

# WHO NEEDS A HOMELAND? ROMANTICISM AND THE (UN)SETTLEMENT OF MODERN DAY ARMENIA

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## **Introduction**

There are two Armenian identities at work in understanding the longing to know and preserve Armenianness. The first is the physical and emotional ties to either an Armenian community in diasporas or in the homeland. These ties are universally expressed among many ethnic groups, and are sometimes suggested to be primordial. The second is a political identity, one in which people feel compelled to support Armenian causes and interests. Feeling Armenian and supporting Armenia mark the core Armenian identities that explain the interest in building a strong Armenian nation. Central to maintaining this core is solidarity around unaccomplished goals necessary for nation building. These identities, coupled with contention around questions of genocide and territorial boundaries, impassion them to feel like they need a home country to speak of and write about, to celebrate and perhaps even to visit or repatriate.

I situate myself in this discussion wondering how Armenian I feel, how Armenian others consider me to be, and struggle to know if my detachment from the homeland offends the national and ethnic cause. How much in agreement are homeland and diasporic Armenians about their history, national borders, ethnicity, religion and culture? What's wrong with liberation from attachment? What's so terrible about living a nomadic or exilic life? Putting basic human needs aside, I question the need to be grounded, physically or symbolically. I think grounding may also take place in de-territorialized space, in the freedom of knowing that one is free to enter or exit. However attractive it sounds, to emotively connect with others around an identity or a nation, belonging here or there is not necessary to enjoy life or to have a good life. It's too sentimental, egotistical and exclusive to have legitimacy as a natural state of affairs. Cannot difference be the connection and a way to find comfort with one's self and in relationships with others?

But at the same time, I feel like that argument pits me against the world. Most people have a need to be needed, to belong to a group or a place. This puts me in the unique position to argue why Armenians need a homeland when my starting place for making such a claim is doubt. Who belongs to the Armenian ethnicity is perplexing, and as much as I would like to not discuss Armenians homogeneously, the current state of international political affairs requires some generalizations. Pattie (1994) points out that “in the nineteenth century, intellectuals, assisted by the advent of mass education and fearful of the ever-increasing physical dislocation of Armenians and their communities, insisted on a narrow and stringent definition of Armenian ‘public’ identity: an Armenian was defined by language, church, and shared history, according to intellectuals who enjoyed some status” (189-190). There are diasporic Armenian communities where traditional Armenianness preserves and reproduces the past, but its completion is passing. As Pattie correctly says, “today, any such stringently defined ‘formal’ identity is fiercely contested” (190).

This paper blends history and politics with memory and emotion to understand the romantic nationalism felt among Armenians both within the Republic and in Diaspora. I seek to understand why Armenians have a need to be seen as Armenian and to involve themselves in the social, cultural and political lives of each other. Specifically, I argue that the unsettled questions about deportation and genocide, contested national borders, and self-identification as a victim diaspora strengthen Armenia homeland and diaspora relations about creating a sense of community and solidarity around nation-building. These unanswered circumstances explain why Armenians everywhere feel a need to have and know a homeland, and the presence of an Armenian nation, whether actual or anticipated, accomplishes this need.

### **The Ubiquity of Romantic Nationalism**

The recent history of creating borders compels us to choose geopolitical-national-ethnic identities. Armenians are not unique in feeling attachment to their homeland, or as many have referred to it, the old country. Ties to one’s country of origin, or ethnic nation or geographic territory of origin, occur among people regardless of residence at home or in diasporas. While generational differences manifest as ethnic groups assimilate into their host countries (for example, differences in knowledge of

and attachment to religion, language, family traditions and gender roles), ethnic identity claims are generally homogeneous. Group, racial, or ethnic homogeneity is always ideological and to make my points clear some generalizations must be made. Perhaps, as I suggested above, my argument is best understood in proximity to political activism, national interests, and community consciousness. Cohen (1996) explains that, “national identities are under challenge from de-territorialized social identities. In the age of globalization, the world is being organized vertically by nation-states and regions, but horizontally by an overlapping, permeable, multiple system of interactions. This system creates communities not of place but of interest, based on shared opinions and beliefs” (517). Therefore, though I speak as if all Armenians share this attachment, individuals can decide when and how much they want to claim attachment to their ethnic identity or homeland.

The construction of nation-states facilitates connections to bordered spaces. Kaldor (2004) says, “The emergence of national cultures is associated with the rise of the modern state and the spread of primary education” (163). Kaldor continues to make the connection between passion and war as the cause of nationalism, saying that passion is tied to death and “that war constructs nationalism rather than the other way around. That is why military heroes and battles are such an important part of the nationalist narrative” (165). Transnational identity has also become the modern conceptualization of race and ethnic groups, often denoted by hyphenation (e.g. African-American, Armenian-American, Asian-American). Hybrid identity coupled with the trans-global order of privatization and deregulation, including the ease of mass communication and collectivity-at-a-distance, constructs a real-but-invented interest in sustaining a connection with geographic and imaginary homelands. Furthermore, the relationship between war and nationalism is particularly relevant to the Armenian cause because many questions about their early twentieth century circumstances remain unsettled.

Diaspora Armenians in democratic states are advantaged in their feelings for Armenia as they are free to penetrate and participate in politics in their hostlands while also building solidarity through media, transnational social networks, and organizations and institutions that appeal to Armenian politics, opinions and remembrances. In a sense, local Armenian issues translate into global concerns. This is generally seen on the political scene as non-reciprocal with support from diaspora communities itinerant to the

homeland. However, Armenian traditions are also sustained, with varying success, in diasporas through the same transnational messages. Armenians in the United States and west Europe also take-up the social and cultural norms of their hostland, thus undermining their Armenian heritage that many Armenian organizations seek to preserve. It's a paradox of identity and interest: Armenian nationalism coupled with American or European cosmopolitanism. There is, however, nothing problematic with this blending. Emotional attachment is sustained in the tension between globalization and bordered living. As long as borders exist, Armenia is not only indistinct from other nations, but it also has a valid argument to claim its historic lands.

Benhabib (2002), in arguing for a pluralistic view of culture, says one of the tenets through which equality and diversity come together to form universal respect and universal rights is the "freedom of exit and association" (19). All people, as global citizens, must be afforded equal rights, have the freedom to claim and name their own identities, and have the freedom to enter or leave any group. "Universal human rights," says Benhabib, "transcend the rights of citizens and extend to all persons considered moral beings" (152). What, then, makes an Armenian and what is the future of Armenian identity? Significantly complicating this question is what Brubaker (2005) refers to as the diaspora diaspora. He writes, "The problem here is with the definite article. Diasporas are... cast as unitary actors. They are seen as possessing countable, quantifiable memberships" (10). This is a problem of constructing groups and as a result may render Diaspora an unintelligible unit of analysis. If Benhabib is correct, that one may enter or exit group identity at will, then counting who counts among diasporas loses significance. However, it may be possible to reconcile this problem by recalling that people maintain communication today through ethnic-specific media and technologies, facilitating close connections even across vast distances. Also, the ability to make this connection coupled with distance from home may in fact augment one's romanticized attachment to the homeland. Thus, differences among Armenians cannot detach them from shared interpretations of rootedness and victim circumstances.

The Unsettled Question of Genocide

Armenians maintain that the Turkish government in power during the period of 1915-1918 intended to remove Armenians from the Ottoman Empire not through forced migration, but through mass kill-

ing in order to advance a purely Turkish nation and culture. Turkey claims the deportation of Armenians was in response to threats by Armenians to seek autonomy in the region, thereby threatening the future of the Turkish nation. Cohen (1996) says: Though the origins of the Armenian diaspora were in commerce and trade, the Armenians can be characterized as a victim diaspora following the massacres of the late nineteenth century and their forced displacement during 1915-16, when the Turks deported two-thirds of their number (1.75 million people) to Syria and Palestine. Many Armenians subsequently landed up in France and the United States. It is now widely accepted (though still implausibly disputed by Turkish sources) that some one million Armenians were either killed or died of starvation during this mass displacement, the twentieth century's first major example of what has come to be known as 'ethnic cleansing' (512) Believing they are correct, Armenians maintain their need for a homeland largely around the insistence that Turkey recognize the events as genocide. Believing they are correct, Turks insist that the circumstances that started in 1915 did not constitute the post-situational definition of genocide.

Armenians claim intent while Turks claim there was no premeditation. In a discussion about the Armenian Genocide, Gunter (2013) says there is no denying, "that Turks killed and expelled Armenians on a large scale; indeed what happened might in today's vocabulary be called war crimes, ethnic cleansing, or even crimes against humanity. To prove genocide, however, intent or premeditation must be demonstrated, and in the Armenian case it has not" (39). It's not clear how or why Gunter makes a distinction between ethnic cleansing and genocide. His point is generally clear, but genocide does not require total annihilation to maintain definitive integrity. Suny (2009) offers a different view and says, "the Turkish state and Turkophilic historians have revised the mass deportation and killing of Armenians in 1915 from state-initiated ethnic cleansing and massacres into a civil war between Muslims and Christians" (931). Both sides are likely guilty of interpreting history through skewed national narratives, but suggesting that ethnic cleansing is somehow not as bad as genocide is a false distortion, and perhaps offensive distinction.

Rather than seeing a possible solution to the genocide question, both sides dwell in the chaotic order of impossible reconciliation, painting themselves as the victims and the others as the perpetrators. Indeed, there were casualties on both sides, but if the murder of Armenians was

premeditated by the state, what was the cause or justification? Did Turkey justify its action in response to the autonomy sought by Armenians? Or, did Armenians seek protection in response to Turkey's movement toward cleansing the Ottoman Empire of Christians and Armenians? It seems Armenians and Turks are too close to the subject to be able to transform the debate into a conversation about history, intent and admission of mistakes. Also, under the current political order of nationalisms, history becomes easily distorted or falsified to serve the strategic interests of nations. Melson (2013), putting forth an argument that many others have made, says, "both Armenian and Turkish nationalist narratives undermine a shared understanding of the events" (314). Similarly, Suny claims, "at present, the histories preferred by most Armenians and Turks remain embedded in their respective nationalist master narratives" (945-946). Thus, the unsettled question of Armenian genocide is not only a problem of memory, but also of creating national myths in the interests of each nation. For Turkey, the denial of genocide means not having to redress territorial claims. For Armenians, acknowledgment of what they maintain to be the true history of the circumstances of 1915 compels supporters of the Republic of Armenia to be active toward achieving reclamation of land that was taken by force.

### **The Unsettlement of Armenia's Borders**

If the question of genocide is unsettled, arguably that means legitimate territorial claims are also unsettled. As long as Turkey denies genocide, Armenians are left with no end, no closure, and in a sense remain in perpetual dispersion (Goekjian 1998). Where is Armenia and how does one get there? Where should Armenia be? The question of locating Armenia involves nearly two millennia of forced geographic movements of the Armenian people and elaborates why the borders of modern day Armenia are contentious for Armenians in the republic and in diasporas. The current Republic of Armenia, which has been in existence only since gaining independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991, is at most one-sixth of what it was between the first century BC and the first century AD. Also, prior to independence, as Baser and Swain (2009) explain, Armenians in "the diaspora perceived themselves as the sole representative[s] of their nation" (55). They continue, "The Karabakh issue, similarly to the 1988 earthquake, became the tool to organize Armenians worldwide and

worked to strengthen national identity and solidarity among the Armenian communities” (59). Armed with nationalist sentiment, concern for Armenians in Karabakh, and having sent support in excess of one billion dollars to the republic, diasporic Armenians energized through political and on-the-ground efforts to redress past experiences of violence and forced migration, the subsequent destruction of artifacts, and the taking of Armenian lands.

In this sense, an important understanding of what it means to be part of a diaspora must include a connection to the idea of a homeland. Baser and Swain (2008) argue, “It does not matter whether the diasporas concept of homeland is an actual homeland or just a symbolic attribution” (8). Writing about the 1988 protests by Armenians who sought to claim Nagorno Karabakh for Armenia, Rutland (1994) says this case “provides an important illustration of the close yet contradictory relationship between nationalism and democracy. The need to unify and protect the Armenian nation was the driving force that persuaded diverse social groups within Armenia to sink their difference and cooperate against the common foe” (857). Whooley (2009) explains, “The territory associated with the republic, which was first established in 1918, is considerably less than those lands historically connected to the Armenian race, lands which prior to the First World War lay within both the Ottoman and Russian Empires” (263). Diaspora Armenians, then, may have different responses to the question of locating their homeland. For some, the old country is the specific town or region from which they came. For others, the symbolic presence of the Republic of Armenia is good enough. Importantly, identifying an Armenian homeland can be in flux or be delineated as social, emotional or political. Panossian (1998) sums up, “not having the idea of homeland fixed on one spot, a ‘typical’ diasporan Armenian in the West can consider his homeland the ancestral village in the Ottoman Empire; the city of his birth in the primary diaspora of the Middle East (or elsewhere); his country of residence or citizenship; present day Armenia; or the ideal of an Armenia-to-be—and probably a combination of all of these” (184).

Despite the heterogeneity of Armenians around the world, a general consensus that they have a long history of persecution, expulsion and massacre, and subsequently territorial erosion and material destruction endures. “In the age of the Internet, Google satellite views, and instant-image news,” says Balakian (2013), “Armenians (as members of other diaspora

cultures), can watch as their monuments and culture disappear” (81). Having been successful in world politics, economics and education, Armenians have argued for recognition of these mostly agreed upon historiographies in attempts to build a strong Armenian nation. Panossian importantly states, “the historical roots of the diaspora lie in western Armenia (now eastern Turkey), not in the present republic. Hence the focus of its ‘imagination’, its historical memory, has been elsewhere—at least up to 1988” (183). However, Armenians still seek to reclaim lost lands. This is an issue over which Armenians clash, but is part of the Armenian cause and conversation, closely tied to the genocide debate. Writing about reasons Turkey denies genocide, Cooper and Akcam (2005) explain that Turkey fears “that acknowledgment of genocide would prompt Armenian territorial demands and calls for restitution of property confiscated a century ago” (85). By denying genocide Turkey does not have to consider seriously Armenia’s claim to eastern Turkey. If Turkey admits genocide, questions of territoriality will emerge and Armenians everywhere will politicize the call for irredentism.

### Conclusion

Thus far I have explained the contentious issues at stake for Armenians both at home and in diaspora. Claiming and maintaining an Armenian identity involves politics and culture, but also an internalized Armenianness. One must feel Armenian as well as have an emotional attachment to and a sense of solidarity around issues affecting Armenians globally. Furthermore, central to being seen as Armenian, arguably, is a connection and commitment to supporting the homeland—support which for some may be about reclaiming stolen territories, strengthening the current Republic of Armenia, arguing for Turkish admission of the Armenian Genocide, protecting Armenia from further erosion, or a combination of interests. Regardless of the causes Armenians take-up, the long history of Armenians as a victim diaspora constructs a framework for building a global community of Armenian people.

Seemingly, political Armenian identity is the starting place for solidarity around Armenian causes, stemming from the world order in which we are all compelled to live. I am not suggesting that other identities don’t need to be discussed, for in fact we have also become compelled to problematize who we are despite our internalized interpretations of experiences as well as narratives which may not speak the whole truth. There is nothing inherently problematic about identity/difference, but the

social and political structures in which we dwell force the issue. Nations and borders are constructs and a framework within which we make sense of the world. If it weren't for such formations perhaps we would perceive global relationships differently, but as long as this is the order of things, groups of people will stake claims to particular places as belonging to their people. Furthermore, attachment to Armenian homelands, whether the real homeland or a post-diaspora nation, is evidence of romantic connectiveness to geography, persecution and modern day politics. This nationalist arrangement of people and places is ubiquitous and for the Armenian Diaspora it appeals to memories of and stories about surviving genocide and losing their homelands to the Turks.

Armenian social solidarities, collective memories and romanticized attachments to the home nation persist in diaspora. Armenians everywhere are active politically for the development, and perhaps expansion, of Armenia. Culturally, however, what it means to be or live an Armenian life is in constant dispute and dispersal. Yet, as I have attempted to explain, there are unanswered questions tied to the current global order that calls on Armenians to work toward establishing a strong Armenian nation. What's so terrible about being emotionally attached to one's ethnicity or homeland? Am I not obligated to care about the question of genocide, the destruction of Armenian cultural artifacts and the taking of Armenian lands? Am I a victim or a survivor, perhaps a perpetrator, or am I a generation apart from needing to feel Armenian? In some moments, I must confess that I feel for the experiences of my not too distant ancestors. At the same time, I long not for the idea of an ostensible homeland, but for a global ethical transformation. For now, the politics of difference force us to choose identities and alliances with groups, situating us in essentialized historiographies of nations, races and ethnicities. As Cohen (1996) says, "Where a conflict did undoubtedly arise was in relation to the emergent force of nationalism. What the nationalists wanted was a 'space' for each 'race', a territorializing of each social identity. What they got instead—although they do not admit it—is a chain of cosmopolitan cities and an increasing proliferation of diasporic, subnational and ethnic identities that cannot easily be contained in the nation-state system" (520).

As globalization swells, de-territorialization will continue to question the idea of nations and borders. However, the current state of bordered affairs controls and demarcates how we write our lives. Armenians

in the homeland are particularly invested in and vulnerable to national bordering, but they have a large, expansive and powerful diaspora behind them. Of course, there are clashes between Armenians in diasporas and Armenians in the republic and a final word comes from Collier (2000) who cautions, “Diasporas sometimes harbor rather romanticized attachments to their group of origin and may nurse grievances as a form of asserting continued belonging. They are much richer than the people in their country of origin and so can afford to finance vengeance. Above all, they do not have to suffer any of the awful consequences of renewed conflict because they are not living in the country” (14).

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