisfaction have ensued as the diasporans' perceptions of life in the homeland are challenged upon arrival. Such issues have been relatively unexplored in the field of Armenian studies. Taking into consideration that 70 years of communist rule froze any possible cultural or identity synthesis between the diasporicised west and the sovietised east (Panossian, 2004, p. 240), Canadian-Armenian historian and political scientist Razmik Panossian (2004) explains how these differences between the two Armenian entities has not yet been fully recognised.

Armenian studies have explored in great detail the Soviet era return of Western Armenians (Lehmann, 2012; Pattie, 1999), as well as the return of the diaspora, steering clear of the separate categorisation of Western Armenians (Darieva, 2011). The current Armenian government has actively voiced a call for repatriation. This research will help develop solutions that can be implemented by governments in Armenia and abroad, to encourage the return of diasporas and overseas communities. Furthermore, the findings of this study will also benefit diasporans and diaspora community organisations who may be contemplating a return to the homeland.

The greater demand for the experiences and stories of individuals involved in the processes of reverse globalisation and de-diasporisation to their ancestral homeland justifies the need for more detailed analysis of their reasons for return, the experiences encountered during the process of homecoming, and the successes and issues faced during the adjustment process. It is through understanding the migrant narrative that government and non-government organisations dealing with return migrants can learn what is distinctive about the particular population's movement (Brettell, 2003), to provide better guidance and advice towards potential returnees.

### 1.3. The Question

In order to address the fairly unrecognised differences between the two Armenian entities, this research explores the homecoming journey of the Western Armenian diaspora. As (Panossian, 2004) explains, the two branches of the Armenian nation are united subjectively, but fundamentally differ from one another in identity and politics. It is this difference in identity that is explored here, as returnees to Armenia encounter a homeland that presents a contrasting identity, narrative and *mentalité*.

In order to address the apparent differences, we ask the question: what interactions, realisations and possible adjustments do Western Armenian ‘returnees’ experience after settling in an independent homeland with a dominant Eastern Armenian narrative? To assist in answering this question, we outline five sub-questions that each address one period of the homecoming process. These are:

- a) What understanding of homeland and (Armenian) identity do returnees possess before settling in Armenia?
- b) What reactions do returnees encounter by homeland society upon arriving and settling in Armenia?
- c) Which elements of the returnees’ identity are questioned, accepted and rejected by homeland society?
- d) Which elements of their Armenian identity are returnees willing to adjust/sacrifice upon their settlement process?
- e) What does the process of adjustment and acculturation involve for returnees?

### 1.4. Thesis Outline

This thesis has ten chapters. *Chapter One* introduces the research and background. *Chapter Two* delves into a review of literature relating to the topics of return migration, ancestral

return migration and the concepts of 'home' and 'belonging'. In order to understand the experiences of migrants returning to an ancestral land, this chapter also reviews literature on the identity of diasporas as a group and the processes of adjustment.

*Chapter Three* provides a comprehensive overview of the theoretical framework and method used throughout the study. This chapter justifies the significance of discourse theory to the power-and-knowledge relationship and demonstrates the importance of how discourse is able to shape both political and social institutions. This chapter also provides an insight into the qualitative method used to collect data and an outline of the participants of the study. Of potential interest to the reader is a section on the role of the researcher in the study.

*Chapter Four* begins the homecoming journey with an exploration of the concepts of *hayrenik* (Armenian for 'homeland') and 'Armenia' for the returnees during their time in the diaspora, before arriving in Armenia. An understanding of why the returnees were motivated to leave their country of origin and settle in Armenia is provided, as well as the reactions of their family, friends and community.

In *Chapter Five*, the returnees have arrived in the homeland, Armenia. Throughout this chapter we examine the returnees' perceptions of the ways in which they were received as 'returnees', how homeland society (locals) reacted to their arrival and how each side dealt with what at times was found to be the unfamiliar. Positive and negative reactions towards the return of these diasporans are all analysed. Homeland society's (locals') reactions to the presence of differing identities, both diasporan and Western Armenian, are explored by gathering the perceptions of the returnees.

Throughout *Chapter Six*, we explore the negotiation process that returnees experience as they begin to notice differences in narratives of 'Armenianness'. The returnees' commitment to their Western Armenian and diasporan identities are challenged when amongst a society in the



homeland that identifies with a differing narrative of identity. We begin to notice the power dynamic between returnee and local, and discover the extent to which returnees are willing to distance themselves from their past identities. This chapter reveals the returnees' determination to control societal discourse in favour of a hybrid Armenian identity, and their willingness to accept the homeland's dominant discourse on identity and integrate linguistically and culturally.

*Chapter Seven* analyses the returnees' perceptions of language use in Armenia, with the exception of the dominant language, Eastern Armenian. The languages most noticed by returnees include Western Armenian, Russian and English. Participants describe their perceptions of each language's popularity in Armenia by providing an insight into homeland society's valorisation of the language and its value as a commodity. Returnee perceptions of each language are used to predict its future in Armenia. The chapter also provides a comprehensive insight into whether Western Armenian as a language is able to survive in the homeland.

*Chapter Eight* describes the contrasting social norms, behaviours and values of homeland society with those of the returnee. The returnees' perceptions of the homeland society's social norms, which are shaped by their preconceived diasporan narrative of 'Sovietness', are analysed. This chapter reveals how challenges to the diaspora–homeland relationship are not limited to the ethos inherited from the Soviet era but include the perceived creation and re-creation of an *Armenian* ethos. The returnees' difficulties with this perceived ethos present in the homeland demonstrates a realisation that in turn leads to their delayed adjustment.

*Chapter Nine* presents the various factors that assist and/or act as barriers to the returnees' adjustment and acculturation process when in Armenia. The chapter answers the question, is the process of assimilation for Western Armenian returnees to Armenia merely a matter of

time? Through an analysis of the returnees' adjustment process, we begin to notice patterns between the adjustment processes of returnees born in the west to returnees from the Middle East.

*Chapter Ten*, the conclusion, provides a summary of the key findings of the study. The chapter offers suggestions on how the experiences of present-day Western Armenian returnees can help improve government policies and assist non-governmental organisations dealing with return migration. Both government and non-governmental bodies are able to use the findings to tailor their processes and create more suitable mentoring and guidance programmes to assist the needs of returnees. The chapter also responds to the research question, what interactions, realisations and possible adjustments do Western Armenian 'returnees' experience after settling in an independent homeland with a hegemonic Eastern Armenian narrative?

An Addendum is added to the Appendix with the intent of providing a brief note on the political and social changes that took place in Armenia following the data collection process, mainly those that occurred as a result of the Armenian Velvet Revolution in 2018.

Let us begin with an exploration of past literature relevant to the topic.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Research exploring the journey of homecoming has become increasingly popular over the past half century, following a growing number of persons deciding to return to their countries of origin or ancestral homelands. Migration studies have frequently used the concept of ‘homecoming’ to describe the phenomenon that is the return of persons to their countries of birth or that of their ancestors (Darieva, 2011; Laycock, 2012; Slobin, 2001). The concept has become popular due to its ability to encapsulate various forms of return and act synonymously with the terms *return* and *repatriation* (Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004). The experience of homecoming has also challenged the ‘dominant paradigms of our era’, which are characterised by increased mobility and cultural hybridity (Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004, p. 3), and a protest to the dominant trend of globalisation, emphasising a one-directional flow of migration from homeland to host land (Olwig, 2003). Within this plethora of research addressing the journey of homecoming, a burgeoning component relates to the return experiences of individuals and groups who possess an emotional attachment to their ancestral or ethnic homeland, who through their actions ‘demythologise the myth of return’ (Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004, p. 6).

In order to appreciate the significance the phenomena of homecoming has had on the field of migration studies, we offer a review of relevant literature. Our literary journey begins with an exploration of the topic of return migration, including its selective usage in past research, the ongoing viability of the phenomenon, and the various theoretical approaches used in the field. The review then focuses on the component of return migration relevant to this study, ancestral return, by demonstrating its growing popularity in research, its relevance and salience in contemporary migration studies, the various motivations behind ancestral return, and the involvement of state and non-state actors in the process of ancestral return. The review

proceeds to highlight the salience of the terms *home*, *belonging*, and *identity* to the study of homecoming and return migration. This section provides an introductory account of these terms in scholarly research as opposed to a comprehensive review. Having delved into an exploration of the terms *home*, *belonging*, and *identity*, the review demonstrates the factors that lead to a questioning of these terms by discussing competing national narratives and the hybridity of returnee identities. The changing definition of *home*, the continued search for a *sense of belonging*, and the implications that come with a *differing national narrative* highlight the transition away from the out-dated and restrictive definition of diaspora, in which one is always seeking a return to the homeland. The review concludes with an outline of scholarly research on homecoming for various migrant groups and their adjustment process.

## **2.1. Return Migration**

### **2.1.1. Usage of the Concept**

Return migration is no new phenomenon; however, research exploring return migration is considered a latecomer in the field of migration studies, due to a once-popular belief that ‘going home’ to a place from which one migrated or was displaced is anti-progressive, illogical and illusory (Chambers, 2008; Rapport & Dawson, 1998; Warner, 1994). Anthropologist George Gmelch (1980, p. 135) points out the reason for past criticism towards the idea of ‘return’ was that it was generally assumed ‘that those who left the Old World never returned’. Criticism was not restricted to social scientists but also to neoclassical economists who described a return to the country of origin as a ‘failure of the migration experience’ (Cassarino, 2004, p. 269). Despite ongoing criticism of return migration and a hesitation to recognise the phenomenon up until the late 20th century, earlier accounts of return migration were found in Ernest Ravenstein’s *The Laws of Migration*, published in 1885. In his paper, Ravenstein had proposed the need to consider the process of migration in

reverse, suggesting that ‘with each stream or current of migrants there runs a counter-current’ (Ravenstein, 1885, p. 187). Notwithstanding this early intervention in the study of migration, the publication of material addressing the issue of return migration remained relatively absent up until the mid- to late 1970s (King & Christou, 2011). By the middle of the 1970s, it had become evident through the large number of papers published that the topic could no longer be ignored. Thousands of migrants were returning to their homelands, including an estimated one quarter of the 16 million Europeans who had arrived in the United States during the early decades of the 20th century (Gmelch, 1980, p. 135). The European oil crisis of the 1970s and the large-scale return of migrants to their respective countries of origin, mostly in the Mediterranean (Bovenkerk, 2012), combined with the development of steamship transportation that provided relatively cheap, fast and safe travel across wide expanses of water, were said to be the reason for a renewed interest in return migration (Caroli, 1990; Constant & Massey, 2002). The use of the concept ‘return migration’ was further enlivened with the creation and independence of various states during the mid-20th century (Lake, 1995; Peres, 1985; Shuval, 1998), and the collapse of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union in the late-20th century (Bonnenfant, 2012; Stefansson, 2004; Winland, 2007). Overall, these studies demonstrate that, despite the initial tendency by social scientists to neglect the realities of return migration, its popularity as a phenomenon over the past half century has both cemented its presence in academic literature, and put into doubt the finality of the return process.

Recent objections to the terms ‘return migration’ and ‘homecoming’ are a result of research no longer demonstrating ‘return’ as the final chapter of the migration cycle. Historically, studies reflected a more simplistic model of migration, a one-way journey in which the migrant would move from origin to destination, typically from ancestral homeland to host land. More recently, research has reflected journeys from the host land to homeland in the case of return migration (King & Christou, 2011). However, this belief held onto binary

explanations of home and abroad, origin and destination, emigration and immigration, migration and return (Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004). One study exploring the 'return' of second-generation Greek-Americans to Greece found migrants contemplating a return back to the host land (USA), the country to which their ancestors had migrated, the authors suggesting this to be a representation of a 'return from the return' (King & Christou, 2011). However, despite the claim that return is but one stage of the migration cycle, such studies remain few given the increasing focus on the importance of the homecoming journey.

### **2.1.2. Viability of the Study of Return Migration**

Over the past quarter century, research addressing return migration has largely emphasised a qualitative approach as a means of strengthening the viability of the research. The large number of studies as a result of the return of migrants following the European oil crisis of the 1970s focused overwhelmingly on descriptive explanations rather than raw data. This was, however, due to most countries gathering information on incoming migrants rather than departing migrants (Gmelch, 1980).

However, the effectiveness of these studies to reflect the experiences of the target population has been disputed, as they were said to consist of a 'lack of reliable large-scale quantitative data' (Cassarino, 2004, p. 253). As such, there were fewer studies using questionnaires and surveys than studies described as 'largely descriptive' (Gmelch, 1980). Despite this criticism, qualitative research continues to be the methodology of choice in return migration studies, as these qualitative methods focus on the migrants' experiences and stories. The importance of using qualitative methods is found to give voice to the migrants in their portrayals of the experiences and journeys they have undertaken; after all, return 'may be more traumatic than the experience of flight and exile itself' and was said to be 'no simple or glorious homecoming' (Stefansson, 2004). John Arthur (2016), in his study of the African diaspora in the United States and Europe, included a qualitative analysis of Ghanaian repatriation from

the United Kingdom and the United States as part of his study, using qualitative face-to-face interviews with each participant. Through the process of interviews, Arthur was able to gather the stories of the repatriates and add agency to their return journey. Anthropological studies on return migration have used methods that involve spending considerable time in the place of study, thereby strengthening the validity of the study. Laura Hammond (2004), for example, examined the post-return experiences of people living in Ada Bai (Northern Ethiopia), an process that lasted eight years. Of greatest proof to the relevance of qualitative data is the work of cultural anthropologist George Gmelch (1980) and his exploration of the return of Barbadians from Britain and North America to the Caribbean. Gmelch's intention was to uncover what it means to 'come home'; however, for his initial study in the 1980s, during which he surveyed 135 Barbadian returnees, he found that the results seemed far removed from the reality of the migrants' lives, and decided to conduct a second smaller-scale study with 20 migrants, using in-depth tape-recorded life-history interviews. In view of all that has been mentioned thus far, one may assume that the use of qualitative methodologies is the reason behind the viability of return-migration studies; however, in addition to the data-collection method, the diversity of the return-migration phenomenon and its various forms also add to its significance.

### **2.1.3. Theoretical Dimensions of Return Migration**

Theoretical approaches used in research on return migration have demonstrated the reasons for a migrant's return to their country of origin. Traditionally, 'push-pull' factors have dictated migration theory (Van Uffelen, 2006, p. 10), as the cause of migration was said to be based on the individual's or collective's decision to migrate, the perceived desirability of the destination and the undesirability of the sending country (Leopold, 1992). Reasons for migration were argued to be either innovative or conservative, 'innovative' relating to the migrant wishing to achieve something new, and 'conservative' to the migrant wishing a

change in their life's conditions (Peterson, 1958). Van Uffelen (2006) cites Leopold (1992) when suggesting that most literature outside specialised migration literature focuses on the 'push-pull theory' and assimilationist models. However, Cassarino (2004) identifies five major theories that demonstrate the complex and unorthodox realities of 'return' migration, which include the neoclassical economics theory, the new economics of labour migration theory, structuralist theory, cross-border social network theory, and transnationalist theory. *Neoclassical economics theory* is used for migrants who return having failed the migration experience, unable to maximise the experience abroad, and desired to return home, with no income or savings and skills unable to be transferred (Cassarino, 2004). The *new economics of labour migration theory* claims return to be part and parcel of the migration project and a calculated strategy in which the migrant returns home once objectives are met: the returnee returns home as the goals have been met and is able to assist household members financially. Constant & Massey (2002) believe people under this model are those who migrate abroad temporarily for limited periods of paid labour and generally return home once the desired earnings have been saved. The new economics of labour migration theory is demonstrated in the work of Ravenstein (1885), through which he argues that return will take place when migrants are in possession of a competency and possibly able to use the skills gained, back in the country of origin. A contemporary example of this theory is Iaria's (2012) study of Iraqi migrants returning to their towns and cities in Iraq following years of residence in neighbouring Jordan and Syria. These migrants were found to experience socio-economic improvements upon returning to Iraq due to transnational ties and cross-border business. *Structuralist theory* claims that return to the home country occurs without changing structural constraints inherent in the origin country, as the return is based on incomplete information about the origin country; the returnee is neither a successful nor a failed migrant. The returnee undergoes a behaviour divergence upon return and motivations for return are readjusted to realities of home market and power relations. *Cross-border social network theory* asserts that



return is only the first step towards completion of the migration project; the migrant is a social actor who values projects and their own perception of the return environment, and resources are mobilised before return. The individual is shaped by social, economic and institutional opportunities at home and by relevance of their own resources; remittances and savings constitute just one type of resource. *Transnationalist theory* emphasises the temporary nature of return as it occurs once financial resources and benefits are gathered and when conditions in the homeland are favourable. Returnees are found to belong to a globally dispersed ethnic group (diaspora) and the migrant's educational background and skills gained abroad allow for upward social mobility. The various theoretical assumptions made by Gmelch (1980) towards *return migration* continue to provide an insight into the reasons behind a migrant's decision to return, with transnationalist theories exhibiting the most relevant model to the study of diasporic return and to this study.

Together, the studies reviewed above provide an important insight into the usage and viability of the phenomenon that is 'return migration'. For much of the 20th century, the term 'return migration' continued to represent the physical relocation of the migrant to the place of origin with the intention of staying for some time, perhaps permanently (Long & Oxfeld, 2004). This binary understanding of migration led to a structural invisibility of return migration as it excluded the experiences of those outside the binary paradigm, which was later termed 'the great unwritten chapter in the history of migration' (King, 2000, p. 7). Recent migration scholars have made use of contemporary definitions of 'return' based on the ontology of the migrant, that *their* belief that they are *returning* to a *homeland* is most beneficial to the study of return (Kasbarian, 2015; King & Christou, 2011; Winland, 2007). Developments in the field of migration studies have also begun to explore the various other forms of return, including the return of second and subsequent generations of migrants and diaspora groups to countries that do not represent their country of birth but that of their ancestors.

## **2.2. Ancestral Return**

### **2.2.1. Usage of the Concept**

Over the past quarter century, an increasing number of academic publications have addressed the phenomenon of groups of people returning to their respective homelands, which are in fact the place of birth of their parents, grandparents and ancestors, rather than their own. Academics continue to be perplexed by the use of the term ‘return’ when describing the migration of an individual to a place from which they did not originate. In a recent example of second-generation Greeks in Italy, Pelliccia (2017, p. 131) asks ‘how can we speak of a so-called return when referring to individuals who go to a country that they are not from?’ Historically, the use of the term ‘return’ was rejected by groups of scholars in the field of migration studies when discussing return in the context of ‘ancestral’, ‘ethnic’, or ‘parental’ homelands (Long & Oxfeld, 2004). The hesitation was due to the term representing the ‘physical relocation of the migrant...in the place of origin’ (Long & Oxfeld, 2004). However, this is not to say the term was never used in the past when discussing migrants emigrating to the ‘ancestral’ or ‘ethnic’ homeland. Bovenkerk (2012) used the term when discussing the return of Jews to Israel and the Rastafarian movement to Africa. As such, the usage of the term should in fact be expanded, rather than sheltered amongst one or two movements. For Bovenkerk (2012), the return was described as an ‘ancestral return’; for Wessendorf (2007), it was ‘roots migration’; for Tsuda (2003), it was ‘ethnic return’. The use of the term has made research addressing ancestral return visible and distinguishable from first-generation return migration, and has made evident the importance, richness and variety of studies addressing return to the parental and ancestral homelands (King & Christou, 2011).

The potential confusion associated with ancestral return to the homeland is further complicated when the homeland that the group is returning to is not the land from which the ancestors originated. This conflict in semantics over the terms ‘ancestral’ and ‘homeland’ is

reflected in statements made by Safran and King & Christou. Safran (1991, p. 83) explains how ‘members of a delocalised religious or ethnic minority expect eventually to “go home” to the former community or nation-state from which they migrated’, implying that the return to a ‘home’ is to a place from which they once originated. However, it has become clear that ‘ancestral return’ is not always to the former lands from which their ancestors originated. King & Christou (2011) describe how Caribbean returnees settled in islands different to the ones from which their parents emigrated. Similarly, Darieva (2011) describes how second- and third-generation diasporan Armenians from the United States are claiming the Republic of Armenia as their homeland despite the lack of historical attachment to the territory. Kasbarian (2015, p. 359) suggests the use of the term ‘step-homeland’ when describing ‘two entities that are not related by descent are forced into a familial relationship by external forces’. However, King & Christou (2011, p. 452) argue to shift the reference to the ‘emic perspective of the migrants themselves’; claiming the belief that they are ‘returning’ to a ‘homeland’ to which they have an ‘emotional and historic connection’ is sufficient. Consideration of the migrant perspective in whether or not they are returning to a homeland is crucial in understanding the growth in research addressing ancestral return to the ‘homeland’ or ‘step-homeland’. Christou (2006) takes the issue one step further by using quotation marks around the word ‘return’, given the return is not to the country from which the migrant originated. The ambiguity when defining ‘ancestral return’ has not hampered the exploration of ethnic and ancestral return studies of diasporas and has in fact strengthened the field of return mobilities, due to the importance placed on the migrant’s emotional and historic connection to the place of return.

### **2.2.2. Examples of ‘Ancestral Return’ Over the Past Decade**

The presence of literature addressing ancestral return migration over the past decade cannot be underestimated (Christou, 2006; Darieva, 2011; Huang, Ramshaw, & Norman, 2016;

Lehmann, 2012; Tsuda, 1999, 2010; Werner, et al., 2017; Wessendorf, 2007; Winland, 2007). Since the 2000s, research on ancestral return has surged in popularity, partly due to the reconceptualisation of the study of migratory phenomena within three analytical and explanatory frameworks: the mobilities paradigm, the transnational approach, and diaspora studies (King & Christou, 2011). The vast majority of research into ancestral return has used qualitative research methods and involved smaller groups of participants. Pelliccia (2017) interviewed 21 second-generation Greek-Italians who had moved from Italy to Greece, collecting life stories as a means of understanding the migrants' counter-diasporic migration. Pawlowska (2017) conducted 30 in-depth interviews with second-, third- and fourth-generation Armenian diasporans who migrated from the United States to Armenia, adding to the strength of the data by adding an observation method. Tsuda (1999) exceeded the standard in her interviews by interviewing 70 Japanese-Brazilians as part of an extensive participant observation and fieldwork study. King & Christou (2008) interviewed two second-generation Greek-American return migrants who, through their life stories and oral and written narratives, expressed their notions of home and belonging. The use of in-depth interviews and phenomenological approaches is common amongst researchers involved in ancestral return projects. From these studies, the main themes that have arisen include the migrant's motivation to return, assistance provided by state and non-state actors, and the experiences encountered upon return. The next section of this review covers the first two themes and the third is covered towards the end of the review.

### **2.2.3. Why 'Return' to the Ancestral Homeland?**

Migrants returning to ancestral homelands state their decision to return is influenced by job opportunities, business prospects, building relationships, and addressing issues of 'longing', 'belonging', and 'nostalgia'. While similarities exist between migrants returning to the country of origin and those relating to the ancestral homeland, such as the prospect of career

change or advancement, building personal/intimate relationships and nostalgia, first-generation returnees typically return to strengthen family ties (Gmelch, 1980). However, literature on ancestral return demonstrates an overwhelming need to address issues of ‘belonging’ and identification with a land connected to them through stories, patriotic sentiments, and the diasporic dream of return (Christou, 2006; Winland, 2007). Addressing the need to ‘belong’ draws diasporans back to their ancestral homeland. In research on second-generation Italians in Switzerland, Wessendorf (2007) found the notions of ‘belonging’ and ‘homeland’ to be powerful influences on choices made by the returnees, inspired by their transnational childhood and adolescence, throughout which their parents’ and grandparents’ nostalgia for the homeland was transmitted to them. Wessendorf described this return to the ancestral homeland as a form of ‘root migration’ in which the migrant was searching for the ancestral roots. The quest to discover ‘roots’ is a phenomenon experienced by generations of diasporans eager to connect with cultures, societies and lands that are a part of their ancestral homeland, or step-homeland (Kasbarian, 2015). Research by (Lehmann, 2012) on the 1946–1948 Armenian repatriation period is an earlier example of Armenian ancestral return migration in which the author alludes to Kasbarian’s concept of ‘step-homeland’ through an exploration of the experiences of over 90,000 diasporan Armenians to a ‘Soviet’ homeland, an ‘Armenian’ homeland unlike the lands of their ancestors in present-day South and Eastern Turkey. Lehmann (2012, p. 182) explains:

The dream of Hayastan (Armenia) remained alive. For many diaspora Armenians the lands lost in Eastern Anatolia were at the heart of what they conceived of as Armenia. Soviet Armenia did not entirely replace Anatolia as the imagined sacred homeland; it offered those yearning for a homeland an opportunity not to live in exile anymore.

This sometimes desperate desire by migrants to ‘belong’ and search for one’s ‘roots’ are succinctly described in the book *Homecoming* through stories of diasporic homecoming

(Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004). The various stories make clear the need for grounding or 'placing' by the migrants involved in the return journey. The desire to 'belong' and 'be grounded' are found scattered throughout diasporic literature addressing the experiences of ancestral return. Christou (2006, page 87), in her account of Greek-American return to an 'ethnic and national' place, found the narratives of migrants to be a project of 'identification', one in which identification came with the belief that the ancestral homeland was inhabited 'solely by Greek-speaking, ethnic Greek-origin Orthodox Greeks'. Similarly, Winland (2007), in research on Croatian return from Toronto, described the return of the diaspora as due to a sense of 'belonging' and finding a 'sense of home' in the newly independent 'homeland'. The need to belong, felt by members of various diasporas, was at times found to be a fulfilment of their parents' and grandparents' dream of return (Christou, 2006; Wessendorf, 2007). However, not all members of a diaspora desire to return; some experience varying degrees of belonging and identification with their homeland, host land or a third country at times. This 'shifting the hierarchies of belonging' means that some individuals feel more attached to *their* country of birth than the claimed 'ancestral homeland' (Werner, et al., 2017, p. 1561).

In addition to feelings of 'belonging' and 'rootedness', other salient considerations in the individual's decision to return were found to include the prospect of marriage, job opportunities, and helping the homeland. Research on Canadian-born Croatians by Winland (2007), includes stories of romance and career prospects. Research on American-Armenian returnees by Darieva (2011) describes their need to help build the homeland. What many ancestral-return migration stories have in common is the relocation of migrants from generally well-off, western nations, to less developed ones. The argument by Bovenkerk (2012) supports the position that migrants undertaking ancestral return normally come from relatively rich countries and enter countries with limited job opportunities and lower standards of living. However, this is not always the case. Literature has also shown return to an

ancestral land to be due to the opportunities presented to the migrant by the ‘ancestral homeland’. One example of the economic advantages of ancestral return was raised by Tsuda (2003) through an exploration of the return of Brazilian-Japanese who were invited to return to Japan. Darieva (2011) also reflects on the advantageous elements of the ancestral homeland through her research on Germans living in Central Asia and returning to Germany following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The end of the Soviet Union led to large-scale emigration from the former Soviet republics, but also included the return of various diasporas, including Mongolian-born Kazakhs who voluntarily returned to Kazakhstan following the nation’s independence, attracted by financial incentives (Werner, et al., 2017).

Experiences of ancestral return mentioned thus far have involved those in which the migrant has made the conscious decision to return to the ancestral homeland; however, return has not always been voluntary in nature but at times one in which migrants have little to no choice but to return to the ancestral homeland. Long and Oxfeld (2004) in their book *Coming Home?* describe the involuntary repatriation of 400,000 Palestinians following the end of the Gulf War and two million Ghanaians expelled from Nigeria. Accounts of Jews returning to Israel from across the world are some of the most prominent examples of ancestral return in contemporary literature. Zerubavel (2002) credits the migration pattern and return of worldwide Jewry to the outbreak of pogroms or war in their countries of origin. More contemporary accounts of involuntary ancestral return include the return of an estimated 20,000 Syrian-Armenians to Armenia following the start of the civil war, a decision made out of necessity and desperation for many (Della Gatta, 2017). These ‘forced repatriations’ need to be acknowledged as part of migration discourse, however are argued not to be ‘homecomings’ due to the forced nature of the movement. Both the conscious and involuntary decisions to return to the ancestral homeland are at times supported by the receiving state and non-state actors, which can in turn influence the migrant’s decision.

#### **2.2.4. Involvement of State and Non-state Actors**

The ongoing phenomenon of return to the ancestral homeland has been accompanied by varying levels of assistance by governments and organisations in the receiving state. Governments through their respective departments and affiliated organisations have provided a diverse range of services including financial assistance with settlement (Werner, et al., 2017), assistance with finding employment (Shuval, 1998), the offering of language classes, and simplified residency and citizenship processes (Harutyunyan, 2006; Winland, 2007). Werner et al. (2017), in their research on ethnic Kazakh returnees, explain the financial incentives of resettlement offered by the government of Kazakhstan to over 944,000 ethnic Kazakhs from nearly a dozen countries. Those included in the government's annual quota of migrants had the cost of their migration and settlement covered and were provided with brand-new homes and low-interest government loans. Shuval (1998) outlines the assistance provided to immigrants to Israel in the form of housing and financial assistance, easy-term mortgages, free language classes, and assistance with finding employment. Such enthusiasm by receiving state governments and organisations towards supporting potential returnees, although admirable, is argued to be more about addressing the state's economic, demographic, and security concerns (Joppke & Rosenhek, 2002) rather than the state's generosity to help its ethnic-kin.

State-driven repatriation programmes and assistance towards such programmes were commonly set up or supported following periods of concern to state security, whether it be physical conflict, demographic concerns, or economic instability. In one of the most popular accounts of ancestral return, Joppke and Rosenhek (2002, p. 309) explain how the 'return' of thousands of Jews to Palestine and then the State of Israel played a 'fundamental role in the demographic make-up of Israeli society'. The authors describe how the fledgling state understood the importance of supporting repatriation to secure the state and its borders. They



further explain how in the early years of Jewish immigration ‘both sides recognised that demography would be a central factor in the determination of the political future of Palestine and its two national communities’ (Joppke & Rosenhek, 2002, p. 310). In a more recent example of government support towards demographic majority, Werner et al. (2017, p. 1559) provide Kazakhstan as an example, by arguing that Kazakhstan’s support towards the return of ethnic Kazakhs following its independence was designed to help ‘the country achieve its demographic goals’. This argument was backed when the government of Kazakhstan, which later halted the repatriation programme, reinstated its support for the programme following Russia’s annexation of Crimea with fears of its own security given its sizeable ethnic-Russian population, despite ethnic Kazakhs at this stage constituting a ‘comfortable majority’ (Werner, et al., 2017, p. 1579). In addition to demographic concerns, governments have also initiated repatriation programmes of their ethnic-kin to address labour shortages and economic difficulties faced by the country.

Several repatriation programmes initiated by governments have been created with the intention of improving economic uncertainty, alleviate labour shortages and address ‘wrongdoings’ by past regimes. Tsuda’s research on ethnic-Japanese ‘return’ from Brazil, describes how the Japanese government invited ethnic Japanese from Brazil to Japan with the intention of addressing a ‘crippling labour shortage in Japan’ (2010, p. 22). The author explains how Japan’s solution to the country’s desperate labour shortage was through ‘ethnic’ migration channels by which both the labour shortage of Japan and the economic concerns of their ethnic-kin in Brazil would be resolved; arguing that ‘the course of migration can be ethnically determined’ (Tsuda, 2010, p. 22). Despite the economic incentives provided to the Japanese and Kazakh ‘diaspora’, in many instances it is the receiving state that wishes to take advantage of the economic boost brought about by the returning diaspora. Turner and Kleist, in research on African diasporas, describe how states have begun to praise diasporas for ‘their

remittances, investments and knowledge transfer' and granted rights including dual citizenship and franchise rights (2013, p. 192). The return of the African diaspora has been encouraged by African states, including Ghana, which encourages the return of Ghanaians living abroad and those of African heritage seeking an ancestral place of return. Such encouragement by the Ghanaian government is argued to be, in addition to the economic advantages, a legacy of mid-century political Pan-Africanism (Turner & Kleist, 2013). These members of the African diaspora are targeted as they are linked with economic resources that the state wishes to tap into (Arthur, 2016). Government intervention in the 'return' of their respective diasporas has also been initiated to address acts of historical injustice towards their population by past regimes.

Darieva (2011) labelled these government programmes 'ideological homecoming programmes', suggesting their development to be based on a European sense of human rights—on doing the right and just thing. Programmes aimed at attracting ethnic compatriots or diasporas from outside were found to coincide with the passing of legislation in the receiving state, allowing for an easier path to citizenship or automatic residency. Examples of states passing legislation as a means of attracting diasporas and reconciling injustices committed by past regimes or powers include a study of the Kazakh Diaspora. Werner, et al. describe the programmes initiated by the Kazakh government as a means of undoing the separation of nomadic Kazakhs following the new national borders of the 1920s, which 'separated Kazakh populations in the Soviet Union from nearby co-ethnics in China and Mongolia' (2017, p. 1563). Similarly, in the case of settlement in Germany, Brubaker (1998, p. 1050) explain how since World War II the bulk of ethnic German immigration had come from Eastern Europe and the (former) Soviet Union 'who claim, however remotely, German origins'. However, new immigration laws in Germany have denied the status of ethnic resettlement to all persons born after 1 January 1993 (Joppke & Rosenhek, 2002).

Government-led programmes have not acted alone, as both not-for-profit and non-governmental organisations have been found to play a growing role in encouraging return through settlement advice and volunteer programmes (Darieva, 2011). These organisations encourage skilled young westerners to volunteer with the intention of redeveloping a homeland, or attract young professionals to contribute to local development through professional work. Such organisations are found in Armenia and include the Armenian Volunteer Corps and Birthright Armenia. Darieva (2011, p. 491) describes such programmes as satisfying the returnees' 'parochial nostalgic longing for a homeland and ethnic soil'. The role played by such organisations is more to do with issues of identity and belonging than the experience of the individual. One long running organisation, *Taglit-Birthright Israel*, aims to provide lessons on how young adults struggle with issues of personal identity and meaning making, and was established to combat signs of weakening Jewish identity in the United States (Lev Ari & Mittelberg, 2008; Saxe & Chazan, 2008). Saxe and Chazan (2008) attribute *Birthright Israel*'s success in convincing participants to consider permanent return to Israel to the exposure participants experience with Jewish culture and history in contemporary Israel. Non-profit organisations, although keen to make the most out of using parochial nostalgia in attracting returnees, are also able to successfully use a transnational perspective in which global values coexist with ethnic elements (Darieva, 2011).

### **2.3. Home, Belonging and Identity**

The concepts of *Home*, *Belonging* and *Identity* have received significant attention in both diaspora and migration literature over the past decade. As historically fluid concepts, all three have been found to play an increasingly crucial role in the decision and adjustment process of homecoming for diasporans seeking a return to their ancestral homelands (Christou, 2006; Lake, 1995; Lehmann, 2012; Slobin, 2001). The prolonged periods of mobility and the effects of transnationalism experienced by diasporans are said to shape an individual's understanding of home, their conceptualisation of identity, and the ties they develop to different spaces and/or places (Liu, 2014). This section of the review provides an insight into the use of these three concepts in academia on return and ancestral return migration.

#### **2.3.1. What and Where is 'Home?'**

Traditionally, notions of 'home' have adhered to a static perception of place; however, contemporary interpretations incorporate a multi-local understanding, at times devoid of attachment to territory. Classical explanations defined 'home' as the stable physical centre of one's universe, 'a safe and still place to leave and return to and a principal focus of one's concern and control' (Rapport & Dawson, 1998, p. 3). Scholars Nigel Rapport and Andrew Dawson in their book, *Migrants of Identity* (1998), provide a sweeping review of the concept of 'home', arguing that 'a more mobile conception of home should come to the fore'. Throughout the book, the salience of a 'plurilocal home' is raised with a justification that home 'is neither here nor there' but one that exists in more than one, or several places. Rapport and Dawson (1998, p. 7) support this claim and argue that traditional notions of home have 'little conceptual purchase in a world of contemporary movement', despite the persistence of reactionaries refusing a world of movement. As such, recent scholarly research has adapted its understanding of the 'home' to incorporate an ever-changing world.

Conservative notions of 'home' are increasingly countered against more descriptive notions, which take into consideration the continuous movement of populations, as growing economies and less costly travel make the world a more unified place. Marc Augé (1995, page 107) describes how this continuous movement of people across the globe 'makes no place itself and separate' and no place 'completely other' for the global individual, a sentiment shared by Ley and Kobayashi (2005), who argue that 'immigrants never quite arrive at their destination because they never quite leave home. This notion of 'home' as neither here nor there has been found to attribute to 'increasing levels of dual citizenship, labour contracts and short-term visas, family members located on opposite sides of national borders, and fast and ever cheaper lines of contact between nations' (Ley & Kobayashi, 2005, p. 113). As such, increasing human mobility in an era of migration, globalisation and travel has de-territorialised 'home', with people more at home in words, opinions and gestures, as opposed to a territorial place of belonging (Berger, 1991). These arguments supporting the multi-locational basis of 'home' reflect the nature of the home as 'plurilocal' (Bammer, 1992), which, in turn, has transformed the understanding of 'home' and subsequently the 'homeland' for diaspora groups across the globe.

The centrality of the 'homeland' in diaspora consciousness has meant individuals have for centuries remained stranded between traditional definitions of 'home' and their own 'plurilocal' understanding of 'home', trapped between a historical memory of the homeland and their newfound loyalty to their host lands and countries of origin. For first generations in the diaspora, 'home' continues to incorporate either or both the host land and their country of origin; however, for second and subsequent generations, or as Benton and Gomez (2014) label them, 'descendants of migrants', their identification with their place of birth has risen sharply, showing signs of reclaiming their identity on their own terms (Huang, et al., 2016) as opposed to what they were raised to believe by their parents and grandparents. Huang et al. (2016, p.

74) concur with Benton and Gomez (2014) due to their own research on second-generation American-Chinese who were found to 'not have a strong attachment to a specific "home" place in China', instead identifying with their country of birth, the United States. Whilst contemporary research on diasporas has discovered the growing importance of the country of origin for second and subsequent generations of diasporans, the symbolic association of 'home' with the homeland has remained salient for many. Winland (2002), in research on second-generation Croatians born in Canada, found the group's interpretation of 'home' and 'homeland' to be synonymous when identifying with symbolic and cultural landscapes of belonging, whether in Canada or Croatia. The extension of the once-static definition of 'home' to include plurilocal locations such as the ancestral 'homeland' has enlivened the sense of belonging of diaspora groups to their respective homelands, particularly for those once limited by society's traditional definition of home as the host land.

Brah (2005, pp. 192-197) elaborate on the salience of 'home' for diaspora groups by recognising the homing desire of diasporic peoples and the multi-placedness of the concept 'home' in the diasporic imaginary as 'home becomes a mythical place of desire in the diasporic imagination'. Understandings of 'home' in diasporan literature have evidently taken on a dimension of multiplicity in which more than one location, including the homeland, is constituted as 'home'; however, can identification with a homeland remain salient should it not constitute the territory from which one's ancestors originated?

Literature addressing the return of people to a territory from which they or their ancestors did not originate has become increasingly common. Cohen (1997) describes the problematic nature of return for diasporas who return to a homeland that was created following their dispersal. One such example is provided by Lehmann (2012) for Armenians who were said to have repatriated to Soviet Armenia from 1946 to 1948, to a territory that existed neither as an Armenian state nor as their ancestors' place of origin during their time of exile. Lehmann

further explains how the return for the Armenian repatriates was ‘not a return in the literal sense of the word, as their ancestors had never lived in the territory that was now Soviet Armenia’ (2012, p. 172). For these repatriates, whose ancestors originated from towns and villages in Eastern Anatolia, Soviet Armenia did not entirely replace Anatolia as the ‘imagined sacred homeland’, but ‘offered those yearning for a homeland an opportunity not to live in exile anymore’ (Lehmann, 2012, p. 182), thereby recreating a home where one did not previously exist. Contemporary research affirms the ‘homing desire’ of diasporan groups (Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004) to settle in a place that is linked to their consciousness as a diasporan, rather than through an actual knowledge of one’s existence on that land. Huang et al. (2016), in phenomenological research on 26 second-generation Chinese-Americans, describe how transnational migrants are able to feel connected to a homeland without actually visiting the land or knowing where their parents had specifically originated in that land. In view of all the notions and studies outlined thus far, it has become evident that identification with a homeland is not determined by territory or one’s physical presence but rather the individuals’ sense of belonging to a place.

### **2.3.2. A Sense of Belonging**

The rise in migration to the new world throughout the 20th century led to the development of policies aimed at inclusiveness and accommodation by the governments of the receiving societies. As migrants began to settle and adjust to their new lives, their connection to their countries of origin began to waver. The 20th century has been described as a period of ‘increasing disconnection between territory, “blood-line” and culture’ for many of these migrants travelling to the new world (Alexander, 2001, p. 245). Receiving societies were eager to encourage migrants to become active members of society, as assimilationist policies were enacted with the aim of having the migrant forget past memories of the homeland and start their lives afresh (Hua, 2005). Alexander (2001), however, describes the failure by

receiving nations to incorporate some migrant groups, referred to as out-groups, which in turn would raise debates in the receiving society on how to best deal with such inequalities that exist between the out-group and society in the receiving state. The initial solution for many of the receiving countries was ‘multiculturalism’, defined by Benton and Gomez (2014, p. 1160) as ‘the recognition of the coexistence of ethno-cultural groups in shared national space and the need to admit them to the social contract’. Policies of multiculturalism, within certain societies, raised questions of ‘belonging’, regardless of the inclusive or dismissive stance of the majority group in any given society. For first generations, this at times led to a questioning of one’s belonging and a desire to return to the country of origin, and for subsequent generations these policies would lead to a return to the ancestral homeland in what would be coined a form of ‘counter-diasporic movement’ (King & Christou, 2008).

Counter-diasporic movements were commonly found to be fuelled by ‘nostalgia’ for, and a desire to identify with, the homeland (Darieva, 2011), due to an absence of a feeling of belonging to the host land. Darieva (2011, p. 493) justifies the feeling of nostalgia as a ‘defensive reaction (of the migrant) to the hardships of displacement or to the stigma, discrimination or radicalisation experienced by members of an ethnic or religious minority in their adopted lands’. However, while this is more likely to occur in the case of first-generation migrants, or possibly those with identities that are evidently distinct to the majority, it does not justify the counter-diasporic movements of second, third and subsequent generations of diasporans who identify with the society of their country of origin. Christou (2006) attributes this movement to the diasporans’ eagerness to reverse their diasporan identity, an action that would result in one’s identity being linked to an ethnic and national place. A common thread found amongst research on diasporan belonging and the desire to return is reflected in Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*. Bourdieu (2003) defines *habitus* as deeply ingrained habits, skills and dispositions that we possess due to our life experiences, a form of common



denominator. For returnees, much like an example provided for habitus, they are ‘most comfortable in an environment in which it is the product; like a “fish in water”’ (Thomas, 2015). Whether the diasporans’ decision to return to the ancestral homeland is based on feelings of nostalgia or a sense of belonging, the development and build-up of these sentiments relies on their successful transmission from generation to generation whilst in the diaspora.

Feelings of nostalgia and the desire to belong felt by generations of diasporans toward their ancestral homelands have been associated with the successful transmission of values said to be typical of diasporan groups. Research has discovered that feelings of nostalgia are transmitted through the family, the community, media and schools that operate to benefit diasporan groups across the world (Christou, 2006; Skrbiš, 2017; Winland, 2002). This transmission of positive sentiments and emotions towards the ancestral homeland is evidenced in research by Huang et al. (2016), who describe how second-generation diasporans feel an attachment to their parents’ homeland before even visiting the country. The feeling of attachment to the parent’s homeland was suggested by Backlund and Williams (2004) to ‘stem not from direct experience of a place but as a consequence of hearing others’ stories and memories of these places’ (p. 324). The power of stories and messages passed on from parent to youth was outlined in research on second-generation Croatian and Slovenian youth in Australia, through which Skrbiš (2017) describes the strong attachments to homeland felt by youth, believing it to be a well mediated process in which parental reconstruction of the past plays a passive role. Parental construction of the past was found to influence youths’ perception of the homeland and instil a sense of nationalism, coined ‘long-distance nationalism’ (Anderson, 1992), which Skrbiš (2017) argues will gain even greater prominence in the future.

Despite the presence of ‘long-distance nationalism’, feelings of patriotism, a ‘nostalgia’ for the homeland and a heightened sense of belonging to the ancestral homeland, migrants remained unprepared for the disappointment and shock experienced upon ‘return’. Werner et al. (2017) explain the predicament of many diasporans, as they discover their understanding of the homeland and its society belongs to a different time, an imagined past, which is in stark contrast to the society they encounter. The imagined past that diasporan groups are said to associate the homeland with is attributed to the development of national narrative that is developed in contrast to that of the homeland.

### **2.3.3. A Differing National Narrative**

National narratives are comprised of myths that have shaped the national identities of people and the positions of powerful groups in society (Brand, 2014). Brand, in her book *Official Stories: Politics and National Narratives in Egypt and Algeria*, notes that national narratives include a founding story, a national identity and the parameters of national unity (Brand, 2014). The introduction of or a change to a national narrative have been demonstrated to take place most effectively during or following periods of crisis (Brand, 2014), including periods in history that come following the end of colonisation (Hayward, 2013), during revolution (Alonso González, 2015; Brand, 2014; Wolczuk, 2000), and following war (Bieber, 2002). People who migrate or flee their homelands during or following such times of severe national change are found to maintain or develop a differing national narrative to those who remained behind (Christou, 2006; Kasbarian, 2015; Panossian, 2004). In the case of Armenians from throughout the diaspora returning to Soviet Armenia in the 1940s, their exposure to a state that did not exist at the time of their ancestors’ exile and one that had developed its own narrative of ‘Armenianness’ came as a cultural shock. Returnees to Armenia were mocked for their differing form of spoken Armenian, their adherence to religious behaviour, and their work habits that stood in contrast to those of Soviet Armenian society (Lehmann, 2012).

Returnees complained that ‘locals seemed to have no inkling of either religion or the national trauma of the Armenian Genocide’ (Lehmann, 2012), a shock to diasporans who had lived with stories and memories of the genocide passed down to them. The Soviet Union had created or at times re-created the national narratives of its various nationalities based on Soviet ideals. Ethnic Kazakhs from Mongolia had at the time of Kazakhstan’s independence discovered a homeland that made them appear to belong to a different time, ‘a past in which Kazakhs were monolingual and retained traditions associated with a nomadic pastoral lifestyle’ (Werner, et al., 2017, p. 1561). This unfamiliarity with homeland society and shock experienced by returnees to both Armenia and decades later to Kazakhstan are attributed to the creation and (re)construction of national narratives following the group’s exile, dispersal or departure.

Membership in the homeland upon return remains complicated when the narrative of the diaspora is inconsistent with that of society in the homeland (Shapira, Stern, Yakobson, & Orgad, 2014). ‘Just as nation-states have often created an external other’, societies have often created an *othered* region, an *internal other* (Johnson & Coleman, 2012, pp. 863–864), which arguably can at times include its diaspora, an essential component of the nation for many people. The formation of a collective identity in the homeland may be in contrast to, or even in combat with, an existing external other, with the intention of excluding the group from membership on the basis of difference from values and past historical identity (Abizadeh, 2005, p. 58). Therefore, as political power and national identity are defined first and foremost territorially, given control over territory is what provides tangible evidence (Herb, 1999), the diasporas’ external identity presents a challenge in consolidating differences upon return and results in conflict (Kaplan, 1999). Therefore, the experience of homecoming has the potential for providing a rich cultural resource to the homeland (Dürschmidt, 2016), and is a potential

seedbed of existential malaise should the homeland be challenged in its capacity to keep a certain narrative going (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994, p. 54).

#### **2.3.4. Diaspora Group Identity**

Group identities are sometimes treated as static, with homogenous descriptions of groups provided in academic research; this, however, neglects the contemporary reality for many groups, notably those who no longer reside in the homeland. Diaspora groups have since their exile and/or departure from the homeland developed a hybrid and multi-dimensional identity incorporating elements of their past and present. Hall (2014) suggests that identity should be thought of as a 'production' that is never complete, rather than an already accomplished fact. Group identity, although made up of an internal solidarity of cultural commonality between its members (Johnson & Coleman, 2012), continues to transform and adapt, resulting in a differing group identity between society in the homeland and diasporan populations. The differing elements of the group's identity are at times a result of the individual's or group's need to adjust their identity through a process of negotiation. Avakian (2010, p. 205) suggests the identities of ethnic groups living outside their homeland is 'a complex negotiation shaped by what their country of residence imposes upon them as well as what they bring from their often oppositional cultures'. The period of time since exile is proven to alter and hybridise diasporan group identity, at times contributing to patterns that lead to assimilation. For diasporan groups that had settled in the new world, their groups' development and socio-economic advancements led to a 'de-ethnicisation and the dilution of primordialism' (Ben-Rafael & Sharot, 1991, p. 13), thereby severing to some degree their attachment to their past group identity. However, many diasporan groups have, despite their socio-economic development, continued to protect particularisms and distinctive elements of their group's identity, emphasising these contrastive elements of their identity (Fasold, 1987) and thereby slowing down the process of assimilation (Ben-Rafael, Olshtain, & Geijst, 1998, p. 353).

Having preserved elements of their group's past identity, diasporans can at times desire to live in an 'authentic' homeland, one which they believe will provide them with a pure version of their group's identity (Avakian, 2010). However, the idea that a group can return to a so-called 'authentic' past was said to be fictitious, given the continuous change in constructions of identity over time and place (Avakian, 2010). Armenians in the diaspora differ from society in the homeland as each possesses a differing collective identity (Panossian, 2004, p. 229). An example of the existence of two national sets of group identities was provided by Christou (2006, p. 834) in research on the return of second-generation Greek-Americans. Christou, using a phenomenological approach, discovered the disappointment of returnees in finding out that Greece, Greeks and the Greek way of life were not as pure as they had imagined, but rather the realisation and recognition of themselves as influenced by their host land (United States). For returning Greeks throughout the diaspora, their differing group identity came into conflict with a Greece that 'struggles to retain and negotiate a quintessential image of "Greekness" in a Europe that is itself engaged in redefining its "European Identity" in a multicultural and multifaith context' (Christou, 2006). Although certain members of a diaspora group claim to exhibit purer versions of their group's identity, they at times fail to recognise the new collective identities they produce while in the diaspora through the repression of memory and celebration of roots (Tölölyan, 1996). The group's experience of collective trauma is arguably a 'stabilising' force in the process of identity maintenance (Saparov, 2003). Saparov explains how such horrific events are able to have a 'profound and traumatic effect' on national and group identities, as found in the case of the Armenians and their collective trauma of the Armenian Genocide (2003, p. 184). The salience of collective traumatic history amongst diasporan populations and its contribution to the protection of group identity is demonstrated in research by Alinia, Wahlbeck, Eliassi and Khayati (2014), in which they argue that collective traumatic history influences the group's perception and sense of belonging towards the homeland. The collective memory of trauma

experienced by diasporans undoubtedly influences their ability to preserve their group identity and fuels their desire to settle and belong in society within their homeland.

#### **2.4. The Adjustment Process of Returnees**

Research addressing the negative consequences of return migration is increasingly prevalent and one that asserts the failure of the traditional migration cycle. A significant number of articles cite stories of failure, resentment and discrimination faced by returnees upon return to the ancestral homeland, excluding stories of adjustment, positive acculturation, and success in the receiving society. An emphasis on stories of disappointment and re-return (re-diasporisation) is presumably due to the interest research of this nature receives in academia, as opposed to an affirmation of the failure process. This section of the review covers both the stories of success and failure of the adjustment and acculturation process for various groups, and the reasons behind the eventuality of such polar outcomes.

The migrants' expectations of life in the homeland and their anticipated hope of belonging when settling in the ancestral homeland are at times met with disappointment, due to a disconnect between what will be, and the reality of what is, the homeland. Negative experiences associated with return have shed light on the process of homecoming by making both migrants and researchers aware of the paradoxes of returning and the subsequent disappointment that should be expected (Anteby-Yemini, 2004). Returnees to various countries have commonly expressed concern with the difficulty they experienced when attempting to adjust to life in the ancestral homeland. Statements such as 'they [locals] are very different from us' (Pattie, 1999, p. 87), or finding themselves 'strangers in the ethnic homeland'- the title of Tsuda's (2003) book, have become increasingly common. Such sentiments were most frequently heard by diasporans returning to ancestral homelands only to discover that the place of return bears little resemblance to the imaginary homeland (Rushdie, 1991).

For repatriates to Armenia in the 1940s, the arrival in a Soviet homeland revealed the absence of a shared Soviet experience (Lehmann, 2012) that was commonly found amongst the various nationalities and people of the Soviet Union. Lehmann (2012) describes the shock of these returnees who were confronted with ‘a culture they felt to be essentially different from what they considered Armenian’, and a society that mocked and continuously reminded them of their foreignness. This disconnect felt between the two groups due to their differing language, culture and social behaviour, continues to be experienced in many parts of the post-Soviet world. Ethnic Kazakh returnees from Mongolia were shown signs of rejection by local Kazakhs due to their inability to communicate fluently in Russian or relate to a shared experience of the Soviet past (Werner, et al., 2017). The absence of the migrant from the past memories of the homeland reveals an absence in understanding by the returnee about how the homeland operates. Similarly, Christou (2006, p. 832) notes that second-generation Greek-American returnees felt disappointed in finding that Greece, Greeks and Greek ways of life are not as “pure” as they had imagined. King et al. (2008) elaborated on this experience by pointing out that the disappointment and profound disillusionment felt by second-generation Greek-American returnees to Greece was also as a result of difficulties with employment, frustration with bureaucracy, a culture of corruption, struggles with the chaos and stress of life in Athens and pessimism about their children’s future in the homeland. Second-generation Italians who were born and raised in Switzerland found themselves challenged by the hierarchic gender relations they encountered when settling in southern Italy (Wessendorf, 2007, p. 1096). Anthropologist Daphne Winland (2007) in her book on Croatian return of second- and third-generation Canadians lists the difficulties with bureaucracy, customs, habits, attitudes of homeland Croats concerning work, and the reception received to be barriers preventing returnees from adjusting to life in the homeland. Disappointment evidently had no boundaries, as research outside the European continent, including in Ghana, found African-American repatriates treated and viewed by the local population as some kind of

‘white people’, in culture rather than colour (Lake, 1995). Frequently, the experience of return to the ancestral homeland leads to a second return back to the country of birth/country of origin/host land in the form of re-return, thereby emphasising the continuous rather than complete nature of migration in a transnational era (Ley & Kobayashi, 2005).

The negative experiences associated with return that were found to be preventing or delaying adjustment are of particular interest to researchers given the frequency of homeland visits during the returnee’s youth. Increasingly, returnees are exposed to the homeland due to short-term holidays referred to as ‘diaspora tourism’ (Basu, 2004), ‘roots tourism’ (Reed, 2013), or ‘recreational transnationalism’ (King & Christou, 2008). These short-term opportunities have allowed diasporans the opportunity to increase their knowledge of, and familiarity with, the homeland as a possible future destination, thereby hoping to ‘help...eliminate any sense of strangeness’ (Pelliccia, 2017, p. 138). What used to be considered a once-in-a-lifetime trip for many has now often become an annual event (Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, Waters, & Holdaway, 2009) due to the increasing availability of low-cost air travel. However, Christou (2006, p. 840) believes these ‘short and sweet’ stays are not sufficient enough to allow for the pragmatism returnees would require should they decide on permanent return. The realities of life in the homeland are found to not be evident during the individual’s short-term stay and therefore result in returnees experiencing a form of ‘rupture’ in their adjustment and identification process upon permanent return. As such, although familiarity with the ancestral homeland has significantly increased due to short-term holidays, the short nature of such holidays does not always prepare the individual for the realities they are expected to experience upon permanent settlement, with issues of belonging and identity questioned despite the returnees’ familiarity with the homeland and its society. Furthermore, not all groups of returnees were once able to make use of return visits during their youth, particularly in the case of the Armenians and their once-restricted Soviet homeland. The resulting



disconnects between the migrants' expectations of the homeland and the realities of the homeland are profound, and to this day put into question the successful adjustment of these returnees. However, despite the overwhelming amount of research addressing negative experiences upon return and the unsuccessful adjustment of returnees, positive experiences are also found.

It is said that an individual becomes a member of society when he learns to act within its limits in a way that is beneficial to it (Mikheyev, 1987). Working to become a member of society is by far the fastest way to adjust to life in a new society, which, for much of the literature discussed thus far, is in relation to life in the ancestral homeland. Despite the negative experiences of adjustment during the Soviet era for many Armenian returnees, it was said that returnees eventually became 'soviet', 'even if they were not to resemble the picture-perfect new man' (Lehmann, 2012, p. 210). Returnees have over the past two decades become increasingly aware of life in the homeland, despite the belief that short-term visits do not sufficiently expose migrants to life in the homeland (Christou, 2006). Wessendorf (2007, p. 1094) explains that migrants from Switzerland to Italy have 'fairly realistic ideas of what to expect of life in Italy, including economic insecurity, chaotic bureaucracy and corruption'. It is due to these positive experiences that returnees decide to stay in the ancestral homeland, in addition to the 'unrelenting patriotism' of the returnee (Lehmann, 2012), the need to overcome legal and socio-economic conditions in the country of origin (Iaria, 2012), and the increasing personal independence felt in the homeland (Wessendorf, 2007). Stories of a successful return and ensuring adjustment to society in the homeland are common, but are, in general, lacking from literature due to these experiences being less powerful than stories of failure, shock and disappointment.

## **2.5. Conclusion**

This review has demonstrated the popularity of return migration and the growing academic focus towards ancestral return migration as generations of migrants born outside the homeland consider the journey of homecoming. Historical push-and-pull factors relating to migration tend to only marginally apply to cases in which migrants are returning to an ancestral homeland, instead driven by their desire to live in, and belong to, a land whose stories and images have been transmitted through generations. The increasing number of people returning to their ancestral homeland over the past several decades demonstrates the fluidity of the concepts of home and belonging, while also continuing to put into question the finality of the migration journey. The migrants' desire to return to the homeland and feel a sense of rootedness and belonging are at times overshadowed by the challenges they encounter upon arrival, due to their unfamiliarity with life in the homeland. Literature on return migration, although now including research addressing ancestral return, remains very much attached to the familiar, as families are still able to recall stories and memories of their time in the homeland, from either the parents or the grandparents. Unlike the many peoples discussed extensively in the review, the Armenians present a unique, although not exceptional case. Returnees from throughout the diaspora settling in the Republic of Armenia are descendants of genocide survivors who once inhabited the territory known as Western Armenia, Turkish Armenia, or Ottoman Armenia. As such, their settlement in the Republic of Armenia is neither a return, nor a return to the land of their ancestors. This research examines the significant gap in literature addressing what is arguably an ancestral return, given that the individuals are the first of their family members over the past hundred years to settle in what is Armenia, or rather, what remains of the Armenian homeland.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

As outlined in the introduction, the aim of this research project is to create meaning from the experiences and stories of migrants undertaking the journey of homecoming and the ensuing process of adjustment in the Republic of Armenia. It is intended to assist diasporans and the governments of receiving countries with implementing successful repatriation programs that take into consideration the various experiences and concerns of past returnees. Before discussing the findings of this study, this chapter re-introduces the research question, demonstrates its relevance to the research problem and outlines several gaps that have been identified in the field of study. This is followed by descriptions of the theoretical approach and methods used throughout the data collection and analysis process and the research participants and their personal circumstances at time of arrival in Armenia and at time of interview. To conclude, an outline of the researcher's position as researcher and member of the Armenian diaspora is provided.

### **3.1. Research Problem and Questions**

For over half a millennium, the Armenian people remained divided within their historic homeland, which had come under the control of competing empires. This centuries-old division resulted in the linguistic and physical division of the Armenian peoples into two portions. The western portion, under the control of the Ottomans, was referred to, from the 18th century, as Western Armenia (or Turkish Armenia); the eastern portion under the control of the Russian Empire was referred to as Eastern Armenia (or Russian/tsarist Armenia) (Oshagan, 1986). The Armenians of each empire would over time adopt and alter elements of their culture, ideology and language. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the creation of the Modern Armenian language further divided the two groups as one group adopted what would be known as the Western Armenian branch of the language and the other the Eastern. The

Armenians within the Ottoman Empire (Western Armenia) were taught the western branch of Armenian and the communities of the Russian (Eastern Armenia) and Persian Empires were taught Eastern Armenian. The division of the Armenian homeland came to its most horrific conclusion when, at the beginning of the 20th century, the portion of the Armenian homeland under Ottoman control, as well as the cities, towns and villages throughout much of the Ottoman Empire, saw their Armenian inhabitants massacred or deported. Those who were able to flee the massacres of the genocide either settled in cities across the world and formed the Armenian Diaspora, or found shelter in the territories of the Russian Empire and what would later become the first independent Armenian state in over 500 years—the Republic of Armenia—a short-lived Republic (1918–1920) that only two years later was occupied by Bolshevik forces and declared a part of the Soviet family. A seven-decade-long period of separation divided the Armenians of the diaspora from their compatriots in Soviet Armenia.

The diverging identities of the Armenian people, one Soviet, one diasporan, one Eastern Armenian, and one—mostly—Western Armenian, led to the creation of differing narratives of ‘Armenianness’. Families, communities and organisations throughout the diaspora maintained their use of the Western Armenian language (with the exception of the Armenian community of Iran which uses Eastern Armenian), distanced themselves from what many considered a fraudulent homeland,<sup>6</sup> and continued to transmit a historical memory of the lost ancestral towns and villages of Western Armenia (Kasbarian, 2015; Panossian, 2006, p. 168). Conversely, the Armenians of Soviet Armenia adopted Eastern Armenian as the official standard of Modern Armenian, embraced the Soviet project, and re-created the narrative of the Armenian nation, a recreation that was authored by Soviet historians and elite, which

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<sup>6</sup> For most of Soviet Armenia’s existence, large segments of the diaspora, including the most influential of the diaspora’s political organisations—the Armenian Revolutionary Federation—continued to assert their rejection of Soviet rule in Armenia. However, other segments of the diaspora, including the left-leaning Social Democrat *Hunchakians* and Liberal-Democrat *Ramgavars* continued to cooperate with Soviet Armenian authorities.

marked Armenian national tradition as exotic and in contrast to the modern norm of Soviet tradition (Bayadyan, 2007). However, despite criticism of the Soviet project, a period of *Korenizatsiya* ('putting down roots') resulted in policies of nativisation, during which native languages were promoted and the Armenian language elevated in the Soviet Armenian Republic, making Armenia as a nation and society more Armenian. Nevertheless, the contrasts in narrative were amplified by the relative absence of visiting diasporans during the Soviet period and the relatively low number of emigrants from the Soviet Union. Armenia's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 created not only an opportunity for the two groups to interact with one another, but also opened a sort of 'flood gate' for differences that had up to this point separated the two portions of the Armenian nation. As citizens of the homeland emigrated in their hundreds of thousands, in many cases to join the established Armenian diaspora, a meagre number of diasporans made the journey to return to the ancestral homeland.

Research on Armenian repatriation during the Soviet period has made evident the mistreatment and prejudice experienced by Western Armenian returnees settling in Armenia, as they were mocked and often treated poorly due to their use of a different branch of the Armenian language, poor knowledge of patriotic Armenian literature, and customs and behaviour adopted from their time abroad (Lehmann, 2012; Pattie, 1999). Research in the field of Armenian return migration following independence has been scarce, but includes the work of researchers such as Sossie Kasbarian (2015) and Tsypyima Darieva (2011), who have delved into topics of 'homeland', 'belonging' and 'return'. The experience of homecoming for members of the Armenian diaspora, and particularly those who identify with a distinctly different Armenian identity and narrative, the Western Armenians, has not been sufficiently investigated and critiqued. This leads us to a problem in understanding how the returning

diasporans will deal with the conflict of identity and narrative they experience. Questions that arise include:

- a) What understanding of homeland and (Armenian) identity do returnees possess before settling in Armenia?
- b) What reactions do returnees encounter from homeland society upon arriving and settling in Armenia?
- c) Which elements of the returnees' identity are questioned, accepted and rejected by homeland society?
- d) Which elements of their Armenian identity are returnees willing to adjust/sacrifice upon their settlement process?
- e) What does the process of adjustment and acculturation involve for returnees?

Past research addressing Armenian diasporan return has made evident the presence of a society that is mostly indifferent to the diaspora's narrative of 'Armenianness', specifically those elements that differ to the dominant Eastern Armenian narrative of the homeland. This apathy needs to be re-examined from the subjective perspective of returnees in the context of their arrival in an independent Armenia. As such, this project will answer the question:

*What interactions, realisations and possible adjustments do Western Armenian 'returnees' experience after settling in an independent homeland with a dominant Eastern Armenian narrative?*

### **3.2. Theoretical Framework**

The suitability of a theoretical framework for this study is determined by its ability to explain both the theory and concepts relevant to the phenomenon of ancestral return migration and the ensuing process of adjustment and acculturation. Past research has made evident the challenges returnees encountered upon return (Lehmann, 2012; Pattie, 1999), due to their

differing narrative of ‘Armenianness’ (Kasbarian, 2015; Laycock, 2012; Pattie, 1999; Safran, 1991). For this reason, we use the inseparable concepts of *power* and *hegemonic discourse* when analysing the stories, experiences and interactions of the returnee group. The presence of power during interactions and its control over hegemonic discourse (accepted knowledge) in society of the Republic of Armenia is a power dynamic affirmed by discourse theorists.

### **3.2.1 Power and Hegemonic Discourse**

The whole social order of discourse is said to be put together and held together as a hidden effect of power (Fairclough, 1995). In the context of society in Armenia, the presence of a dominant *Eastern* Armenian narrative and identity, through the elevation of the Eastern Armenian vernacular as the standard and ‘national’ language, and a historical memory of the Soviet past, is a display of power in action and the power of discourse. Armenian society’s acceptance of a hegemonic ‘Eastern Armenian’ discourse has strengthened the monopolistic role of the Eastern Armenian narrative, by stigmatising all others through the questioning of their place and belonging. Foucault’s (2013) understanding that knowledge and ideas are created by certain people and social groups is a dynamic evident within society in Armenia, as the dominance of *Eastern* Armenian has transformed into an unquestioned truth when discussing identity in the homeland.

The Republic of Armenia’s official language, Armenian, is used in society through the form of *Eastern* Armenian. The persistence in usage of Eastern Armenian is by virtue of the centuries-old dominance of both the Eastern Armenian vernacular and its identity on the territory of what is historically termed *eastern* Armenia. The domination of Eastern Armenian was historically upheld by both institutions and society during periods of large-scale migration of Western Armenians, predominantly following the Armenian Genocide (Herzig & Kurkchiyan, 2004) and the 1946–1948 period of *nerkaght*’ (in-gathering) (Lehmann, 2012). The usage of Eastern Armenian is maintained by the power of institutions, including

universities, government bodies, and, most importantly, society in the Republic of Armenia. To the detriment of all other alternatives, specifically Western Armenian as only another variant of the language, the Eastern Armenian identity is upheld as the dominant and hegemonic variant of Armenian in society. The hegemony of Eastern Armenian within Armenia is reflected in Foucault's account of *hegemonic discourse*, in that specific opinions come to be formed, preserved, and dominate viewpoints in society, which are kept stable by political power dynamics (Macdonald, 2003, p. 32). The power of the Eastern Armenian narrative in the *linguistic and identity* discourse within society and institutions of Armenia is further reflected in the 'cultural capital' the language and identity represent as a social asset in the country (Bourdieu, 2003), as is made evident throughout our research. Returnee stories and experiences when arriving and settling in Armenia provide an opportunity to analyse these interactions through the lens of discourse theory and discover the existence and prevalence of *power* and its effect on *hegemonic discourse* in Armenia.

### **3.2.2. Discourse Theory**

Discourse theory explains how things people say or write draw from a pool of generally accepted knowledge in society, while at the same time feeding back into society to shape or reinforce such knowledge (Schneider, 2013). This knowledge that is accepted by society becomes the *hegemonic discourse*, the process by which specific opinions come to be formed and preserved as the dominant viewpoint throughout society (Macdonald, 2003). Schneider (2013) explains how discourse is crystallised into institutions and prompts societies to create and shape the physical world they inhabit in specific ways rather than others. Language, after all, has the power to programme how people behave, by establishing the norms and values of what is normal or appropriate (Link, 2018), notably by being intimately involved with socially embedded networks of power (Whisnant, 2012).



Foucault's discourse theory remains the most suitable in providing an analysis of the power dynamic that exists between returnees and locals, as they return to a homeland with a hegemonic discourse created by institutions and elite in Armenia, both new and old (Figure 3.1; Foucault, 1991).

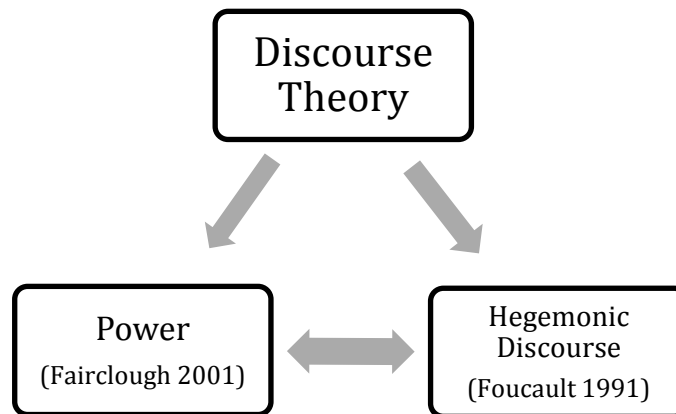


Figure 1.2: Discourse theory and the power-discourse relationship (Fairclough, 2001; Foucault, 1991)

The significance of the power-discourse relationship is evident in the field of migration studies, given the plethora of studies addressing the difficulties migrants face in new settings. In a study of black Francophone Africans and Haitians in Ontario (Canada), Madibbo (2004) identified the various resistance strategies used by group members in entering power structures and countering hegemonic discourse. It is this existent power structure that migrants confront, a power structure that has already dictated society's attitudes towards migration (Al Fajri, 2017). Choi (2014) reveals how negative attitudes towards human trafficking are present in Chinese society and affect the lives of North Korean women who work and live in China, discouraging others from making the decision to migrate. And finally, the power of hegemonic discourse to positively influence migration and settlement was evident in an ideologically 'Peron-dominated' Argentina, throughout which time the Islamic community was able to use this positive hegemonic discourse as a source of power and

establish community centres and religious institutions (Hyland Jr, 2017). These are but some studies that use and make evident the negative and positive influence of the power and discourse dynamic in analysing the experiences of migrants, minorities and community groups.

When exploring the power-discourse dynamic, numerous studies, including my own, use a strand of discourse theory known as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in analysing data collected from participants. CDA is distinguished from other non-critical forms of discourse analysis by its inclusion of the concept of power as a central analytical lens (Leitch & Motion, 2013). The experiences, stories and perspectives of returnees are transcribed and critically analysed through the use of themes. While the use of themes is arguably not unique to a distinct method such as thematic analysis, it is used by numerous researchers when conducting Critical Discourse Analysis in fields such as the study of textbooks (Alghamdi, 2018), the analysis of political speeches (Arce-Trigatti & Anderson, 2018), workplace bullying (Johnson, 2015), media analysis, and business leadership development (Fyke & Buzzanell, 2013). The use of themes allows for an understanding of the participants' intent and their lived experiences, without the complications associated with linguistic coding, which, although of great importance, is not necessary in empirical studies exploring life experiences. The centrality of the concept of power in Critical Discourse Analysis is due to the approach's ability to explain how power is abused, reproduced and legitimated by the talk and text of dominant groups and institutions (Van Dijk, 1996), and the dialogical struggle that is reflected in the privileging of a particular discourse and the marginalisation of others (Mumby & Stohl, 1991; Oswick, Keenoy, & Grant, 1997). Having described the theory and concepts guiding this study, we now explore the method used in collecting the data.

### 3.3. The Research Method

The data for this research was collected through a qualitative method of in-depth interviews, intended to collect the thoughts and experiences of each participant through a collection of statements, short responses and detailed stories. Anastasia Christou, who specialises in counter-diasporic return for second-generation Greek-Americans and Greek-Germans, explains that ‘qualitative methods are much better suited than quantitative methods for addressing and further exploring meanings, processes and experiences in individuals’ lives that are not easily quantifiable’ (2006, p. 833). The qualitative interview process allows the participants the opportunity to interpret their own experiences on the process of homecoming and provide their own understanding of the interactions and confrontations they experience in the social setting in which they now live. The interview process was an attempt to enter the participants’ world and provide a comfortable space for them to recount their experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). This qualitative method of data collection is well suited in the overall research design, as the collection of stories and experiences provides for a ‘life narrative’ of each participant and a detailed portrayal of their homecoming experience. The semi-structured interview process comprised six sections, each addressing the various stages of homecoming and elements of identity, culture and language that appear in contrast to the narrative of ‘Armenianness’ in the homeland (see Appendix 1 for the interview questions). The sections of the interview were as follows:

- *Life in the diaspora:* The first four questions address the concepts of homeland and identity prior to migration, and then delve into the participants’ decision to return and the reactions of family and friends.
- *Reception by homeland society:* The second set of questions explores the returnees’ perceptions of the reception they received by homeland society, including the reactions of

locals towards their return, their observations of how locals perceive them as Western Armenians, and any discriminatory behaviour they may have encountered.

- *Western Armenian identity:* The third set of questions addresses the participants' identification as Western Armenians, including their use of the Western Armenian language and script, their personal identification with the cities, towns and villages of their ancestors in Western Armenia, their identification with the lost lands of 'Western Armenia', and their ties to a diasporan identity.
- *Western Armenian language:* The fourth set of questions explores the use and presence of the Western Armenian language in the homeland, the reactions of locals towards the use of the language, the future of the language in the homeland, familiarity with the language by homeland society, and the presence of Russian as a language in the homeland.
- *Adjustment and Acculturation:* The final set of questions explores the participants' process of adjustment to life in the homeland, their acculturation attitude and the similarities and inconsistencies between the two segments of the Armenian nation (diaspora and homeland).

The interview questions were pre-prepared in both the English and Armenian languages and laminated with the intention of being used as a guide should the conversation deviate from the topic. In general, the question-by-question format of the interview was followed, as participants felt comfortable being guided through the discussion and responses generally digressed into other stories. On average, each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes with all interviews recorded using a small recording device. Participants were frequently asked whether they would like to take a break. During breaks, the recording was stopped and the participant and researcher engaged in casual conversation. Interviews were conducted in either Armenian or English, depending on the participants' language preference. The participants were asked to choose their preferred language in order to feel more comfortable and provide the most detailed responses. Participants assured the researcher that they were

comfortable with the chosen language. In general, participants originating from a country in the Middle East (in addition to the participant from Argentina) chose to respond in Armenian, and participants from Australia, Canada and the United States of America chose to speak in English. It was common to have participants who chose to speak in English frequently switch to Armenian when discussing certain topics or recalling interactions with homeland society. Interviews completed in Armenian were later transcribed and translated by the researcher, who is fluent in both the Armenian and English languages. At the end of the interview, each participant was provided with a ‘thank you’ gift for taking part in the interview process. Not surprisingly, all 30 participants initially rejected the gift as the researcher was reaching into his bag to take it out. This rejection is a cultural gesture common amongst Armenians, with the response *Պէտք չիկա՛ւ* *Be’dq chigah’* (there’s no need/you shouldn’t have), however, once they saw the gift, a decorative boomerang,<sup>7</sup> all were delighted to receive it. The gift itself was representative of the hybrid identity of diasporan Armenians, such as the researcher, which is discussed at the end of the chapter.

### **3.4. The Participants**

Individuals deemed eligible to take part in the study were those of adult age (18 or over) who had migrated to the Republic of Armenia following its independence in 1991, were born and raised in the diaspora,<sup>8</sup> received the Armenian component of their education in Western Armenian, and consider their settlement in Armenia to be permanent.

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<sup>7</sup> A boomerang is a well-known weapon used by indigenous Australians for hunting purposes.

<sup>8</sup> As specified in the introduction chapter, the *diaspora* for the purpose of this research is intended to represent communities who reside outside the territory of what was previously the Soviet Union, and specifically those who speak the western branch of the modern Armenian language.

The sample selected from the target population was chosen from the first 30 people who responded to the request for interest sent by the Repat Armenia Foundation.<sup>9</sup> The foundation had agreed to assist in sourcing eligible participants for the study through the use of their database. Prior to the researcher's arrival in Armenia, the foundation had sent an introductory email to its members, seeking interest by those wishing to take part in the study and who met the eligibility criteria. Interested participants emailed the researcher directly, to which he responded explaining that he would make contact with them upon his first few days in Armenia. The fieldwork took place during a two-month stay in Yerevan, Armenia, in October–November 2016, with interviews being conducted at local libraries, Repat Armenia's offices, and parks in and around the city. Interviews took place only in the capital city, Yerevan, due to the absolute majority of participants who met the eligibility criteria being located there. Of the 30 participants, one resided permanently outside the capital in Armenia's second largest city, Gyumri; however, the interview was conducted in Yerevan.

The sample group was made up of 30 participants who are representative of the larger Western Armenian target population in Armenia. The number of participants in the sample group (n=30) is characteristic of studies addressing homecoming and return migration, as these fields of study typically employ qualitative research methods with small numbers of participants until data saturation is reached (Boyd, 2001). These interviews will likely be longer in duration (Creswell & Miller, 1997), as researchers intend to study the data collected in great detail to arrive at the very heart of the experience (Orbe, 2009). Similar studies involving return migration and experiences of return to homelands have also used qualitative methods with small numbers of participants (Christou, 2006; Tsuda, 2010; Winland, 2007).

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<sup>9</sup> The Repat Armenia Foundation is a non-governmental, non-profit institution, which aims to return professional and entrepreneurial individuals and families to Armenia, with the aim of securing the future development of the Armenian nation.

The names of the 30 participants, listed as pseudonyms in the Appendices, are accompanied by the participant's sex and country of origin. The pseudonyms chosen are names of Armenian origin, intentionally selected, to reflect the fact that all but one participant had a first name that is considered typically Armenian, in contrast to thousands of diasporans who have first names that originate with the dominant culture in their country of origin. However, the researcher gave the one participant with a non-Armenian first name an Armenian pseudonym so as not to make it obvious to members of the sample group who might read this thesis the identity of the individual. Other personal identifiers of interest for the sample group include their countries of origin, the civil status of the individual upon arrival to Armenia and at time of interview, their family composition upon arrival, and the duration of time in Armenia at the stage of the interview. Each identifier is explained in detail as follows:

**Country of origin:** The 30 participants of the study migrated to Armenia from nine countries: Argentina, Australia, Canada, Cyprus, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, France and the United States. These countries represent the participants' country of birth, or the country in which they spent most of their time before settling in Armenia (Figure 1.3).

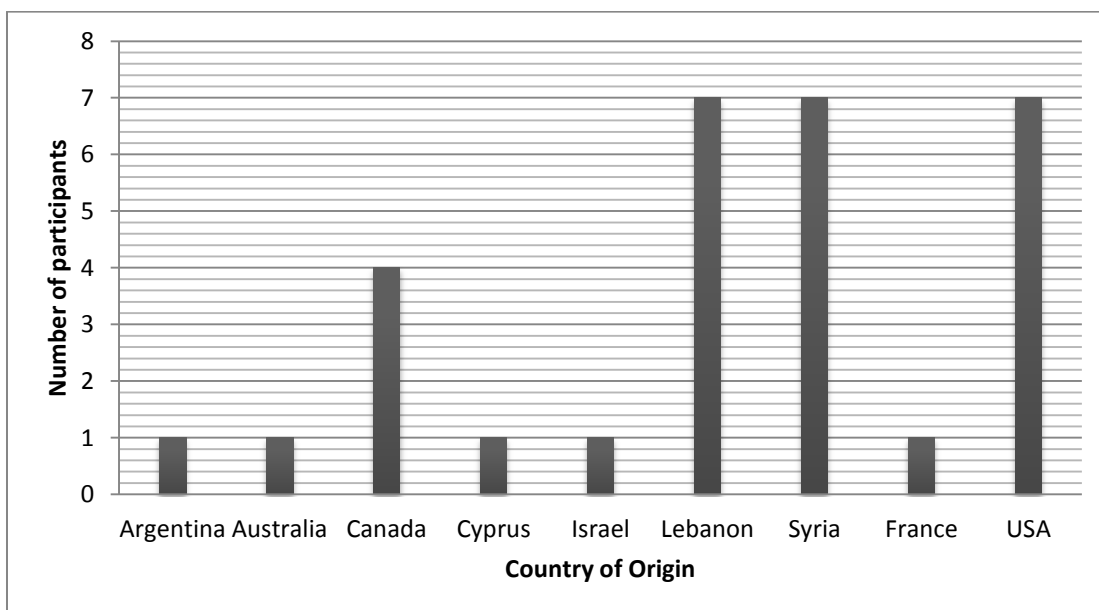


Figure 1.3: Country of Origin of Interviewees

**Civil (marital) status upon migration:** The civil (or marital) status of the group upon arriving to Armenia was as diverse as the participants' countries of origin. Of the 30 participants, 22 were single, two were engaged, one was in a relationship, two were married with no children, two were married with children and one married with children who remained overseas (Figure 1.4).

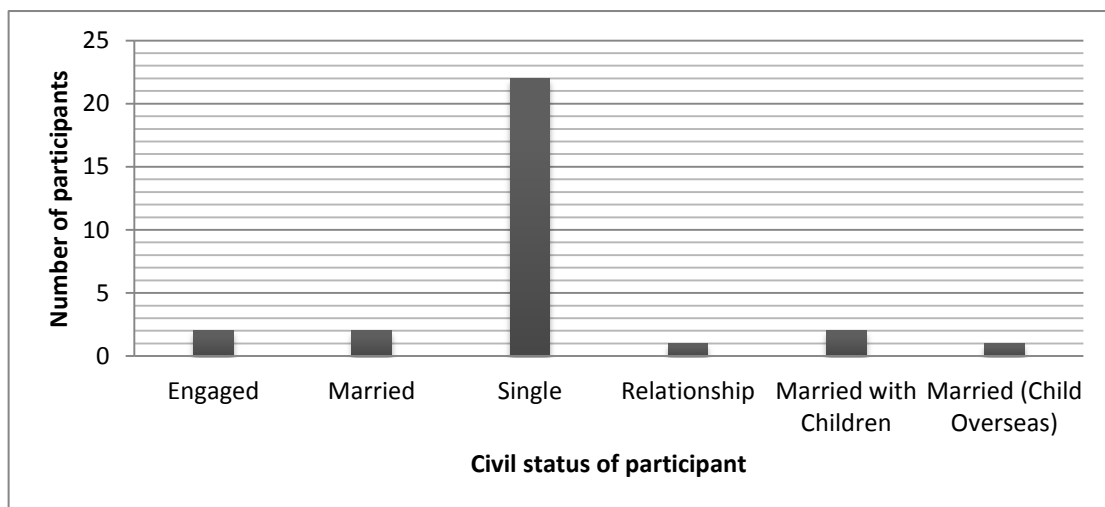


Figure 1.4: Civil status of participants upon arrival in Armenia

Acknowledging the fact that the participants have been in Armenia for different durations of time, at the time of interview in 2016, 21 of the participants had no change in their civil status, one had experienced their relationship fall apart, one was in a relationship after having met a local partner, one had become engaged, four had married, and three of the four who married had children (Figure 1.5).



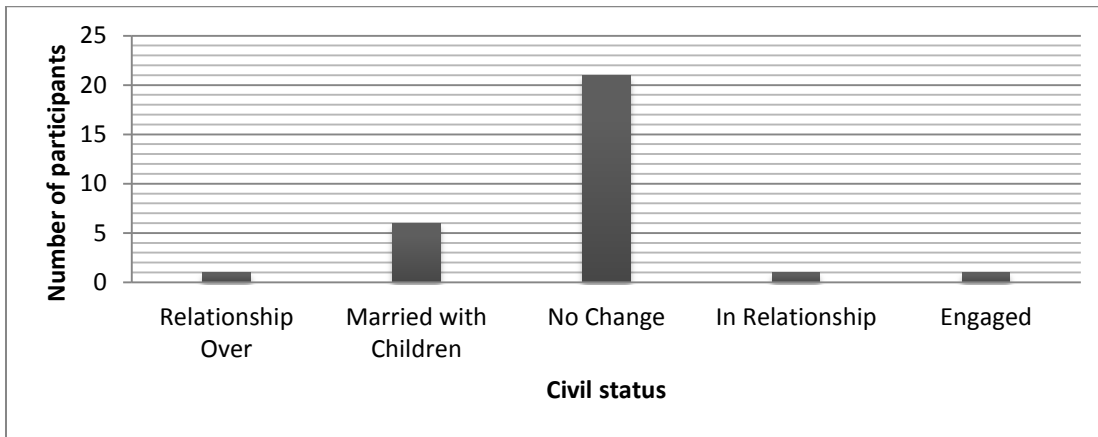


Figure 1.5: Civil status at interview

**Family composition:** Of the 30 participants, 20 arrived in Armenia alone, five arrived with partners (spouse, fiancé, girlfriend or boyfriend), four arrived with family members (parents, siblings or children), and one arrived with a friend (Figure 1.6).

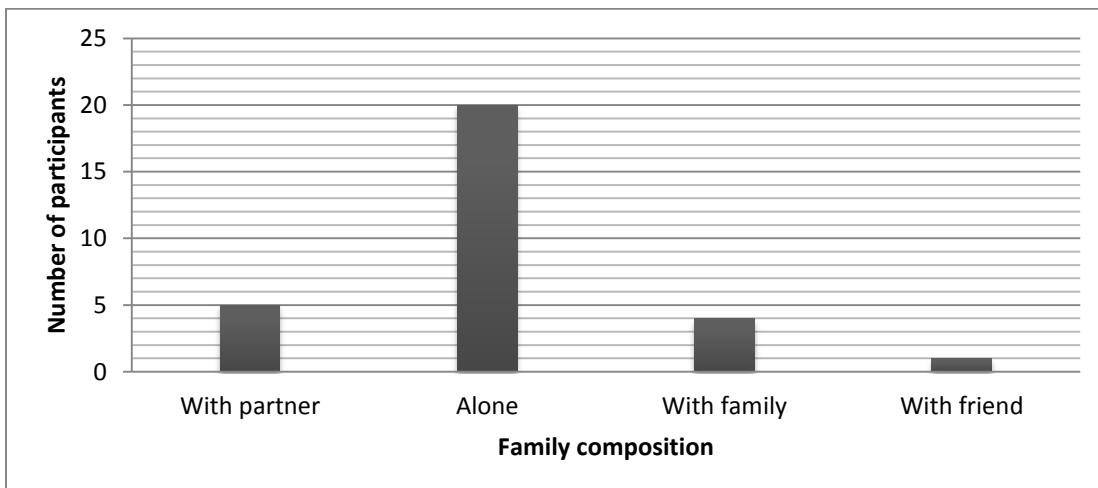


Figure 1.6: Family composition on arrival

**Sex:** Twelve of the 30 participants identified as female and 18 of the 30 participants identified as male.

**Duration of time in Armenia:** The duration of time for each participant from their time of settlement to the date of the interview varied from six months to over 14 years (at the time of interview in 2016). The average time of settlement amongst the 30 participants was 60 months (five years).

### 3.5. Limitations of the Study

**Life in the capital:** As noted earlier in the chapter, 29 of the 30 participants interviewed resided in the capital city, Yerevan. One participant resided permanently in Armenia's second largest city, Gyumri, making an occasional trip to the capital. The overwhelming number of participants residing in the capital exposes the research to a subjective perspective based on life in the capital, as opposed to other regions of the country where experiences with homeland society may be considerably different. However, given the small number of returnees who permanently settle in areas outside the capital, the sample group and its perspectives are satisfactorily representative of the target group itself.

**Occupations:** All 30 participants interviewed either worked full-time, part-time or were studying at university in Armenia. This meant that participants have limited exposure to other returnees who may be unemployed and/or not studying. The benefit to this limitation is that participants provided somewhat objective accounts of their experience, not constrained by negative emotions resulting from a lack of work or education. However, it is worth noting that there are individuals who comprise part of the *target* group who are unemployed and are not undertaking study.

A delimitation of the study was that the experience of members of the homeland society around the arrival of the diaspora and their perspectives towards this group was not accounted for. However, this delimitation was intentional as the study is examining the homecoming experience of the Western Armenian-speaking diaspora, not the perspective of the receiving society. For similar reasons, the experience and perspective of Eastern Armenian-speaking diasporans (including the Iranian Armenians) has not been accounted for, given that the criteria for the research included identification with the Western Armenian identity. Assumptions made towards this study include the authenticity of the participants' responses, the reliability of participant responses as being representative of the larger target group, and

the participants all having identified as diasporans who believe to hold an (originally) Western Armenian identity.

### **3.6. Positionality of the Researcher**

It is without regret that I make clear my position as a member of the worldwide Armenian diaspora. Elements of my identity, as a diasporan, an Australian, an Armenian and the overall hybrid nature of my identity, rather than a hindrance, are contributing factors to my ability to build a level of trust and comfort with the participants I interviewed. The participants' willingness to meet and provide honest and subjective responses to the questions asked was surely influenced by their ability to identify with me as 'one of them'. My identity as an Australian of Armenian descent was well-known to all participants due to my identity having been pointed out by the Repat Armenia Foundation upon initial contact. Participants were aware that I, like them, identify with the Western-Armenian language as my written and verbal communication with them before the interview was in Western Armenian. At times, I felt a bit like an imposter, as I am only half *Western* Armenian, my other half being *Eastern* Armenian. Nevertheless, my 'likeness' to the participants' own personal stories, as descendants of Western Armenians now living in the diaspora regardless of whether they were born in a western nation or in the Middle East, made me a 'friend' from the start and responses were provided in what I felt was a setting of comfort and mutual understanding. The professional relationship that developed between the participants and me was one based on an understanding that *we* derive from a common ancestral land (Western Armenia), a common people (Armenians), and *we* all possess hybrid identities as diasporans. This commonality was evident, as most participants used (possessive) pronouns such as 'us' or 'our', subconsciously including the researcher in descriptions of *both* the diaspora and Western Armenians.

The journey of homecoming for members of the Armenian diaspora begins in the host land. Their decision to return is influenced by their understanding of 'homeland' and, in the case of the Armenian diaspora, the significance of the Republic of Armenia. The next chapter of this thesis (Chapter Four) starts the journey of homecoming with an understanding of the concept of 'homeland' from the participants' perspective.

## Chapter Four: Contemplating Homecoming

‘The Armenian communities abroad always live with the dream of Armenia’, said Arsen, a young Syrian-born returnee who fled his native city of Aleppo (Syria) following the outbreak of war in 2012. Year after year, Arsen’s family would discuss and debate the possibility of settling in Armenia whilst seated for dinner. The family would question whether they would find employment, whether it was the right time to return, and what life would be like in a country they knew very little about. Contemplating homecoming was a typical discussion for many of the returnees, invoking stories of romanticism and longing for a homeland. For many diasporans, the idea of return to Armenia remains a possibility, a question raised or an afterthought to conversations, no matter how unrealistic the prospect may be. However, as will be discussed in more detail shortly, the historical disparity of the terms ‘Armenia’ and ‘homeland’ for diasporans, particularly within older generations, complicates the idea of return. For some in the diaspora, ‘the homeland’ and ‘Armenia’ will always be the historical Armenia from which their families were exiled, a homeland of stories, kingdoms, battles, and of lands that remain lost and emotionally inaccessible. For others, particularly generations that witnessed the dissolution of the Soviet Union at an earlier time in their life, ‘Armenia’ and ‘homeland’ have become synonymous with the contemporary Armenian state – the Republic of Armenia.

This binary representation is discussed throughout the chapter, as participants recall their understanding of the terms ‘Armenia’ and ‘homeland’ as members of the diaspora, making particular reference to their interpretations of ‘Armenianness’ before migrating to Armenia. The discussion then leads to an exploration of the motivations behind their decision to migrate and the reactions of their family and friends. This chapter argues that participant perceptions of their Armenian identity as unique whilst in the diaspora draws them towards identifying with the Republic of Armenia, the contemporary Armenian state, and pressures them to make

the move to find their place of belonging, thereby making the negative reactions of family members all the more unexpected and difficult to understand.

#### **4.1. The Armenian Homeland**

Describing what is, or what represents, the Armenian homeland is no simple task for Armenians throughout the diaspora who were raised during a time when Armenia was equated with all things Soviet and unfamiliar, and were preoccupied with their own lives throughout the four corners of the globe.

For returnees, the vast majority of whom were either young adolescents or infants at the time of Armenia's independence, the terms *Armenia* and *homeland* were synonymous, though depictions of these terms varied. Descriptions of these terms were found to be brimming with historical, cultural and geographic references ranging from contemporary representations that included the Republic of Armenia, to the more historical descriptions of Western Armenia, Cilicia, Greater Armenia or *Medz Haig*<sup>10</sup> (*Medz Hah'g*); and geographic references such as Eastern Armenia, Western Armenia, and the Armenian Highlands. Such diverse references to Armenia and the homeland are common for diasporans raised with varying stories, descriptions and portrayals of the homeland over the past century.

For centuries, the homeland was a kingdom whose borders fluctuated over time. However, following the fall of the last Armenian Kingdom, Cilicia, in 1375, what represented Armenia became more complex. For the next six centuries, the Armenian people became the subjects of competing empires. Herzig and Kurkchiyan describe the Armenian people in the 19th century as a divided people, 'each group ...stamped with the culture, language and lifestyle of their particular overlords' (2004, p. 4). The near destruction of the Armenian people in what would come to be known as the Armenian Genocide resulted in the end of the Armenian presence in

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<sup>10</sup> *Medz* (Great) and *Haig* (Hayk, the legendary patriarch and founder of the Armenian nation).

the western portion of the homeland (referred to as Western Armenia and Cilicia) and the creation of the Armenian diaspora. To the east, what remained of the Armenian homeland transformed to become a Soviet republic for the next seven decades. For those 70 years, the diaspora remained relatively unaware of the inner workings of the ‘Soviet’ homeland and unfamiliar with its narrative and the realities of life. In 1991, Armenia gained independence from the Soviet Union and the Republic of Armenia was re-born once again.

An excerpt from a poem found on an online blog describes the relatively small size of the Republic of Armenia, which stands in contrast to the Armenian homeland of yesteryear, with its vast borders and surrounding seas.

...small as an elderly mother,  
small as a newborn child,  
and on a map, just a teardrop.  
This is my country (Grigoryan, 2013)

This is the tangible homeland for many diasporans; however, for some, the homeland of their childhood is unlike the small, teardrop-sized country described in the poem, but rather one shaped by the stories of family members and the narrative put forward in the diaspora.

Participant descriptions of the Armenia of their childhood and adolescence are categorised into five themes. The most prominent is the *mythical descriptions* of Armenia, followed by an Armenia of *disillusionment and disappointment*, a *historical* Armenia, an Armenia imagined through the image of *Mount Ararat*, and through the *various sites and events* that shape the contemporary Armenian state.

Mythical descriptions of Armenia were made by participants when describing Armenia as an unreachable place, a place of dreams, or a mirage-like place. Such descriptions of the homeland were directed not towards the unreachable lost lands of historic Western Armenia, but towards what remains of the Armenian homeland, the only Armenia younger generations

of diasporans are familiar with: Soviet/Independent Armenia. Descriptions of Soviet Armenia, although mythical due to the few in the diaspora who ever visited, are evidence that the diaspora had come to accept the more realistic of the two ‘unreachable homelands’: the Soviet version, a homeland behind the Iron Curtain, an unknown place viewed through images in textbooks and books published in the Soviet Union. Several returnees remember seeing images of Armenia such as pictures of sites throughout the city of Yerevan, landscapes of Armenia, historical monuments including the *Sartarabad* War Memorial and the *Dzidzer'nagapert* Genocide Memorial. Many returnees during their younger years remember being puzzled with seeing Russian writing on these images (see Image 1.7 for an example of an image from the Soviet period).



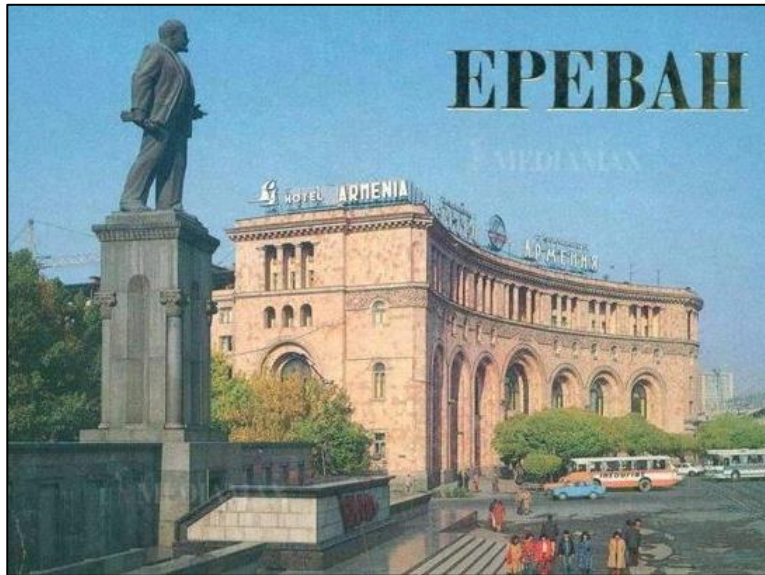


Figure 1.7: Image of Yerevan's Lenin Square (Soviet Armenia)

Participants were taught that Armenia was not only beautiful but of grave importance to the survival of the Armenian people. One returnee during his teenage years questioned how such a place could be so important and so beautiful if no one he knew had visited it before. Armenia was a land diasporans knew little about, other than to defend it at all costs. Older generations of Armenians throughout the diaspora had more difficulty relating to, or recognising, Soviet Armenia as the homeland. Susan Pattie (1999) describes the homeland for Armenians as a 'contested and evolving notion' with 'no single, clearly defined centre and periphery acknowledged by all Armenians' (p. 82). Such a statement, although true for older generations in the diaspora, is not the case for younger generations who had as little a connection with the historic lands of Western Armenia as they did with Soviet Armenia. At the very least, the contemporary Armenian state, whether Soviet or later independent, was the only homeland from which the younger generation of diasporans received pictures, songs, and for the lucky few, souvenirs. An increasing number of diasporans, particularly younger generations, began to identify with the contemporary Armenian state, both Soviet and independent, as memories of the historic lands of Western Armenia became just that—memories.

The obsession with Soviet Armenia and then the Republic of Armenia (post-1991) became only more evident as the country gained its independence. The mythical homeland was now accessible, a place one could travel to and see all the sites they had come to know during their childhood. Several returnees became obsessed with hearing Armenian spoken on radio stations, wanting to see this land inhabited by Armenians, in which Armenian was spoken by the population on a daily basis, and the monuments and sites they learnt about at school scattered throughout the landscape.

Returnees spoke of the ‘rosy’ way in which Armenia was described to them during their childhood by family members, or while at school. The absolute majority of the 30 returnees interviewed had attended an Armenian community school during the course of their mainstream education, as opposed to a local state or private school. The portrayal of Soviet Armenia, or the Republic of Armenia for those educated in the diaspora following the nation’s independence in 1991, as a ‘rosy picture’ was attributed to Armenian school textbooks. School textbooks played an important role in the diasporans’ understanding of Armenia; its capital Yerevan was portrayed as a ‘garden-city’, a city that was ‘uniquely Armenian’ through ‘its use of a locally quarried stone, a traditional Armenian building material’ (Ter-Ghazaryan, 2010, p. 64). What was considered a previously forsaken corner of the ancient homeland (Pattie, 1999) was now referred to by one returnee as a ‘heaven-like paradise’, regardless of how familiar they were with the realities of life in Armenia. School textbooks spoke of how ‘Yerevan and other cities grew, were beautified, cultural centres opened and the country’s infrastructure improved’ (a sentence from the excerpt of an Armenian history textbook used in the diaspora translated by author: see Figure 1.8).

Հայաստան նոր ու նմանը չունեցող վերելք մը ապրեցաւ տնտեսութեան,  
շինարարութեան եւ գիտութեան բնագաւառներուն մէջ: Երեւանը եւ այլ  
քաղաքներ ընդարձակուեցան, գեղեցկացան, բացուեցան նոր  
մշակութային կեդրոններ ու բարելաւուեցաւ երկրին ներքին կառոյցը  
(infrastructure):

Figure 1.8: A Grade 10 Armenian History Textbook in Western Armenian

The homeland was a ‘heaven-like paradise’, a frequent statement made by participants born in the 1970s and 1980s. Armenia during this period was accessible through select travel agencies; however, diasporans remained wary due to ideological issues and general unfamiliarity. Nevertheless, Armenia remained a land that filled their textbooks with images of unfamiliar beauty and memories. The abundance of images combined with an increasing level of curiosity maintained Armenia’s status as a dream. Tina, a returnee from Jerusalem explains: ‘Armenia was the nation we all dreamt of going to one day’.

The participants’ imagery of Armenia as a ‘colourful’, ‘perfect picture’ is typical of diasporans who find themselves absent from the physical homeland for long durations of time. The participants’ recollections of the unfamiliar homeland resemble fanciful lands of romance to which return is encouraged through song and frequently discussed around the dinner table. The return to a sacred land is, after all, a sacred diasporan tradition, whether it be Armenians singing songs about (Lake) Van (Minassian, 2002, p. 27), Jews praying for a return to Jerusalem, or Sikhs chanting in their daily prayers that the Khalsa shall rule (Safran, 2007). Indirectly, these altered images and promises play their part in providing diasporans with a glorified vision of the homeland, distant from the realities they will experience.

*Disappointment* with the realities of life in the homeland was as a result of the utopian visions of Armenia participants were raised to believe. In research on Croatian (Winland, 2007) and

Greek (Christou 2006) ancestral return, returnees were said to have felt disappointed with life in the homeland; however, for many of the Armenian returnees, disappointment was expected. Returnees were well aware that life in the homeland would be different, having seen footage and read stories of the earthquake that hit Northern Armenia in 1988 and the conflict with neighbouring Azerbaijan from 1988 to 1994 that continued to affect Armenia economically, politically and socially. For many returnees, the independence of the homeland and the conflict with Azerbaijan over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh made them realise that they wanted to be a part of a nation-building project. The conflict had awakened a sleeping diaspora ready to serve a homeland. Despite an awareness of the disappointment that would be experienced upon settlement in the homeland, Tuncel (2014) explains how aiding the frail and infant independent Armenian republic became a paramount ethno-national cause for the diaspora.

The realities of a homeland that required assistance from the outside was evident following the economic and natural devastation caused by the 1988 earthquake and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The disasters shattered the soon-to-be returnees' illusory descriptions of homeland they had been raised to believe. Even before migrating to the homeland, returnees described their realisation that the homeland was not a mystical homeland but one that was experiencing the troubles of a nation affected by war and loss of human life. Souren, a young man from Syria's capital, Damascus, explains his frustration as he was led to believe the homeland was something perfect:

Everything about Armenia was portrayed as a rosy picture. Why would they never talk about the issues taking place? It was as if nothing bad could be said about Armenia. (Souren, Syria)

Souren's frustration was directed towards the previous generations who he believes are the reason why so many diasporans are expecting to be disappointed with life in Armenia even before visiting. The expectation of disappointment is something unique to returnees who

decide to permanently settle in Armenia, in a way making themselves comfortable with the disappointment they may experience when arriving. Feelings of disappointment are evidently more apparent for those permanently settling and establishing a life in Armenia, willing to avoid any unrealistic expectations. However, such disappointment was said to be a 'returnee' expectation rather than a tourist one. Tourists continue to be unaware of the difficulties faced by society in the homeland, experiencing short-term holidays filled with adventure, dining-out and shopping. There is little reason for tourists to have to think about disappointment they may experience, or possibly little reason for them to have to deal with this disillusionment, given they will be returning to their country of origin. Their trips are 'short and sweet' (Christou, 2006, p. 840) because the intention is to have fun, consume and entertain. Several of the returnees had previously visited Armenia on group excursions or family holidays, explaining how they had stayed in hotels, visited all the sites, drunk at cafes, and eaten at restaurants without having witnessed the difficulty in which many citizens of Armenia live. This feeling of ease was not something they experienced before their final migration to Armenia. One returnee, however, felt he understood what was to be expected upon settling in Armenia, making him stand out against the rest. Hrant, a Lebanese-born returnee, explains:

Unlike other diasporans, Armenia for me has never really been some abstract thought; rather it's been real and tangible. For most diasporans it is the nation of their dreams, but for me it was never like that as my family visited Armenia, even during the Soviet period, so I knew what to expect. (Hrant, Syria)

What differentiated Hrant from the rest was his familiarity with life in Armenia, having had a family who was aware of pre- and post-Soviet life there. Familiarity with the homeland and society was found to be crucial in reducing disappointment, thereby balancing expectations and reality. Hrant's situation was different, as his parents had both been educated in Soviet Armenia during the 1970s and Hrant himself had visited Armenia during his childhood on two occasions. His parents' familiarity with Soviet Armenia and the visits he had as a child,

exposed Hrant to life in Armenia, to Soviet-era corruption, bureaucracy, business practices, and cultural habits, mannerisms and mentality.

Visits to Armenia by diasporans during the Soviet period were uncommon due to factors including a lack of connection to Armenia and other ideological issues. Diasporans who were members of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), the party that ruled Armenia during its brief two-year independence from 1918 to 1920, were hesitant to visit Soviet Armenia due to opposing ideologies and the historical persecution of the party by Soviet authorities. The vast majority of participants were in fact past or present members of the party, or somehow affiliated with one of its many organisations. In contrast, participants associated with the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), an apolitical cultural organisation that cooperated with the Armenian Soviet Government, were found to have visited Armenia in the past. Members of the AGBU were found to have been less disappointed by the realities of the homeland due to their parents' experiences whilst traveling to Soviet Armenia. In contrast, the 18 participants (of 30) aligned with the ARF experienced a greater degree of disappointment due to their family's general lack of familiarity with the homeland and their outright nationalist ideologies.

For some, Armenia meant *Historic Western Armenia and Cilicia*, a sort of 'substitute-homeland' for those who were unable to relate to Soviet or Independent Armenia's linguistic, cultural and ideological differences. Homeland, particularly amongst the older generations, was depicted as a land immersed in memories of the past and the *baykar* (struggle) of the post-genocide diaspora. The representation of historic lands as the homeland should, however, not be exaggerated, as the absolute majority of participants associated homeland with the Republic of Armenia.

Nevertheless, Western Armenia was still included as *part* of the homeland for many of the returnees. The collective memory of past generations combined with the political activism of

younger generations had left a mark on how many participants came to view the homeland, as one that included both the Republic of Armenia and Western Armenia, labelling them both together as part of the Armenian nation. Krikor, a returnee from Los Angeles, one of the largest cities in terms of Armenian diaspora population, describes the duality of two entities working side by side:

There are two Armenias in people's minds, the homeland Armenia, which is Turkey, and the Republic of Armenia, which is the physical Armenia. (Krikor, USA)

The memory of the historic lands said to have been lost, not as a result of Ottoman, Russian or Persian conquest, but following the Armenian Genocide when the Armenian population had been exiled, remained in the memory of many returnees. Several historically aware returnees explained their rejectionist position towards the Treaty of Sèvres<sup>11</sup> and the adoption of the Treaty of Lausanne,<sup>12</sup> which took away any hope of the Armenians regaining their historic lands. Western Armenia and its cities, towns and villages from which the Western Armenian diaspora's ancestors had originated were kept alive throughout the diaspora. Krikor went on to elaborate, with a degree of frustration in his voice, that 'none of us spoke about Armenia (Soviet); instead we spoke of Western Armenia, the Genocide and its recognition'. The term 'Armenia' in Krikor's statement refers to Soviet Armenia and describes its rejection by large segments of the diaspora, particularly members of the socialist-nationalist Armenian Revolutionary Federation.

Herzig and Kurkchian (2004), in their book *The Armenians: Past and Present and the Making of National Identity*, explain how, during the Soviet years, only a minority of the

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<sup>11</sup> The Treaty of Sèvres signed by the Central Powers following their defeat in World War I was intended to partition and dismember the Ottoman Empire, allocating a sizeable portion of the empire to the established Armenian state to the east.

<sup>12</sup> The Treaty of Lausanne defined the borders of the newly formed Turkish Republic, thus annulling the previous Treaty of Sèvres. The treaty resulted in the extending of the Turkish Republic's borders to include land allocated to the Armenian Republic by the previous treaty.

diaspora recognised Soviet Armenia, and ‘for decades many diasporan Armenians spoke as if no Armenian state existed’ (2004, p. 115). Participant responses make clear the attitudes of past generations and the influence their mindset had on younger generations, particularly that an Armenian state that was not independent was not to be accepted. The belief in a primordial homeland that was taken to include Western Armenia was kept alive through history lessons and Armenian classes throughout the diaspora. The emphasis placed by organisations and educators of the Armenian diaspora, particularly those associated with nationalist factions, created an emotional attachment between the diasporans and Western Armenia in the absence of any physical connection. Over 80% of the participants had never visited the lands known to them as Western Armenia (Eastern Turkey), which included the region of Cilicia (*Giligia/Kilikia*) on the southern shores of Turkey’s Mediterranean coast. Despite having never visited the villages and towns of their ancestors, their emotional connection to the sites, landscapes, and images was enough for them to be classified as part of the homeland. A returnee from Detroit, USA, who later settled in the Republic of Armenia describes his feeling of disappointment with not being able to identify the Republic of Armenia with the concept of homeland:

As a diasporan Armenian from Cilicia, I was a bit angry with the current Armenia, though I also love Eastern Armenia, it is not necessarily close to my heart as the actual Armenian occupied lands are, and now it is a goal to gain that back. When I visited historic Ani,<sup>13</sup> I had tears in my eyes, because I couldn’t cross the fence after a certain extent, and it was the live version of what we had learnt in Armenian history. Neither Yerevan nor Eastern Armenia is my homeland. When I say homeland, I imagined myself on the shores of Cilicia, but now I guess it is a mixture of both, I am sitting here in Eastern Armenia, my homeland, and I carry the characteristics of Western Armenia, my identity. (Sasun, USA)

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<sup>13</sup> *Ani* is a ruined medieval Armenian city now situated in Turkey’s province of Kars, next to the closed border with Armenia. Known as the city of a thousand churches, it was the capital of the Bagratid Armenian Kingdom from 961 to 1045 AD.



Sasun, a fourth-generation American-Armenian, demonstrates through his statement a willingness to begin to identify with the contemporary Armenian state. However, this disappointment with the realities of life in Armenia has led to his belief that the images, stories and fables of Western Armenia may be a better option. His attachment to Western Armenia is not limited to the region of Cilicia from which his family was forced to flee during the Genocide, but also to the city of Ani, over a thousand kilometres away. Sasun's identification with two regions in historic Western Armenia is a demonstration of the ongoing binary *us* and *them*, *eastern* and *western*, that continues to exist amongst many diasporans who feel historically disconnected from the Republic of Armenia. The contrast in binaries of *homeland* and *diaspora*, *eastern* and *western*, *Russian* and *Turkish Armenia* were evident as far back as the Paris Peace Conference (1919), when representatives of the newly independent Republic of Armenia (eastern Armenia) travelled to attend the conference only to discover that another Armenian delegation was in attendance, led by Boghos Nubar Pasha, representing the diaspora and Western Armenians (Björklund, 1993). There was, however, one site of great importance for the majority of the participants that was of equal importance to all the binaries listed, a landmark that, although located in the Republic of Turkey, looms over Armenia's capital Yerevan with its majestic peaks: Mount Ararat.

*References to Mount Ararat* in descriptions of the homeland were plentiful. In the 1960s, close to half a century after the exile of the Armenian peoples from their ancestral lands, it was written that the 'Armenians yearned to return to their idealised mountain homeland with ...its holy mountain, Ararat' (Atiya & Suryal, 1968, p. 303). The validity of Atiya's argument continues to this day, due to the strength of the mountain in the memory of the diaspora and its ability to act as visual conduit, transmitting images of the homeland and Armenia.

Mount Ararat, located just across the border of the Republic of Armenia in Turkey, holds immense symbolic power for both the homeland and the diaspora. For the Armenian people,

the mountain has historically represented the birthplace of the pre-Christian era pagan gods and the claimed resting place of Noah's Ark, as evidenced by the image of the ark on Armenia's coat of arms (Figure 1.9, 2.0). The image has historical significance in state symbols, for both Soviet and Independent Armenia's coat-of-arms.



Figure 1.9: Coat of Arms of Soviet Armenia

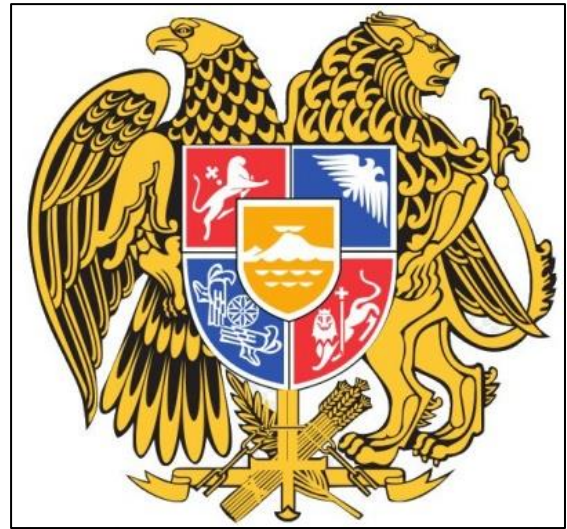


Figure 2.0: Coat of Arms of the Republic of Armenia

For the diaspora, the term 'Ararat' is synonymous with the many clubs, sporting groups, schools, cultural organisations, retirement homes, and stores spread across the diaspora. For returnees, their image of homeland and Armenia while in the diaspora was Mount Ararat, a landscape that has come to symbolise the homeland for the Armenian people and transformed to become the icon of *landscape memory*. Through landscape memory, participants are able to visualise the homeland from afar through an image that has come to encompass all things Armenian. Most participants explained how the image of Ararat was the ideal representation of the homeland as it came to adorn the living room walls of their childhood.

My only connection to Armenia was the painting of Mount Ararat we had on the wall. (Paylun, USA)

This statement by Paylun, a diasporan and returnee from California, represents the importance an image is able to have in the subconscious identity. Many diasporans continue to relate the powerful image of Mount Ararat with Armenia. More than a mountain, Ararat is able to transcend ideological, political and linguistic divisions, as the mountain is on the border of what is known as ‘eastern Armenia’ and ‘western Armenia’, within what one participant referred to as ‘Armenian occupied lands’, yet is visually evident from within the Republic of Armenia. The mountain, although a form of landscape memory connecting Armenians from throughout the world to Armenia, represents a ‘landscape of exile’ (Haebich, 2008) for those who recount stories of lost lands, genocide and exile, a mountain that no longer belongs to the Armenian state.

Despite the mountain being located in the Republic of Turkey, it has not lost its significance as the symbol of Armenia. Talar from Canada explains: ‘Armenia to me is Mount Ararat, with the sun behind it and the flag on top’. In this statement, the mountain represents a source of pride, glory and happiness for the participant, as its image is surrounded by the sun and topped off with the tricolour of the Armenian state. It is a glorious mountain; it is an *Armenian* mountain.

Talar’s statement represents the belief that the mountain remains an Armenian mountain for many Armenians both in the diaspora and the homeland, despite its physical location outside the border of the Republic of Armenia. It was common for the participants to speak of the symbolism of the mountain during their schooling in the diaspora. Geographic representations of the mountain outside the Armenian homeland were simply irrelevant, as the mountain continued to be located within the ‘Armenian homeland’, just not within the borders of the contemporary nation-state.

For a long time I didn’t even know Mount Ararat wasn’t in Armenia’s borders, at school we never learnt about it. (Roupen, Canada)

Roupen's belief that the mountain was in Armenia is not necessarily attributable to any nationalist tendencies within the diaspora, as the mountain was, as mentioned, the centre of both the Soviet and Independent Armenia's coat-of arms. The inclusion of the mountain on Soviet Armenia's coat-of-arms had raised concerns in the past when Turkish officials questioned Moscow on the presence of an image that was located within the borders of the Turkish state, yet adorned on Armenia's state symbol. The query was met with a cunning response by First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, who pointed out that Turkey had included the moon on their flag, questioning whether the moon belongs to Turkey. Mount Ararat continues to represent the homeland through its visual dominance in the landscape of Yerevan, through to its inclusion in Armenian iconography both within Armenia and the diaspora.

Mount Ararat dominated the many images of homeland the returnees had come to know during their time in the diaspora, however, images of *sites in Armenia and historical events* also played a role in representing homeland. Sites scattered throughout the Republic of Armenia, which include memorials, churches, pagan temples and statues, are well known to diasporans who learnt of these places during their schooling and community life. Most of these sites are located within the Republic of Armenia and act as a form of 'tangible history' that diasporans can one day travel to and experience. One returnee from the United States described her impression of these sites during a holiday before permanently settling in Armenia: 'the whole Armenian history that I've learnt was actually tangible to me, and I finally was able to connect history to reality' (Tamara, USA). Students attending Armenian community schools throughout the diaspora are educated in Armenian history and exposed to the stories associated with the many sites throughout the contemporary Armenian state. Sites include *Khor Virap*, a site of pilgrimage attributed to Armenia's patron saint, Gregory the Illuminator, and dating back to the 7th century A.D.; *Sardarabad*, the site of a battle between

Armenian forces and the approaching Ottoman Empire, seen as the battle that stopped the complete destruction of the Armenian nation; and *Etchmiadzin*, the mother church of the Armenian Apostolic faith. The ability to touch and be witness to sites in Armenia demonstrates a tangible history that diasporans can learn about and later witness for themselves. This is in sharp contrast to the sites in Western (historic) Armenia, which may either have been destroyed or are less than accessible due to their location in neighbouring Turkey and a growing emphasis on sites located in the Republic of Armenia.

In addition to historic sites and places, more contemporary events that have re-shaped the Armenian nation are found to draw diasporans towards identifying the Republic of Armenia as the homeland. Razmig, a participant originally from Lebanon, explains how events that took place towards the last years of the Soviet era and during the first decade of the fledgling Republic Armenia (1991–present) have shaped his impressions of the homeland while in the diaspora:

During my childhood, the Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) liberation war took place, followed by the earthquake in Spitak and Gyumri (Northern Armenia) and then the Independence of Armenia, these left a great impression on me...I knew I wanted to live in another country...at the time my friends came back from a trip to Armenia and spoke very fondly of Armenia, so we decided to move there. (Razmig, Lebanon)

The often devastating events that dominated Armenia's years into independence revealed a reality to many diasporans they had not known during the more stable years of the Soviet Union. Diasporans were able to identify with the natural and man-made disasters that shook Armenia, as they rallied and lobbied their respective governments to provide aid and support to the people of Armenia. Vahé, a returnee from Cyprus, summarises the diasporans' position towards the natural disaster and conflict that had erupted in Soviet Armenia in the late 1980s:

‘we loved Armenia, and it was our homeland, despite it being part of the Soviet Union’. Armenia’s inclusion in the Soviet Union did not detract from the fact that it was the only remaining part of the Armenian homeland, as diasporans rallied behind a homeland they knew little about as its existence was in peril with the onset of conflict with neighbouring Azerbaijan. For diasporans, ‘the importance of its (Armenia’s) survival is one of the few things that nearly all Armenians there and anywhere in the diaspora agree upon’ (Avdoyan, 1998, p. 14).

For the majority of participants, the homeland whilst in the diaspora was a place of dreams, a mythical land in which nothing could go wrong, or at least they were led to believe. An understanding of what exactly the Armenian homeland is remained unknown for those who were told stories of Western Armenia, who struggled for the lost and ‘occupied lands’ now within the borders of the Turkish state. For some, the Republic of Armenia was ‘Eastern’ Armenia far from the shores of Cilicia from which their ancestors were sent into exile. However, images of Mount Ararat and sites throughout the contemporary Armenian state acted as landscape memory in the way in which they connected the diasporan to the homeland. In general, participants who were raised as members of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation and its affiliate organisations had more mythical interpretations of the homeland than those who were raised as members of the Armenian General Benevolent Union, an organisation that cooperated with the communist government in Soviet Armenia. However, for the vast majority, the homeland is the present-day Republic of Armenia, including the Republic of Artsakh,<sup>14</sup> a popular position held among the participants, including those who spoke of the importance of the historical lands (Western Armenia).

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<sup>14</sup> The Republic of Artsakh, commonly known by its former name of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, is a state with limited recognition located to the east of the Republic of Armenia.

This shift in identifying the Republic of Armenia as the homeland presents a shift in power from the diaspora to the homeland. For close to a century, historical references of the homeland and mythical portrayals of Armenia have maintained power over representations of the homeland firmly in the hands of diasporan leaders and organisations. This growing acceptance of the Republic of Armenia as the legitimate and tangible homeland makes diasporans increasingly reliant on the Republic of Armenia as its reference of homeland; however, do diasporans require any guidance when it comes to their feelings of Armenianness?

#### **4.2. ‘Armenianness’ in the diaspora**

The importance placed on identifying as an Armenian while in the diaspora is arguably the reason why most returnees decide to migrate to Armenia. Identifying as an Armenian in a society dominated by one or many other cultures and identities is no easy task for diasporans. Reliance is instead placed on social surroundings, the family and community organisations. Participants described what being an Armenian meant whilst in the diaspora. The most common theme was a belief that their Armenian identity is ‘unique’, followed by inclusion in one of the many diaspora-based Armenian organisations, a relationship with the historical injustices caused towards the Armenian people, and lastly, an Armenian identity means identifying as a hybrid diasporan-Armenian.

A perceived *uniqueness* of the Armenian identity was the most dominant explanation behind what it meant to be an Armenian. The ‘uniqueness’ of the Armenian identity described by the participants had a great deal to do with the diasporan nature of the community and its persistence to survive. Participants were made to believe that the Armenian identity was unique and unlike all the others by which they were surrounded. For participants born in the Middle East, uniqueness was contrasted with the ‘others’ in society, a way of distancing community members from the others who differed in ethnicity and religion. Armenian

communities throughout the Middle East and primarily the Arab world have a long history of community building, community engagement and strong elements of isolation. Participants originating in Syria emphasised the ‘respect’ shown towards the community by local Syrians (Arabs), describing the Armenian people in Syria as ‘hardworking and honest,’ ‘forward thinking and decent people’. The emphasis on differences between Armenians and the native Arab population was repeated by close to all Syrian-Armenian participants. A sense of separation as a community from mainstream society was evident in their responses as it was believed that assimilation jeopardises the so-called ‘purity’ of the Armenian identity. It is this need to survive, prosper and resist assimilation that has resulted in Armenians throughout the Middle East establishing large and successful sporting, educational and cultural organisations. Armenians in Syria, for example, were said to have the ‘biggest theatres and choirs in the country, as well as the best dancing groups’ (Gomidas, Syria). Lebanese-born Armenians also spoke of the communities’ insular nature, which became clear when two Lebanese-born Armenian participants from Beirut described how there was little need to learn Arabic as their lives were completely engulfed in the Armenian family, community, schools, etc. Lusiné from Beirut explains that the large size of the Armenian community in Lebanon meant her adolescent life up to the age of 17 was all in Armenian: ‘I didn’t even know Arabic very well’. A similar sentiment was shared by Razmig, who resided in the Armenian-populated district of Beirut known as Bourj Hammoud, explaining how ‘Arabic has always been hard for me’.

The insular nature of the Armenian community throughout the Middle East and in the western world was said to be the reason why socialising with the out-group did not occur during the adolescent years. Participants described being Armenian as ‘not socialising with *odars*’ (non-Armenians), not because they did not want to but because there was no time to if they spent their years attending Armenian schools and organisations. Attendance at Armenian private schools was the reason why the majority of participants were found to have ‘only Armenian



friends'; as Talar from Jerusalem explained: 'we were always a closed-off environment and wouldn't socialise with *odars*'. Whilst most participants described the insular nature of the Armenian community and the importance they placed on their Armenian identity as a result, two participants went further by describing the Armenian identity with a tinge of superiority:

Being an Armenian in the diaspora meant everything to me; it's not only my blood, it's also my religion...hence being Armenian meant being a survivor. (Sasun, USA)

Being Armenian back in the diaspora meant a lot to me, being Armenian is what makes me whole, identity first and then family. (Mardiros, Australia)

The reverence shown towards their Armenian identity by participants, both from the Middle East and the western world, is not simply a matter of nationalism that has spread amongst segments of diaspora populations across the world, but a fear of losing one's identity. Assimilation has remained a hot topic for generations of diasporans who believe that the only solution is to return to the ancestral homeland. Mardiros from Australia believes there are no cultural threats in Armenia compared to the diaspora, his solution being that a move to Armenia will end the possibility of assimilation, and assist him in marrying an Armenian. Identity-preservation was the primary concern for the absolute majority of participants and was the reason behind their (and their parents') decision to continue to support their Armenian community and its many organisations.

Attendance at Armenian schools and visiting cultural centres, churches and other organisations were viewed as necessary outlets of identification as an Armenian. Participants from Western nations emphasised with a sense of curiosity that they had no foreign (non-Armenian) friends as they had attended private Armenian schools, despite being raised in cosmopolitan cities such as Los Angeles, Toronto and Montréal. As noted in the methodology, more than three-quarters of participants attended a full-time Armenian school, schools that placed significant importance on Armenian identity preservation, which later resulted in ideas of 'us' and 'them'

by diasporan-Armenians towards the majority group in society. This being said, it was evident that despite the hesitation of participants from the Middle East to mix with locals, participants born in the west expressed little sense of otherness with the majority group of the cities and countries from which they originate, despite the perceived distance between themselves and those outside the Armenian community. Instead, participants expressed great interest in the politics of their countries of origin, associated themselves with the cultural traits of the majority society and expressed statements of transnationalism, which are discussed later in the thesis.

Community organisations were some of the most influential bodies promoting culture and identity, as was evident in the majority of participants having taken part in numerous community organisations. These organisations are known for their role in transmitting cultural awareness and identity promotion to members. Schools, cultural and sporting organisations all embraced, in addition to their main purpose, the historical victimisation of the Armenian people and historical injustice towards the Armenian nation as a means of preventing members from leaving the in-group (the Armenian community). Many of the younger participants raised the issue of genocide recognition when discussing Armenian identity, which is expected given the increase in global awareness and recognition of the Armenian Genocide, notably following Armenia's independence. The passion shown towards the continued recognition of the Armenian Genocide is assisted through the education received within the diaspora in Armenian schools. Lorig, who was educated in Beirut, Lebanon, explains:

We were taught about the Armenian Genocide from a young age, a book I had on the genocide was full of images that I must say, weren't suitable for a child...growing up with these images led to feelings of antagonism towards the Turks. (Lorig, Lebanon)

Education about the Armenian Genocide is commonplace in Armenian schools throughout the diaspora; however, such education makes it difficult for adolescents to remain objective on the

issue, given Turkey's ongoing denial of it. The continued denial of the genocide and injustice caused towards the Armenian people has resulted in participants feeling a sense of desperation in ensuring their Armenian identity is preserved. This desperate need for preservation was found amongst the participants interviewed, as was the case a century ago with survivors of the genocide, with one participant stating 'genocide survivors are obsessed with identity preservation, as are we' (Roupen, Canada).

This obsession with identity preservation has weakened over time, or become less obsessive as subsequent generations of Armenians throughout the diaspora become more entrenched in their host societies, with which they begin to identify as being a part of. The primary identities of the participants, what can be referred to as a 'baseline identity', was their common Armenian heritage, with each participant displaying a different ratio of homeland/host land/third-country identity association. The hybridity of the participants was evident to me as the researcher, even for those who denied any ongoing identification with the identity of the majority in the country of origin/host land. Several participants displayed an association with a cosmopolitan identity, claiming their being an Armenian was essentially their dual or multi-layered identity; others felt caught between the identity of the homeland and that of the host land. For Syrian-Armenians in particular, the issue of identity remains challenging, given the immediate disruption of their lives following the outbreak of war. One Syrian-Armenian, Souren, felt he was in a 'lost state of mind', not sure of whether he is Armenian or Syrian. On the other hand, several participants from the west, arguably spoilt with choice and their upbringing in multicultural nations, declared their homogenous identification with the Armenian identity, claiming 'diaspora means assimilation'.

The participants' Armenian identity is shaped by the 'uniqueness' they are raised to believe, whether it be taught by members of the family, community organisations, stories of historical injustice inflicted on the Armenian people, or a comparison with the identity of the majority

society in the country of origin. Participants born in the west are heavily influenced by the Armenian community schools and organisations they attend, which remind them of their responsibility to protect and promote their ‘Armenianness’. Participants originating from communities throughout the Middle East are, in addition to a perception of uniqueness, led to believe the community is unique in the country in which they reside. It is arguably the difference in religion between the Armenian communities of the Middle East and the dominant religion in the country that leads to their belief of differentiation in identity and community. This perception of ‘uniqueness’ for all participants is the primary influence behind their motivation to return.

#### **4.3. Motivations for Return**

The motivations behind each individual’s decision to return and settle in the Republic of Armenia were vast. These individuals left behind comfortable lives, well-established businesses, property and valuables, with the intention of re-starting their lives in an unfamiliar society and differing cultural landscape. The Syrian-Armenian participants were similarly, if not more, affected by having to re-create a life for themselves and their family in Armenia. For most of them, their property and valuables were left behind as they fled civil unrest and the subsequent war in their country of origin. What had been left behind was different for everyone; however, the common denominator was the separation each and every participant had with leaving behind loved ones. Their decision to settle in a different country and be apart from family and friends was not easy, regardless of how transnational their lives may have been upon returning to Armenia and the frequency of contact over the phone or online with family and friends. Despite the differences in reasons for settling in Armenia, parallels can be made from their statements, the most common of which is the desire to *‘build a relationship with the country (Armenia)’*, followed by *patriotism, independent living, and studying*.

#### 4.3.1. The Relationship-building Process

For the majority of participants, their motive for settling in Armenia was a relationship-building process. Years of absence by them and their family members led to a desire to familiarise themselves with life in the homeland, and in the process develop a relationship with a society they were led to believe was very different. Krikor, a young returnee from the United States who identifies as a gay man, was eager to build a relationship between himself, as a gay man, and the patriarchal society he knew little about. For a quarter of a century, the nationalist undertones of current and past regimes have conflicted with the civil rights of minorities, including homosexuals, members of Jehovah's Witness, and, to some degree, females (discussed in Chapter Nine of the thesis). Homosexuals, for some in society, are said to be perceived as a product of the 'west' and for others an overly 'un-Armenian behaviour'. Despite the opposition towards homosexuality by patriarchal and conservative elements of Armenian society, Krikor, an American-Armenian, decided to leave the comforts and security of his native California and settle in Armenia, a country in which his very being remains taboo. The *mending of the relationship* in Krikor's case is more than a conflict between him and the State, but rather the conflict between his identities as a homosexual and an Armenian. Krikor nevertheless expressed his enthusiasm in becoming a part of not just an LGBT community but an Armenian LGBT community. His statements were filled with patriotic overtones that included references to Armenian identity defined through blood, but a homeland he wished to be cosmopolitan in nature, typical of diasporans raised with nationalist-leaning ideologies within a cosmopolitan society (California). Krikor's intention was to have the LGBT population of Armenia accepted by the wider society; after all, they were Armenians just like everyone else.

It is evident that no matter how difficult life may be in the homeland, the participants were the ones willing to give life in the homeland a try. Their unfamiliarity with many aspects of life in

the homeland and the scarcity of visits by family and friends, notably over the Soviet period, has led to a yearning to familiarise themselves with society in the homeland. Many aspects of life in the homeland remain completely foreign and bizarre to returnees, which is understandable given their absence from the homeland and lack of familiarity with many of their ethnic-kin in Armenia. However, this does not prevent people from wanting to establish a connection. From the far shores of the United States, diasporans such as Arakel claim to have felt the urge to understand society in Armenia; when asked by his parents what he wanted for his birthday, he responded ‘Armenia!’ His desire to feel close to Armenia was demonstrated by the use of the word ‘reconnect’, a term frequently used by participants. The curiosity with the use of the word ‘reconnect’ is due to the absence of the word ‘connect’ in their motivation to settle in Armenia, and curious due to the participants not having originated from the territory of the Republic of Armenia. The use of the prefix ‘re’ indicates a reconnection with the Armenian homeland as opposed to the contemporary nation-state that is the Republic of Armenia.

This desire for reconnection was raised by several participants, who were at times desperate to be a part of a country and society their ancestors had for close to a century only dreamt of. The need to feel a part of a physical, tangible homeland, an *official* Armenia, was a struggle conveyed to them throughout their youth through messaging in community schools, social circles, and around the family dinner table. Two participants recount this experience:

At school they would tell us that ‘Armenia is the home of all Armenians and we have to go there’ so naturally I had that thought in me since childhood. (Lusiné, Lebanon)

As a diasporan Armenian, I think in reality this is what we aim to do: repatriate to Armenia. We are always dreaming about Armenia, the motherland, hence I was looking for an opportunity to move to Armenia. (Raphael, Canada)

William Safran suggests that a characteristic shared by diasporan communities is that ‘they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or could) eventually return (1991, p. 83). Since Armenia’s independence in 1991, diasporans have increasingly become aware of the possibility that they ‘could’ return to the homeland; however, only a handful ‘would’ return. Several participants, who decided they ‘would’ return to the ancestral homeland, recall past memories of wanting to return; one such example was Sasun’s recollection of his youth back in the United States:

Since I was young, I have always thought that it was cool to go to Armenia and see what is there. I remember sitting in front of the computer listening to Radio Yerevan<sup>15</sup> with the desktop background of my computer being either a photo of Yerevan or Ararat. So, I wanted to come and see those sights with my own eyes, not only in photos. (Sasun, USA)

Returning and one day living in Armenia was a common thought, even if it may not have been overly serious at the time. Ani, a mother of two, made a promise with her circle of friends in Aleppo, Syria: ‘when we get married, we were all going to move to Armenia’. Ani later explained that two of the four friends who originally made the promise had indeed moved to Armenia. This promise represents a diasporan dream of return, a promise made amongst friends, and an intention to marry an Armenian in order to make the promise a reality. This sort of social behaviour, which is limited to within the Armenian community, is typical for Syrian-Armenians who rely on socialising amongst their own community due to the cultural, ethnic and religious differences between their group and the dominant group of society.

The desire to build a relationship with the homeland was described by four participants as an emotional connection they had felt during a visit to Armenia that they wanted to make permanent. This emotional connection was primarily made during temporary visits to Armenia

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<sup>15</sup> Radio Yerevan, also known as the International Public Radio of Armenia, is the international broadcasting service established in 1967.

through programmes such as *Birthright Armenia* or the *Armenian Volunteer Corps (AVC)*. These programmes are volunteer internships for individuals of Armenian descent (or non-Armenian descent for the AVC) wishing to volunteer in Armenia. Having volunteered for short periods of time and established relationships with those they met and worked with in Armenia, participants developed an emotional bond, claiming to have ‘loved everything’ as ‘the desire swelled up inside to move here’. The programmes were found to connect their participants to Armenia emotionally and instil a desire to build the relationship they had developed through increased exposure to the homeland.

#### **4.3.2. Feelings of Patriotism**

Patriotism and a sense of love towards the homeland were undeniably strong forces drawing participants towards Armenia. Most participants were quite open with their patriotic feelings towards the homeland, claiming ‘if I wasn’t an Armenian, there wouldn’t be any reason to move here’, after all it is ‘what pushed me towards Armenia, a place I can feel more Armenian’. Their settlement in Armenia is not because Armenia can offer them an economically better life than their country of origin, but because of the simple fact that they identify as Armenians. For others, patriotism was expressed through sentiments such as ‘I feel most at home in Armenia amongst other Armenians’. For these individuals, the relationship they were to build with Armenia was important as it represented a place they felt most at home.

For Raphael and his wife, their decision to migrate with their children from Canada was with the hope of finding a place in which they felt at home, was safe and familiar, and where they could raise their children. Their reason for deciding to relocate, although a common motivation for many migrants around the world, is arguably not one frequently used by citizens leaving Canada. Throughout his interview Raphael displayed a great deal of pride in what Canada represented, stating his reason for moving to Armenia to have nothing to do with



any negativity or grievance with Canada. Instead Raphael's and his wife's decision to settle in Armenia was a sort of message to his loved ones in Canada and to his children that a future in Armenia is possible, and their contribution would better society in the homeland.

Other participants were less financially prepared for their move to Armenia. They were in general younger in age, ready to throw themselves into the unknown, develop their skills and knowledge, and in the process create a sense of home in Armenia. For a large part, this included Syrian-Armenians who had little choice but to make it work in Armenia. Armenia was after all their homeland too and a place they could seek shelter. The Armenian government's willingness to extend a helping hand at a time of need resulted in increased feelings of patriotism by Syrian-Armenians who, although very nationalist in nature, saw the support provided by the homeland as a sign that they belong. Syrian-Armenians were offered permanent residence, citizenship, minor settlement assistance and other benefits, thereby encouraging Syrian-Armenians to migrate and settle in their ancestral homeland. Syrian-Armenian participants who decided to settle in Armenia following the onset of war described their return as one of choice based on a common homeland, a country in which to settle and build their futures.

I could have chosen to go to Europe as a refugee like some of my friends, however, I wanted to go to a place where I knew I would feel at home. (Souren, Syria)

Armenia wasn't my first choice when I decided to escape the Syrian war. I don't know why I didn't choose Europe or Canada...I thought since I have a motherland, then why wander? (Gomidas, Syria)

Six of the eight Syrian-Armenians interviewed had settled in Armenia since the outbreak of war in Syria. Their reasons for return, although significantly influenced by the onset of conflict in Syria, were now directed towards creating a future in the homeland rather than migrating to far-off lands.

### 4.3.3. Independent Living

For many communities throughout the diaspora, traditional family values *discourage* children from moving out of the family home and beginning a life while still single. Even in western cities where it is typical for children to move out of home at a young age, participants from traditional or more conservative families felt pressured to remain at home. For this very reason, Armenia presented an opportunity for them to live independently and escape the confines of the Armenian community. One participant, Tina, raised in the city of Jerusalem with a tight-knit Armenian community, was all too aware of the traditional elements of the Armenian community and claimed it to be a protective community that watches out for its members, torn between two opposing sides (Palestinian and Israeli) in a city they also call home. Tina's explanation for moving to Armenia was found to be a mix of patriotic sentiment and the need to start afresh:

My reason for moving to Armenia wasn't just patriotism, but more so the opportunity to live independently that interested me...there was a fear by others in the community that I was going alone, because our community, in comparison to others, is small and they all know each other, they know when someone goes somewhere and what they're doing. (Tina, Jerusalem)

Tina had visited Armenia twice before, once in 2002 and then again in 2003. When she made the decision to relocate in 2004, the decision was not final, as Tina had given herself a year to find out what life in Armenia would be like. Within six months of moving to Armenia, Tina returned to Jerusalem in two minds as to where she should live. However, after some thinking, Tina decided to return to Armenia. Since then, throughout the 12 years that Tina has lived in Armenia, she admits to having returned to Jerusalem on two occasions, but on both occasions regretted her decision and returned back to Armenia. Tina's use of the word 'Jerusalem' as opposed to 'home' when describing her short-term returns, proves her comfort in identifying with the Republic of Armenia as 'home'.

Conservative mindsets of living at home are not constrained to communities in traditional diasporan centres, but also in the west, as in the case of Christapor from France. Born in the United States, but later raised in France, Christapor's reason for moving to Armenia was as follows:

To escape from home! I had turned 16 and wanted to live on my own. My father wouldn't allow it, but my mother was accepting. So, knowing that my father would be happy if I went to Armenia, I sneakily used a programme which brought me to Armenia and then I just stayed. (Christapor, France)

Armenia offered an escape for participants eager to experience independent living and freedom whilst accommodating the conservative mindset of their parents. From the parents' perspective, one is led to believe that their flexibility towards their child's decision to relocate to Armenia has more to do with their patriotism towards their culture and identity, viewing Armenia as the place their child is able to heighten their sense of 'Armenianness'. However, for their child (a young adult), Armenia is an escape, a means by which to 'kill two birds with one stone' (English proverb), a fitting proverb in this scenario as two goals (that of the child and the parent) are unintentionally met at the one time. Whether the goal of the participant was to live in Armenia is questionable; however, their goal of living independently was met. Tina and Christapor both continue to live in Armenia, well over a decade since their final move.

#### **4.3.4. Commencing studies in Armenia**

Education in Armenia, both in the pre- and post-Soviet days, offers an opportunity for diasporans to complete their tertiary studies whilst living and becoming a part of society in the homeland. Seven of the 30 participants had completed their tertiary education at a university or institution in Armenia. Their reasons for wanting to study in an Armenian tertiary education institute were varied, with some undertaking Armenian studies and citing Armenia as the perfect place to study the topic. Others chose to study in Armenia due to the prestige of the

topic in Armenian institutions, including the choice to study music at a conservatory in Armenia. All but one of the participants who would go to complete their studies in Armenia are from countries throughout the Middle East, showing a preference towards the institutions in Armenia. Seta, an Armenian from the Syrian city of Aleppo, decided to study in Armenia following her family's decision to migrate to Armenia, years before the onset of war in her country of origin. Seta explains:

I wasn't the one who decided to migrate to Armenia; it was my family's decision. I was in grade 10 when my father decided we should move. I was initially very sad as we had family in other places too; if we didn't come to Armenia we would have gone to France. I'm not a very patriotic person so I would have preferred to go to France but my mum said that Armenia is our homeland and we must go there. The problem was that I was of the age when you're meant to start your studies at college/university. In Syria there's a perception that those who don't receive adequate marks to get into a local university go to Armenia, where you pay to attend university, as opposed to the system in Syria that requires you to get a good score in your exams to attend for free. So I was upset that my friends would think that I am attending university here for that reason. (Seta, Syria)

The primary reason for Seta's return may not have been for the purpose of study, given that the decision was made by her parents. However, Seta's decision to study in Armenia shifted the agency in the decision-making process from her parents to her. Her parents' decision to live in the homeland was met with Seta's realistic goal-driven purpose of attaining education and furthering her career.

#### **4.3.5. New Romances**

The prospect of romance and new love was but another, less common, reason for moving to Armenia for two of the 30 participants. One participant, Sasun, fell in love whilst visiting the homeland and decided to move permanently. Eventually, he proposed. Despite having been born and raised in the United States, Sasun had incorporated traditional elements of Armenian

identity in his life. Sasun explained that ‘being an Armenian...meant everything to me, it’s not only my blood, it’s also my religion’, and as such his intention was always to marry an Armenian. Sasun believes his patriotic feelings towards the homeland were not the primary reason for his migration to Armenia, rather his *true* motivation for moving to Armenia was to marry his girlfriend. New romance was, however, not always the diasporan wishing to be with someone from the homeland, but instead, newlywed couples throughout the diaspora wishing to start their lives together and experience the challenge of living in Armenia. Nuné, from the capital of Lebanon, Beirut, explains that her move to Armenia was due to her husband wishing to settle in Armenia. Nuné had expressed no desire to move to the homeland, believing herself not to be a patriot, but was aware of her husband’s dream before choosing to marry him, and thought it a worthwhile opportunity, claiming to have nothing to lose. Nuné has since had a child and has integrated well into her life in Armenia.

Participant motivations for migrating to Armenia were reflective of the diasporan dream of return. Following decades of separation, the opportunity to return to an independent homeland was too tempting for most participants to ignore. A sense of desperation was present in responses on return, as for some the need to call Armenia ‘home’ and ‘reconnect’ with the homeland could not be delayed any further. Realities of homeland society were not always important for diasporans who stressed the advantageous qualities of Armenian society, including the need to live amongst other Armenians, the safety of a homeland that is made up of ‘all Armenians’ and the security that comes with raising children in Armenia, in contrast to the complexities and paranoia of their Western cities. Participants who considered themselves patriots in the diaspora found themselves promoting cosmopolitan values, which stood apart from the patriarchal, conservative narrative of the homeland. To a lesser degree, participants were found to migrate to Armenia to live independently away from their families, sustain new romances and pursue studies. No matter their motivation, their decision to return would be the

step required to familiarise themselves with homeland society and become a part of the homeland.

#### **4.4. Reactions Towards the Decision to ‘Return’**

The decision to leave family, friends, employment and familiar surrounds to settle in an ancestral homeland many knew little about was met with mixed reactions from friends and family. The most common reactions were support, surprise, shock and discouragement. When grouping responses, the thought was to initially categorise by reaction, however what became clear from the beginning was the almost identical reaction by the members of each group, with a few exceptions. As such, responses are categorised based on the reactions of each group, including family members, community members, Armenian friends and *odars* (foreigners, non-Armenian).

##### **4.4.1. Family reactions**

Historical memory and unfamiliarity of life in the homeland contribute to the sense of unease and pessimism towards life in Armenia by diasporans unable to picture the country as one in which opportunity exists. Historical memory was said to include stories of events that took place a century ago, fearing a repeat of a situation in which the nation’s future was put into peril. Comments such as, ‘it might turn out like it did in 1918 when we lost our country, it’s just not safe’ were said to Vartan, a middle-aged returnee from Lebanon. These comments are a reaction to their family member’s decision to return to a country that in their eyes has on many occasions represented uncertainty. It is unknown whether Vartan’s relative’s reaction was in relation to the loss of Western Armenian lands to the Republic of Turkey, or the short-lived Republic of Armenia (1918–1920), but regardless of which event the comment was directed towards, it is a representation of the uncertainty with which many diasporans view the Republic of Armenia.

Historical memory also includes negative perceptions of Armenia's more recent Soviet history. As one father told his son, 'I don't want you to go and live amongst the communists' (Arakel, USA). Stories of life in the Soviet Union continue to resonate in the negative reactions of family members, believing the country to be mafia-controlled or filled by people who 'will trick you'. These reactions do not just resonate from stories heard during the Soviet era but also from those who visited following the independence of Armenia and had the unfortunate experience of meeting an unfavourable character. The period following independence was a decade of great economic instability, power and food shortages, and conflict with neighbouring Azerbaijan. Families remained sceptical of the realities in Armenia, fearing the worst, as parents were said to be 'concerned' and 'unsupportive,' and grandparents were 'nervous'. The nervousness of older generations was found to be one of complete unfamiliarity and historical memory, thinking their grandchildren were 'crazy' or reiterating the perceived differences between Eastern and Western Armenians with statements such as 'we are like this and they are like that'. Most participants suggested such negative responses to be due to the 'negative stereotypes they [grandparents] had about Armenia'.

Younger-aged participants were discouraged by family members, who argued that there is 'better work in other countries', or who were disappointed with their children for selling businesses, property and valuables to move their lives to Armenia despite the high level of uncertainty. These participants complained about how their families were unable to 'understand how advantageous it could be' and were disappointed in their family's reactions. Some support was, however, shown by families who understood the benefits of their kin's experience in Armenia. Those who were migrating to Armenia with the intention of undertaking studies were in general supported by the family, with comments such as 'people knew my area of study was a higher calibre in Armenia than at home' (Zarmig, Lebanon), as well as the non-Armenian parents (discussed under the section '*odars*' below). Despite the

majority of family members reacting negatively, the main point of difference between support and discouragement was the perceived benefit they expected the family member migrating to Armenia to receive. Reactions of disappointment were most common for participants who left behind a life that was in the early stages of development, including those who sold businesses, houses, cars and other valuables. Disappointment was also expressed for youth who were migrating to Armenia with little financial backing (in the case of many young Syrian-Armenians), and they were encouraged to seek job opportunities in other countries. A lack of optimism existed amongst many in the diaspora that their family members might succeed or prosper in the homeland. Warnings from family members were to no avail as the decision had been made to migrate.

#### **4.4.2. Community reaction**

Armenian community members back in the country of origin were in general supportive of the individual's decision to migrate to Armenia. Encouragement was provided by community members who understood the benefits of studying in Armenia and experiencing life in the homeland, presumably unconvinced that the individual would decide to permanently remain in Armenia.

The Armenian community within Syria was particularly encouraging, given the ongoing conflict in Syria, stating 'it's a good step to take as that is the fatherland, there's no reason to move from place to place when we can just settle there permanently' (Abraham, Syria). Abraham, a young Syrian-Armenian returnee, believes the support from the community in Syria to be due to the feeling of segregation increasingly felt by Armenians in Syria:

It is true, Syria is our birthplace, however the reality is that it reached such a stage that we would start to feel that it's wrong to live in an Islamic country, so our love for Armenia grew. (Abraham, Syria)



This sentiment by Abraham reveals the discomfort felt by some Armenians with living in an Islamic country, not uncommon amongst Syrian-Armenians since the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the fear that the future of Christianity in the Middle East has come to an end. In a 2017 article, *The Economist* quoted a Syrian-Armenian businessman who fled Syria following the destruction of his newly opened business and settled in Armenia, as stating: ‘it lasted a hundred years. It is finished...there is no future for Christians in the Middle East’ (Syria’s Armenians are fleeing to their ancestral homeland, 2017). However, simply leaving your birthplace due to war is not so simple a decision. Armenian media have made clear the difficulties faced by Armenians in Aleppo who struggle with the fact that they might need to ask for handouts from family and friends if they leave the country, or the difficulties they might encounter in Armenia, or the sheer fact that they love the city they were raised in. Many throughout Syria show a supportive but cautious attitude towards people wishing to relocate to Armenia, supportive of the fact that they are returning to the homeland where they would not have to face the fate of millions of Syrian refugees throughout Europe, but cautious of the difficulties they may face with employment. However, for communities outside Syria, one cannot help but wonder whether the reactions of community members would have been different if the person migrating was their own family member. This difference in reaction between ‘family members’ and ‘community members’ is arguably one of indifference, preferring to show support towards the individual in a matter that does not concern them.

#### **4.4.3. Armenian friends**

The most supportive of groups towards the participant’s decision to return was found to be Armenian friends. Younger participants were more willing to disclose the reactions of their friends, describing the reactions as including ‘a cool thing to do’. In general, younger generations of Armenians were more optimistic about Armenia’s future, having visited Armenia at least once, unlike older generations who had not had an opportunity to visit.

Younger generations of diasporans were seemingly more familiar with society in Armenia, given their experience with traveling there, or less familiar with stories of injustices or the Soviet era their parents would have been exposed to. This is in sharp contrast to friends of more mature-aged participants, who explained that their friends had warned them of their decision to move to Armenia because they had been raised with stories of caution and scepticism relating to the Soviet era.

#### **4.4.4. *Odars* (non-Armenians)**

Friends and family of non-Armenian ancestry, referred to in Armenian as *odars*, were said to provide a great deal of encouragement and support. These *odars* were found to be the most sympathetic, having the advantage of not possessing a pessimistic nature of the Armenian past. However true or false this statement may be, the reality is that most non-Armenians do not have either an understanding of the difficulties faced in Armenian society, or the historical baggage that comes with understanding the turbulent history of the Armenian people. Non-Armenian friends and family (including a parent and a step-parent) showed encouragement towards the decision to return, seeing it as an experience and a positive move if it would make the individual happy.

Reactions were found to be influenced by the group's familiarity with Armenian society and historical memory (if any), with those who reacted negatively having been raised with a historical perspective (or bias) of Armenia as one of turmoil, communist rule and a troubled start to independence. Discouragement was mostly by family members unfamiliar with society in the homeland, relying on stories based on past events. This is not to say that the perspectives of the homeland are completely inaccurate, as economic stagnation and corruption are valid arguments; however, their pessimistic reactions towards their family member's decision to settle in Armenia was futile, as the decision had been made.

Support was, however, shown by three groups: community members, Armenian friends, and *odars*. Support by friends is arguably due to the optimistic perspective of Armenia's future by younger generations, less immersed in the negativity of the past. Friends were said to believe that the individual could make a positive change in Armenia and improve their life for the better. These younger-generation friends are not overwhelmed by the 'west vs. east', 'us and them' binaries their parents were raised with, and have a greater degree of familiarity with homeland society due to increasing travel to the homeland by diasporans. For the very same reasons, as well as the benefit of not having an Armenian historical bias, *odar* family members and friends were able to show encouragement towards their decision to return. The encouragement and support provided by community groups is questioned given that the family members of the participants, who mostly discouraged the participants, belong to these very same communities. It is worth questioning whether the community members showing support would do the same if the person migrating were their own family member.

#### **4.5. Conclusion**

Mythical representations of the concept 'homeland' continue to exist within segments of the diaspora, irrespective of whether the concept is synonymous or different to the term 'Armenia'. Unlike past generations, young diasporans are now exposed to up-to-the-minute news coverage of events transpiring in Armenia due to the growth of social media. This exposure has provided an opportunity for younger generations of diasporans to become familiar with life in Armenia. Much like this younger generation, technically savvy or well-travelled Armenians throughout the diaspora have also become aware of life in Armenia over the past quarter century. These individuals are beginning to understand Armenia through their own terms, as opposed to the traditional methods of learning from textbooks that were provided to them at school, or by announcements made by community leaders whose information was at times laced with bias. Diaspora-tourism, volunteering opportunities and

school excursions are assisting diasporans in forming a realistic image of life in Armenia, including its beauties and pitfalls. Whether through exposure to online media or the frequency of travel to Armenia over the past quarter century, diasporans are now increasingly beginning to associate the term ‘Armenia’ with the concept of ‘homeland’. Once thought of as the eastern portion of the Armenian highlands, distant from their memories and stories of Western Armenia, the returnees in this research overwhelmingly acknowledge the Republic of Armenia as their homeland.

This generational shift in perspective of belonging and identification with a tangible homeland presents a challenge to the once-monopolised discourse of homeland held by leaders in the diaspora. For close to a century, many throughout the diaspora’s structures, including members of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (once an influential political organisation in the diaspora), emphasised the importance of the historic *lost* lands of Western Armenia and Cilicia. It would be incorrect, however, to downplay the significance of Soviet Armenia to the diaspora, as even the most ardent diasporan nationalist perceived Soviet Armenia to be of central importance to the Armenian cause. However, justice, reparations and recognition for the Armenian Genocide dominated discourse for close to a century. The inaccessibility and unfamiliarity many diasporans felt with Soviet Armenia allowed community leaders the opportunity to monopolise the Armenian narrative, a practice only noticed by returnees upon arriving in Armenia.

The independence of Armenia in 1991 exposed its diaspora to a contrasting narrative of ‘Armenianness’, a narrative that had been largely ignored, and avoided, for decades. Nevertheless, large numbers of diasporans looked to this newly independent Republic to assist with finding closure to the woes and injustices they had come to be familiar with as diasporans whose ancestors were deprived of their identity and existence by oppressive rulers. For many returnees, their patriotic upbringing guided them towards the idea of return, despite their

strong identification with their countries of origin. Armenia's independence and its complicated economic, social, political and security situation signalled these returnees to protect what remains of the Armenian homeland. A sense of desperation to belong with what remains of the ancestral lands exists amongst the returnees, who have embraced the opportunity to become a member of society in Armenia, a land they had heard so much about.

Returnees were motivated by the idea of living in a 'tangible' homeland, enticed by idealistic images of the Armenian flag atop Mount Ararat or the sceneries of the 'pink city'.<sup>16</sup> Others were inspired by the opportunity to study, volunteer or work in the homeland, knowing that these experiences would help grow their social circles and assist with adjustment. Armenian community members the returnees were raised amongst, including Armenian friends with whom they had attended school and community organisations, were pleased to hear of their friend's decision to return. The new experiences and challenges the returnee would encounter in Armenia were viewed as exciting opportunities rather than risky steps. *Odar* friends were similarly supportive of their decision, providing encouragement. In contrast to these expressions of support were the reactions of family members. Family members were mostly shocked by the decision to return. Parents, siblings, grandparents and others were surprised to hear that their family member was migrating to a country suffering from years of economic, social and political uncertainty. Some were upset that their family member was to sell their business, withdraw their savings or uproot their whole family to experience life in Armenia. These reactions of shock came as a surprise to returnees who were often confused by them, given that they had been raised to idolise the Armenian nation, cherish the idea of Armenia, and protect the fragility of the Armenian state, an influence largely contributed to by the very family members now distressed by their return. There was, however, little preventing the returnee from making the move to Armenia. The abstract homeland once read about in

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<sup>16</sup> The term 'pink city' (or 'rose city') is used to describe Yerevan due to the colour of the pink-toned volcanic tufa stone used in construction.

textbooks during their childhood is now an accessible and tangible homeland ready for them to discover. What remains unknown is how the returnees will be received upon their arrival to the cherished and 'tangible' homeland.

## Chapter Five: Arriving in the Homeland

*‘Yergire yergir chi!’* (This country is not a country).

This was a statement Krikor had heard time and time again when locals discovered that he had left the United States to settle in, of all places, Armenia. As a Californian-born returnee, Krikor had arrived in Armenia optimistic and enthusiastic about his new life in his homeland. Locals, however, were not so enthusiastic, instead confused by Krikor’s decision to leave the comforts of the *great* United States of America and settle in a *struggling* Armenia. What was described by Krikor as an ‘irritable statement’ is representative of the reactions of locals in Armenia who are dissatisfied and discontent with life and who feel themselves trapped in a country awash with economic and political hardship. Living in a country with an unemployment rate of 18%<sup>17</sup> means many locals are unable to find jobs related to their area of expertise. Furthermore, Armenia’s political climate has, since independence, suffered from deeply entrenched corruption that has led to the emigration of hundreds of thousands of Armenian citizens and the monopolisation of various key sectors of the economy by individuals and families. Krikor, despite his optimism, was seemingly well aware that discourse in the country is heavily focused on emigration abroad and dissatisfaction with life in Armenia. It is for this very reason that locals remain confused with the decision made by returnees like Krikor who migrate from affluent nations and settle in Armenia. The everyday difficulties experienced by locals, combined with their confusion over the diasporans’ decision to return, lead to mixed reactions when meeting newcomers to Armenia.

Throughout this chapter, the positive and negative encounters experienced by returnees when arriving and settling in Armenia are analysed. The analysis is intended to show the association between positive encounters and group familiarity, and negative counters with group

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<sup>17</sup> Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia, 2017, [www.armstat.am](http://www.armstat.am) (Retrieved 16 April 2018).

unfamiliarity. I argue that homeland society's general apathy towards returnees and its unfamiliarity with the returnees' contrasting narratives jeopardises the returnees' integration in the homeland, particularly during the early stages of arrival. This chapter answers the following questions: what reception was provided to returnees upon their arrival to Armenia?; how do locals perceive returnees?; and have experiences of prejudice been encountered by returnees when settling in Armenia?

## **5.1. Background**

Periods of sporadic migration, repatriation and return migration of ethnic Armenians to Armenia have taken place over the past century (Suny, 2005). Aside from the movement of thousands of Armenian refugees fleeing persecution from within the Ottoman Empire during the Armenian Genocide and seeking shelter in the newly created Republic of Armenia (1918–1920), the most significant repatriation programme of diasporans took place from 1946 to 1948. This period of repatriation, known to Armenians as *nerkaght'* (internal migration) was intended to attract Armenians from throughout the diaspora to Soviet Armenia with the intention of supplementing Armenian lives lost during World War II and recovering Armenian irredenta in eastern Turkey (Suny, 2005, p. 119). Approximately 89,600 ethnic Armenians from across the diaspora accepted the Soviet Union's invitation and migrated to an Armenia they knew very little about (Lehmann, 2012, p. 184), many of whom were exiled to prison camps in Siberia shortly afterwards (Suny 2005). References to *nerkaght'* are made throughout this chapter as a suitable comparison to the contemporary phenomenon we are witnessing today. Both *nerkaght'* and *contemporary ancestral return migration* represent periods of return migration that are comprised of individuals for whom present-day Armenia was or is not the homeland of their ancestors. Both include Western Armenian-speaking



diasporans,<sup>18</sup> and both are confronted with a host society, mostly unfamiliar with their version of ‘Armenianness’. Both acknowledge the more favourable conditions under which returnees today experience return to Armenia, as opposed to during the Stalinist period of the Soviet Union. This comparison is critical in understanding whether perceptions towards returnees have changed over the past half century.

## **5.2. Acceptance or Rejection?**

A positive reception upon arrival in the homeland is found to have a profound impact on a returnee’s ability to diminish anxieties associated with return, while a negative reception can hamper the returnee’s hopes of finding a place in society within the homeland. For returnees to Armenia, the reception by locals towards their arrival was mostly *positive* and by locals who either understood the diasporan’s reasons for return or recognised the benefit that return migration can have on Armenia’s economy, demography and society in general. However, for many, this positive homecoming reception was coupled with questions of *curiosity and uncertainty* by others in the homeland about why someone would choose to settle in Armenia given the economic hardships society has had to deal with over the past quarter century. However, not all reactions to the returnees’ arrival in Armenia were positive, or even questioning, but were instead *negative or rejectionist*, leading returnees to either ignore the negativity or find ways to *conform to society’s expectations*.

### **5.2.1. A positive reception**

The warmth and happiness with which returnees were welcomed to the homeland made their initial period of adjustment all the more manageable. Most returnees were anxious about returning to a homeland they knew very little about; some questioned whether they would be

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<sup>18</sup> Of the 89,637 returnees, 20,587 originated from Iran, an Eastern Armenian-speaking community. The remainder originated from countries with Western Armenian-speaking communities (Syria, Lebanon, Greece, Egypt, France, Bulgaria, United States, etc.).

able to survive the change in lifestyle and culture. However, what was evident was the optimism the returnees brought with them when settling in Armenia. These optimistic returnees arrived in Armenia with high spirits and a determination to succeed in the homeland. Their optimism did not go unnoticed and was the main reason behind why locals in Armenia reacted so positively to their arrival. Locals were said to be ‘warm and inviting’, a common reaction when confronted by newcomers excited about having returned to the Armenian homeland. Other locals were said to be surprised and delighted to discover the returnee spoke Armenian and continued to identify as Armenian, despite their families having resided outside the homeland for over a century. Locals were also impressed by the breadth of knowledge of some returnees on topics of Armenian history and contemporary affairs; one returnee proudly explained how impressed locals are with ‘how Armenian I am’ (Sasun, USA). The affirmative influence exhibited by locals was found to provide returnees with the moral support they required at a time not long after the negativity of their family members when they announced their decision to migrate to Armenia.

The positivity and encouragement of locals was said to be genuine and a result of the locals’ patriotic nature. However, although some locals were positive, their reactions were mostly apathetic, a conscious stance by locals not wanting to discourage the optimistic returnee. One such example was provided by a returnee from Lebanon, Zarmig, who described the humorous way in which she was welcomed to Armenia by a neighbour:

The locals greeted me with happiness and provided a sense of comfort; I can say that the locals provided the most encouragement ... One neighbour said to me ‘good on you for coming to Armenia’. A week later, I heard that he had migrated abroad.  
(Zarmig, Lebanon)

In this instance, Zarmig's desire to live in the homeland was met with support and encouragement by a neighbour who was sympathetic of her decision to settle there, purportedly with the belief that the returnee would make a positive impact on the homeland. The neighbour's statement, however, is seemingly dubious given his almost immediate departure from Armenia. What may sound hypocritical in this paradoxical encounter in fact illustrates the contrasting priorities of returnees and locals who need to ensure their own prosperity and economic survival.

Despite the general position of indifference towards the returnees' decision to settle in Armenia, a more sincere and positive reception was shown to the arrival of the Syrian-Armenians. Since the outbreak of civil war in Syria, society in Armenia has become increasingly aware of the dire conditions in which their ethnic-kin are living in Syria. Many Syrian citizens of Armenian descent were continuing to arrive in Armenia at the time of this project's data collection process, unable to endure the economic and physical difficulties of living in a country in civil conflict. Since the start of civil conflict in Syria, the Armenian government's rhetoric on diasporan return had transformed to one of reality in which the homeland would prove to be a shelter for thousands of ethnic-Armenians in need of safety. One returnee describes the warmth with which Syrian-Armenians were received:

They would approach us with a spoon, with a sense of remorse, telling us that both the government and society have to take every step to assist us, reminding us that it's difficult for Armenians residing in Armenia to survive, let alone someone who just arrived from a war-torn country with little resources. (Arakel, Syria)

The returnee made use of an Armenian expression 'to approach someone with a spoon' to describe the upmost care and sensitivity with which locals treated Syrian-Armenians. The settlement of Syrian-Armenians to Armenia was said to be both revitalising for homeland society and the Republic of Armenia, reaffirming its purported belief as 'the homeland of all Armenians' (a statement made by Armenia's first President, Levon Ter Petrossian, quoted in

Harutyunyan (2006)); for despite the profound divisions and differences that exist between diasporans and homeland society, a sense of belonging to the same nation still prevails (Herzig & Kurkchian, 2004). Much like the return of diasporans during the *nerkaght*' period, the present-day return of Syrian-Armenians once again acknowledged the myth of the nation as a united primordial entity (Lehmann, 2012). Syrian-Armenians were welcomed in universities and other educational institutions, as locals were impressed with their eagerness to continue their studies and become members of society.

Upon arriving in Armenia, Syrian-Armenians were said to be issued 10-year visas free of charge or provided the opportunity to apply for Armenian citizenship through the Armenia's Right of Return programme. The 10-year visa was found to be most popular amongst younger male returnees who are required to enter the armed forces if below the age of 27. However, outside the formalities of official status, Syrian-Armenians choosing to settle in Armenia were treated as *Hah'renatartzner* (Armenian repatriates) by a government that insists Syrian-Armenians are not refugees in Armenia. In fact, Syrian-Armenians waive their rights when they become an Armenian citizen (Davtyan, 2017). The role of the Armenian government and society in welcoming Syrian-Armenians was acknowledged by Abraham, a returnee from Syria:

The Armenian public was the only group in the country who received me well, compared to the Lebanese-Armenians (residing in Armenia) who were not accepting...the Armenian government gave us 10-year visas for free and let Syrian-Armenians import their cars from Syria tax-free. When they find out you're from Syria, 95% of them greet you very positively and ask, 'how is the situation in Syria? Welcome to Armenia, this is your homeland too; you have the same rights as all of us. (Abraham, Syria)

In general, it is evident that most returnees perceive the reception they received by locals to be positive, regardless of which country they originate from or the reason for returning.

However, Syrian-Armenians are evidently provided more assistance and encouragement, given society's awareness of their flight from war and their less-than-voluntary decision to settle in Armenia. The hardships experienced by many Syrian-Armenians were met with signs of positivity and encouragement by locals keen to support their struggling ethnic-kin. Despite the positivity and/or apathy shown towards returning diasporans (including Syrian-Armenians), the economic uncertainty and high levels of unemployment that exist throughout Armenia have resulted in confusion amongst locals about why someone would leave a more prosperous country and settle in Armenia.

### **5.2.2. Confusion With the Returnee's Decision**

A significant number of returnees experienced what can be described as astonishment and confusion by locals trying to understand their decision to migrate to Armenia. The bewilderment of some locals towards the returnees' decision to settle in Armenia was due to the returnees' choice to leave an advanced, affluent nation (in some instances), and settle in a developing nation dealing with a significant number of socio-economic problems. The difficult conditions homeland society has had to endure have included high levels of unemployment, corruption and a lack of democracy, etc. These difficulties justify local reactions to the returnees' migration from well-to-do nations, however their *unfamiliarity* with the patriotism that inspired diasporans to 'return' (discussed in Chapter Four) is what leads to reactions of confusion and astonishment. Contemporary society's unfamiliarity with diasporan patriotism is reflective of Soviet-era Armenian return migration during the period of *nerkaght*'. In the book *The Repatriate*, Mooradian (2008) explains how Soviet propaganda regarding the state of the world outside the union was reflected in the locals' assumptions that repatriates had lived much worse abroad if coming to Soviet Armenia was an option for them. Similarly, the lack of awareness of diaspora patriotism by some in the homeland has led to assumptions that conditions abroad must be worse. Mardiros, an Australian-Armenian, explains in his own

terms that most people were able to understand his reason for return, however the other half ‘couldn’t put it together to understand my situation’. The confusion with why someone would leave the comfort of their hometown and come and live in Armenia was justified by some locals with the assumption that the country from which they migrated to be in trouble. Pasian, an Argentinian-Armenian returnee, described the reactions of locals who learnt of her arrival from Argentina as one of disbelief, arguing, ‘we are leaving this place, why have you left your country and come here?’ Pasian believes that locals think the situation in Argentina must be quite bad if she has decided to leave there and move to Armenia.

One returnee explained the reason for society’s unfamiliarity of the diasporans’ decision to move to Armenia, believing that historically diasporans were perceived as benefactors, viewed from a distance, who would come to Armenia and make donations or make announcements from television. The shift from a diaspora viewed from afar to one present throughout many sectors of homeland society has confused some locals and led them to question why the successful and prosperous diasporan would want to return to a place with high unemployment and other economic challenges. Many participants acknowledged that locals are getting to know diasporans more personally through increasing interactions and ongoing relationships. With increasing interactions comes a better understanding of the diaspora and less bewilderment over their decision to return. However, for some, the diaspora remains unfamiliar and distant, and their arrival poses a threat to the homogenous culture and narrative of the homeland.

### **5.2.3. Negative Reception**

Positive reactions towards the returnees’ arrival to Armenia, although frequent, were at times met with scepticism and negativity by those threatened by the presence of these so-called ‘outside Armenians’. These rejectionist perspectives of the diaspora, whether of their language, culture, identity, or belonging to Armenia, although infrequent, remained part of the

returnee's memory of how they were received in the homeland. Locals who displayed hostility towards returnees were noticeably threatened by confrontations with 'unknown' elements of the Armenian identity they had come to know since their childhood. The profound differences that exist between the 'diasporicised' Western Armenian identity and the 'sovietised' Eastern Armenian identity remain visible to locals (Herzig & Kurkchian, 2004), many of whom have had little to do with the diaspora and foreigners from the west. Herzig and Kurkchian (2004) describe the Western Armenian identity of the diaspora as one not connected to a homeland but rather hybrid in form with loyalties to both the homeland and the host land. The presence of returnees who, in the opinion of some locals *exude a Western Armenian identity* through their use of the Western Armenian language and cultural elements adopted from their countries of origin, present a threat to locals unaccustomed to such differences in Armenian identity. The few returnees who met negativity upon arrival to Armenia responded to this negativity with disappointment rather than anger. Returnees justify their disappointment by pointing out that such negative encounters are not frequent but rather displayed by those who are ignorant of their Western Armenian identity, their diverse appearance and styles, and the hybrid identities they possess.

The most common reason behind returnees confronting negativity was said to be due to their use of Western Armenian, which differed from the dominant form of Armenian spoken in society, Eastern Armenian. Society in Armenia's capital Yerevan has begun to notice the growing usage of Western Armenian on the streets, in educational institutions and within businesses owned by Western Armenian returnees. Although Western Armenian-owned businesses and returnee numbers do not represent a significant number in comparison to local numbers, their presence remains obvious. Since the arrival of the Syrian-Armenians, over 50 restaurants have been opened, most of which serve 'traditional' Armenian cuisine more similar to dishes found throughout the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean (Roupen, Canada).

Locals were said to frequent Western Armenian-owned businesses due to their unique and tasty food (Christapor, France). Whilst in these establishments, locals are exposed to the Western Armenian language, food, and the customs and behaviour of the many returnees. The usage of Western Armenian in the city presents a modest, albeit uncomfortable level of otherness in the nation's narrative for those reluctant to change. This small presence of Western-Armenian speakers, whether on the streets of Yerevan or in restaurants, demonstrates a new level of inclusion predominantly in the landscape of the capital, Yerevan. Although limited in their ability to affect society at large, those with a differing understanding of the Armenian narrative fear their presence. Locals educated during the Stalinist period (1922–1953) or with a memory of the preceding decades have lived through days in which Western Armenian was grouped with the terms 'otherness' and 'illiteracy'. During this time, Western Armenian was officially branded as a part of the 'reactionary culture' of the west, a time in which Western Armenian speakers were labelled illiterate (Lehmann, 2012). Given the overt propaganda against Western Armenian during the early Soviet period and the general absence of Western Armenian in Soviet Armenia and Post-Independent Armenian society, acceptance of the language by some is difficult due to its sharp differences in pronunciation, grammar and sentence structure. One returnee from Lebanon explains her encounter with peers during her first week at university when conversing in Western Armenian:

When I spoke Western Armenian on my first day of school, I overheard my colleagues' say, 'What is she talking? Where is she from?' There's a complete lack of knowledge here. (Lorig, Lebanon)

The obscurity of Lorig's spoken Armenian to her peers was viewed by them as ignorance; however, ignorance towards the Western Armenian language is not a new phenomenon and not something present-day society in Armenia can be blamed for. The *nerkaght*' period of 1946–1948 exposed stories of ridicule and discrimination by locals criticising repatriates for speaking Western Armenian, labelling them 'illiterate' (Lehmann, 2012). As such, present-day



ignorance and unfamiliarity of Western Armenian is as much a consequence of the past as it is the ongoing unfamiliarity of the two groups of one another.

The second most noticeable reason for experiencing negativity was related to the returnees' physical appearance, including dress and hairstyle. The physical presence of the returnees is noticeable in Yerevan due to the contrast in appearance between locals and returnees, which makes their presence all the more pronounced outside the capital, Yerevan. The returnees are more likely to dress and style themselves in the fashion of their countries of origin. In the earlier stages of return migration (post-independence), female returnees had been criticised for smoking and having large circles of male friends and male returnees were criticised for having long hair, dressing very casually, or having a beard, all reasons for them to stand out amongst the crowd of citizens still struggling to break free from the homogeneity of Soviet Armenian society.

Some criticism towards returnees was described as 'outright disrespectful' and was usually an encounter between the returnee and an older-aged member of Armenian society, a generation said to be suspicious of the returnee's presence. Negative encounters were generally one-off statements made by individuals wary of people who seemed different to others in society. A returnee from Syria, who studied in Armenia during the years following the country's independence, explains:

I've never had a bad experience, though their personalities are a bit on the rough side, but their reception isn't direct towards you, they behave the same way towards one another. (Sirvart, Syria)

The negativity shown towards some returnees was evidently not personal but rather a reaction shaped by an unfamiliarity of the diaspora and the difficulty with accepting a change to the homogeneity of the national narrative. Negative encounters, I argue, are due to the infrequent contact between homeland and diaspora over the past century, and improve as homeland

society begins to interact with an increasing number of diasporans visiting Armenia over the past quarter century. The presence of the diaspora in the homeland has provided both locals and diasporans the opportunity to interact with one another and learn to accept each other's differences. Those who experienced negative encounters provided a subtle warning to society that such behaviour would act as a deterrent to diasporans contemplating return and a hindrance to the nation's development. However, some returnees are less willing to deal with criticism and have a repeat of their negative confrontation, thus propelling them to conforming to society's expectations.

#### **5.2.4. Conforming and Fitting-in**

For some returnees, a negative encounter in their homeland, a land they had dreamt of since childhood, was an unexpected experience and one they wished to avoid. As a result, some returnees felt the need to just 'fit in' and avoid elements of difference in their appearance that made them stand out. This process of 'fitting in' made their adjustment process less complicated. However, conforming to societal expectations was not a popular decision, being criticised by other returnees, or one that the returnee would admit to. Returnees were, after all, fond and proud of their cosmopolitan and diverse behaviours and styles. In fact, most returnees described how peculiarly locals dressed, as they had become accustomed to the fashions and dress-sense of society in their own countries of origin. Nevertheless, some returnees remained convinced that they too should dress like the rest in society and 'fit in'. Arakel, an American-Armenian student enrolled in a course at a local university that does not attract many international students from the west, describes his first week as a student:

People were noticing that I'm not from here...I couldn't even feel like a local even in my own fatherland, so I started to do things to feel more integrated. Eventually, I got a local Armenian haircut and put on a jacket like them. (Arakel, USA)

Arakel's journey to the homeland is one of self-discovery and belonging. His statement leads us to believe that his perception of himself as an outsider in the United States spurred him to move to Armenia. However, the inhospitable welcome he received by colleagues at university during his first few weeks in the homeland led to disappointment and disbelief that he remained an outsider *even* in his own fatherland. To avoid the feeling of otherness, Arakel got a 'local' haircut, a story reminiscent of returnees from the 1940s who described local haircuts as 'square' and unlike the styles they were accustomed to. His next decision was to wear a jacket, a distinct part of Soviet and post-Soviet Armenian men's attire. This decision to wear similar clothing to others in society is described by Lehmann as a means of delineating lines of distinction as clothing is a way of demonstrating the 'unity of a community' (2012, pp. 188, 192). For this reason, Arakel decided to put on a jacket regardless of how warm the weather was outside. Clothing was, however, not the only physical difference between returnee and locals, but also included facial hair.

A young Syrian-Armenian returnee, Hrant, who was accustomed to his well-trimmed beard, was surprised to discover that his facial hair was considered unusual for some men in Armenia. Local friends of Hrant would comment on how foreign his beard was, an attitude inherited from the Soviet period when societies throughout the Soviet Union espoused the 'expected appearance' of the Soviet citizen. During the early Soviet period, a moustache and beard had ambiguous meanings, associated on one hand with the demonised Christian Orthodoxy, and on the other with communism's fathers including Marx, Engels and Lenin. However, this positivity was superimposed by the clean-shaven state of the Soviet Union. Society has in fact changed from the time Hrant was told that his beard was strange, as teenagers in particular are more supportive of change and beards are no longer considered unusual in Armenia, a point acknowledged by Hrant. The growing acceptance of diverse appearances, which was significantly lacking during the Soviet years, has led not only to a

shift in local mindset, but to nationwide acceptance as Armenia hosts its first Beard Festival in 2018. The impact of globalisation and the presence of growing numbers of diasporans in tourism and permanent settlement have clearly affected societal change.

The reception received by Western-Armenian returnees upon arrival to the homeland was a mix of positivity, curiosity and rejectionist statements. Positive introductions were made by locals happy to see the return of their ethnic-kin seeking an opportunity to live in the homeland and contribute to its development. However, much of society remained unsure of the returnees' decision to 'return', confused by their decision to leave the comforts of their countries of origin to reside in a country they themselves are finding difficult to live in, due to high unemployment and economic hardships. A general lack of awareness or familiarity of the Armenian diaspora is found to be the reason behind some in the homeland criticising their 'return', unaccustomed to seeing the wealthy diasporans from the outside now living amongst them. However, the use and presence of Western Armenian is cause for further alarm by those suspicious of the newcomers who were themselves raised with past rhetoric of Western Armenian as an element of the 'other'. This general unfamiliarity of the Armenian diaspora was found to be the reason behind the curiosity of locals; however, of greater obscurity to some locals is the presence of a group of Armenians who challenge the homogeneity of 'eastern' Armenia.

### **5.3. A Western Armenian-returnee or a Diasporan-returnee?**

Society in Armenia has for decades had a somewhat uniform understanding of the Armenian identity, having developed a standardised version of Armenianness during the Soviet period. Returnees to Armenia arrive with an Armenian identity that differs linguistically, culturally and historically. For returnees, their Armenian identity is a multi-layered identity comprised of elements of their Western-Armenian past, their diasporan upbringing and their transnational belonging. For many who belong to society in Armenia, the Armenian identity is associated

mostly with the territory of the Republic of Armenia, one that is shared amongst all locals that contains elements of the Soviet past, and the belonging as a citizen of an independent Republic of Armenia. Furthermore, the Armenian identity of the homeland is one closely associated with the Eastern-Armenian language, the official branch of the modern Armenian language used in Armenia. For these reasons, discourse on the diaspora is normally associated with the Western-Armenian language and the homeland as Eastern Armenian; a paradox that excludes others including the Eastern-Armenian speaking community of Iran or the thousands, if not millions, of Eastern-Armenian speakers throughout the diaspora.

The categorisation of the diaspora as *Western Armenian* is not only historically inaccurate, but also reveals the persistence of an out-dated Soviet understanding of the Armenian narrative. A typical Soviet-era belief was that inhabitants of Armenia and throughout the countries of the former Soviet Union were *Eastern Armenian*, and the post-genocide diaspora were Western Armenians. The responses of returnees depict a society in which all diasporans are Western-Armenian speakers and one that overlooks the presence of Eastern-Armenian speakers throughout the diaspora. It is argued in this section that society's perception of diasporans as Western-Armenian speakers has to do with their limited knowledge of Western Armenians, and the possible inclusion of other Eastern-Armenian speakers throughout the diaspora as *part of the homeland* as opposed to the 'otherness' that is the Western-Armenian diaspora.

### **5.3.1. Local Opinions of Western Armenians**

An overwhelming number of people with whom returnees interacted in Armenia were said to have a superficial understanding of the Western Armenians of the diaspora. Locals were said to associate the Western Armenians with the genocide. The Armenian Genocide is commemorated yearly in Armenia as a national holiday, as thousands march in remembrance of those who perished. School students throughout Armenia are taught to remember and demand justice in having the crime recognised by the international community, including by

Turkey. Many in Armenia are the descendants of those who fled their towns and villages in present-day Turkey and found shelter in what was then the Republic of Armenia (1918–1920) or Soviet Armenia (1921–1991). Returnees pointed out that locals are aware of their ancestral origins from cities throughout Western Armenia, such as Van, Mush, Sasoon, or Erzerum. Their ancestors were forced to flee and find shelter in various parts of present-day Armenia, including a large number from the city of Erzerum (Armenian: Karin) who settled in the northern Armenian city previously known as Leninakan (present day Gyumri). To this day, several Western-Armenian dialects survive in contemporary Armenia, including the Karin dialect, a dialect of Western Armenian spoken in the city of Gyumri. However, a contemporary understanding of the Western-Armenian people by locals, is either absent, superficial, outdated or limited.

It was acknowledged that locals are educated at school in Western-Armenian literature, including the works of 19th century Western-Armenian poet and writer, Siamanto.<sup>19</sup> Knowledge of Western-Armenian writers and poets is evident when locals meet the returnees. Locals familiar with elements of Western-Armenian identity, whether it be language, culture or history, were said to frequently show appreciation of all things Western Armenian when discovering the returnee was Western Armenian: a means of connecting with the returnee. Comments were made to returnees such as, ‘it’s [Western Armenian] such a beautiful and ancient language that needs to be preserved’, a comment that demonstrates the inclusiveness of Western Armenians in the homeland, despite the inaccurate classification of the language as an ancient language,<sup>20</sup> seemingly confusing Western Armenian with Classical Armenian. However, locals with a better understanding of Armenian history were aware that Western

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<sup>19</sup> Atom Yarjanian, better known as Siamanto, was an influential Armenian writer, poet and national figure from the later 19th century and early 20th century. He was killed by the Ottoman authorities during the Armenian Genocide.

<sup>20</sup> Western Armenian is a branch of Modern Armenian that was preceded by Middle Armenian (12th–18th century) and Classical Armenian (5th–18th century).

Armenian continues to be used by communities throughout the diaspora. These individuals would provide encouragement to returnees, asking them to continue to speak Western Armenian despite the difficulties with understanding locals may have. This tenacious attitude and encouragement by some locals towards the maintenance of Western Armenian was said to be made by ‘patriots’. Returnees interpreted the encouragement and support as a sign of inclusiveness and one that played an important role in welcoming the returnee to Armenia, a welcome that is in sharp contrast to returnees during the 1946–1948 *nerkaght*’ periods.

The Western-Armenian language was often referred to as a beautiful language, often compared with, or incorrectly labelled as, Classical Armenian. One local described Western Armenian as a ‘purer form of Armenian’, a statement that may have less to do with the perceived ‘purity’ of the Western-Armenian language and more to do with the overt colloquialism found in the Armenian spoken throughout Yerevan. The use of foreign and international loan words in the Armenian of Yerevan becomes more evident to locals when hearing returnees using the Armenian alternative. Such statements on purity should not, however, distract from the persistent usage of Turkish, Arabic and French words by Western-Armenian speakers who, when in the homeland, may use the Armenian term, conscious of the local not understanding the Turkish, Arabic or French equivalent.

In contrast to the comments of support and encouragement, three returnees described being referred to as an *aghpar* when speaking Western Armenian. *Aghpar*, the Western Armenian pronunciation of the term ‘brother’, as opposed to *akhper* in Eastern Armenian, is used colloquially to refer to Western-Armenian speakers and diasporans. The term originates from the 1940s *nerkaght*’ period that led to the repatriation of thousands of Western-Armenian speakers. The usage of this derogative term has been said to signify both the claim and the negation of national unity (Lehmann, 2012, p. 172). The term is still recognised by many in the homeland, given the significant number of media articles one is able to find through a

simple Internet search. Though the word is no longer said to be used in a derogative manner, as many are unaware of the origins of the word, it continues to be used by some locals as a means of describing a ‘Western-Armenian speaker’.

For close to a century, society in Armenia has viewed the Western-Armenian language through a historical lens, thereby limiting their exposure to the contemporary realities of the language and identity. Relegation of Western Armenian to an inferior position, outside the homeland, has led to increasing levels of unfamiliarity of the language by homeland society. Returnees’ described how many younger generations in Armenia believe the Western-Armenian language to be a dialect of Armenian, much like the dialect of Western Armenian found in Armenia’s northern city of Gyumri. The language’s classification as a dialect, as opposed to one of the two branches of Modern Armenian, frustrated one returnee, a teacher, whose students thought he was speaking an unknown dialect of Armenian. Participants who arrived during the earlier years of repatriation (1991–mid 2000s) experienced greater animosity as Western Armenians, given the smaller number of Western-Armenian returnees living in or visiting Armenia at the time. They were met with comments such as ‘what language is she speaking?’ or ‘where is she from?’ One returnee from Cyprus was asked to speak Western Armenian, as management at his workplace believed it would attract diasporan customers; however, it turned out that local customers were unable to understand him and as such he was told to switch to using Eastern Armenian.

Those in the homeland familiar with the history, identity and usage of Western Armenian are better placed to provide support and encouragement to the use of the language by returnees. In general, it was clear that Western-Armenian returnees were respectfully welcomed to the homeland, as the reactions of locals were full of praise, recognising the diasporas’ efforts in preserving and maintaining their culture, language and identity. However, perceptions of Western Armenians as *aghpars* who speak a ‘dialect’ of Armenian diminishes the importance



of the group's identity and language, and repeats mistakes made during the Soviet era. The labelling of returnees as diasporans rather than Western Armenians is as much to do with local understandings of Western-Armenian identity as it is the returnees' identification as a diasporan whose transnational identity at times overshadows their 'Western Armenianness'. Whilst 'Western Armenianness' continues to be viewed through a historical lens; a contemporary understanding of these exiled Western Armenians or diasporans who established Armenian communities across the globe in the cities of the Middle East (such as Beirut, Aleppo, Jerusalem, Alexandria), Europe (such as Paris, Marseilles, Nicosia) and North and South America (such as Boston, Los Angeles, Buenos Aires) remains relatively unknown.

### **5.3.2. Local Opinions of Diasporans**

Soviet Armenia had very little to do with its diaspora, one side being deeply suspicious of an old enemy, Russia, and the other suspicious of the anti-communist policies of the larger diaspora communities (Cohen, 1997). The absence of any formal working relationship between the Soviet homeland and the majority of the diaspora led to what was at the time of the nation's independence referred to as 'a troubled relationship' (Cohen, 1997). Past, yet very recent, Armenian government rhetoric viewed the diaspora as a 'natural resource' whilst blaming them for having too much to do with Armenian politics (Cavoukian, 2013). Such perceptions of the diaspora are mostly in reference to the 'established' post-genocide diaspora, rather than the Armenian communities living throughout what was formerly the Soviet Union, known throughout the Soviet era as the 'internal diaspora' (Cavoukian, 2013). Ideological differences between the diaspora and Soviet Armenia were eventually set aside, first in response to the 1988 earthquake in Northern Armenia, when millions of dollars of aid poured into the country, followed by the end of the Cold War, as investments were directed towards the new independent state (Cohen 1997). Both events, as well as the outbreak of war with neighbouring Azerbaijan, led to the awakening of the sleeping diaspora as the group began to

appear as benefactors contributing to the development of the homeland. Contributions, diaspora tourism, volunteering, permanent settlement and the return of over 20,000 Syrian-Armenians following the outbreak of conflict in Syria, transformed the homeland society's perceptions of the diaspora.

The majority of participants believe that perceptions of returning diasporans by locals are positive. Locals were said to view the settlement of diasporans in Armenia as an important step in the development of the nation. The contribution diasporans are able to make to the homeland when transferring their knowledge and skills acquired abroad is recognised by many in the homeland, with one returnee being told, 'you have done well by coming here to your homeland, you have to stay, you will make a big difference to this country' (Krikor, USA). The decision made by returnees to relocate to Armenia was not downplayed by locals, who understand the difference one diasporan can make to society in the homeland. The perception of diasporans as knowledgeable, hardworking, and skilled has promoted locals to regard them as favourable to the development of the nation. Returnees also believe their skills have allowed them to gain senior positions in companies and organisations not readily available to many locals, given their knowledge of English and attitude towards work. The arrival of thousands of Syrian-Armenians, one of the oldest communities of the post-genocide diaspora, reinforced this perspective of diasporans as skilled and hardworking as the enthusiasm and entrepreneurship of the Syrian-Armenians was made evident in the years following their arrival. The majority of returnees interviewed explained that locals have noticed how much has changed in Yerevan since the arrival of the Syrian-Armenians. Changes to the hospitality sector, customer service, fashion, and the diversification of societal norms such as hairstyles and facial hair were all named as changes made since the arrival of the Syrian-Armenians. Nevertheless, despite the diaspora's efforts to alter its image through financial aid and investments to the homeland, pessimistic perceptions of the diaspora continue to persist.

For some in the homeland, the difficulty with accepting returnees is less to do with their Western-Armenian identity, and more to do with the concern that the returnee will disrupt the national narrative of Armenia. Those who believe the diaspora are outside the parameters of inclusion in the homeland's narrative tend to feel that past attributes of the Armenian identity are under threat. Identifiers of Armenianness during the Soviet period included the use of Eastern Armenian, the ability to speak Russian and a familiarity with local culture, behaviour and norms. Returnees often were often told that an Armenian of the homeland is someone who experienced the turbulent period following Armenia's independence when power and food shortages challenged the very existence of the homeland. Known as the dark days, the years following Armenia's independence became a collective experience that united the people of Armenia. Diasporans were non-existent during this period, as the aftermath of an earthquake, the onset of war and the subsequent power and food shortages dominated discourse in the homeland and further added to the diaspora's rejection as part of the national narrative of the homeland.

Shortly after their arrival, participants became aware of the diaspora's absence during the difficult period of the 1990s. It was said that some locals have a list of 'eligibility criteria' for those wishing to be considered Armenians that belong to the homeland. The most common criterion was said to be knowledge of Eastern Armenian and knowledge of Russian terms frequently used in Armenia. Returnees, much like those who arrived during the period of *nerkaght*, were at times criticised for having no command of the Russian language. Another criterion was the length of time the returnee had spent in the country, questioning the returnee as to whether they had 'planted trees' or 'drunk the water', expressions used to show the absence of the individual from Armenia during their childhood and adolescence. Such expressions were successful in causing the returnee to believe themselves to be an outsider, as one returnee asked 'do they perceive us as being temporary (returnees)?' (Ani, Syria). One

returnee explains that some locals view returnees as temporary migrants in Armenia here to ‘make the most of the good days’ (Harout, Lebanon), having been absent from the period of war and economic hardship of the 80s/90s. This list of criteria a diasporan was expected to meet to be classified a local is mainly held by those with a rejectionist stance towards the diasporans’ identity and their place as part of the homeland. These individuals were not only dismissive of the diaspora’s place as part of the homeland but suspicious of those who had arrived to open businesses and establish a life for themselves in Armenia. Such individuals were said to be ‘implementing some sort of change’, leading locals to feel offended by the thought that the diasporan has come to ‘teach them’ something. A rejection of perspectives from the outside is a common characteristic of the Soviet era, during which time perspectives from abroad, or those in contrast to the norms of the Soviet Union, were labelled irrelevant. For some locals, their reluctance to accept ‘returning’ diasporans is arguably their only means through which to demonstrate a sense of control over the parameters of the national narrative they were raised to understand.

#### **5.4. Prejudice Towards Returnees**

A mostly unfamiliar environment is encountered by returnees settling in Armenia due to the multi-layered identity of each returnee, whether it is their Western Armenian, diasporan, or identity inherited from their country of origin. Facing discrimination or prejudice in Armenia due to contrasting identities is an experience difficult to overcome given the prejudice is by a group that returnees are raised to believe they belong to. The topic of discrimination was difficult for returnees to discuss; after all, their place of return was to the homeland of their ‘dreams’. For most returnees, discrimination was rare, occurring only once or twice since their arrival, or never occurred at all.

Those who had met prejudice were returnees who challenged the perception of the Armenian norm understood by many in the homeland. A returnee from Lebanon, Lorig, describes the

prejudice she experienced due to having originated from Lebanon, her non-Armenian sounding surname and her identification as a Catholic. Lorig describes the reaction of taxi drivers who discover she originates from Lebanon as racist and rude, labelling Arabs as ‘smelly’. Such racist and ignorant statements were insulting to Lorig and sparked a need for her to defend a people she had grown to know and understand. It was not uncommon for participants to mention during their interviews that diasporans and returnees should avoid speaking to taxi drivers. Another element of Lorig’s identity that led to prejudice was her Arabic-sounding surname, a name that that could be described as ‘obviously non-Armenian’ and ‘very clearly foreign’ to both Lorig and me as the researcher. Lorig believes her surname at times led to her classification or treatment as a second-class citizen. She was, after all, very proud of her Arabic-sounding surname, a name that was given to her family when escaping the genocide as a means of concealing their Armenian identity. Not only did Lorig defy the norms of Armenian ethnicity and patriarchal names, but also identified with a contrasting branch of Christianity, Catholicism. Lorig’s frustration was unavoidable as she was questioned on several occasions as to whether she is in fact, a Christian.

Historical realities and a heightened devotion to the national Armenian Apostolic Church following the nation’s independence has led to a degree of otherness when it comes to the other two denominations of Christianity found amongst Armenians, Catholicism and Protestantism (both combined comprise approximately 1.5% of Armenia’s population (2011 Armenian Census). However, both Catholicism and Protestantism have significant historical importance in the development of the Armenian vernaculars (Etmekjian, 1964) and secular education throughout the Armenian communities of the Ottoman Empire (Göçek, 2002, p. 41), and hold an important role in the present-day communities of the Armenian diaspora.

Homeland society’s unfamiliarity with *their* diasporan and Western Armenian identity jeopardises the possibility of a harmonious reception for some returnees. Christapor, a French-

Armenian returnee and an ardent supporter of all things Western Armenian, experienced difficulties during his settlement process due to his persistence in speaking Western Armenian. His period of settlement in Yerevan was described as lacking ‘any warmth’. Describing an encounter with a university professor who asked him to speak Eastern Armenian, when he questioned why he must speak Eastern Armenian, the professor responded, ‘this is a university, it’s for people, not for *aghpars*’ (a derogatory term used to refer to Western Armenians). Christapor’s expression whilst recalling this encounter was calm and composed, which reflects the younger generations’ belief that such derogatory statements are signs of ignorance generally made by those unable to accept change. For this reason, returnees were found to react to negative encounters with humour, perceiving the behaviour as disappointing and absurd rather than upsetting. In two examples provided by returnees, a returnee was approached and told to ‘go back to your country, we don’t need your dollars’, an incident that took place within the first decade following independence, a time in which the American dollar was used more frequently due to Armenia’s weak currency. Another more recent incident involved an elderly lady telling a Syrian-Armenian returnee and his mother to ‘get out of Yerevan; you’re dirtying our city’ (Souren, Syria).

Although the returnees described these incidents with a great sense of humour, the encounters were between returnees and elderly citizens of the homeland. Elderly members of society troubled by the presence of the diaspora are arguably due to the disruption in the Armenian narrative caused by the returnees and their multi-layered identities, as well as a memory of a Soviet-era perspective of the diasporan as an outsider. As such, official government rhetoric towards the inclusion of the diaspora, although accepted by a large proportion of society, is difficult to accept for generations who spent many of their adult years within the Soviet Union. Suggestions made by newcomers on how the country should be changed were met with negative reactions by locals, who questioned whether the returnee had lived in Armenia during

the Soviet period or whether they had ‘drunk the water or planted the trees of this country’, signifying the returnees’ absence during the country’s development. These reactions were found to be offensive to returnees who interpreted such crude statements as evidence of ignorance and jealousy, and further adds to the divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

For most returnees, there was an insistence that the discrimination they encounter is ‘positive’ discrimination due to their diasporan and transnational identities. The treatment they received by locals was described as unprejudiced and sincere, with returnees keen to point out the positive discrimination they experienced when offered jobs for which they believe their local colleagues were more qualified. Returnees were keen to point out that they had been hired by local businesses due to the linguistic skills and work ethic they possessed. Their belief that they are more positive and optimistic than locals and more flexible to change may be true, as this reflects the realities of the past Soviet mindset and the unavoidable harsh conditions citizens in the homeland have experienced since their nation’s independence. The reality of what the homeland citizen has had to experience over the past quarter century is in sharp contrast to the comfortable lives of diasporans. One participant describes the way in which they deal with negative encounters:

I don’t judge the people that live here, after all the locals have also gone through very hard years, but I have to say that years of Soviet rule has made the population lazy, this is because before they were always told what to do and dictated to, so now locals don’t know how to organise themselves. (Ani, Syria)

I believe that I have a part to play, whatever the person says to me, I respond in a positive way, eventually they also start talking to me in a more positive light. (Lusiné, Lebanon)

However unfamiliar returnees may be of society and life in the homeland, most are seemingly aware of the difficult times endured by citizens in the homeland. As mentioned, society in the homeland has undergone great difficulty over the past quarter century, from the earthquake in

Northern Armenia (1988), the ongoing war with neighbouring Azerbaijan (1988–present), closed borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan, the economic collapse following independence (1991–present), and widespread corruption throughout the country. Returnees are very much aware of the difficulties locals have encountered and are very sympathetic to the behaviour of locals no matter how negative the encounter may be. Knowledge of the difficulties faced by locals was found to make stories of perceived discrimination harder for returnees to share, possibly feeling a sense of guilt over the opportunities they have been provided in a country they were not raised in. Several participants hesitated to provide examples of perceived discrimination, later revealing the stories with a disclaimer that it was only once, maybe twice, since their arrival. This hesitation in expressing themselves was due to the sense of remorse they felt for talking negatively about their own ethnic-kin with whom they had at the time of the interview developed a stronger relationship and bond.

With the exception of the few experiences of prejudice and discrimination that can be attributed to homeland society's unfamiliarity of the diaspora by mostly older generations, discrimination was found to be positive, with at least 16 participants stating they had received jobs due to their status as a diasporan and the differing outlook and attitudes they possess from their life and experiences abroad.

## **5.5. Conclusion**

A warm welcome is found for returnees arriving to Armenia. Returnees remarked on how accepting and positive their reception was in the ways through which locals confirmed their belonging to Armenia and their assurances that the returnee would contribute a great deal to *their* homeland. The infrequent instance of negativity was in general disregarded, returnees attributing negativity to individuals who feel threatened by their presence in Armenia. Locals in Armenia may perceive returnees as enjoying the most of the better days, as they endured the darker days of the post-independence era. For these select few locals, the returnee was an



‘other’ from the outside, who poses a threat to the homogeneity of the national narrative. Nevertheless, for most locals, returnees represented a diaspora that was finding their place in their homeland. Locals were found to feel pleased by the fact that the diasporan had chosen to settle in Armenia, distinguishing the individual’s place of belonging as a returning diasporan, as opposed to the transnational identities the returnee may distinguish themselves by (such as, transnational ‘American-Armenian’, ‘Lebanese-Armenian’, ‘Australian-Armenian’ citizen).

Notwithstanding experiences of warmth, understanding, and acceptance shown by locals towards the returnees’ arrival, many returnees described the confrontations they experienced with locals who were confused and shocked about why someone would leave the comforts of their country of origin and settle in Armenia. Returnees had initially attempted to explain their reasons for return; however, explanations of patriotism and belonging were difficult for locals to appreciate given the difficulties they have experienced in the homeland over the past quarter century. Eventually, returnees found ways to conform to society, preferring to blend in rather than stand out. Irrespective of the returnees’ efforts to fit in through a change in their physical appearance, these efforts were hampered by their past identities as diasporans and Western Armenians, as their spoken form of Armenian and general unfamiliarity with social norms and behaviours in the country made them stand out.

Homeland society’s unfamiliarity with the returnees’ multilayered-hybrid identities, as diasporans, Western Armenians and their respective identities with their countries of origin, is most commonly found amongst older generations. The influence of the Armenian narrative developed during the Soviet era, which for a long time demonised the Western Armenian language and neglected the global diaspora, continues to negatively affect relations between returnees and some members of homeland society, as was commented by one participant: ‘I start to think just how much we know about Armenia, and here, they’re the exact opposite, they know nothing about the Diaspora’ (Souren, Syria).

Returnees, however, insisted on pointing out the vast changes in homeland society's awareness of the diaspora they had noticed since first arriving in Armenia. For those who had resided in Armenia for greater than five years, there was a realisation of how increasingly familiar locals had become of the diaspora, the group's diversity, and their reasons for return. This familiarity was found to be due to the growing number of diasporans visiting, volunteering, studying and working in Armenia, as well as the increase in citizens of the homeland travelling abroad. This familiarity with the diaspora is, however, not reflected in the homeland's familiarity with the returnees' Western-Armenian identity. There appears to be a limited understanding of the group's identity, its Western-Armenian language, use of traditional orthography, the group's re-creation of Armenian identity over the past century, and the group's contemporary history, with the exception of information learnt from textbooks. The homeland's general unfamiliarity with the Western-Armenian identity causes returnees, upon their arrival to Armenia, to inflate their sense of identification with the Western-Armenian identity. As returnees are confronted with challenges to their choice of language, writing and culture, they initially begin to defend their 'native' Armenian identity. Whether the Western-Armenian identity is able to continue to endure in the confines of 'Eastern' Armenia in the long term remains unclear as the returnees begin to negotiate elements of their transnational and plurilocal identities.

## Chapter Six: Negotiating Identities in the Homeland

Since settling in Armenia, returnees from throughout the diaspora have found themselves negotiating elements of their group's Western-Armenian, diasporan, or host-land identity with that of the dominant identity in the homeland. The Armenians present an example of two gradually diverging groups, Eastern and Western Armenians, who, following centuries of control under foreign rule, developed differing vernaculars and cultural habits, and were guided and influenced by differing ideologies.<sup>21</sup> Events over the past century, primarily the Armenian Genocide, have shifted this east-west divide to places outside the traditional Armenian homeland, as Western Armenians settled in different parts of the world, creating their own diaspora communities. The Armenian refugees fleeing persecution found themselves in foreign lands surrounded by, at times, a dominant culture that was both foreign and unfamiliar. Their identities, which by then were categorised by regional distinctiveness based on the town, city or province from which they originated, were now to absorb elements of the dominant identity of the country of settlement. This transformation led to what is the multilayered identity of the diaspora, whether they be French-Armenians, French-Western Armenians, French-Eastern Armenians, French-*Barsgahays* (Persian-Armenians), French-*Lipanhays* (Lebanese-Armenians), or simply French. Some throughout the diaspora have managed to hold onto their Armenian identity through language, community and family, whilst others have distanced themselves from those 'things' that make them Armenian.

In contrast to the Western-Armenian experience, the eastern portion of the Armenian homeland became the birth place of the contemporary Armenian state. Hundreds of thousands

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<sup>21</sup> Panossian (2004) explains that literature throughout the Armenian communities of the Ottoman Empire was influenced by the realist school and a political ideology centred on reform, liberalism and constitutionalism, which had stemmed from Constantinople. In the east (the Russian Empire), literature was influenced by the romantic school and a political agenda in pursuit of revolutionary goals.

of Western-Armenian refugees found shelter in the newly declared independent state (1918–1920); thousands more arrived following the country’s transformation to a Soviet socialist republic. For the thousands of Western-Armenian refugees who settled in Armenia during the first few decades of the 20th century, their language and cultural identity would assimilate to the dominant Eastern Armenian cultural and linguistic identity of the country. Past references to a ‘diasporicised west and the Sovietised east’ (Panossian, 2004, p. 240), although now obsolete, remain a historically valid description of a division that existed for over seven decades, but are presently discounted for not taking into account political changes in the homeland as well as emigration patterns following the nation’s independence.

For present-day returnees migrating to Armenia from communities throughout the west, such as Los Angeles, Sydney and Toronto, interactions with Eastern-Armenian speakers are common, given the presence of large numbers of Iranian-Armenians and, increasingly over the past quarter century migrants from Armenia, within these communities. Armenian schools throughout the west cater to one of the two branches of the Armenian language, and *some* offer classes in both eastern and Western Armenian. To supplement this exposure to the two branches of Armenian, community organisations provide spaces for these individuals to mix, including sporting, social, or cultural associations. Within these familiar spaces, community members either communicate in the dominant language of their country of origin (for example, English), a common occurrence amongst Armenian communities of the English-speaking world, or in the variant of Armenian they have been raised speaking. However, never has their Armenian identity been challenged as much as what was experienced since their arrival in the Republic of Armenia, a place where their difference in *Armenian* identity can act as an impediment, though not an obstacle, to their successful integration.

In this chapter, the returnees’ attachment to their Western-Armenian and diasporan identities is discussed to discover the importance of these identities to the individual. Much like each

chapter in this thesis, the power dynamic between returnee and local is examined to determine the extent to which the returnee is willing to negotiate or be separated from their past identity. Those willing to identify with the dominant identity of the homeland, I argue, accept the power of the dominant *Eastern-Armenian* discourse and their relative inability to influence significant change. This chapter demonstrates that returnees who place greater emphasis on their past Armenian identity are seemingly more reluctant to negotiate their identity; in contrast, those who place less importance on their past identity are more willing to negotiate and integrate linguistically and culturally with the dominant identity of the homeland.

Three facets of the returnees' past *Armenian* identity are analysed to demonstrate its significance to the returnees' contemporary lives. These facets are (1) the returnees' self-categorisation as a diasporan; (2) the returnees' usage of the Western-Armenian language, and (3) the significance their Western-Armenian identity.

### **6.1. The Returnees' Self-categorisation as a Diasporan and/or a Local**

Prominent Diaspora scholar, William Safran (1991), describes 'return' as central to diasporas who retain a collective memory, vision, or myth of their original homeland; a homeland that represents a sacred space, in which members of a diaspora can survive. This leads to a presumption that a return of the diaspora to the homeland ends their struggle for survival and life in 'exile'. If this is to be presumed, then the question remains, when does a returnee cease identifying as a diasporan? The Armenian case remains distinct, given the historically cultural and linguistic differences between Armenians of the homeland and the diaspora. It was clear that returnees remain divided about when, if ever, they cease identifying as a diasporan once they have settled in Armenia. Few returnees described the process of change from diasporan to local as immediate; others insisted their diasporan identity exists in harmony with their identity as a local; however, most continue to affirm their identification as a diasporan.

### 6.1.1. 'I am a local now'

Of the 30 returnees interviewed, only three self-categorised as a 'local'.<sup>22</sup> Their self-categorisation as a local appeared to be more a reflection of their permanence in Armenia, rather than a rejection or dismissal of their diasporan past. For the three returnees, transition was simple: they ceased to be a diasporan upon settling permanently in Armenia. Their process of ancestral return had accomplished the 'diasporan goal' of reaching the homeland and concluded the diaspora's journey in exile. Their diasporan identity was described as a 'thing of the past' and associated with their life in exile, as the three returnees emphasised the urgency for diasporans to return to the homeland. For them, cultural integration with homeland society was most pronounced as they reiterated time and time again just how much they belong in Armenia and feel a part of Armenian society. These statements of belonging did not, however, reflect a rejection of their diasporan past; on the contrary, each of the three spoke with great appreciation of their diasporan past and the organisations and individuals that made them what they are today. The returnees' categorisation of the diaspora as 'the past' and their 'local-self' as the present was, however, found to be conditional on two factors: *recognition by the state* and *cultural integration*.

Having migrated from Syria in 2011, Hrant believes his transition from a diasporan Armenian to a local Armenian happened 'as soon as I arrived in Armenia'. Hrant's statement reflects his understanding of the definition of diaspora as a group outside the homeland. However, at the beginning of the interview process when asked where he migrated from, Hrant joked 'I am from here (Armenia), I am a citizen'. Hrant's humour exposes a contradictory belief of when the transition to a local Armenian took place, a statement that linked 'belonging' to citizenship. Hrant had acquired citizenship for reasons including what appeared to be a need

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<sup>22</sup> A local was defined by participants as a resident who is socially and emotionally a part of society in Armenia and should not be confused with the Armenian term *Hayastansi* taken to mean an Armenian originating from (Soviet/Independent) Armenia.

for recognition by the state. Citizenship is evidence of membership in any given state and in the case of Armenia, citizenship made Hrant a local. A similar sentiment towards belonging and classification as a local was noticeable in the case of another returnee whose partner obtained Armenian citizenship so as not to 'be considered an outsider'. The returnee described their partner as an individual who works with defending the rights of particular groups of people, a position that led the individual to obtain citizenship so as not to remain an outsider in the 'eyes of the society'. It was made clear that many in the homeland did not appreciate diasporans telling them what to do; as such, citizenship was one strategy to avoid being categorised as a diasporan.

The second condition was in relation to cultural integration. Zarmig, a returnee from Lebanon, explains the importance of mirroring the way of life of the average homeland citizen, citing her own experience of renting an 'ordinary' apartment when arriving in Armenia and insisting on mixing with locals.

If you come and live in an expensive house and take a taxi to work every day, while locals wait for the bus, then you will never become a local. If you take *khorovadz* (barbequed meat) to lunch with you every day and your colleagues eat *pilaf* (rice), it will be natural for them to consider you an outsider, because you are culturally very different. (Zarmig, Lebanon)

By living like a local, Zarmig asserts her position that the returnee will begin to identify as a local and will also be perceived as one due to their efforts to integrate. Interestingly, her suggestion to live like a local was typical of most returnees who, despite their ability to afford above-average accommodation, choose to live in average apartments or houses that they renovate and refurbish. The reluctance to purchase one of the many lavish-looking houses in Yerevan is a sign of the returnees' desire to replicate the realities of the majority in Armenia and not stand out. These hopeful few displayed enthusiasm with identifying as part of homeland society, as a local, by acquiring citizenship and replicating the life of others in

Yerevan. However, for some, distancing themselves from a diasporan past meant forgetting their Western-Armenian identity, an element of their past that was not up for negotiation.

#### **6.1.2. 'I am both a diasporan and a local'**

Over a quarter of returnees interviewed expressed indifference towards the idea of having to categorise as either a diasporan or a local, believing the two can co-exist, as evidenced by their day-to-day reality. A commonality shared by these returnees was their duration of time since arriving in Armenia, each having lived in Armenia for over a decade. Returnees who have lived in Armenia for over a decade were found to have a more rational sense of identification, whilst those drawn to the idea of relinquishing their past identity are newcomers. These longer-term returnees describe their reasons for identifying as both a local and a diasporan as simply not having spent their adolescence in Armenia. These individuals show signs of continued learning, absorption and mirroring of local customs and practices, which although they are more discernible to newcomers and visiting diasporans, are less evident to locals who display similar behaviour. Nevertheless, this did not mean the individual had ceased to be a diasporan, as there continued to exist a need for the long-term returnees to justify their identity to members of homeland society who would notice elements of difference in their humour, behaviour and mannerisms, thereby creating an obstacle to a complete self-identification as a local.

Several longer-term returnees described having to 'prove' themselves when interacting with locals, justifying why *they* should *also* be considered a local. Interestingly, these returnees also had difficulty identifying as a diasporan, given their extensive period of time spent in Armenia and away from their familiar diaspora surroundings. What was most noticeable in returnee responses was the role played by past and contemporary memory as a barrier to identification. Both past and present memories placed the returnee as a part of two worlds, a diasporan and a local world, with one individual explaining that most returnees will



eventually reach the same conclusion that ‘their memory will always lead them to believe they have two identities’. The returnees’ memories of childhood and adolescence in their countries of birth combined with their experiences of life in Armenia eventually complement one another and form a new hybrid classification as both a diasporan and local.

This uncertainty of identity had, much like the identity of repatriates during the 1940s *nerkaght*’ (in-gathering/repatriation) period, formed a new diasporan-local hybrid identity.

Vahé, a returnee from Cyprus explains:

I haven’t considered myself a diasporan for a long time; however, I also don’t see myself as a *Hayastansi* (an Armenian from Armenia). I once wrote on Facebook that I’m a *Spyurkahayastantsi* (a combination of the Armenian word for diaspora and a homeland Armenian). My friends laughed and said just write ‘Armenian’. I said no...because half my life has been here in Armenia. (Vahé, Cyprus)

Vahé’s statement reflects a reluctance to specify a time at which one can identify as a local when in Armenia, believing one can be caught somewhere in between the diaspora-homeland nexus. Vahé’s ambiguity in deciding whether or not he is still a diasporan and the reactions he received from friends when attempting to formulate his own term of who he is (*Spyurkahayastantsi*)<sup>23</sup> is a sign of the absence in homeland discourse regarding diasporans who settle in Armenia. If these returnees can be taken to represent a sample of the target population (all Western-Armenian returnees), it becomes clear that returnees who have lived in Armenia for longer periods of time will embrace cultural integration as they absorb elements of homeland identity and culture, as well as preserve their cultural identity of the past. However, for the majority of returnees who have resided in Armenia for less than a decade, identification as a diasporan was most common.

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<sup>23</sup> The Armenian suffix *ts’i* denotes a geographical provenance, in this case a component of the word is *hayastantsi* that signifies a person from *Hayastan* (the Armenian word for ‘Armenia’).

### **6.1.3. 'I am still a diasporan'**

The majority of the returnees reiterated their identification as a diasporan, justifying their position with the perceived impossibility of considering themselves a 'local' given the absence of memories and cultural identifiers associated with the homeland.

I will always be a diasporan, because for 25 years my psyche has been a diasporan-Armenian and that's how I have been raised. For me, a local is someone who has lived here since the day they were born and gone to school here. (Abraham, Syria)

Much like returnees who felt unable to identify explicitly as a local, the majority of returnees remained convinced that their past memories prevented them from ever identifying as a local and had instead chosen to continue to identify as a diasporan. However, much like the point made earlier, these returnees had not resided in Armenia for an extended period of time, most having relocated to Armenia only a year or two earlier. These returnees were reluctant to lose the memories they had cherished and gathered during their life in the diaspora, unable to foresee a time when the two sets of memories could co-exist. As noted in Chapter Four, only one of the 30 returnees interviewed had visited Armenia during their adolescence. The absence of childhood memories associated with life in Armenia and the prevalence of a diasporan memory is the most evident reason why the majority of returnees continue to identify with their diasporan past.

One noticeable element of their diasporan past that individuals were unwilling to distance themselves from was their sense of belonging to a Western-Armenian categorisation. For most, their reason for settling in Armenia was to establish a sense of belonging to the country, inspired by their patriotic upbringing. However, this did not mean a neglect of their Western-Armenian identity. Lorig, a returnee from Lebanon, explains:

I will always be a diasporan, as becoming a local is the same as losing. I am a Western Armenian and I have my own culture and language. Yes, I do speak Eastern

Armenian, quite fluently actually, but I don't want to lose my Western Armenianness. One day when I was at university, I was giving a presentation and speaking in Eastern Armenian. The teacher stopped me and asked, 'Aren't you Western Armenian? Why are you talking Eastern Armenian? You have to preserve your language. Let others learn something about Western Armenian language and culture'. It was at this stage I realised just how right she was. I will always remain true to my Western Armenian roots. (Lorig, Lebanon)

Lorig's reference to her Western Armenian 'roots' is arguably not an indication of her memory of Western Armenia, but rather the *Western-Armenian* home, community and school within which she was raised. It is the attachment to this memory that she fears will be lost if she begins to identify as a local: as an Eastern Armenian. As much as participants talk of the difficulty they experience with locals not wanting to consider them a local, it is evident that they (the returnees) themselves hesitate to associate, at times, culturally and in identification as a local.

The returnees' memories and experiences that exist in the diaspora have prevented most from labelling themselves 'locals', an example being the experience of a longer-term returnee who self-classified himself a *Spyurkahayastantsi* (Diasporan + Armenian from Armenia). The self-classification is possible due to the flexibility offered to the returnees to decide for themselves the group with which they wish to be classified. For this reason, many returnees continue to identify as diasporans or hold onto elements of their past diasporan identity including the most noticeable identifier, their use of the Western-Armenian language.

## **6.2. Western Armenian Language Use**

The two literary forms of the Armenian language, Eastern and Western, are mutually intelligible languages. The absence of Western Armenian in the linguistic landscape of Armenia has meant the spoken language is difficult to understand for many locals, given the differences in phonetic realisation (pronunciation) and lexicon (vocabulary). For these

reasons, returnees in general feel pressured to negotiate this one element of their past identity and switch to speaking Eastern Armenian. The decision to speak Eastern Armenian shows the returnees' acceptance of the hegemonic discourse of homeland society in relation to language and a reluctance to create confusion and difficulty when interacting with locals. The switch to Eastern Armenian is a process of negotiating identities with the intention of adapting to life in the homeland and avoiding discomfort, a position that weakens the continued presence of the Western-Armenian identity in Armenia. On the other hand, those who continue to use Western Armenian when speaking with locals, although relatively few, display a level of commitment to their past identity and its survival in Armenia, a behaviour said to be 'admirable' by other returnees.

The returnees' use of western or Eastern Armenian was found to be dependent on the situation they found themselves in and whether a negotiation of their identity was advantageous, or more to do with their absolute determination to preserve the most evident element of their past identity.

#### **6.2.1. Situational Awareness of Language Use**

Accommodation theorists explain that a speaker will modify their speech during interactions with listeners by becoming more like the listener. Therefore, it is presumed that returnees will modify their speech to reflect that of the Eastern-Armenian listener. This process of speech modification, known as *linguistic convergence*, is said to reflect the group's perhaps unconscious wish for mutual identification with the listener (Downes, 1998). Evident in most responses was the returnees' wish to be included as part of society; as such, switching between Western or Eastern Armenian dependent on the situation would help facilitate this inclusion.

The most common sites of linguistic convergence towards Eastern Armenian were places such as university, work, restaurants and shopping malls. At these various sites, interactions with Eastern-Armenian speakers were most common and most returnees believe it is easier to just talk in Eastern Armenian, to not cause confusion. Arsen, a self-declared enthusiast of the Western-Armenian language, had settled in Armenia two years earlier from Syria and explains that, although he loves the language, he did not come to Armenia to ‘create difference or annoy people’, explaining, ‘If I am at the shops or a place like that, I will speak the way the people who work there speak’. Many returnees found it difficult not to replicate the language of the person listening to them, finding it uncomfortable to speak Western Armenian to someone who is an Eastern Armenian, given their status as a minority in the country. The *general* sense of unfamiliarity of the Western-Armenian language within the homeland creates a desire by returnees not to cause discomfort or make life more difficult for themselves.

Several returnees believe that forcing a language onto the majority population, despite its categorisation as ‘Armenian’, is not fair or realistic. Zarmig, who migrated to Armenia from Lebanon, argues that returnees need to speak Eastern Armenian when interacting with locals: ‘I can’t force an Eastern Armenian to understand my Western Armenian, just like how I can’t force someone in a different country to understand my language, we need to succumb’. However, not only were returnees found to ‘succumb’ to the dominant linguistic discourse of society in the homeland, but they also adopted some of the commonly used linguistic slang and usage of foreign words. The adoption of foreign loan words in both Eastern and Western Armenian is common given centuries of rule by foreign powers. Using foreign loan words in place of the Armenian equivalent was not easy for many of the returnees, however at times they made use of the foreign terms to simplify interaction with the locals, justifying their use of words as a temporary phenomenon given society’s gradual move away from using foreign

terms they had previously become accustomed to. Words including *petrushka* (Russian *петрушка* for parsley) or *svetofor* (Russian *светофор* for traffic light) are used by many locals in Armenia who are seemingly well aware of the Russian origins of these words. However, words such as *gazar* (Persian for carrot), or *zibil* (Turkish for waste, originating from Arabic *zibl*) are commonly used in Armenia and their ‘foreign’ origins are not well-known by large segments of society. One common example that was raised by the returnees was the use of the word *gazar* in Armenia, as returnees had difficulty adapting to a word for which they knew the Armenian equivalent *sdebghin* (Armenian: *ստեղծիկ*). Despite the hesitation of returnees to use foreign loan words that had become a part of Eastern-Armenian colloquial speech, returnees in general switched to using Eastern Armenian when interacting with locals. However, switching to Eastern Armenian was not the case for all returnees, some of whom were determined to continue speaking Western Armenian.

### **6.2.2. Language Maintenance**

The use of the Western-Armenian language continues to take place when returnees are amongst family members, Western-Armenian friends and many visiting diasporans. A select few were, however, determined to continue speaking Western Armenian when interacting with locals. A commonality amongst these individuals was their place of employment, which offered them the choice of speaking either Eastern or Western Armenian. The two returnees, Ani and Sirvart, who were originally from Syria, explained that their ability to speak Western Armenian at work was due to their employers being Western-Armenian media outlets—an exceptional scenario in Armenia. Others described their work environment as ‘flexible’, allowing them the opportunity to use Western Armenian. These flexible workplaces included the returnees’ own businesses, universities, and organisations with large numbers of diasporan employees.

Arsen, a young academic from Syria explains how he was encouraged to use Western Armenian by his colleagues who are language professors themselves, believing that the staff were not about to discourage him from speaking Western Armenian, given their professions. Arsen comments that he still uses Western Armenian ‘unlike those who have already adopted Eastern Armenian’. At times, Arsen appears unfamiliar with the experiences of his fellow returnees who interact with Eastern-Armenian speakers who are less familiar with Western Armenian. Despite the insistence by several returnees that Western Armenian is spoken in the workplace, their interactions with locals outside work were mainly in Eastern Armenian. The responses made clear that Western Armenian is used amongst family and friends, and at work for a select few, however the linguistic convergence to Eastern Armenian is already underway. Although a shift in speech is taking place, returnees were unable to use the Armenian spelling system (orthography) found in Armenia.

Western Armenian differs from Eastern Armenian not only in phonetic realisation (pronunciation) and lexicon (vocabulary) but also in orthography (spelling),<sup>24</sup> an element of difference newer returnees are less inclined to accept. Returnees continued to use the traditional orthography used throughout large parts of the diaspora when writing in Armenia, claiming there to be a big difference between being able to *speak* Eastern Armenian and being able to *write* in Eastern Armenian. It was, however, acknowledged by several returnees that their written communication at work was mostly in English, given the international companies and global audience with whom they interacted. In addition to the difficulty with writing using the reformed orthography, several returnees appeared reluctant to switch to using the reformed orthography, citing historical injustices by the Soviet authorities when changing Armenian spelling. This meant quite a few returnees were determined not to relinquish their usage of traditional Armenian spelling in place of a Soviet-imposed spelling

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<sup>24</sup> With the exception of the Armenians of Iran, Eastern Armenian speakers use a reformed version of the Armenian alphabet implemented in 1922 by Soviet authorities and rejected by the Armenian diaspora.

system. However, regardless of the insistence to maintain traditional orthography, a few of the longer-term returnees had adopted the usage of reformed orthography when writing in Western Armenian. This choice to write Western Armenian sentences that differ in verb construction but use the reformed orthography of Armenia is a phenomenon not heard of in Armenia, or, as yet, in the diaspora, and one that shows just how flexible returnees can be in negotiating their past identity. This mix has created a hybrid use for the Armenian language, one that displays the transnational nature of the returning Armenian.

The negotiation returnees are willing to have in relation to their past identity is evident when using the Armenian language; however, the historical element of their past identity is perceived as an inseparable part of their identity and a great source of pride.

### **6.3. Western Armenian Historical Identity**

For returnees, their Armenian identity originates from what is today known to the Armenian people as the territory of Western Armenia. Western Armenia is commonly understood by the returnees as territories west of the Republic of Armenia that had been inhabited by the Armenian people before the Armenian Genocide.

The symbolic importance of Western Armenia was not lost on the returnees, many of whom acknowledged its historical significance as the birthplace of various Armenian kingdoms and the lands in which Armenians were indigenous. Returnees are proud of the ancient Armenian culture that was native to those lands and its contemporary importance to the Armenian people, despite their absence from the territory. The most cited place in Western Armenia was the Kingdom of Cilicia, a principality further west of the territory considered to be Western Armenia, yet classified as part of the Western Armenia grouping. The popularity of the region of Cilicia is due to the majority of returnees, notably those from the Middle East, being able to trace their roots to the region. The significance the territories of Western Armenia and



Cilicia have on contemporary Armenian identity is, however, a point of dispute between returnees from the Middle East and those from the west.

Returnees originating from and having been raised in western countries, including Australia, Canada, Europe and the United States, emphasised an abstract understanding of Western Armenia. Most had, in fact, never visited the cities and towns from which their ancestors had originated. Their unfamiliarity with how society lived in the towns and villages of their ancestors, led to a disconnect with the territory of Western Armenia. The returnees' unfamiliarity with society in Western Armenia is due to a century of absence from their ancestral lands as well as the cosmopolitanism they exhibit as Armenians from western nations possessing hybrid identities. This disconnect has transformed Western Armenia from a tangible land to a historical concept, much to the irritation of past generations who had sought to instil its importance through education and stories. Western Armenia had become a historical imaginative concept for many returnees, who, despite their insistence in identifying with the villages, towns and cities from which their ancestors originated, admitted to not understanding what it meant to 'identify' with those places. Returnees acknowledged that they had not visited the villages and towns in Western Armenia, which in turn meant they were unable to truly understand its importance until their 'feet touch the ground there'.

When someone asks me where my roots are from, I say "I am a *Kharpert(tsi)*<sup>25</sup> and *Mersin(tsi)*" without really knowing what it means. (Krikor, USA)

Krikor admits his identification with the cities of Kharpert (present-day Elazig) and Mersin is symbolic, believing the bond is due to his time in school when he was told of their importance (a reminder that Krikor attended a full-time Armenian community school in the United

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<sup>25</sup> The Armenian suffix *ts<sup>hi</sup>* denotes a geographical provenance, which in this example is used to describe the individual originating from the city of Kharpert.

States). However, one returnee had travelled to his ancestral village and experienced a transformation in his understanding of and identification with his ancestors' town of origin.

Raphael, a returnee from Canada, had only a year earlier visited his ancestral town, which helped him understand how his ancestors may have lived over 100 years ago. He describes his experience as having 'really helped me to understand the way we behave now'. This statement demonstrates Raphael's realisation why generations of Armenians continue to emphasise the tragedy that was the exile of Armenians from their native cities and villages. Raphael's visit to a village in present-day Turkey provided tangible evidence of the 'cultural and knowledge inheritance' that had been lost following the genocide. His position on Western Armenia had changed since visiting his ancestral village, from one of unfamiliarity and symbolic importance to an insistence on having some form of property and territory returned.

In addition to the abstract notion of Western Armenia for many western-born returnees, several emphasised the demographic realities of the territory. One can only assume that the liberal values and democratic representation with which these returnees were raised, which is in contrast to the countries from which other returnees originate, influenced their claims to Western Armenia. Many western-born returnees argued that the future of Western Armenia is one that centres on a Kurdish reality. Pasian from Argentina questioned:

If the lands are given back, what are we going to do with those regions and the Kurds or Turks that live there now? Are we going to kick them out? And if we don't kick them out and the region becomes part of Armenia, the number of Kurds and Turks will exceed the Armenians. (Pasian, Argentina)

A similar sentiment was expressed by Aren from the United States, who described Western Armenia as synonymous with the term 'Kurdish Independence'. He posed an argument that:

the possibility that 20 million Kurds are claiming their independent land on ancestral Armenian lands is the best thing that could happen to the Armenians, as we (Armenians) will be able to access those territories freely. (Aren, USA)

The reason for Aren's support towards the Kurdish people was less to do with the rights of the Kurdish people, and more to do with a sort of 'best possibility' for the Armenian people. The reality is that most (Armenian) diasporans, particularly in the west, would not return to live in the ancestral land, given their hybrid and at times cosmopolitan identities (Panossian, 2002).

In contrast to the symbolism and disconnect felt towards Western Armenia by western-born returnees, Middle-Eastern born returnees emphasised the ongoing struggle to reclaim parts of Western Armenia. Reclaiming lost lands was more of a plausible reality for returnees born in the Middle East, less concerned with demographic numbers in the territory. It can be argued that Middle-Eastern born returnees are more aware of the changes than can conspire throughout the region, as opposed to their compatriots from the western world who would have been raised in an environment of social and political stability. Tina from Israel explains that 'reaching Armenia was a difficult task', however 'Western Armenia is more of a dream, as we need to continue the struggle to claim it'. Nuné from Lebanon echoed Tina's sentiments as she emphasised the importance of Western Armenia by stating that 'the real *hayrenatartsutyun* (return migration) is going to be when we return to Western Armenia and not the physical Armenia we are in now'. History has shown that territorial and political change throughout the region, or anywhere for that matter, is inevitable. Most countries throughout the region were once part of a larger empire, some did not previously exist, and others came under colonial rule for decades or centuries. These changes in borders, maps and countries are most noticeable to Middle-Eastern born returnees whose families have experienced life during colonisation and occupation, and following decolonisation and independence. Hrant's comment reflects the perspective of Middle-Eastern born returnees: 'I

believe maps change every 50 years and if we choose the right path we can reach our objective’.

Middle-Eastern born returnees also expressed a more complex understanding of their ancestral villages and cities. An awareness of their ancestral points of origin was evident as they listed the names of the villages and cities, including Cilicia, Kars, Kharpert, Musa Ler, Mush, Sasoun, Sis, Urfa, Van, Zeytoun, etc. A sense of pride was displayed when explaining the character traits associated with each region and how descendants can still exhibit these peculiarities. Notable examples were the descriptions of Armenians from Dikranagerd (present-day Diyarbakir) as very proud of their dialect; people from Kilis as people who made tasty food, people from Marash (Kahramanmaras) who love speaking Turkish, and people from Antep (Gaziantep) who are ‘stingy’ and frugal with their money. Such generalisations about an individual’s character are made with pride as opposed to ridicule, characterisations of past communities unknown to younger generations of diasporans throughout the west.

There exists a sharp contrast in significance of the territory of Western Armenia between returnees born in the west and those born throughout the Middle East. Returnees born in the west emphasise a symbolic understanding of Western Armenia and a superficial attachment to the towns of their ancestors. Returnees from the Middle East reiterate the struggle to reclaim lost lands and maintain a link to the ancestral identity by preserving behaviours and character traits associated with their ancestors. Group identification with ancestral towns and regions is found to be more common within the Armenian communities of the Middle East, as survivors of the genocide chose to settle in areas of cities they had found shelter in surrounded by others from their place of origin. Furthermore, cultural organisations were frequently created based on ancestral towns and villages that descendants would join to share experiences, and as such the traditions and character traits were to some degree able to be maintained. The contrast in symbolic and real attachment to Western Armenia shows the tendency for those who

symbolically identify to be more inclined to negotiate their past identity and accept the narrative of the homeland.

#### 6.4. Conclusion

The relative isolation felt by the Armenians of the diaspora from events in the homeland during seven decades of what was popularly believed to be a Soviet occupation, exacerbated differences in identity of the two groups. For diasporans, as descendants of genocide survivors, their ‘Armenianness’ was unequivocally linked to their Western-Armenian identity. For some this meant a link to the Western-Armenian language, and for others an identification with the Western-Armenian culture. Over time, this association with a Western-Armenian identity transformed to a diasporan identity of dispersal, nostalgia for a lost land, and a more neutral Armenian identity based around the community. The President of the Armenian General Benevolent Union, during an interview in 2013, described how 30–40 years ago there used to be one diaspora, those who survived the genocide, within which there existed a link—a nostalgia for an old country—as Armenia was practically closed.<sup>26</sup> Whether through language, memory or a commonality in identity, diasporans had throughout those 70 years developed the ability to re-create Armenian identity in the diaspora, a *mainly* Western-Armenian identity.<sup>27</sup> Armenia’s independence created not only an opportunity for the diaspora and homeland to interact, but also the realisation that two distinct narratives of Armenian identity had been firmly rooted: one in the homeland and the other in the diaspora.

Many returnees, years after settling in Armenia, remain uncomfortable with their linguistic convergence to Eastern Armenian, believing it to be an abandonment of their Western-

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<sup>26</sup> The interview with President of the Armenian General Benevolent Union, Berge Setrakian, can be viewed on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/KKSwgSuzjZg>.

<sup>27</sup> Eastern-Armenian speakers originally from Iran and Armenia had also emigrated to existing diaspora communities, predominantly in the United States, Australia and Canada.

Armenian roots and their ancestors' memory. However, some take comfort in knowing that the language continues to be used in their homes and amongst friends and family. A negotiation of their past Armenian identity is, however, limited to the linguistic realm, as returnees continue to associate with a Western-Armenian and diasporan identity, due to their memories of life in the diaspora. However, this does not mean returnees will continue to identify as diasporans, with longer-term returnees displaying a willingness to identify as both a diasporan and a local, uncertain of where in the diaspora-local nexus they belong. One returnee suggested the creation of a new identity, a *Spyurkahayastantsi*, a combination of the words *diaspora* and *an Armenian from Armenia*.

Despite the majority of returnees claiming a shift to the Eastern-Armenian language during their interactions with locals and a gradual shift away from the diasporan identity, all returnees continued to identify with their ancestral towns and villages of Western Armenia, whether superficially or as an important element of their identity.

Identity negotiation in the homeland remains problematic, as returnees are unwilling to create conflict with locals that may jeopardise their process of integration and acceptance. Negotiation in terms of identity is evidently in the hands of homeland society, as those who control power over discourse. As such, belonging to Armenia means identifying with the dominant linguistic vernacular of the majority of society and developing a shared sense of memory of time in Armenia that comes with having lived in the country, which increases in importance for returnees as each year passes by. In time, returnees reprioritise the importance of their Western Armenian, diasporan, and hybrid identities for the opportunity to fulfil the diasporan dream of return and accomplish what their ancestors couldn't: the opportunity to live in what remains of Armenia, *Hayastan*.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Hayastan*, the term for Armenia (the country) in Armenian, meaning the land of the *Hay* (the Armenian).

## Chapter Seven: Perceptions of ‘Other’ Language Use in Armenia

The contemporary Armenian state has experienced several challenges to its dominant language, Eastern Armenian, over the past century. The forced introduction of Russian as a mandatory language of education in the 1930s, ongoing debates relating to the pluricentricity of the modern Armenian language, and most recently, the growth in popularity of the English language, have all at different times over the past century altered linguistic discourse.

The territory on which the contemporary Armenian state rests witnessed a demographic ‘reconstruction’ at the beginning of the 20th century. The collapse of the Russian Empire and the establishment of an independent Armenian state in 1918 paved the way for the officialisation of the Armenian language.<sup>29</sup> Within less than two years, the fledgling Republic was begrudgingly ceded by the government in power to the Bolshevik Red Army and transformed to a socialist and then a Soviet Republic. The official status of the Armenian language was maintained throughout the life of the Soviet Republic. However, in 1938 the population of Armenia was introduced to what would be one of many Russification policies, as the Russian language was declared mandatory in education, a decree that would henceforth guarantee the official status of the Russian language within Soviet Armenia. Following 70 years of Soviet rule, Armenia declared independence in 1991, and the Republic of Armenia was reborn. The third republic proclaimed Armenian as the only official language, thereby abandoning the official status of the Russian language. During the life of all three Armenian republics over the past century,<sup>30</sup> Armenian remained the official language, with the exception of Russian, which was also an official language during much of the Soviet period.

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<sup>29</sup> See Richard G. Hovannisian’s book, *The Republic of Armenia: The first year, 1918–1919*, for more information on the development of Statehood and language officialisation.

<sup>30</sup> The three Armenian Republics were: Democratic Republic of Armenia (1918–1920); Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (1921–1991); Republic of Armenia (1991–present).

Although Armenian maintained its official status during all three Armenian republics, the language is unofficially regarded as *Eastern* Armenian. The unofficial, *yet* compulsory status of Eastern Armenian is reflected in all state run institutions and the mindset of the everyday citizen. On the other hand, Western Armenian as the other branch of the modern Armenian language holds no official status and is perceived as the language of the diaspora.

This chapter analyses the perception of returnees towards the use of three languages in the homeland. The three languages, Western Armenian, Russian and English are discussed as participant responses reveal these three languages to be the most commonly spoken and noticed throughout Armenia, with the exception of Eastern Armenian. Returnee perceptions on the usage of Eastern Armenian are not included, given it is the dominant language and the variety of Armenian used by the majority of society in Armenia. It is also important to acknowledge that the territory on which the contemporary Armenian state rests has historically been home to various other language communities, including the Assyrian, Greek, Jewish, Kurdish, Persian, Russian, Turkic/Azeri and Yezidi communities, some of whom continue to thrive within contemporary Armenian society.

The responses of returnees reflected their perceptions of the language's place and future in Armenia, as well as their opinions on how society in Armenia perceives the use and learning of the language. The benefit of returnees' perceptions and its usefulness in hypothesising the survival of a language within society cannot be underestimated. Returnees, as newcomers, are at the *front line* when noticing societal reactions and conflict in the usage of a particular language. Returnees are best able to explain societal reactions towards their usage of Western Armenian, and societal habits in the usage of Russian and English languages, due to their inability to understand Russian (all but one returnee) and their fluency (for most) in English. In contrast to locals in Armenia, returnees are better able to notice code-switching between Armenian and Russian as well as the usage of English language. The chapter answers the



question: can returnee and societal perceptions of a language be used as a means of predicting its survival?

In order to appreciate the sociolinguistic challenges faced by returnees and societal perceptions of the various languages, a brief historical overview of the Armenian language and the linguistic history of the territory of the Armenian state over the past century are necessary.

### *The Armenian language: A brief overview*

The standardisation of the *Modern Armenian* language can be placed from the 18th century onwards, following *Classical Armenian* (5th–12th century) and *Middle Armenian* (12th–early 18th century). The two branches of the Modern Armenian language, Eastern and Western, present a story of competing empires and the linguistic division of their respective Armenian communities. The origins of Modern Armenian stem from two dialectical branches of Armenian (Clyne, 1992), one in Constantinople and the other in Yerevan/Tbilisi, each acting as the basis of one of the two standardised languages in the 18th and 19th centuries respectively (Dum-Tragut, 2009, p. 1). Western Armenian, standardised based on the dialect of Constantinople, was spread throughout the communities of the Ottoman Empire; Eastern Armenian, on the other hand, became standardised based on the dialect of the Ararat plain<sup>31</sup> and was used by the Armenians of the Russian and Persian Empires. The spread of literature in one of the two standardised forms of modern Armenian and the absence of interaction between the communities or their respective literature, further divided the Armenian people.

The marked diatopy of Modern Armenian was exaggerated with the division of two groups of Armenians: a post-genocide diaspora that predominantly spoke Western Armenian, and the

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<sup>31</sup> The Ararat plain stretches from the Sevan basin, at the foothills of the Geghama Mountains, with its borders constituting Mount Aragats in the north and Mount Ararat in the south. The majority of the plain is located within the territory of the present-day Republic of Armenia.

Armenians of the homeland (Soviet Armenia) who used Eastern Armenian as the official language of the state. Throughout most of the 20th century, the homeland and diaspora relationship was described as an Eastern- and Western-Armenian relationship, in which Western Armenian would act as the medium of communication amongst communities in the Middle East, Europe, and other parts of the diaspora (with the exception of Iran), and Eastern Armenian as the medium used by Armenians of the USSR (Clyne, 1992).

*The Linguistic Realities of the Contemporary Armenian State (1918 onwards)*

The declaration of an independent Armenian state on 28 May 1918 provided an opportunity to declare the Armenian language an official state language. The geopolitical and linguistic realities of the region meant Modern *Eastern* Armenian would be the variant used in state apparatus, given much of the territory of the newly created state, and particularly the capital Yerevan, spoke the Araratian dialect, which is the specific dialect chosen as the basis for the standardisation of written modern Eastern Armenian (Dum-Tragut, 2009, p. 3).

During the first decade following Sovietisation, the Armenian language maintained its status as the official language due to a process of nativisation (*Korenizatsiya*) by Soviet authorities. The process of nativisation saw the transformation of administrative and economic institutions in their usage of the Armenian language, a period when Armenia was made more Armenian and Armenians became more aware of their history, culture, and language (Suny, 1993). The Armenian language became the official language of the courts, government institutions and schools (Suny, 1993, p. 146); this officialisation process meant that the thousands of refugees arriving in caravans in the 1920s from Greece, France, and elsewhere and spoke Western Armenian (Suny, 1993) soon after arriving adopted Eastern Armenian.

The period of nativisation also included orthographic reforms to various languages throughout the Soviet Union, including the Armenian language. Reforms resulted in the altering of the

1,500-year-old spelling system of the Armenian language. Linguist Jasmine Dum-Tragut (2009, p. 5) describes the consequence of the Soviet orthography reform as having ‘disunited the written Modern Eastern Armenian from the Modern Western Armenian by abandoning historical writing’. As Armenians throughout the Soviet Union were taught the rules of reformed spelling, the Armenians of the diaspora rejected the changes and continued to use the traditional form. The gap created between reformed and traditional orthography of the Armenian spelling system continues to remain an obstacle between the homeland and large segments of the diasporan communities that provide education using traditional Armenian orthography (Cowe, 1992).

Within the Soviet Union, the development of native languages intensified until the 1930s, when Russian was declared the most progressive language of the Soviet Union and its teaching was made compulsory (Suny, 1993). The Russian language was forcibly taught to minorities, thus making the language compulsory for all children throughout the Union. Soon after, the Russian language was accepted as the second language of the majority of the population of Armenia.

During the 1940s, Soviet Armenia witnessed one of the first significant challenges to its dominant linguistic and cultural narrative, as thousands of Western-Armenian speaking diasporans repatriated to the Soviet homeland. The 1946–1948 period, known as *nerkaght*’ (in-gathering), saw the arrival of tens of thousands of diasporans in Soviet Armenia, persuaded by Soviet propaganda. The newcomers encountered a hostile environment in which their variant of Armenian was discredited and demonised, and their lack of knowledge of Russian labelled them ‘illiterate’. During this time, Western Armenian was labelled a part of the ‘reactionary culture’ of the west and the antithesis of the modern Armenian language (Lehmann, 2012, p. 199). In 1951, the Soviet Armenian propaganda secretary went as far as to dismiss the inclusion of Western Armenian as part of the modern Armenian language and

deny its existence in the Armenian regions of Anatolia (Matossian, 1955). Authorities continued to emphasise the teaching, learning and adoption of Eastern Armenian and Russian for those wishing to become the idealised Soviet citizen, seeking not to have the Armenian language tarnished by the ‘dialect of Constantinople’ (Lehmann, 2012, p. 199). Western-Armenian speaking repatriates were settling in a country that had only a decade earlier undergone extreme policies of Russification, and had only recently experienced the massive loss of human life as a result of World War II. The Russification policies of the Stalinist era, which attempted to make Russians out of non-Russians (Taranenko, 2007), eventually softened and followed, once again, a period of ‘re-nationalisation’ (Pavlenko, 2013). Re-nationalisation reasserted the importance of the native languages, but from that point forward placed native languages as secondary to the lingua franca of the Soviet Union, which was the Russian language. The prestige and ‘valorisation’ of the Russian language (Pavlenko, 2013) prevailed during the remaining years of the Soviet era and following independence for many of the now-independent nations. The reasons behind the continued prestige of the Russian language by generations not raised during the Soviet era is said to be due to the economic superiority of the Russian Federation in the late 1990s; a rise in employment opportunities within Russia; and the increasing number of migrants settling in the Russian Federation whose financial remittances families relied on, thus prompting the migrants, their families and potential future workers in maintaining their fluency in the Russian language (Pavlenko, 2013).

### **7.1. The Western-Armenian Language**

Article 20 of the Armenian Constitution states the official language of the Republic of Armenia to be *Armenian*; however, past actions, or rather inactions, have put into question the State’s willingness to accept the Western Armenian language as part of the nation’s language register. As such, the status of the Western-Armenian language within the Republic of

Armenia remains ambiguous, even under the protection of Article 15(2) of the Armenian Constitution, which guarantees that ‘*the Armenian language and cultural heritage shall be under the care and protection of the State*’. Numerous language conferences, teaching programmes both in secondary schools and universities, and empty promises by politicians have been witnessed since the nation’s independence; however a detailed understanding of the language, its history and existence, remains relatively unknown by the majority of the population. When hearing Western Armenian, returnees’ said that locals would either comment on the language’s ‘musical’ melody and its ‘beauty’, stare bewildered at the speaker, or have trouble understanding the speaker. Despite the comments of support comments made by some locals when hearing the returnee speak Western Armenian, it is believed that Western Armenian is largely perceived as a language of the past, the language of the diaspora, and one of historical significance rather than of contemporary importance.

Homeland society was generally found to treat Western Armenian as a language external to *contemporary* Armenian linguistic discourse, as it was unaccustomed to hearing the language. For those aware of the language and its existence, their perceptions were generally one of *support and encouragement*, fascinated by what was described as ‘a beautiful language’, and consciously troubled by the regrettable situation the language finds itself in globally. However, the most common reaction when hearing Western Armenian was *confusion and misunderstanding*, as locals were unable to understand the Western-Armenian lexicon and the phonetic realisation of various letters. Misunderstanding led to *rejection* of the unfamiliar. Misunderstanding and reactions of rejection and negativity have put into doubt the possibility of having Western Armenian included as a part of Armenia’s multilingual discourse for generations to come, in spite of the nation’s constitutional responsibility to protect the Armenian language.

### 7.1.1. Support and Encouragement

Returnees' responses showed that society perceives Western Armenian through a mystic lens, as a language of beauty and purity, with a melodic sound that had remained absent to the ears of those who had grown up hearing the language spoken by their elders. Its usage of traditional Armenian words in place of contemporary international words struck an emotional chord for *some* locals who believe the Armenian language has become inundated with foreign loan words. Such cryptic descriptions of Western Armenian as an otherworldly language are arguable due to the language's usage of very traditional Armenian words. The language, much like the memories of its older generation of speakers, can be thought of as having remained frozen in time. Its terminology remained unaffected by the russification policies of the Soviet era, and its usage in traditional communities of the diaspora remained strictly guarded by older generations unwilling to allow for the absorption of foreign words, despite its continued usage of historical Turkish and Arabic loan words.

A young Syrian-born returnee, Arsen, explains how locals will at times comment on his usage of Western Armenian vocabulary by responding, 'what beautiful Armenian words you use, we need to use those words rather than foreign words'. Pasian, an Argentinian-born returnee, believes that locals perceive these words to be both the 'correct' and 'pure' form of Armenian. A worthwhile comparison can be made with the usage of old French words in the province of Quebec (Canada) compared to the terminology used in Metropolitan France: words such as *breuvage* (a drink) or *cour* (backyard) rather than *boisson* or *jardin* used in France. Both words originate from old French, but continue to be used within Quebec. Participants mentioned numerous examples of Western-Armenian words that are perceived as 'old fashioned' by locals, such as the word *inqnasharzh* to mean 'automobile,' as opposed to the Eastern-Armenian word *avtomeqena*. The Western-Armenian word is a verbatim translation of the words 'auto' (*inqna*) and 'movement' (*sharzh*). However, the so-called

‘purity’ of the returnees’ Armenian speech has less to do with the returnees’ knowledge of Armenian terminology than their awareness that the locals may not understand the foreign words they have become accustomed to using in the diaspora.

Irrespective of the returnees’ reasons for using Armenian terminology in place of a foreign word, locals were commonly said to be surprised by the returnees’ usage of Armenian words in place of ‘international’ loan words. Examples provided by returnees, include:

**Information:** The English word ‘information’ is translated in Armenian as *deghegut’iwn* (western) and *tegekowt’yown* (eastern). The same word is used with a difference in pronunciation. However, society in Armenia will commonly make use of the word *informacia*.

**Corruption:** The English word ‘corruption’ is translated in Armenian as *gasharagerut’yun* (western) and *kašarakerowt’yown* (eastern). The same word is used with a difference in pronunciation. However, society in Armenia will commonly make use of the word *kořowpc’ian*, as the word *kašarakerowt’yown* made up of the word *kašark’* (bribe) denotes one form of corruption, bribery.

The usage of ‘international’ words has become popular in Armenia; however, the terms originate not so much from the ‘international’ but rather the Russian equivalent, *информация* (informaciâ) and *коррупция* (korrupciâ) respectively.

The returnees’ usage of the original Armenian vocabulary was found to be a novel concept, a language that reminded one local university student of an Armenian revolutionary, left-wing nationalist militant and commander, Monté Melkonian, who was born in the United States and fought and died in the Nagorno-Karabakh war. The perception of the language as a diasporan language is common; however, its presence in Armenia has become remarkably more evident with the arrival of thousands of Syrian-Armenians due to whom the language

can be heard in pockets throughout the capital, Yerevan. Despite the signs of encouragement and positivity, returnees made no mention of the language as a part of contemporary Armenian discourse but rather continuously referred to it through a historical context.

The so-called ‘purity’ of the Western-Armenian language is due to the returnees’ usage of Armenian words in the absence of any knowledge of the local equivalent, their refusal to use the Russian equivalent, and the local’s unfamiliarity of the word in the language of the returnee’s country of origin. Western Armenian has over the past century transformed to include various words from each community’s host-country, such as English, French, Spanish, and Arabic words, dependent on the community. The language also continues to make use of Turkish words, which, although considerably less frequent compared to a century earlier, has been transmitted to younger generations. As such, the usage of uniquely Armenian words by returnees is more to do with their unfamiliarity with the local equivalent coupled with homeland society’s unfamiliarity with terminology used in the diaspora.

### **7.1.2. Confusion and Misunderstanding**

The difficulty many Eastern-Armenian speakers face when hearing Western Armenian is the misunderstanding that arises due to its contrasting use of vocabulary and pronunciation. This misunderstanding is no surprise for returnees who are somewhat familiar with the historical challenges faced by Western-Armenian speakers during the Soviet era. As discussed in the historical outline at the beginning of the chapter, society in Armenia is largely unaccustomed to hearing other forms of spoken Armenian, apart from the standardised Eastern Armenian taught in Armenia, with the exception of dialects spoken throughout the country.

The differences in pronunciation of particular letters of the *Aypenaran* (alphabet) such as the letters Բ (pronounced ‘b’ in eastern and ‘p<sup>h</sup>’ in western), Գ (pronounced ‘g’ in Eastern and ‘k<sup>h</sup>’ in western), and Դ (‘d’ in eastern and ‘t<sup>h</sup>’ in Western); and the absence of differentiation



in the Western-Armenian pronunciation of the letters Չ (tʃ<sup>h</sup>) and Ջ (tʃ<sup>h</sup>); and Յ (ts<sup>h</sup>) and Ձ (ts), pronounced distinctly in Eastern Armenian as Չ (tʃ<sup>h</sup>) and Ջ (dʒ); and Յ (ts<sup>h</sup>) and Ձ (dz), creates confusion for Eastern-Armenian speakers. Some examples of commonly used words are shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Commonly used words in Western Armenian

Western Armenian (WA) pronunciation	Interpretation of word	Eastern Armenian Pronunciation
chur	water	jowr
kuyn	colour	gowyn
tsug	fish	jowk

In addition to pronunciation differences, returnees spoke of the difficulty local Eastern-Armenian speakers have in understanding Western-Armenian vocabulary. The differing meanings of particular commonly used words have led to occasions of misunderstanding during interactions between Eastern- and Western-Armenian speakers. The examples provided by returnees in fact present an insight into the Western-Armenian language's place in Armenia. If Western Armenian is to have a place in Armenia, the majority of society in Armenia needs to understand the language. Some terms that cause confusion with Eastern-Armenian speakers appear in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2: Terminology in Western Armenian

Western Armenian (WA)	Interpretation of word in WA	Interpretation of WA word in Eastern Armenian
kednakhtsor	potato	gooseberry
shinel (verb)	to make	to build
gokhel (verb)	to press	'plunge' and colloquial word for 'sexual intercourse'
dzayr	the edge	the end
kaghut	community	colony

The word *kaghut* ‘ continues to be used (simultaneously with the word *hamaynk* ‘) by Western-Armenian speakers to denote ‘community’, for example, the Australian-Armenian community would be the Australian-Armenian *kaghut* ‘. However, the term *kaghut* ‘ in Western Armenian also means ‘colony’, stemming from the word *kaght* ‘ (migration), and was originally used to define communities that had migrated out of the homeland (pre- and post-genocide). However, its usage as a term to identify the original post-genocide communities and the Armenian communities that were established from the 17th to 20th centuries, continues to be used by Western-Armenian speakers to this very day. These differences in definition and pronunciation are but some examples of differences between the Eastern- and Western-Armenian languages. However, a lack of acceptance of these differences puts into question the possibility of having the Western-Armenian language as a part of the nation’s linguistic discourse. To support this position, returnee descriptions of negativity and ridicule will be discussed to demonstrate the challenges facing the acceptance of Western Armenian within language discourse in the homeland.

### **7.1.3. Rejection**

Reactions of ridicule and amusement by locals when hearing Western Armenian were said to be embarrassing and unnecessary by returnees who felt hurt by the reaction of their ethnic kin. This form of behaviour was most commonly experienced by younger returnees who generally mixed with people of the same age, as mature-aged returnees were not able to recount such experiences. Krikor, a young American-Armenian returnee, describes the reaction of his work colleagues when he spoke Western Armenian:

They will make fun of the Western Armenian sounds, telling me that I am not pronouncing the letters Յ (ts<sup>h</sup>) and Չ (ts) properly. I always try and explain to people that the same phonetics doesn’t exist in Western Armenian, but they can’t understand it. They would just laugh. (Krikor, USA)

Returnees were found to generally dismiss harmful behaviour by locals rather than confront it. The need to feel a part of greater Armenian society led to returnees language-switching as a means of avoiding derogatory treatment by locals. Language-switching is when Western Armenian is replaced with Eastern Armenian. The decision to switch from Western to Eastern Armenian was not only common amongst returnees who felt a less-than-favourable reaction towards their Western Armenian, but by longer-term returnees who had resided in Armenia for over 10 years. There was, in fact, concern amongst the returnees about just how many Western Armenians had switched to using Eastern Armenian throughout their daily interactions. One returnee from Lebanon explained that the overuse of Eastern Armenian by those returnees has led to the permanent transformation of their pronunciation of Armenian letters, even when speaking Western Armenian. The process of language-switching and the permanence of Eastern Armenian pronunciation has resulted in returnees believing there to be little to no chance of the Western-Armenian language surviving in the homeland if the speakers themselves have switched to Eastern Armenian. However, switching to Eastern Armenian was more preferable than having to deal with the occasional giggle or mockery by colleagues, friends, restaurateurs and people encountered during daily interactions.

The reaction of laughter was always followed with a statement of reassurance by returnees that the laughter was not a 'loud one' but a 'soft giggle'. This statement can be interpreted as the locals' technique of not offending or insulting the returnee but rather their way of saying how humorous they found the pronunciation. Regardless of the intention of the locals, returnees interpreted the softest of giggles as a sign of annoyance and ridicule.

Other returnees met negativity when speaking Western Armenian, as some locals were keen to assert what they believed to be the linguistic identity of an Armenian in Armenia (*Hayasdants'i*), which was one who spoke Eastern Armenian. Mardiros, a returnee from Australia, was told that his spoken Armenian (Western Armenian) was in contrast to his

behaviour, as his social circle believed him to have integrated to the cultural behaviour of a local Armenian. Mardiros explains:

Someone once said to me that Western Armenian doesn't suit me, I am too much of a *Hayasdants 'i'*. (Mardiros, Australia)

More uncommon were statements made towards returnees such as, 'Western Armenian isn't the correct form of Armenian and the real Armenian is Eastern Armenian' (Souren, Syria). However, returnees acted with great resilience, claiming such statements to be made by individuals who just did not understand the differences between the languages, or the existence of the Western-Armenian language. Unfamiliarity with the vocabulary and pronunciation of the Western-Armenian language was, however, not confined to the so-called 'uneducated class' but surprisingly also in the Armenian Studies department of the State University. Harout, who studied Armenian language and history at one of the leading universities in the country, explains:

In Armenia people will usually not understand what I am saying when I speak Western Armenian, and I'm not just talking about taxi drivers but also university professors. My field of study is Armenology so to some extent my professors have to be familiar with Western Armenian, but when I talk to them some will understand only parts of what I am saying and some won't understand at all, so there's no point speaking to them in Western Armenian. They don't even want to remember two simple words [in Western Armenian] like *hos* (here) or *aghvor* (nice). (Harout, Lebanon)

Overall, returnees felt the Western-Armenian language had a limited future in the homeland due to the increasing number of returnees switching to Eastern Armenian, the unfavourable reactions met by some locals, and the general unfamiliarity of the language and its vocabulary by Armenians in the homeland. In contrast to the unfamiliarity of Western Armenian, the Russian language has held, and continues to hold, significant influence within linguistic discourse in Armenia.

## 7.2. The Russian Language

Following Qajar Iran's loss in the Russo-Persian War of 1828, the Russian Empire expanded its territory to include the territory of Eastern Armenia (present-day Republic of Armenia), at which point the influence of the Persians was gradually replaced by the Russians. As early as the mid-19th century, Armenian intelligentsia had become highly russophile due to the flourishing state of Armenian culture under Russian rule (Suny, 1993). Following the sovietisation of Eastern Armenia and the 'nativisation' policies of the 1920s and early 1930s, Armenia underwent a period of Russification. The Russification policies of the Stalinist era cemented Russian as a *lingua franca* of the region and Armenia (Adjarian, 1951). The usage of Russian terminology was intensified during this period and affected not only the professional sphere but everyday life. Famous Armenian linguist Hrachia Adjarian (1876–1953) wrote:

[the contact] with the more civilized and educated Russian people, as well as with its advanced elements, with Russian literature, Russian press, Russian school and Russian theater...shook off the dust of antiquity [from the Armenian language, which] assimilated new and free ideas that penetrated into its life, literature and language. (Adjarian, 1951, p.445)

The rapid evolution of terminology not only affected the fields of chemistry, medicine, mechanics and politics, but also the linguistic terminology of cooking and everyday language (Adjarian, 1951). Following Armenia's independence in 1991, the Russian language was 'de-officialised' and declared a minority language in Armenia, despite which it continues to hold a modest presence in the country (Mkhoyan, 2017).

The presence of the Russian language in Armenian media and speech, and Russian text in Armenian shops, remains evident to returnees, who believe it to be unnecessary. The phenomenon of using Russian terminology in Armenian sentences is not easily noticeable for

locals of Armenia, most of whom are fluent in the Russian language; however, it remains starkly evident to returnees who generally have no knowledge of the language. However, Russian continues to hold significance within the linguistic discourse of a large portion of Armenia's inhabitants: after all, Russian was a predominant and mandatory language in all schools in the USSR, serving as a 'component of internal cohesion within the USSR' (Mkhoyan, 2017, p. 694). Yet, since the collapse of the USSR, the language no longer defines the cultural boundaries of the space. In Armenia, the language has no official status in contrast to other post-Soviet Republics such as Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in which Russian has official status. Nevertheless, the language continues to play an important role in Armenian society, a role that is recognised by many returnees.

The *historical significance* of the Russian language within the territory of present-day Armenia was acknowledged by returnees. The Russian language within the territory of Eastern Armenia was said to be as a result of Russian imperialism and colonisation, which left behind a legacy of admiration of the Russian language by generations of Armenians. Although the majority of returnees believe the Russian language has no place in Armenia, their stance is more in relation to any preferential treatment of the language. In fact, many returnees understood the historical significance of the Russian language on Armenian society in Eastern Armenia.

The influence doesn't annoy me a lot because if you look into history, you will notice that both the borders of historic Eastern Armenia and today's Armenia were under Russian imperial rule for a long time, so this influence is a natural thing.  
(Arsen, Syria)

However strong the historical influence of the Russian language has been on Armenian society in the homeland, its colonial legacy was not forgotten by returnees, many of whom acknowledge the dangers that exist with allowing the Russian language to grow in influence.

One participant commented, ‘I don’t want Eastern Armenian to face the same danger [as Western Armenian]...which faced genocide and lost its culture and legacy. (Krikor, USA).

Returnees did, however, acknowledge the advantages of learning Russian and for society in the homeland to continue to be taught Russian as a second language. Such advantages were said to be due to Armenia’s membership in the ‘Russian-led’ Eurasian Union and its ongoing economic, military and strategic relationship with the Russian Federation. Russian was perceived as beneficial in acknowledging Russia’s importance in the region, as ‘our largest neighbour in the region’ and for these reasons, Armenia continues to ‘need Russian speakers for diplomatic and economic purposes’ (Arakel, USA). Knowledge of the Russian language was said to ‘keep Armenia in the game, on the international board’ (Tamar, USA), as Armenians were able to use their knowledge of a larger language when dealing with neighbours and trading partners.

Knowledge of Russian was also perceived as beneficial to Armenian society given the large number of Russian tourists visiting Armenia. The National Statistical Service of the Republic of Armenia found tourists from Russia to constitute 22% of tourists in Armenia (CivilNet, 2017). The need to cater for tourists in Armenia is vital for a country in which tourism brings in over \$383 million a year, makes up 3.8% of the country’s GDP, and creates over 40,000 jobs. For these reasons, the Russian language stands out as advantageous. Arsen from Syria confirms this perspective: ‘Russian will always have a place in Armenia as a second or third language, as a means of improving tourism; however, the same could be said about Persian’ (Arsen, Syria). Persian (Farsi) has for much the same reason also increased in popularity, as smaller numbers of youth have begun to learn Farsi, a language spoken by Armenia’s largest tourist group, the Iranians (CivilNet, 2017). For historical and economic (business and service-related) reasons, the Russian language remains advantageous and the perception of the

language continues to remain largely forward-looking for a people (returnees) unaccustomed to the Russian influence felt by the homeland during the Soviet era.

Returnees said that many in the homeland continue to perceive the Russian language as *positive* and beneficial to their future. Russian-language schools, although limited in number, continue to be perceived *by some* as more prestigious. Souren, a university staff member, explains that students who receive a Russian education in Armenia are proud of their education in the Russian-language education system of Armenia. The prestige of the Russian language, evident in the older generation who view the language with a sense of ‘love,’ continues to persist through to younger generations due to the availability of Russian television programmes, songs, and music, all of which are said to be more ‘developed’ than their Armenian equivalent. Older generations were said to view the Russian language with great admiration, notably given their education during the Soviet era was so heavily influenced by the use of Russian texts. One Syrian-Armenian returnee, Abraham, from Syria, was shocked to hear a mature-aged colleague tell him, ‘it’s such a shame that you don’t know Russian. It’s such a beautiful language and I prefer it over Armenian’. Abraham was in disbelief, stating ‘I’ve never known a society to be so influenced and controlled by another culture’. This so-called ‘influence and control’ by the Russian language has flowed through to the ways in which certain Armenian words are pronounced. This form of pronunciation is more than an actual change in pronunciation, but more, a certain copying of the Russian pronunciation by TV show hosts and others evidently influenced by Russian ‘glitz and glamour’.

Despite the overwhelming admiration for the Russian language, as well as the positive and advantageous elements that knowledge of the Russian language has in Armenia, the vast majority of returnees described the influence of the Russian language as weak(ening). In 2012, an opinion poll found that 94% of Armenians have a knowledge of Russian, with 24%



having advanced knowledge, 59% intermediate knowledge and 11% having beginner knowledge (Digest, 2012). In 2010, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that 70% of Armenia's population has the ability to speak Russian (Russkiy Mir Foundation).<sup>32</sup> Stores with Russian language signs are, however, perceived by returnees as 'odd', since an increasing number of people in the country do not speak Russian. Similar sentiments towards the decline of the Russian language were expressed by Alla Berezovskaya, an affiliate of the Russian Mir Foundation, a Russian Government-sponsored organisation aimed at promoting the Russian language worldwide. Berezovskaya, who upon visiting Armenia stated, 'many citizens of Armenia recognise the need to be fluent in Russian' due to family members working in Russia, however explains that:

communicating freely in Russian in Armenia today is really only possible with the middle-age and older generations. Young people do not understand us, or speak in Russian with great difficulty, although they were nevertheless quite forthcoming and good-intentioned. (Russkiy Mir Foundation, 2012).

Berezovskaya's statement reflects a society eager to absorb elements of new cultures, as returnees were also able to notice the decline in use of Russian over the past decade since their arrival in Armenia. The younger generation's distance from the Russian sphere of influence may not be due to ill intentions but rather to the rapid influence of another foreign language—the English language.

### **7.3. The English Language**

Since independence, the number of institutions in Armenia providing education in the English language has steadily grown and society has become increasingly aware of the growing presence of English within the country. Institutions teaching English can be found in state-run

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<sup>32</sup> *МИД России о борьбе и гибели русских СМИ в странах бывшего СССР: Армения. Regnum (in Russian). August 14, 2010. Retrieved September 29, 2012.*

pre-schools, primary and secondary schools, at tertiary-level institutions, and private or foreign-run organisations. The so-called ‘American influence’ in Armenia is by far the most prominent reason behind the growing desire to learn English. One of the first examples was the establishment of the American University of Armenia, coincidentally on the same day as Armenia’s independence referendum and the subsequent opening of the university’s doors just two days later, which in turn coincided with the declaration of Armenia’s independence (Petrosyan, 2009). The Embassy of the United States has also established ‘American Spaces’ throughout the country in conjunction with several state-run libraries that offer an opportunity for visitors to learn about the United States through programmes, lectures, books, magazines, etc., all in the English language.<sup>33</sup> The growing influence of the English language within education, tourism and business is undoubtable, as a representative nationwide sample in 2012 found English to be preferable for Armenians to learn in secondary school than Russian (Digest, 2012). Longer-term returnees who had resided in Armenia for over a decade had noticed the significant shift from Russian to English as a second language, specifically amongst the youth. When asked what they believed to be the reasons behind the shift to English, returnees explained that it was more than just about the educational opportunities available in the West, but also about business opportunities available to young adults and established businesses, and the growing influence of western music and pop-culture amongst the youth.

In an era of increasing nationalism, Armenia has come under the influence of two foreign languages, on the one hand the age-old presence of the Russian language, which attempts to hold on to a historical legacy by providing cultural programmes and educational opportunities; and on the other, the presence of a new language, English, which represents new opportunities for the Armenian people, through educational, employment and business

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<sup>33</sup> For more information on American Corners Armenia, see <https://yerevan.americancorners.am/en/about-us>.

opportunities throughout Europe and North America. An increasing number of western, or English-speaking, tourists and the benefits of receiving education at local institutions such as the American University of Armenia make the learning of English all the more attractive. However, despite the noticeable shift to English language use by youth and warming attitudes towards English language-learning by the general Armenian population, many returnees who themselves are either native or fluent English speakers still believe Russian holds an important place in present-day Armenia, as well as in the future of the country, for reasons noted such as tourism, geopolitics, business, and employment opportunities.

#### **7.4. The Future of the Three Languages**

The borders of the present-day Republic of Armenia are situated on a territory that over the past two centuries has been ruled by two imperial powers, had a short period of independence, seven decades of occupation and independence once again. The historical realities of the Republic cannot be ignored. Known historically as ‘Eastern Armenia’, the Republic sits on that portion of the Armenian highlands from which the Eastern-Armenian vernacular originated, as opposed to the heart of the Western-Armenian vernacular thousands of kilometres away. Other historical influences such as Russian imperial rule and Soviet control are also realities that, for the time being, cannot be simply pushed aside. The Republic of Armenia inherited a past in which one’s lack of Russian-language knowledge meant being labelled ‘illiterate,’ and Western Armenian was branded a part of the ‘reactionary culture’ of the west, the antithesis of the modern Armenian language (Lehmann, 2012). For these reasons alone, one can hardly expect a *dramatic* change in linguistic discourse for either Western Armenian or Russian.

However, changes were found to have taken place in regards to the Western-Armenian language, as returnees explain how society has become increasingly familiar with the language due to growing numbers of diasporan tourists, returnees and the presence of large

numbers of Syrian-Armenians. For the most part, old Soviet commentary from the 1950s that the Modern Armenian language may be tarnished by the ‘dialect of Constantinople’ (Western Armenian) is evidently no longer common, despite the occasional negative comment made by some locals. Nevertheless, the main obstacle in acceptance of Western Armenian as part of the nation’s linguistic discourse remains a lack of understanding of the language’s pronunciation and vocabulary by local Eastern-Armenian speakers, and the growing shift in Western Armenian-speaking returnees who choose to speak Eastern Armenian.

In contrast to Western Armenian, the historical importance of the Russian language for the Armenian state and the region continues to maintain a level of prestige amongst society in the homeland, and a positive perception amongst returnees. Returnees are well aware of the benefits of speaking Russian, as it was said to help with employment opportunities abroad and the growing Russian tourist numbers. The prestige of the Russian language in Armenia is more evident amongst older generations rather than the youth, a point emphasised by members of the Russian Mir Foundation, who expressed concern with not being able to communicate in Russian with younger generations. Nevertheless, Russian television programmes and music continue to be popular amongst the youth, despite signs of growing interest in western media and the English language. One language that has, however, made great strides is the English language. Its influence is obvious to longer-term returnees who have resided in Armenia for over a decade, who describe the evident shift in the usage of English rather than Russian by youth. It is due to expected benefits such as higher education opportunities and employment abroad, and international business opportunities from within Armenia that one can understand why English language is growing at a steady rate in Armenia.

Returnee perceptions of all three languages makes clear the questionable future Western Armenian faces in a country that is becoming increasingly sympathetic and supportive of the

language, but faces a rapidly increasing Western Armenian-speaking (returnee) population who in these early stages shifts to using Eastern Armenian as a form of belonging and avoiding potential societal conflict. In addition to Western Armenian, the historical significance held by the Russian language for close to two centuries is also put into question, as a new generation is emerging in which Russian-language knowledge for the majority is weak. Until the questionable future of these two languages, the English language, much like in other parts of the world, has become more prominent and more popular amongst younger generations and those wishing to increase tourism, create international connections and improve their own business/self-interests.

## **7.5. Conclusion**

With the exception of Eastern Armenian, the survival of a language in Armenia is found to be dependent on the value the language has as a commodity. Languages in Armenia are valued based on the appeal they hold as a mode of communication that is able to further one's career, travel opportunities, and business prospects.

As a historic and contemporary language, Russian continues to maintain a level of prestige amongst locals in Armenia and is positively perceived by returnees due to the opportunities for growth and visibility it offers locals in the homeland. Returnees appear conscious of the benefits of speaking Russian, attributing language knowledge to increased employment opportunities abroad and the growing numbers of Russian tourists in Armenia. However, the prestige and value of the Russian language is more evident amongst older generations in the homeland, as its value appears to be fading amongst the younger generations whose Russian language skills are less than fluent. Nevertheless, Russian television programmes and music continue to be popular amongst the youth, despite signs of growing interest in western media and the English language.

The English language represents a contemporary communication tool for working in the tourism industry, a pathway for admittance to prominent universities in Armenia and abroad, a career advantage for those wishing to better their future in companies and organisations operating in Armenia and elsewhere, and a chance for a different future. English is acknowledged as a language of communication used by countries wishing to develop closer associations with their neighbours and the global markets (Bissoonauth-Bedford & Parish, 2017) and yet a language ‘creating a global monoculture’ (Sonntag, 2003, p. 46). This global hegemony has evidently reached Armenia and transformed English into an increasingly significant, non-dominant language of growing importance.

In contrast, Western Armenian, the other branch of the modern Armenian language and the language of much of the diaspora, is perceived to be a language of no tangible benefit to society in Armenia. Locals who show interest in the language are said to be those wishing to broaden their knowledge of the Armenian language and act inclusively towards the returning Western-Armenian diaspora. On a formal level, there appears to be some interest in Western Armenian by departments in universities and at various schools throughout the country; however, this is also attributed to the development of the Armenian language during education as opposed to any tangible future benefit. Furthermore, despite the growing number of Western Armenian-speaking tourists visiting Armenia each year and the presence of a large number of Western Armenian-speaking Syrian-Armenian returnees, negative comments, though infrequent, remain. The difficulty some locals experience with understanding the language, society’s unfamiliarity with the language’s pronunciation and vocabulary, and a perception of the language as belonging to history as opposed to contemporary linguistic discourse contributes to less than positive sentiments towards the language. The main obstacle to the inclusion of Western Armenian as part of the nation’s linguistic discourse is society’s unfamiliarity with the language, which is an obstacle that is becoming increasingly impossible

to reverse as returnees begin to shift their spoken language to speak Eastern Armenian and reduce homeland society's exposure to the language.

Returnee perceptions of all three languages have made clear the dire future of the Western Armenian language, the problematic future of Russian and the promising future of the English language in Armenia.

## Chapter Eight: Confronting a Contrasting Set of Societal Norms

The Soviet Union created a different narrative for the people here [Armenia], which distanced them from the Armenians outside. We're now living in the next stage of that narrative, the post-Soviet stage, in which the '*Homo sovieticus*' doesn't exist; instead globalisation has become the dominant influence on identity. (Harout, Lebanon)

This succinct perspective of Armenia's socio-political situation over the past century highlights a society transitioning from one dominant economic and social order to another. For 70 years, the governing elite of the Soviet Union had attempted to create a *Homo sovieticus* (Latin for 'Soviet Man'), an ideal citizen who would dominate the social, economic and political landscape of Armenia and the other Soviet Socialist Republics. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 forcibly replaced the Soviet citizen with a global citizen who was henceforth exposed to ideas, opinions and norms that were once unknown or unwelcomed. No longer was the former Soviet citizen limited to a pre-determined collective ethos or encouraged to follow a set of values. Citizens of each former Soviet Republic were now able to develop their own normative ethics, some guided by the norms of the Soviet past and some created or re-created from history. The returnee's statement, however, falls short of taking into account the remnants of the population that remains nostalgically loyal to a system that once provided certainty and safety, a nostalgia that is passed down generations through stories, behaviours and attitudes.

Remnants of *Homo sovieticus* are understood by returnees to be those residents of Armenia whose mentality, or rather behaviour, continues to be reflective of the norms and behaviours they believe to be from the Soviet era. This mentality is understood to be the perceptions of the physical and social environments and human relations, shaped by both the leadership and the masses during the Soviet era, which are passed on from generation to generation without fundamental change (Mikheyev, 1987, p. 493). For this reason, although Armenia's



contemporary political and economic system differs from that of the Soviet era, it is not uncommon to notice a generational transfer of social norms and values from older to younger generations in Armenia. The returnees' understanding of the so-called 'Soviet mentality' or 'ethos' is the local behaviour they notice that is characteristic of the pre-migration narrative of 'Sovietness' they were directly or indirectly taught to understand. However, their understanding of Soviet social norms and behaviours differed based on their country of origin, or rather the dominant cultural mindset of the country of origin. For returnees originating from the Middle East (Lebanon and Syria) the behaviours that stood out most and were labelled as 'Soviet' were the noticeable paranoia and suspicion with which some locals were said to interact. Returnees from the west (Australia, Canada and USA) spoke mostly of Soviet-era behaviour, including a perceived 'laziness', a lack of 'will to succeed', a reluctance to work, and a reliance on government support. For each group, their perception of Soviet norms and behaviours were those that most differed from their own countries of origin, whether it be the tight knit communities within which many diasporans in the Middle East were raised, devoid of suspicion by other community members or of paranoia from the government given the relative distance they maintained from political life (with the exception of Lebanon). Australian, Canadian and American citizens identified behaviours that were in contrast to their prevailing social norms and values, including a reliance on oneself to succeed and to prosper, an opportunity available to them in their affluent countries of origin. All returnees, however, spoke of an evident level of corruption in the homeland and a dominant or singular school of thought with bureaucracy and interpersonal relations. What is apparent is that returnees arrive in Armenia with a preconceived narrative of how society in the homeland behaves, preconceptions that are dominated by unjust and immoral behaviours inherited from the Soviet past and concentrated on a collective ethos rather than individual values, all of which are evidence of a narrative of *Homo sovieticus* spread throughout the diaspora.

In this chapter, returnees describe the contrasting social norms, behaviours and values of homeland society with those of their own. Their perceptions of homeland society's social norms are shaped by their preconceived diasporan narrative of 'Sovietness' and through their interactions with locals since settling in Armenia. What is revealed is the returnees' realisation of a society in transition, which although it includes individuals (or remnants) who exhibit social norms inherited from the Soviet past, also includes a set of social norms that have been created or re-created post-Independence that present a greater threat to the values of many of the returnees. Through an analysis of these contrasting behaviours, social norms and values, this chapter demonstrates that conflict is not limited to the ethos inherited from the Soviet era but also with the creation or re-creation of an *Armenian* ethos that is being spread throughout society. Note that, although it is acknowledged that a *national* 'Soviet' mentality may never have existed, it has been accepted that the 'socialisation arising from relations within a common system has left a mark on the citizens of post-Soviet States' (Cavoukian, 2013, p. 710).

### **8.1 Remnants of *Homo sovieticus***

There appeared to be a general consensus among returnees that a 'Soviet mentality' continues to exist in Armenia, particularly amongst members of the older generation who spent much of their adult life during the years of the Soviet Union. The overwhelming presence of this generation in society is due to these individuals having only just entered the workplace at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union. These individuals were said to include politicians, professors and doctors, who are not as evident in the small- to medium-size business landscape of Armenia, preferring to work in government-owned enterprises. The presence of large numbers of individuals within professions that affect policy-making and education means the 'shaking-off' of past Soviet behaviour, norms and values remains difficult. This is not to say that individuals have not been able to distance themselves from the behaviours of

the Soviet past; however, it is less likely for individuals post-adolescence to be able to completely alter the norms with which they were raised.

These professionals, politicians and academics, some of whom were complimented for their intelligence and forward-thinking, were largely portrayed as people looking back to better days, with one returnee describing how surprised he was to hear what he labelled a ‘patriotic’ history professor talk positively about the Soviet system. The patriotic professor’s stance is not uncommon, as psycho-cultural analysts believe one’s mindset and perceptions of the world are stabilised during the years of adolescence (Mikheyev, 1987). For this reason, the social norms and values of the Soviet era are arguably still present, though to a lesser degree, in citizens of Armenia who were teenagers during the 1980s. Returnees described the differences in values and behaviours by different generations and the effect of past ethos perpetuated by Soviet authorities on contemporary society in the Republic of Armenia.

#### **8.1.1. Differences Between Generations**

A common perception amongst returnees was that the social norms and behaviours reminiscent of what they understood to be from the Soviet era were most evident amongst older generations who were raised wholly or in part at that time. Senior citizens and middle-aged residents of Armenia were said to ‘reflect Soviet ideals’ and ‘have difficulty adapting to changes in the economic, social and political dimensions of Armenia’ (Vartan, Lebanon). These individuals were described by returnees as everyone from the politicians, government workers and bureaucrats to the average citizen of Armenia. Tamar from the United States explains:

[The] communist mentality exists amongst the older generations, amongst whom creativity does not exist. They have always been told what to do, they want others to come and open a business and they work for them, without taking any serious responsibility. (Tamar, USA)

Tamar's criticism comes with the difficulty she has experienced during business interactions in Armenia. Having been raised in the United States and gained work experience throughout Europe, her understanding of the business world is in contrast to the slow-changing business environment of her homeland. There appeared to be signs of frustration amongst many returnees about how business and everyday 'transactions' are completed in Armenia, although their feelings were limited to frustration rather than antagonism. Many returnees claim to have begun to understand why older generations appear reluctant to change, having themselves gained an understanding of the homeland's Soviet past and become more sympathetic to the behaviour of those who display norms different to their own. Arsen, a young returnee from Syria, explains:

[It's] a normal thing as they lived in the Soviet Union throughout which time the authorities tried to create a single mode of thinking for everyone in society. (Arsen, Syria)

The sympathy evident in Arsen's statement was typical of most returnees who try to understand the transition process that older generations of the homeland experience; however, there was a recognisable irritation by returnees when hearing citizens of Armenian speaking of a so-called 'glorious (Soviet) past':

When you talk to the older generations, you hear the stories of the glorious Soviet past...[However,] what we are experiencing in Armenia today is because people are so used to being told what to do...which opened the door for corruption. The way people manipulate the system and so on, it's a communist-era mentality. (Sasun, USA)

The narrative of Soviet oppression of Armenian patriotism, nationalism, and freedom commonly heard throughout much of the Armenian diaspora of the past is reminiscent in the returnees' rejection of what may appear to be positive elements of the Soviet era. A collective diasporan ethos may not exist; however, a collective memory of survival was evident amongst

much of post-genocide diaspora. Post-genocide communities throughout the Middle East and in many diasporan centres across the world were described by returnees as high achievers, a characteristic acknowledged in scholarship that describes that Armenian communities as being known for their prominence in trade and commerce, with a great many contributions made in the sciences, culture, and the modernisation of their host society (Safran, 1991). This determination to prosper and succeed was said to be in contrast to the experiences that many returnees encounter in the homeland, in a society that was and at times continues to be overly reliant on the support of the government. This view was echoed by most western-born returnees, from the United States, Canada and Australia, who were clearly more irritated with the unrealistic expectations of the older generations towards the government. These returnees described the Soviet mentality as one that made the citizen completely dependent on the government for every aspect of life. This pessimism towards a segment of society was not displayed when reflecting on their experiences with younger generations in the homeland.

Younger generations were said to be different to their parents and grandparents in their outlook of the world and their behaviour. This difference is attributed to the now-abundant exposure younger generations have to external influences not available to their parents and grandparents during their years of adolescence. The independence of Armenia opened the nation to a free-market economy, globalisation and increasing travel beyond the confines of the Iron Curtain.<sup>34</sup> This exposure to the outside world is evident to returnees who are able to notice the difference between generations:

[They] now have access to the outside world; they understand what we do, thanks to the internet. The new generation develops ties with the diaspora, it's obvious how much interaction there is between them (younger generation) and people from the outside. (Arsen, Syria)

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<sup>34</sup> The Iron Curtain is a term symbolising the efforts by the Soviet Union to block itself and its satellite states from open contact with the West and its allied states.

Arsen's comment is typical of many returnees, however, one point of difference is Arsen's use of the pronoun 'we'. *We* is used to reflect the world outside the Soviet Union, a world that, although it includes countries that differ from one another in many aspects, has in common the ability to allow their citizens to travel and communicate freely. This world was not intended to include every country, but rather the countries in which the Armenian diaspora are found, countries in which the Armenian communities were found to grow and prosper. Arsen's statement describes the exposure younger generations have had to the outside world and was found to be the reason behind a growing resilience and will to succeed by a growing number of individuals in the homeland.

The young generation that went through the independence period are more eager to prosper in their careers despite the difficulties they encountered in their childhood. This generation has undergone a 180-degree flip in comparison to the older generation. (Hrant, Syria)

Despite the growing optimism towards the shifting mindset and behaviour of the younger generations, it was said that remnants of the past are still very much evident in contemporary society.

### **8.1.2. Effect of the Soviet Past**

Over the past quarter century, Armenia has undergone significant social change. Although it abandoned the collapsing Soviet project and its ideology of communism and socialism, it struggled to erase the social norms and values associated with its Soviet past. During the Soviet era, the 'centralisation of economic administration presuppose[d] dependence of [the] citizens upon the state organs' (Guins, 2012, p. 201). This meant Soviet citizens were completely dependent on the state, which was able to deprive the individual of employment and income. Individuals were usually assigned tasks and reluctant to perform tasks not assigned to them for fear of making a mistake. Pay was usually minimal and theft from

workplaces such as factories was common.<sup>35</sup> A favourite saying of the Soviet people is, ‘they pretend to be paying and we pretend to be working’.<sup>36</sup> The complete dependence upon the state for income, employment and guidance led to a relatively passive and careless workforce. Despite the social changes made in Armenia, several returnees noticed reluctance by their colleagues at work to perform. Observations included:

[It] has something to do with the socialist mentality of the communist era, as well as the laziness and lack of attitude towards the making of goals. (Mardiros, Australia)

[They] still only know how to work within the boundaries...they don’t know how to think outside the box. (Arsen, Syria)

The comments above are a reflection of work behaviour that was said to be foreign to returnees. However, it does not take into account the low wages offered to employees in Armenia that are at times not sufficient to provide for one’s family. Despite the generally low wages, many returnees believe the attitude of employees who are reluctant to work, or business owners unwilling to improve their customer service or business practices, are a reflection of past attitudes towards customer service during the Soviet era. Bad service was, after all, a fixture of life in the Soviet Union, with store clerks being famous for their surly service. Their excuse was that they were never trained to be polite.<sup>37</sup> These attitudes, although changing, still exist a quarter of a century later and cause irritation to returnees who are accustomed to a customer-focused service environment. One American-born returnee made an observation about a recent experience with a small printing business in Yerevan:

Just the other day, my cousin and I were preparing invitations for an event we were organising. The printing business we approached refused to take our order, saying they don’t have any time...they’re not interested in earning more money they

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<sup>35</sup> [http://factsanddetails.com/russia/Economics\\_Business\\_Agriculture/sub9\\_7b/entry-5163.html](http://factsanddetails.com/russia/Economics_Business_Agriculture/sub9_7b/entry-5163.html).

<sup>36</sup> See <http://englishrussia.com/2012/04/03/peculiarities-of-soviet-mentality>.

<sup>37</sup> [http://factsanddetails.com/russia/Economics\\_Business\\_Agriculture/sub9\\_7b/entry-5163.html](http://factsanddetails.com/russia/Economics_Business_Agriculture/sub9_7b/entry-5163.html).

already have enough business...people are just lazy and the Soviet days are to blame for this. (Paylun, USA)

Another vestige of the past that was said to have endured the test of time, primarily amongst older generations, is paranoia and suspicion. Although not as pronounced as during the Soviet era when there existed a 'high level of suspiciousness and mistrust among the Soviet people' (Mikheyev, 1987, p. 495), returnees notice the reluctance of older-aged locals to engage in communication. This suspicion is an aspect of life in the homeland that is most surprising to returnees, who expect to be treated with the same warmth they show to locals. One Syrian-Armenian returnee, Souren, describes the setting in the apartment building in which he resides:

In our building, our elderly neighbours don't say hello to us. My dad would question where this behaviour comes from, but we later understood that during the days of the Soviet Union, neighbours would be scared of each other. When someone would buy something new, like a chair, the neighbour might inform the authorities of the possibility of an illegal purchase. (Souren, Syria)

This level of suspicion was not uncommon during the Soviet era when people's personal gains or misfortunes could lead to reprimand from authorities. Several returnees were keen to describe a behaviour that was used by locals back in the Soviet days so as not to raise suspicion, which continues to be used, though not for the same reason. When asked 'how are you?', it was not common to provide a neutral response. Talar from Canada explains:

People used to respond *Očič* (not bad) when asked 'How are you?'...The reason for this originates from the Soviet times, when people were obliged to underestimate their living and personal conditions so as not to raise suspicion. (Talar, Canada)

Responding with an 'I am well' would raise suspicions of misbehaviour; responding with an 'I am not well' would suggest the individual's possible discontent with the system, neither of which was a desirable suggestion. Therefore, a response of *Očič* (not bad) would have been



the best way to avoid arousing any suspicion. The term continues to be used frequently in Armenia to denote an expression of ‘not bad’ rather than its original intent of circumventing the suspicion of neighbours and authorities.

The centralised system of social control in all aspects of the individual’s life is a power dynamic not easily forgotten by citizens. While the Soviet Union may have dissolved, the source of power was said to have merely transferred from Moscow to the respective capitals of many post-Soviet nations. This source of power, although noticeably different to that of the past, brought with it an understanding by many that the new power centre would provide for its citizens, which was a one-sided understanding that many so-called ‘incapable elites’ were unable to meet as new governments were formed in the newly independent nations. The ensuing process of market liberalisation and self-survival exposed faults within the Soviet system such the over-centralised process of decision making, which meant many Soviet citizens were not required to make important decisions or think of solutions to the simplest of life’s challenges, instead relying on a Soviet elite that was corrupt, piratical, privileged and corrupt (Voslensky, 1984). A returnee from Canada, Roupén, explains his perception of the consequence of past social control:

Its roots [Soviet mentality] lie in their lack of responsibility and paranoia—hence why they don’t smile and are generally only interested in short term advantages...  
(Roupén, Canada)

Strong elements remain of the once-Soviet mentality in older generations of the homeland. Behavioural traits of older generations included a belief that the government should be the source of support, a distrust of others and society as a whole, and a perspective of life as an incessant struggle for survival. Returnees do not blame older generations for thinking this way; after all, it was these individuals who had their careers interrupted or halted and their lives turned upside-down overnight when the Soviet system crumbled. In contrast, of concern to returnees were the traits characteristic of a Soviet mindset that had made its way into the

mindset of younger generations, including avoiding responsibility or refusing employment due to the overall low pay. Despite the difficulties returnees experience with a contrasting set of social norms they believe to be inherited from the Soviet era, it is the creation or re-creation of an increasing Armenian ethos centred around a gradual weakening of women's rights and discrimination against minority populations that is of greatest concern. These collective values that are found to be widespread in Armenia include the treatment of women and mistreatment of the LGBT population.

## **8.2. A New or Re-created 'Armenian' Ethos**

In contrast to what is perceived to be a diminishing, though lingering, set of social norms and values inherited from the Soviet Union, returnees described the rise in an Armenian ethos that is fuelled by nationalist and conservative segments of politics and society. The Armenian government has since the nation's independence developed its own set of values. One such value is a special place for the Armenian Apostolic Church, which is recognised in Armenia's constitution as the national church and provided with the exclusive right to preach and disseminate the faith freely throughout the Republic of Armenia. The rise in conservative religious values is also the reason, though not the sole reason, behind a rise in two issues most raised by the returnees. The first is the returnees' concerns with gender inequality and the second is the mistreatment of the LGBT population of Armenia.

### **8.2.1. Gender Inequality in Armenia**

Since independence, Armenia has seen little improvement in relation to women's rights with at times this leading to a reversal in the rights afforded to women during the Soviet era. The gender imbalance in Armenia is commonly associated with the increasing number of reported domestic violence cases against women and the overt patriarchal nature of the country. Returnees in general were uncomfortable with the level of gender imbalance found in

Armenia. Returnees from the west spoke of a need to reassert women's rights in the nation's constitution and alter the mindset of the nation. Returnees from the Middle East spoke with dismay over the way in which women are treated in Armenia, expecting women's rights in Armenia, in the homeland they were raised to idolise, to be different to their country of origin they were told was different to the homeland due to the 'backwardness' of their religion. When discussing women's rights and the role of women in society, a sense of shame was exhibited by many returnees, unable to accept a gradual shift back to a patriarchal society. Soviet era rhetoric by locals when discussing gender equality was said to be 'useless' if women are not treated with equality in an independent Armenia.

Armenia is labelled a patriarchal society, in comparison to North America, Australia, and much of Europe, in which an unequal patrilineal and patrilocal kinship system favours boys over girls (Khachatryan, Dreber, Von Essen, & Ranehill, 2015). Inequality is blatantly visible to female returnees who experience encounters relating to their gender they would not have experienced in their countries of origin, which they believe makes living in Armenia more difficult. Issues relating to gender inequality are expected considering the ongoing issues relating to domestic violence and sex-selective abortion that remain at a high level in Armenia (Michael et al., 2013). The behaviour of *some* adult males and the subservient role played by some females in Armenia through an acceptance of norms and behaviour was said to be the reason behind the enduring discourse on women's social and economic standing in society, relative to men.

A behaviour that was said to be generally accepted by society was that of a married man having a mistress. The issue of extramarital affairs by men in Armenian society is a phenomenon that remains relatively unspoken in Armenia. Lara Aharonian, founder of the Women's Resource Centre in Yerevan, describes the act of a man cheating on his wife as 'normal and very much tolerated by different spheres of our [Armenian] society'; a woman, however, cheating on her husband is considered a 'slut', 'whore', or unworthy of being called

an 'Armenian woman' (Aharonian, 2010). However prevalent or exceptional the phenomenon may be, the frequency in which returnees raised concern over this practice was alarming. Abraham, a Syrian-Armenian returnee, described his own concern with this practice.

It is worth remembering that when men get married here, it isn't uncommon for them to have a mistress, it's such an awful thing, especially as it's acceptable to them here; even the wife knows! It's as if we're living in an Islamic society where it's acceptable to have four wives. Men have convinced themselves that they have the right to a mistress. (Abraham, Syria)

Abraham's shock and opposition to this practice is due to its contrast with what he believes to be Armenian values and behaviour, and a reflection of a legitimated practice by the dominant religion of the country from which he originates. Having been raised in a predominantly Islamic nation, Abraham is aware of the allowances made under Islam to the issue of polygyny, however infrequent it may be in most parts of Syria. His realisation that such extramarital affairs are common in Armenia and known by many wives is a reality of life in Armenia that he may not have expected. Another returnee was shocked to hear from a local friend that such things were acceptable; as the local man explains, 'what are we meant to do when she is pregnant?' Such statements may not reflect society as a whole, as research has shown polygamy to not be a common practice in Armenia (OECD, 2010), and may in fact be the behaviour of individuals who feel the need to share their experiences with others, as opposed to the silent majority of society. The extremity of issues such as extramarital affairs, domestic violence and sex-selective abortion are concerning to returnees as they believe the behaviours are passed onto the next generations, through a belief by minors that such behaviour is part of the 'accepted' status quo.

The returnees' mindset is in sharp contrast to the patriarchy of large segments of the homeland in which respect towards women is said to be symbolic and ensures power remains in the hands of men. Many returnees are themselves representational of a cosmopolitan world,

expressing ideals that are common throughout the west; others are products of transnationalism in which connections were maintained with the Armenian *nation* and their lives adapted to that of society in the host country. This continued exposure to their countries of origin and frequent interaction with other returnees means these transnational returnees are better able to notice what they consider strange behaviour between men and women in the homeland. The strangeness of these experiences is due to its contrast with the behaviour and social norms of their countries of origin. The following four examples demonstrate the patriarchy prevalent in Armenia in comparison to societal norms found in their respective countries of origin, Lebanon, Canada and USA:

They think it's strange if a female opens the door for a male, at times considering it offensive towards the male ego. (Nuné, Lebanon.)

The way we [diasporans] interact with females for them is strange, particularly because we show a lot more respect towards our wives than they do. For example, our wives interact a lot more with others, shaking their hands. For them this is unacceptable as their wives don't do these sorts of things. (Vartan, Lebanon)

It's not common for them to greet a female and shake their hand. (Paylun, USA)

Shaking hands with women, washing dishes and changing diapers in public are not common sorts of behaviour [for a man], people will consider it weird and not masculine. (Raphael, Canada)

What became evident during discussions with the returnees is that, for returnees born in the west, the societal norms found in Armenia often conflicted with their own behaviour and those accepted by society in their countries of origin. However, for returnees originating from the Middle East, their opposition to social norms towards women in Armenia is due to their upbringing in mostly liberal Armenian communities located in traditional Arab and Islamic societies, and to the expectation that norms in the homeland would be different to that of the Arab world. However, despite decades of gender equality during the Soviet period, segments

of society in Armenia have been displaying a ‘slow return to patriarchy’ (Kaser, 2008). This traditional outlook is at times a reflection of the past, as well as values brought to the capital by Armenians leaving more traditional settings in villages throughout the country. Society’s reluctance to address issues relating to gender, although affecting more than half of Armenia’s population, is seen as more progressive than the treatment of the homosexual community of Armenia.

### **8.2.2. Societal Attitudes Towards Homosexuality**

Negative attitudes towards homosexuals in Armenia is believed to be partly inherited from Soviet times, during which communist leaders associated homosexuality with capitalistic society’s degradation (Carroll & Quinn, 2009, p. 33). However, societal attitudes towards homosexuality have worsened since independence due to various reasons, including the influence and power of the Armenian Apostolic Church, which labelled homosexuality a grave sin and one that should be rejected by society (Carroll & Quinn, 2009, p. 34). Several returnees raised concern with the ongoing mistreatment and negative perceptions of society towards homosexuals.

For most returnees, their liberal attitude towards the LGBT community was a position made during their time in the diaspora, at times inherited from the societies with which they mixed. Returnees originating from the Middle East displayed no signs of criticism or negativity in relation to the LGBT community, acknowledging that the majority of returnees interviewed originating from the Middle East were young adults or middle-aged females. Despite the general acceptance of homosexuals by the returnees, it was agreed that the situation faced by homosexuals in Armenia is one of increasing hostility, homophobia and outright rejection. More than half the returnees interviewed had a friend or acquaintance who identified as a homosexual and were aware of the discrimination experienced. One returnee, who identifies as a gay man, despite having originated from an affluent western country was careful not to

advertise his sexuality in public, unless around friends and a close network of people. The returnee worked for a local aid organisation that provided counselling services for homosexuals and campaigned for greater awareness of LGBT related issues. He describes:

We can't even advertise on the Internet where our office is, people will find out and there are a lot of crazy people here, who knows what they would do. (Krikor, USA)

The fear of violence is common. Discourse in relation to homosexuals is increasingly aggressive in Armenia and those part of, or associating with, the community are familiar with how the government and right-wing factions use the issue to stir up popular support. At the time of the interviews, a notable cultural figure in Armenia who voiced violent opposition to homosexuals was a few weeks later found chatting to a homosexual man on the Internet trying to arrange a sexual favour. Politicians, cultural figures and the Armenian Apostolic Church have all done little to assist the community, instead acting as a mouthpiece for violence. One returnee, who supports the community in its fight for equality, describes a situation she experienced when travelling to work on a bus:

He (the passenger) saw that the back of my phone had a rainbow flag sticker and waited for me to get off the bus. When I got off at my stop, he did too, he followed me to an alleyway and started yelling at me, saying that my sort should be set on fire and burned. (Lusiné, Lebanon)

The negative and violent attitude towards homosexuals in Armenia has become a part of the societal norm; however, returnees are not willing to remain silent. Returnees have the luxury of picking up and moving back to their country of origin, unlike the local Armenians who may have to deal with their family, friends and community finding out about their sexuality. Societal attitudes towards homosexuality are in line with the general intolerance shown by Armenian people towards new ideas that go against established principles (Carroll & Quinn, 2009, p. 33). A local gay-identifying Armenian man known to the researcher explains his difficulty with being a vegetarian and a gay man in a country that is both patriarchal and

proud of its *xorovaç* (barbeque), saying ‘it was more difficult coming out as a vegetarian than it was a gay man’ (Anonymous, Armenia), proving that many ideas that go against the grain are discouraged in Armenia.

### **8.3. Conclusion**

Returnees arrive in Armenia with preconceived notions of a society dominated by a Soviet mindset and behaviour, which is a rather popular way of thinking about the homeland throughout the diaspora. These behaviours were found to include corruption, a dependency on the government, and mistrust of others in society. To some degree, these pre-conceived notions were found to be accurate, particularly amongst the older generations who spent most of their lives during the Soviet era. Some experiences with elderly citizens made evident a level of mistrust and suspicion and a reliance on the government for support and direction. In some cases, these behaviours and social norms of the Soviet era were found to exist amongst younger generations and this behaviour was transferred from generation to generation. Rather than feel in some way upset about this form of behaviour, returnees were instead found to be sympathetic towards these individuals who they believed were behaving the way they were taught to throughout most of their lives.

Regardless of the sympathy returnees showed towards members of homeland society who exhibited a form of Soviet-style behaviour, they continued to experience difficulty adjusting to this form of behaviour. Becoming accustomed to a behaviour that they believed to be ‘un-Armenian’ was out of the question; however, it was the new ‘Armenian behaviour’ or ‘Armenian ethos’ that returnees had the most difficulty with. This ‘Armenian ethos’ was said to be a combination of historical regional behaviour and a new set of ideas supported by a right-leaning government. Concerns with the growing level of gender inequality and negative attitudes towards minority groups including homosexuals were common, especially



considering the contrast these values had to the liberal values many returnees were accustomed to.

There was realisation amongst many returnees that the country they had dreamt of was not the country they had chosen to return to. Returnees from all parts of the world believed Armenia would be a nation in which *all* Armenians, irrespective of their differences, would be treated equally. This realisation that there exists a differing behaviour and ethos has made integration to Armenia more challenging for returnees who identify with a *more* cosmopolitan set of ideas. Whether returnees are willing to accept these differences and adjust to life in Armenia is discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter Nine: Adjustment and Acculturation—The Last Stage of Homecoming?

The term *homecoming* denotes a migration experience filled with nostalgia, celebration, and a sense of finality. However, as has been discussed thus far, returnees to Armenia have, much like others before them, experienced a homecoming brimming with as many obstacles and complications as positive aspects. Complications experienced by returnees continue to put into doubt the finality of the homecoming journey for those desperate to settle in the idealised homeland. Hopeful and positive expectations of settling in the homeland are instead spoilt by confrontations with locals over the returnees' use of a contrasting Armenian syntax, their multi-layered cultural identity, their diasporan, or rather *non-homeland-focused* historical memory, and a differing *mentalité*. As a conclusion to the homecoming journey outlined throughout the thesis thus far, this chapter discusses the returnees' acculturation process by examining the factors that act as barriers and those that assist through the process of adjustment.

*Acculturation* assists in explaining how people react when exposed to a new sociocultural environment with their attitudes towards acculturation explaining whether the individual feels a part of, or excluded, from society (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006). The acculturation attitudes of returnees are crucial to understanding the success or failure of the homecoming experience, acknowledging that their acculturation attitude may change in time should they remain in the homeland. For returnees to Armenia who have participated in this project, their familiarity with the cultural narrative of the homeland is unlike that of a returning migrant who was either born or raised in Armenia. For this reason, scholars addressing the acculturation process of return migrants have tended to either adjust Berry's *acculturation model* or use alternative models, such as Sussman's *cultural identity model* (Kunuroglu,

Yagmur, Vijver, & Kroon, 2015). However, such alternatives are more useful for individuals who once originated from the place to which they are returning. These models do not sufficiently address the case of the returning Armenian diaspora, many of whom remain unfamiliar with the realities of life in the Republic of Armenia, and possess a somewhat contrasting understanding of the Armenian narrative. For this reason, despite the relevance of Sussman's cultural identity model for individuals who possess a similar cultural identity, Berry's acculturation model will be used, as the diasporans are much like new migrants from different cultures, unfamiliar with societal norms and life in Armenia. Berry's model will assist in providing an insight into the success and failures of the returnees' journey.

The process of acculturation is said to begin when the migrant interacts with other groups in the new setting and experiences a change to their culture, resulting in an eventual assimilation, integration, separation, or marginalisation, to and from the dominant group (Berry, et al., 2006; Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). The focus of this chapter, as throughout the thesis, is the Western-Armenian returnee group. Furthermore, an additional reason for investigating the cultural changes affecting Western-Armenian returnees, as opposed to homeland society, is due to the process of acculturation inducing more change in the non-dominant group (Berry, 1990). While the chapter does not explore the cultural changes of the dominant group, it is acknowledged that cultural norms of the dominant group can alter as a result of changes introduced by the incoming migrant group, referred to as *creative acculturation* (Barnett, 1954). Examples of *creative acculturation* include changes in food culture and customer service due to the arrival of large numbers of Syrian-Armenian's following the onset of conflict in Syria (Varshalomidze, 2017).

Predicting the acculturation outcome of returnees remains difficult, even with a shared Armenian identity between returnee and homeland society. Past research using the acculturation model for migrants from different cultures, and re-acculturation of migrants

returning to their country of birth, have made evident the ‘loss of familiar cues’ as individuals ‘integrate into a different cultural system’ (Neto, 2010, p. 222). The returnees to Armenia originate from different countries, possess different values, social norms, beliefs and behaviours, which, during their settlement in Armenia, lead to a loss of familiar cues they have come to know and understand. However, their Armenian ‘base identity’, whether as a Western Armenian or a diasporan allows them some opportunity to relate to, or openly accept, the dominant culture of Armenia. The uniqueness of the returnees is that they do *not* possess a different cultural base, *nor* do they originate from Armenia, making their experience with the dominant culture of Armenia both familiar and un-familiar.

As part of the discussion addressing the factors that assist and those that act as barriers to the returnees’ acculturation process, this chapter uses an argument by Beiser et al. (1988) that some long-term positive adaptation to the new cultural context usually takes place after a period of time. With Beiser’s argument in mind, we will seek to answer the question: Is the process of assimilation for Western-Armenian returnees to Armenia merely a matter of time?

### **9.1. The Adjustment Process**

Adjusting to life in a foreign country is made all the more difficult if the culture, language, and social norms of society differ from those with which the migrant is accustomed. Language barriers, cultural differences, and a conflicting value system are but some issues faced by migrants trying to establish a life for themselves in a foreign land. Armenians from throughout the diaspora who settle in the Republic of Armenia are no exception, with their identification as an Armenian acting as an advantage—an important identifier in a homogenous nation of 98.1% ethnic Armenians. Nevertheless, identifying as an Armenian is not sufficient to ensure a smooth transition from host land to homeland, as returnees describe the factors that made their process of adjustment difficult and those that provided assistance. Factors that caused difficulty during the adjustment process include finding an *appropriate*

job, the realisation that their *values and norms* differ significantly from large segments of homeland society, and *financial issues* (particularly relevant to the Syrian-Armenian returnee group). Factors that proved to be of assistance to their process of adjustment included *acceptance into university* and the *offer of a suitable job*.

The most evident challenge experienced by returnees was the difficulty with securing a well-paid job. The majority of returnees were initially disheartened by the low salary and long work hours of jobs they were offered, or by the unsuitability of the job to the skills they possess. Several returnees, nevertheless, managed to find suitable jobs, or reluctantly accepted an underpaid job for the sake of creating routine in their lives. Sirvart, an experienced journalist from Syria, was surprised at just how low the salary was for the job she was offered at a local news agency. Christapor, a returnee from France, describes the difficulty returnees have with accepting jobs that offer a low salary: ‘unlike locals who own property, diasporans cannot afford to survive off the low wages offered by many employers in Armenia, as they are expected to pay rent’. Christapor’s argument is valid, given many of the returnees are young adults with little savings; nevertheless, his argument does not take into consideration younger generations of locals who also need to move out of their family homes and find a place to live and start their own families. In both instances, the returnee eventually found work with a company abroad that would supplement their local income. This solution, although beneficial to Sirvart and Christapor’s adjustment process, displays a reliance on foreign income to meet the expenses of life in Armenia.

Others, particularly those born in the west, were keen to use what money, work experience and knowledge they had acquired abroad to expand their entrepreneurial skills and open a business. A wide array of businesses were opened, ranging from language tutoring to public relations firms, non-government aid organisations, restaurants, and food wholesalers. For Syrian-Armenians, particularly those arriving in Armenia with little savings, flexibility with

employment was not an option. Having left Syria at a time of a plummeting currency, life in Armenia was more complicated, given their need to purchase food and find suitable accommodation. Armenia's limited ability to assist financially did not assist their adjustment process and led to many Syrian-Armenians initially accepting jobs that were of little interest to them. Despite the reluctance to accept such jobs, Syrian returnees acknowledge the assistance provided by the state that alleviated some of their financial concerns. It was described how the Armenian government allowed for the importing of cars from Syria tax-free, tax incentives for local businesses employing Syrian-Armenians, free health care for a limited period of time, and assistance finding employment. For some Syrian-Armenians, the Armenian government provided loans to the value of five million Armenian drams (approx. USD \$5,000), payable in five years at a reduced annual rate of 5%, with very limited success, as only 100 of the earlier arrivals had taken up the loan (Petrosyan, 2017). Others willing to move to more remote areas, including the *self-declared* Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) Republic, were offered free land and special tax rates (Elliott, 2016). For most, however, the acceptance of a job was initially an opportunity to meet their day-to-day expenses and/or to create routine in their lives.

In addition to difficulties with sourcing appropriate employment, returnees experienced issues with understanding some prevalent social norms and values of society in Armenia. Attitudes towards gender issues, sexual orientation and equality in general, which were discussed in greater detail in Chapter Eight, were difficult for returnees to accept, a concern that was particularly pronounced for returnees from the west, though also important for many returnees from the Middle East. Returnees were concerned with the frequency of stories relating to domestic abuse. Tamar, a returnee from the United States and a businesswoman in Armenia, explains:

I am a female diasporan-Armenian who is trying to settle in Armenia. When working with people here, everyone tries to feel themselves superior to the next person. I work with people on farms and on occasions I go to visit them and they (men) just stand there looking at me. In a loud voice I say, 'Who is the boss here? Are you going to work or not?'. (Tamar, USA)

Gender issues are vastly more prevalent in rural parts of the country, although not as obvious as in the capital Yerevan, where reports of domestic violence are more commonly reported. However, returnees claim the dominant attitude of society and the perceived ignorance towards domestic violence was a factor discouraging female diasporans from settling in Armenia and also disrupted their own path to integration. In a country where the gender balance is not equal, the dominant heteronormative perception of large segments of society towards other minorities, including homosexuals, was found to be more extreme.

The perceived derogatory attitude displayed by some locals towards homosexuality and the general aggressive attitude of men in society towards behaviour that is viewed as different was of great concern to many western-born returnees. Those with a great sense of patriotism tried to make excuses for the negative behaviour of some by explaining how 'the homogenous nature of Armenian society has prevented this issue from being dealt with', or 'it will take time' (Talar, Canada). Such excuses were considered unpopular and irrelevant to returnees who believe in equal rights, explaining how the homogenous nature of the Armenian state should not act as an excuse or barrier to greater inclusion. Returnees who justified discrimination against the LGBT community were in fact attempting to conceal the real issues faced by Armenia, claiming that other more important issues should be dealt with, whether that is the ongoing war with Azerbaijan, the endemic corruption of the elite, or the economic instability. Those who believed in protecting the LGBT community of Armenia saw the rights of minorities as inseparable from the other issues faced by Armenia, claiming it to be a 'domino effect', in which patriarchy and religious values are combined to present an

alternative to the people at times of economic and social despair. Returnees acknowledge that issues such as LGBT rights are to a large degree *hidden* in what is a patriarchal society, as one returnee explains: ‘they claim to oppose homosexual behaviour because of their Christian roots, yet so many men have mistresses, and we have the nerve to laugh at our neighbours!’ (Talar, Canada). The term *neighbours* was used to refer to the patriarchal and otherness of Armenia’s Middle-Eastern and Islamic neighbours. However, the reality for some, notably many Syrian-Armenians, was not civil rights but the basic need to provide for one’s family and secure financial wellbeing.

For most returnees, voluntarily returning to the homeland from well-to-do developed countries, was about finding a job you love and working to change society. There were no serious repercussions for these individuals. Simply said, if they failed they would just return to their country of origin. However, for Syrian-Armenian returnees, the homeland was an opportunity to establish a life in their homeland following the catastrophic loss of life and property from the Syrian war. Of course, there were other options for Syrian-Armenians and many decided to take the path of migrating to other developed nations. By the time of this research, hundreds upon thousands of Syrian Armenians had applied for refugee status in Western Europe, North America and Australia, mostly choosing to take a path other than what had been seen on mainstream media with millions walking to Europe. However, thousands remained in Armenia, deciding it would be the place to call home, believing they would belong nowhere more than they would their ancestral homeland. For the Syrian-Armenians who had made the decision to remain, financial stability was the primary concern; issues of equality or dreaming of the perfect job would for the moment come second.

For those who left Syria at the start of the conflict, possessions were able to be transported to Armenia, mainly personal belongings, cars and money. It was these individuals and families who were able to ‘scrape-in’, having *only* lost a quarter of the value of their savings.



However, as the Syrian pound dropped against the US dollar, so too did it drop against the Armenian dram. Those less fortunate, having either had little savings to begin with, or having arrived too late, saw their savings drop by close to 75%. Those fortunate enough to sell their assets and purchase property in Armenia were able to create stability in their lives and those of their family members. Others had to find places to rent, uncertain with how long they would manage to survive. Abraham, a Syrian-Armenian, describes his settlement process in Armenia:

I went through a lot of torment when settling in Armenia because I didn't come here with a lot of money. All I had in Syria was a car, so I sold it and came here...I had little money and knew nothing about living here. (Abraham, Syria)

Abraham's experience of adjustment points to the concerns with life in Armenia due to the financial instability some returnees face and the relative inability of the Armenian government to assist. The difficulties discussed thus far relating to employment, values and norms, and financial constraints were found to be barriers prolonging the adjustment process of the returnees. However, in time, the majority of returnees adjusted to life in Armenia, as they developed friendships with locals, found a suitable job, were accepted to university, and began to adjust and 'appreciate' the quality of life in Armenia, previously unnoticed.

Education was the most noticeable reason behind a successful adjustment process, likely due to the reason for return to Armenia for many returnees being to study. Those accepted to university or other educational institutions were better able to develop new skills, create a sense of routine in their lives and, most importantly, create new social circles that included colleagues at university, most of whom were locals. Commencing studies at university was the time many returnees believe integration started. Much like education, finding a suitable job meant being open to challenging oneself, perceiving the job as permanent and, much like commencing studies, meant stability, routine, and making new friends. Returnees were found

to expand their social circles to include local colleagues, despite maintaining strong connections with other diasporans and returnees. As social circles grew, so did the returnees' knowledge of local cultural behaviour and habits, and a general familiarity with the way of life in Armenia. The significance of education and employment in adjusting to life in a new society is no new phenomenon, as many migrants are found to feel more comfortable once securing their livelihood. An example of a Syrian-Armenian family stood out. Ani, who migrated to Armenia with her two daughters and husband when war broke out in her native Syria, describes the time she and her husband realised their settlement in Armenia was permanent.

My husband wanted to leave Armenia because he wanted us to be financially secure and he wasn't able to find a suitable job here. So after finding a house and enrolling my daughters into school, he left to work abroad. During that time I was trying to get my degree recognised here, but was having difficulty finding my paperwork, given some things were left in Syria. A month went by and on the very same day I got a call from the university requesting that I enrol for the remaining subjects and then from an organisation that offered me a job, so the rush began. At this stage it was obvious to my husband that I had settled down and he knew it was time for him to return and try to continue his job from here. (Ani, Syria)

Returnees often expressed a sense of surprise about how fast their lives transitioned from an unsettling feeling of initial adjustment to complete adjustment to life in Armenia. Each returnee acknowledged some form of difficulty with adjusting and was keen to provide guidance to avoid future returnees experiencing similar difficulties. However, there was a great sense of 'excitement' with having undergone a process of adjustment in Armenia. Several returnees humorously recalled their negative perceptions of people in Armenia as a result of stories of a minority who may have caused trouble following emigration in the early 1990s after independence. However, these stories were found to be ridiculous, as one returnee explains how safe it is to walk in Armenia in the middle of the night, compared to the country

she grew up in. An Argentinian-Armenian returnee describes Armenia as a place where you will never feel alone. It was humorously described how Armenians love interfering and knowing about your personal life, giving their opinion and getting to know a total stranger. Adjustment to life in Armenia was no easy task, and the challenges encountered by returnees were numerous; however, for most, their lives started to experience a sense of normalisation upon entering the workforce, commencing studies, creating new social circles, and increasing their knowledge of life in Armenia through their interactions with local Armenians.

## **9.2. Acculturation Attitudes**

The process of adjustment to life in Armenia differed from one returnee to the next; however, over time the majority of returnees were found to have a positive acculturation attitude, despite the delay. The most preferred acculturation attitude was integration, as returnees gradually settled in and became preoccupied by their careers, education, social circles and general familiarity with life in Armenia. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the acculturation attitudes of returnees are determined based on Berry's (1997) acculturation model. Berry's model includes four attitudes: the first, assimilation is the non-dominant group member not wanting to maintain their cultural identity and instead seeks daily contact with the other culture; the second, separation, is when the individual places value on holding the original culture and avoiding interaction with other cultures; third, integration is the individual seeking to maintain their own original culture, while seeking to take part in the larger social network and maintain some form of cultural integrity; and fourth, marginalisation, when the individual has little interest in developing relations with others. Acculturation attitudes are not limited to Berry's (1997) defined terms, despite their popularity, as other forms of acculturation may be found. However, the following analysis focuses on Berry's set categories, given their relevance to the returnees.

The most popular acculturation attitude in research on migration was that of integration: maintaining one's own original culture, while seeking to take part in larger social networks and maintain some form of cultural integrity. The popularity of the integration attitude for Armenian returnees is not unique, as studies have shown that integration is the preferred option for migrants (Neto, 2010). Integration was understood to be that process in which elements of their Western-Armenian, diasporan and host-land identities are all able to be maintained while absorbing the cultural identity of the homeland. Returnees were found to be conscious of having adopted elements of Eastern-Armenian and homeland identity, such as mannerisms, language, habits and cultural practices. Longer-term returnees had noticed how they were able to understand local humour and make sense of the ways in which locals understood politics. Their ability to understand the thought processes of homeland society made them believe they were 'fitting in' and 'belonging'. They were no longer considered outsiders when listening to a joke made by a colleague at work, or a group of friends at university. Such integration was found to be more obvious amongst Syrian-Armenian returnees who entered the process of acculturation involuntarily without having sought it out, but rather were propelled into it following the outbreak of war in Syria. There was little choice but to remain in Armenia, or face the same dire consequences of claiming refugee status in Europe. Others, mainly western-born returnees, were able to prolong their integration process, if they so chose, given their ability to pack up and return to the host land at any point. Syrian-Armenians had eagerly accepted employment, sometimes not of their choosing, and integrated with locals on a daily basis. This is in contrast to numerous western-born returnees who instead chose to work for international organisations, start-ups, or to open their own businesses, within which many chose to speak in English. This is not to say that western-born returnees did not integrate and adjust as well as Syrian-Armenians, as many were quite integrated into homeland society at the time of the interview; their integration process was prolonged and guided by their own terms. However, returnees remained mindful of

maintaining their existing Western-Armenian, diasporan and transnational cultural identities, influenced by their host-land culture, their families and their diasporan communities.

Integration was the most popular option for returnees as assimilation was understood to be the ‘giving up of our Western-Armenian identity’ (Seta, Syria). Returnees were convinced they would always remain a minority and that letting go of their past diasporan identity was not an option, though it may be for their children. A few of the returnees made clear that they did not wish to be just like everyone else in society and instead stand out, separated by their productive work ethic and general positive attitude to life. Assimilation in Armenia was, however, not uncommon, taking second place, despite its much smaller numbers (three returnees). These select few who believe they have assimilated into society in Armenia share in common their involvement in civil society and organisations dealing with domestic issues concerning (human) rights and equality and are thus more exposed to sensitive elements that connect them with members of Armenian society. Their interactions were found to create a connection with society and, using the words of one returnee, made ‘local issues my issues’ (Zarmig, Lebanon). The more returnees dealt with local issues, the more they interacted with locals and the less time they spent interacting with other returnees, diasporans, and Western Armenians, and this was found to accelerate their process of integration and later assimilation.

However, not all returnees were comfortable with labelling themselves as integrated or assimilated, instead insisting that they were separated (coincidentally also the third most common acculturation attitude in a vast number of studies (Partridge, 1988; Sayegh and Lasry, 1993). This decision to feel separated from society was said to be their decision rather than one imposed upon them. Only one returnee identified as being separated from society, as they believe becoming integrated into society in Armenia is ‘not something to desire’ (Sasun, USA). This returnee in particular believed the aggressive mannerisms of many locals, the treatment of women, the disregard for the general public when driving, etc., were reasons for

not wanting to be a part of society. The very same returnee had earlier said that ‘being a bad person in Armenia is much easier than being a good person’ (Sasun, USA). As opposed to the exclusive popularity of integration and the infrequent assimilation and separation attitude, no returnee felt they are, or have ever felt, marginalised. This absence of marginalisation can be interpreted as a sign of the homeland’s welcoming of their ethnic kin throughout the diaspora, rather than a sign of Armenian society’s attitude of inclusion towards migration. Integration remains desirable for the majority of returnees and was said to be a natural outcome for Western-Armenian returnees to experience when adjusting to life in Armenia, given their shared ethnicity and growing attachment to the Republic of Armenia.

### **9.3. Eastern- and Western-Armenian Harmonisation**

Differences such as vernacular and identity between Eastern and Western Armenians continue to cause varying levels of tension when adjusting to life in Armenia. These differences prolong the returnees’ process of positive acculturation (integration or assimilation). Historically, differences between Eastern and Western Armenians became more evident at the turn of the 20th century as the genocide of the Armenian people permanently altered their presence in the region. One portion of historic ‘Eastern’ Armenia was declared the Republic of Armenia (1918) and the other portion was emptied of its Armenian life and civilisation. The population of the Republic of Armenia embraced an Eastern-Armenian narrative and nationhood, and the newly created diaspora largely embraced a Western-Armenian narrative and the struggle for an independent homeland. During this 70-year period, the relative isolation each group faced from one other made prevalent the distinction between a diaspora

representing the Western-Armenian identity and the homeland representing the Eastern-Armenian identity.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to existing differences in vernacular and place of origin (villages, cities, empires), the development of two distinct narratives of ‘Armenianness’ further divides the two groups. The Armenian narrative of the new homeland (1921) focused on a Soviet vision of Armenia, one which continued to deepen its century-old relations with Russia and base its relations on a common socialist framework now found amongst the other peoples that made up the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. In contrast, the diaspora developed an Armenian narrative based on the historical memory of the lost lands of Western Armenia, victimisation as a result of the genocide, and a tendency to promote nationalism and the goal of an independent Armenia. The diaspora remained largely unfamiliar with developments in the ‘Soviet homeland’, with the exception of groups of Armenians including members of the apolitical *Armenian General Benevolent Union*<sup>39</sup> and the left-leaning *Social Democrat Hunchakians*.<sup>40</sup> Differences in the Armenian narrative that intensified during the Soviet era continue to frustrate returnees during their adjustment process and at times prolong the formation of a positive acculturation attitude.

The frustration experienced by present-day returnees with remnants of the Soviet narrative is noticeably becoming less ‘aggravating’ as returnees become more familiar with society in the homeland and as society in the homeland moves further away from its Soviet past. Returnees

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<sup>38</sup> Eastern-Armenian speakers were/are also found outside the Soviet Union, primarily within Iran and in the growing number of Armenians from both the Soviet Union and Iran emigrating to other countries.

<sup>39</sup> The Armenian General Benevolent Union is a non-profit organisation established in Cairo, Egypt, in 1906 and currently operates in over 30 countries with the aim of promoting Armenian educational, cultural and humanitarian programs.

<sup>40</sup> The Social Democrat Hunchakian Party is a centre-left to left-wing Armenian political party, which was banned in Soviet Armenia due to the country’s one-party system, but remained active in the diaspora. The party remained a supporter of the development of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic and since independence has entered the political arena in the Republic of Armenia with little success.

also point out the advantageous consequence of increasing interaction between members of either group over the past quarter century. Such interactions have led to a growing familiarity with one another's narrative and have helped avoid the confusion and surprise commonly experienced in the past by members of either group. These two distinct segments of the Armenian nation, despite their continuing differences, were said to be more alike than different. Returnees, time and again, described how much has changed over the past quarter century and how they (diaspora and homeland) had 'understood each other less before'. Armenia's independence in 1991 made evident the cultural, linguistic and ideological challenges the two groups faced, following centuries of division and separation. However, it also created a chance for the two groups to interact with one another, build relationships, and experience opportunities that had not been possible for centuries.

Discord between the two groups was found to be superficial, in that differences related mostly to the labelling of someone as belonging to either the 'eastern' or 'western' grouping; based on their variant of spoken Armenian; or by character traits that are stereotypical of each group. The two dominant vernaculars of Armenian were said to be differences the Armenian people as a whole had to overcome and accept as part of the diversity of the Armenian nation, rather than a hurdle preventing a united Armenian identity. Several returnees raised the growing acceptance of Western Armenian by locals, as they received encouragement to 'keep talking my language'. This is despite the growing shift in language by Western-Armenian returnees who choose to speak Eastern Armenian with locals shortly after arriving in Armenia. In addition, stereotypical representations of *Hayastantsis* (Armenians from Armenia) and *Spyurkahyes* (diasporan Armenians) were common. However, these oversimplified images, ideas, or clichés were not perceived in a negative manner but rather believed to be a normal part of any society in which different groups belong. In fact, returnees believe the discord between the two groups is merely an issue of unfamiliarity and something



that disappears over time as both groups become more familiar with each other. The returnees' belief strengthens Beiser's argument raised at the beginning of the chapter, as it demonstrates the increasing harmonisation of the two groups due to the process of familiarisation over time.

Much more evident in discourse amongst returnees were descriptions of features shared by both groups that act as unifiers rather than elements that cause separation. Shared elements of Armenian identity, including the national church and the millennia-old history and culture were frequently discussed. These were labelled 'obvious elements of Armenian identity' by one returnee who believes they are shared by all Armenians worldwide, ignoring the reality that there exist thousands of Armenians who belong to faiths outside the Armenian Apostolic Church, or who do not belong to any faith at all. The most common element of the shared identity was the emphasis placed on the victimisation of the Armenian people, which was justified based on two events separated in time by close to a century: the first, the Armenian Genocide, and the second, the ongoing conflict over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Both events are perceived as events of aggression by historic foes of Armenia, Turkey in the case of the Armenian Genocide and Azerbaijan in relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The Armenian Genocide continues to be commemorated throughout most diasporan communities and has become an increasingly important day of commemoration in Armenia over the past half century. Both events are said to symbolise the fragile position of the Armenian people in the region, events in which Armenia is the victim and the 'Turk' (Turkey and Azerbaijan) is perceived as the aggressor. There is little doubt the message heard by both society in Armenia and throughout the diaspora is one of continued victimisation and the threat of losing what remains of the cherished homeland. At this point, it must be noted that the interviews for this research were taking place only several months following the outbreak of clashes in Nagorno-Karabakh that lasted four days in 2016, known as the *Four-Day war* or the *April War*. The

horrors of the Armenian Genocide followed by a devastating war with neighbouring Azerbaijan have left the Armenians of the homeland and the diaspora concerned for the future of their sacred homeland. Differences between a homeland Armenian, a diasporan, an Eastern or a Western Armenian were all found to be secondary to the needs of the Armenian nation and the state. The comments made by the returnees on the importance both groups place on the Armenian nation are reminiscent of a statement made by Levon Avdoyan (1998, p. 14) and cited by Susan Pattie (1999, p. 83), that ‘the importance of its (Armenia) survival is one of the few things that nearly all Armenians there (Armenia) and anywhere in the diaspora agree upon’.

The quarter century since Armenia’s independence in 1991 has seen significant headway in the development of mutual understanding by both diasporans and homeland society. Longer-term returnees who have resided in Armenia for over a decade have described the differences in perceptions and understanding each group have of one another as stark. It is believed that both groups now understand each other more, largely due to increasing diasporan tourism and the development of relationships, friendships and general contact by members of each group. Each group’s past rhetoric of the other is gradually transforming into one of greater acceptance and inclusion. This convergence in narratives and ‘Armenianness’ was described by a returnee with the proverb, ‘you can’t clap with one hand’. Centuries of division are said to be historical problems that should not permeate the minds and attitudes of Armenians today. After all, both groups share in common the importance they place on their homeland, as a Syrian-Armenian returnee, Gomidas, explains, ‘no matter where you are from, your heart will beat when you hear the word Armenia’.

#### **9.4. Conclusion**

Returnees arrive and settle in Armenia uncertain about when, if ever, they will adjust to life in their new homeland. For most returnees, there is an expectation that adjustment to life in

Armenia will be rather straightforward and uncomplicated, given their shared identity as Armenians, irrespective of the differing elements of their Western-Armenian and diasporan identities. Throughout the first year or two in Armenia, returnees experience difficulty with adjusting to life there due to challenges they face with finding an interesting *or* relevant job, combined with the financial uncertainty for returnees arriving with minimal savings and those needing to support their family. Finding employment in their relevant field of expertise and experience is a challenge experienced by most returnees. However, they remained positive that they would find an interesting job, despite the smaller employment market they encountered in Armenia. Eventually, most returnees found a job in an industry or a company they were keen to work for, leading to the start of a routine in their lives.

Other returnees, including Syrian-Armenians, were, in addition to finding a suitable job, concerned with securing their financial future in Armenia. Syrian-Armenians who had arrived in Armenia following the outbreak of war in Syria had little choice but to accept jobs they were offered and establish a life for themselves and their family members. Many Syrian-Armenians chose to re-settle in countries throughout the west, having arrived in Armenia with the intention of using the country as an interim point whilst waiting for their acceptance to settle in a third country. Many other Syrian-Armenians, however, chose to stay in Armenia, stating they were not interested in seeking asylum in Western Europe or North America as others had done upon arriving in Armenia. The Syrian-Armenians interviewed were those who had found a home in Armenia, in a place they felt was their homeland and this meant they did not have to leave and ‘wander around Europe’.

Unlike the financial uncertainty of the Syrian-Armenian group, returnees originating from countries throughout the west had the advantage of a ‘Plan B’, should their return to Armenia not succeed. These returnees had the luxury of time on their hands and were found to be more concerned with civil rights and society in Armenia, focusing on issues related to women’s

rights, LGBT rights, and ways in which to assist society in Armenia. For these reasons, the adjustment process of Syrian-Armenians was accelerated in comparison to returnees from the west, who were mostly in charge of their adjustment process. Eventually, all returnees adjusted to life in Armenia, experiencing what was said to be a 'sense of normalisation' when entering the workforce, commencing studies, and creating new social circles that included mostly local Armenians. The longer returnees remained in Armenia, the more they adjusted to life in their new homeland. Longer-term returnees who are viewed as a representative sample of the adjustment outcome expected for most returnees described experiences that made evident their familiarity with local humour, politics, and social behaviours. These longer-term returnees are individuals who are beginning to believe they are finally 'fitting in'.

The majority of returnees believe their acculturation attitude to be integration, describing this choice to be the 'most desirable' and 'natural process' for Western Armenians settling in Armenia. This so-called 'natural process' is due to their shared ethnicity with the majority of society in Armenia and their growing attachment to the contemporary Armenian state and its representation as the homeland. The choice to identify as integrated is also a reflection of the returnees' continued rejection of assimilation, as they believe assimilation is a sign that they have 'given up' on their past Western-Armenian, diasporan and hybrid identities. Those who had settled in Armenia less than a year before these interviews took place were, in general, more insistent that their past identities had to be protected against assimilation into the Eastern-Armenian identity of the homeland. However, returnees who had settled in Armenia more than five years earlier acknowledged the weakening of their attachment to other diasporans and returnees in Armenia, and the increasing sense of comfort and similarity felt when among local Armenians. In fact, longer-term returnees were more sympathetic with the local narrative of 'Armenianness', as they displayed signs of a change in behaviour and mannerisms, and an acceptance of linguistic norms that are dominant in the homeland. It is

therefore appropriate to assume that Beiser's argument of assimilation being a matter of time for migrants is true for returnees for Western Armenians settling in Armenia. While these individuals are able to maintain their past identities in the short term, their futures and those of their offspring are likely to be categorised by the process of integration and eventual assimilation.

## Chapter Ten: Conclusion

Armenia's independence in 1991 officially sparked the beginning of what would be the dismantling of seven decades of Soviet control and narrative. The newly declared Republic of Armenia transitioned overnight to a sovereign country that would represent the interests of its citizens, and increasingly its diaspora. Only two years earlier, the diaspora had watched events unfold throughout the region that led to the independence of a country they knew very little about, a country that represented what was left of the Armenian homeland. The mythical stories and images with which many in the diaspora were raised had finally become a tangible reality as Armenia opened its doors to the outside world and the dream of returning to Ararat became possible. Diasporans making the decision to leave their countries of origin and settle in Armenia viewed their arrival as a 'return' to what is the land of their ancestors. Though these were not the historical villages and cities of Western Armenia from which their ancestors were exiled, it was still cities and towns in a historic homeland called Armenia.

Soon after arriving in Armenia, returnees were reminded of the difference in narrative of 'Armenianness' in the ancestral homeland from that with which they were raised. The homeland was found to identify with a culture and identity that in many ways differed from that of the multi-layered identity of the returnee. The dominant Western-Armenian narrative and hybrid identities returnees recognised were replaced in the homeland with a dominant Eastern-Armenian narrative. Returnees are to some degree aware of the challenges Western-Armenian returnees to Soviet Armenia experienced, whether it be discrimination towards their spoken vernacular, their countries of origin or a society mostly apathetic to their interests. However, contemporary returnees are settling in an *independent* homeland in control of its own discourse of what is, and is not, part of the Armenian grouping.

Much of the diaspora operated independently of the Soviet Armenian homeland, creating its own organisations, fuelling a narrative of ‘Armenianness’ based on a memory of victimisation, a struggle for historical justice, and the use of the western branch of the Armenian language. Armenia’s independence ended the diaspora’s monopolisation of the national narrative outside the homeland. The experiences, perspectives, opinions and stories of returnees to Armenia were analysed throughout this thesis to understand the realisations and adjustments returnees had to make when settling in an Armenia with a dominant narrative that differed from their own.

Returnees had discovered a tangible homeland, one unlike the mythical representations of Armenia they were raised to believe that included images of a ‘rosy’ and ‘dream-like’ place. Returnees were aware of the challenges the homeland was facing through having access to online sources and interaction with individuals who had visited or lived in Armenia. Their return to Armenia confirmed their assumptions that the homeland was experiencing economic and political challenges and struggling with ongoing hostilities due to the outbreak of conflict with neighbouring Azerbaijan. Their homeland was not like the mythical image they were raised to believe, described as ‘Mount Ararat with an Armenian flag at its peak’, but it was for most returnees a place in which they belong and what remains of the Armenian homeland. Their return was, however, met with objections by most family members who were shocked to learn of their decision to settle in a country undergoing so much difficulty. The discontent displayed by loved ones towards their family member’s decision to return was illogical for returnees whose parents and family members had instilled this sense of patriotism and even nationalism during their upbringing.

What had gone largely unnoticed over the quarter century since Armenia’s independence was the growing attachment diasporans felt towards a land called Armenia. The villages, towns and cities of historic Armenia, in present-day eastern Turkey, were the lands of memory for

older generations whose parents had escaped genocide, but were merely textbook stories for younger generations unable to physically or mentally connect with the lost lands. The sites and images of Western Armenia were no challenge to the stones, churches, monuments and buildings that returnees were able to touch and feel in the Republic of Armenia.

Returnees to Armenia are welcomed warmly by many locals who feel Armenia is a place where all diasporans are free to settle, knowing the reasons behind the diaspora's dispersal from the historic lands. There was little negativity or hostility shown towards the returnees, with the exception of the infrequent confrontation with an individual who felt threatened by the presence of people who differed from the homogeneity they had grown up in. The warm welcomes returnees experienced were followed by a great deal of confusion by locals as to why returnees, many of whom originate from well-to-do nations, would choose to leave the comforts of their countries of birth and settle in a developing, post-Soviet nation. As a means of fitting in to society in Armenia, returnees found ways to conform to the locals' way of life, believing adjustment to be easier if they did not stand out. Several returnees began to dress the way they believed locals dressed; others were committed to living, commuting and eating as a local would by catching a bus to work, taking lunch to work from home, and not renting or purchasing accommodation that was too flashy.

Identity increasingly became a sensitive topic for most returnees, eager to find a place and people with which to belong. A negotiation of their identity was, however, unavoidable, the first of which was their language shift from their native Western Armenian vernacular to the dominant Eastern Armenian spoken in Armenia and especially their city of residence, Yerevan. This language shift to Eastern Armenian was accomplished with great difficulty for returnees who felt their shift was a sign of abandoning their Western-Armenian roots. Their shift was self-perceived as a contribution to the homogeneity of the Armenian language, as opposed to an encouragement of the diversity that could have been achieved. Longer-term



returnees who had switched to speaking Eastern Armenian amongst locals had themselves noticed a change in their pronunciation of Armenian letters towards an Eastern Armenian-based pronunciation, even when speaking Western Armenian. The returnees were, however, keen to avoid conflict with locals and not jeopardise their integration to society in Armenia. Nevertheless, Western Armenian continues to be spoken amongst friends, family and tourists from the diaspora.

Newer returnees to Armenia remained convinced that they will continue to self-identify as diasporans, despite having returned to the homeland and thereby ending what was traditionally understood to be the migration cycle. However, returnees who had spent more than five years in Armenia had started to identify with the memories of their time there. Over time, the memories of their experiences began to transform their identities away from their diaspora-base. Most longer-term returnees were found to have spent as much time in Armenia as they had in the diaspora, finding themselves identifying with both groups, as one returnee described himself a *Spyurkahayastantsi* (a combination of the word ‘diaspora’ and the term for an ‘Armenian originating from Armenia’). This duality of past and present identities was an increasingly popular choice amongst returnees who had adjusted to life in their homeland.

The returnees’ absence of personal memory in Armenia during their childhood contributed to their need to identify with their past identity as a diasporan. The absence of such memories led to confrontations with locals who felt the returnee had not ‘tasted the water of the country’, implying the individual was not raised in Armenia. For returnees born in the west, the initial challenge to a place of belonging was met with an embrace of their diasporan identity as French-, Australian-, or Canadian-Armenians, etc. Their transnational identities allowed them to negotiate their belonging somewhere in between a place where they *strived* to belong and one to which they *already* belong.

As returnees adjusted to life in Armenia and shifted away from using Western Armenian when interacting with locals and increasingly identifying with memories of Armenia, there came a realisation that the Western-Armenian language would have to be preserved. Returnees are aware that the Western-Armenian language has little in terms of value as a commodity in Armenia, as opposed to Russian and English. Russian holds historical value and provides opportunity for employment to thousands of Armenian citizens who seek jobs in Russia. English is also valued as a language that provides new opportunities in Europe and North America. In this context, Western Armenian faces a dire future.

Whilst there was ongoing rhetoric in Armenia regarding the need to protect Western Armenian, returnees have noticed that there is little to nothing being done to do so. The inaction of authorities in Armenia to protect one of the two branches of the Armenian language is a sign that the homeland remains ill-prepared to incorporate elements of the diaspora's Armenian identity and adjust the narrative of the Soviet past.

When negotiating their past language and identity, returnees remained flexible, adjusting to the dominant vernacular spoken in the homeland. They began to create their own memories of their time in Armenia with which they identified. An aspect of life in the homeland with which they had great difficulty identifying was the upholding of patriarchal values in Armenia. Regardless of the countries from which the returnees had originated, they all noticed the ongoing cases of domestic violence against women and the mistreatment of various minorities in Armenia. There was a realisation by returnees that a so-called 'Armenian ethos' was reinventing itself, encouraged in many ways by a government and an elite unwilling to change the status quo. Returnees had arrived in Armenia believing their shared Armenian identity would act as the common denominator in their adjustment process. However, over time, many began to realise just how different their values are to those they were confronted with in the homeland.

Adjustment and integration remains a challenge for many hopeful returnees wishing to simply ‘fit in’ to a country they were raised to idolise. However, it is said that ‘time heals all wounds’, as is the case for many returnees. Success with securing employment, commencing studies and creating social circles that include local Armenians leads to a sense of routine in the lives of returnees and act as the beginning of the integration process. Having slowly integrated into society in the homeland, returnees appear comfortable with their identification as a quasi-diasporan and quasi-local, a *Spyurkahayastantsi*, thus resisting efforts to assimilate. However, the same quasi-identification with the diaspora grouping is not likely to apply to their offspring or those arriving in Armenia during their early adolescence, as their memories of Armenia outweigh any in the diaspora. The process of assimilation to the homeland will be guaranteed for their offspring, much like those of returnees to Armenia during the *nerkaght*’ period (1946–1948).

The power over discourse about what is and what is not Armenian has shifted from the diaspora to society in the Republic of Armenia. A sense of what it means to be Armenian, once partially decided by leaders of the classical Armenian diaspora, is now determined by society in a homeland that views itself as the representative of Armenians worldwide. This self-appointed role as representative of all Armenians brings with it a responsibility to protect markers of the diaspora’s identity, including the Western-Armenian vernacular with which the majority of the classical diaspora identify. While the homeland remains ill-prepared to accept and embrace the differing identities of the diaspora, the returnees represent micro-powers that influence society from the bottom up as their language is heard on the streets of Yerevan, their food is in the restaurants that are scattered around the city, and there is a growing familiarity of the diaspora by locals in Armenia. The challenges experienced and described by returnees throughout this thesis are expected to continue into the near future. The Eastern-Armenian narrative of the homeland is by no means under threat, however, the growing presence of a

Western-Armenian community in the capital of Yerevan is exposing a society with a homogenous narrative to the possibilities that diversity has to offer. In spite of all the challenges experienced by returnees, the Republic of Armenia has come to represent *home*, a place within which they feel a sense of growing comfort and security, a place that exemplifies all things Armenian through landscape, sounds, images and people; a complicated yet rewarding return to Ararat.

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# Appendices

## Addendum

During the final months of thesis writing, I felt the need to add an addendum. The addendum is intended to represent a separate piece of knowledge, a note to the reader, on developments in Armenia since the completion of my data collection that have the potential to change the demographic landscape of Armenia and the diaspora.

In April 2018, protests and marches throughout Armenia culminated in what would be known as Armenia's Velvet Revolution. Led by opposition Member of Parliament Nikol Pashinyan, the Revolution saw the resignation of an authoritarian Putinesque-style prime minister (The Economist's Country of the Year 2018), the election of a new prime minister, the revitalisation of civil society, and democratic snap-elections later that year. The year-end elections resulted in an overwhelming victory for the popular leader of the revolution, Nikol Pashinyan, and his 'My Step' coalition (Pashinyan Wins Big in Parliamentary Elections).

In addition to heightened public trust by society in Armenia towards the political process, there appears to be a changing of values and attitudes amongst members of the public towards many issues. Since the peaceful revolution, Armenia's new political leadership has emphasised a breaking down of barriers between Armenia and its diaspora, stating 'we offer the Diaspora the same as the citizen of the Republic of Armenia' and 'that there is no longer Armenia and the Diaspora, there are united Armenians' (Pashinyan, 2018). With Armenia's new prime minister urging youth in the diaspora to make real the country of their dreams and emphasising the importance of Diasporan Armenians to maintain the idea of return (European Endowment For Democracy 2018), a change in rhetoric has evidently taken place, one in which the idea of belonging shifts away from the superficial to a genuine stance.

It appears that the new government has developed a more realistic approach to return migration, acknowledging the difficulties with carrying out ‘huge immigration and repatriation’ and the need to create a climate with which to propose to compatriots around the world to return. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan can be seen personally welcoming diasporans to Armenia as he greets them on the streets. However, the politically turbulent year has left the new leadership with little opportunity to carry out reforms aimed at improving return migration, preferring to address more critical matters relating to the nation’s political process and economic development. At present, it remains unclear whether government rhetoric will be realised and efforts will be made to address concerns of potential returnees, which are less obvious to Armenia’s authorities.

The findings of this thesis and the experiences of past returnees may provide Armenian authorities with a useful insight to issues that must be addressed if return is to continue and increase in number.

## Appendix 1: Interview Questions

### Life in Diaspora before migration - **Կեանքը սփիւթքի մէջ ներգաղթէն առաջ**

1. Describe what Armenia meant to you whilst growing up in the Diaspora.
2. What was your motivation for migrating to Armenia?
3. When you decided to move to Armenia, did you experience any support or dissuasion from others before your move?
1. Նկարագրեցէ՛ք, թէ ի՞նչ նշանակութիւն ունէր Հայաստանը ձեզի համար ձեր մանկութեան ու երիտասարդութեան ընդացքին սփիւթքի մէջ:
2. Ի՞նչ էին Հայաստան ներգաղթելու շարժառիթներդ (պատճառաբանութիւններդ):
3. Երբ որոշեցիք տեղափոխուիլ Հայաստան, մարդիկ քաջալերանք, զգուշացում կամ բացասական դրսեւորում ցուցաբերեցի՞ն:

### Reception upon arrival to Armenia - **Ընդունելութիւնը Հայաստան ժամանելու պահուն**

4. Explain the reception you received upon migrating to Armenia.
5. As a Western Armenian, how do you believe the locals (*hayasdantsi*) perceive your presence in Armenia?
6. Have locals ever treated you in a discriminatory manner because you are a repatriate?
7. Have parts of Armenian society, whether in Armenia or Diaspora, assisted in your integration to Armenia?
4. Նկարագրեցէ՛ք, թէ ի՞նչ ընդունելութեամբ դիմաւորեցին ձեզ երբ Հայաստան ներգաղթեցիք:
5. Ձեր կարծիքով իբր Արեւմտահայ, հայաստանցիները ինչպե՞ս կ'ընկալեն ձեր ներկայութիւնը:
6. Տեղացիները երբեւէ վերաբերա՞ծ են ձեր հետ խտրականօրէն իբր ներգաղթող Հայ Հայաստանի մէջ:
7. Հայկական համայնքները՝ ըլլան անոնք սփիւթքի եւ կամ Հայաստանի մէջ, երբեւէ օգտակար դարձա՞ծ են ձեր Հայաստան հաստատման գործընթացին:

### The (Your) Western Armenian identity - «Ձեր» արեւմտահայ ինքնությունը

8. How much time do you believe should pass before you can no longer consider yourself a diasporan after moving to Armenia?
9. Do you still use Western Armenian when you communicate and/or write?
10. Do you still identify yourselves with your ancestral Western-Armenian identity (historical cities, towns and villages) and what importance does Western Armenia have for you?
11. Describe your social circle in Armenia; does it include Western and Eastern Armenians?
8. Որքա՞ն ժամանակ պետք է անձնի մինչեւ ինքզինքնիդ չէք համարել որպէս սփիւռքահայ Հայաստան գաղթելէն վերջ:
9. Արդեօք դեռ կը շարունակէ՞ք արեւմտահայերէնով հաղորդակցիլ եւ գրել:
10. Արդեօք դեռ կը շարունակէ՞ք ճանչնալ ձեր պատմական արեւմտահայ ինքնությունը (տեղական պատկանելիությունը. պատմական քաղաք կամ գիւղ) եւ ի՞նչ կարեւորություն ունի Արեւմտեան Հայաստանը ձեզի համար:
11. Նկարագրեցէ՛ք ձեր ընկերային շրջանակը Հայաստանի մէջ, արդեօք այն ե՛ւ արեւմտահայեր ե՛ւ արեւելահայեր կը պարունակէ՞:

### The Western and Eastern Armenian languages - Արեւմտահայերէնն ու արեւելահայերէնը

12. Describe the reactions you have received when speaking Western Armenian in Armenia.
13. Does the Western Armenian language have a future in Armenia?
14. In your opinion, do you think the Russian language and culture belong in Armenia?
15. Do local Armenians know the differences between the Western and Eastern branches of the Armenian language?
12. Նկարագրեցէ՛ք մարդոց վերաբերմունքը Հայաստանի մէջ՝ ձեր արեւմտահայերէն խօսելուն նկատմամբ:
13. Ձեր կարծիքով, արդեօք արեւմտահայերէնը ապագայ ու՞նի Հայաստանի մէջ:
14. Ձեր կարծիքով Ռուսերէնը լեզուն եւ մշակոյթը կը պատկա՞նի Հայաստանի մէջ:

15. Արդեօք տեղացի Հայերը գիտե՞ն հայոց լեզուի արեւմտահայերէն ու արեւելահայերէն ճիւղերու տարբերութիւնները:

Western vs Eastern Armenian culture - **Արեւմտահայ ու արեւելահայ մշակոյթները**

16. Describe situations in which you have experienced what is known as a ‘communist mentality’ in Armenia; does this mentality, in your opinion, prevent the formation of unified Armenian identity?
17. Describe Western Armenian cultural habits that you notice locals (*Hayasdantsis*) find strange?
16. Նկարագրեցէ՛ք, եթէ երբեւէ զգացա՞ծ էք «Համայնավարական մտածելակերպ» Հայաստանի մէջ: Կը կարծե՞ք որ այդ մտածելակերպը արգելք կը հանդիսանայ միացեալ հայ ինքնութեան ձեւաւորմանը:
17. Նկարագրեցէ՛ք արեւմտահայ սովորութիւններ որ հայաստանցիներուն համար տարօրինակ կը թուին:

Future of the Western Armenian language, identity and culture - **Արեւմտահայ լեզուի, ինքնութեան ու մշակոյթի ապագան**

18. Describe your experience in adjusting to life in Armenia.
19. Should Armenia be more proactive in bringing Western Armenian Diasporans home?
20. Do you believe you have integrated, assimilated or been segregated from Armenian society in RA?
21. Do you believe that there is a sense of unity amongst Eastern and Western Armenians as a people?
18. Բացատրեցէ՛ք, ձեր կեանքի կարգաւորումը Հայաստանի մէջ:
19. Ձեր կարծիքով, Հայաստանը աւելի աշխոյժ պէտք է ըլլա՞յ արեւմտահայեր ներգաղթելու մէջ:
20. Ի՞նչ կը կարծեք, արդեօք դուք ընտելացա՞ծ էք, ձուլուցա՞ծ, թէ առանձնացուա՞ծ էք Հայաստանի հասարակութեան մէջ:

21. Կը կարծէ՞ք որ միասնութեան զգացում կայ արեւմտահայերուն ու արեւելահայերուն միջեւ:

## Appendix 2: Participants and their pseudonyms

Participant	Name	Sex	Country of Origin	Age Bracket
1	Arsen	Male	Syria	25–34
2	Krikor	Male	USA	25–34
3	Arakel	Male	USA	25–34
4	Mardiros	Male	Australia	25–34
5	Harout	Male	Lebanon	18–24
6	Tamar	Female	USA	35–44
7	Tina	Female	Israel	35–44
8	Lorig	Female	Lebanon	18–24
9	Souren	Male	Syria	25–34
10	Zarmig	Female	Lebanon	35–44
11	Seta	Female	Syria	45–54
12	Nuné	Female	Lebanon	25–34
13	Sirvart	Female	Syria	45–54
14	Vartan	Male	Lebanon	18–24
15	Pasian	Female	Argentina	18–24
16	Abraham	Male	Syria	25–34
17	Hrant	Male	Syria	35–44
18	Paylun	Female	USA	35–44
19	Lusiné	Female	Lebanon	25–34
20	Talar	Female	Canada	25–34
21	Roupen	Male	Canada	25–34
22	Ani	Female	Syria	35–44
23	Sasun	Male	USA	25–34
24	Vahé	Male	Cyprus	35–44
25	Raphael	Male	Canada	45–54
26	Gomidas	Male	Syria	35–44
27	Shahe	Male	Canada	25–34
28	Aren	Male	USA	25–34
29	Christapor	Male	France	25–34
30	Razmig	Male	Lebanon	18–24