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Connection without Engagement: Paradoxes of North American Armenian Return Migration

Abstract: Return migration from the diaspora to the ancestral homeland has emerged as an important sub-field within migration studies. The scholarship has introduced new ways of understanding migratory trajectories by exploring the roles of migrants' ethnicity and imagination and has identified novel ways of unpacking migratory patterns whose motivations are not centered on economic mobility. But the scholarship has begged the question by documenting the ethnic and sentimental motivations that make migration incomprehensible and the unexpected difficulties returnees encounter once they have settled in their perceived homelands. The current research project investigates the experiences of North American Armenians who have "returned" to Armenia. It seeks to extend the existing theoretical framework by demonstrating how ancestral returnees sustain a powerful feeling of connection to a country while simultaneously harboring a sense of disengagement from local practices.

Introduction

In the twentieth century, migration yielded unprecedented changes throughout the globe. Traditional accounts of migration—of peoples from less privileged countries moving to more privileged countries—have been augmented by more complex analyses (Schein 1998; Yang 2000; Žmegač 2005; Sardinha 2008; Tsuda 2009). More specifically, scholarship on return migration has introduced new ways of understanding migratory trajectories by incorporating ethnic ties and nostalgic imagination into its analyses. Such scholarship has provided new ways of moving beyond acknowledged *push* factors and uncovering new *pull* factors (Tsuda 2009).

The roles of ethnicity and imagination (sentimentality) help generate an understanding of migrations in which motivations are not primarily economic or political. At the same time, the scholarship has introduced tools to understand the difficulties encountered once the ethnic returnees have settled in their perceived homelands (Schein 1998; Žmegač 2005; Cook-Martín and Viladrich 2009; Tsuda 2009). While the existing treatment has yielded some important frameworks, there exists considerable room for new theoretical understandings of the many complexities of ancestral return migration. This is especially true of ethnic return migration from developed to developing countries—that is, where there often exists little economic advantage to migrate.

This subset is often referred to as ancestral return migration or "ethnically privileged migration" (Žmegač 2005; King and Christou 2011), which is carried out by those whose motivations are voluntary and rooted in sentiment and imagination. In this article, the term *ancestral return migrants* pertains to those who voluntarily "return" to a place to which they (and often their parents) have never lived. Robin Cohen (1997) has referred to the Jewish return to Israel as an example of this sort of migration; North American Armenians also fit this description. Despite the relative smallness of the sample, this type of return migration can illuminate quite a lot about return migration more generally, particularly among the second generation. In particular, this subset can help scholars understand what sustains voluntary returnees in the face of the hardships they often encounter.

By noting the sentiment that motivates return and the difficulties encountered post-settlement, the existing scholarship on return migration has not yet reconciled the chasm it has uncovered. Once settled, how do return migrants reconcile themselves with the unexpected difficulties they encounter? What sustains them even in the face of disillusionment? While some

do opt to move back to their countries of origin, many remain in the perceived ancestral homeland in the face of alienation and discrimination from the local population, bureaucratic and organizational barriers, emotional or material compromises, and other difficulties. Why they remain has yet to be meaningfully explored in the scholarship.

This article attempts to contribute new ways of understanding return migration within the context of the North American Armenian ancestral returnees who live and work in contemporary Armenia. As with American Jewish Zionists, the population chosen has no immediate ancestral or physical ties to the country to which they have returned. These ethnic and diasporic returnees work in various spheres of Armenian life—culture, politics, economics, and so on. While their motivations for moving and their experiences living in Armenia vary considerably, several key themes emerge that lend themselves to more critically understanding the paradox created by affective return migration. Over a nine-month period, I interviewed over fifty North American Armenians living in Armenia and asked them about their backgrounds, motivations, and homecomings. Some surprising themes emerged from their responses.

Rather than articulating a merely passive or sentimental relationship to their perceived homeland, those whom I interviewed consistently returned with a very specific agenda. They spoke candidly about the desire to "build" and transform Armenia—that is, they aspired to participate in developing a "new" Armenia. Similarly, several interviewees had assigned to themselves and assumed a role to "brand" (i.e., rebrand) the country. They felt Armenia had a rather negative image in various media and were working to alter its perception. Simultaneously, however, while most interviewees acknowledged that this dedication either to build or to brand stemmed from a strong connection to the country, a majority also acknowledged feeling disengaged from local issues and people. That is, many felt a connection without engagement.

But the active and transformative influences (i.e., to build and brand) sustained them in the face of disillusioning disengagement. As North American Armenians evince, return migrants sometimes migrate with the effort to transform their homeland.[2] This transformation, which manifests itself in the desire to build and/or brand, can sustain return migrants' emotional connection to the homeland despite a concomitant feeling of disengagement from local issues. As such, an assessment of North American Armenian migration to Armenia contributes new understandings of return migrants, particularly those who have opted to leave the developed world and resettle in their less developed homelands.

Questions and Methods

The research questions underlying the present analysis are the following: What background experiences overlap in the lives of those who have chosen to move to Armenia from North America? What motivations prompted this move? And what are the experiences of the North American Armenians once they arrive? Indirectly, this article also explores the extent to which North American Armenians integrate into Armenia or the degree to which they remain an isolated group, or, to borrow a felicitous framing from Jade Cemre Erciyes's (2008) research, "the diaspora in the homeland" (346)—that is, bounded mini-disasporic social networks and communities.

The research is based upon nine months of fieldwork in Armenia's capital city, Yerevan. I lived and worked in Yerevan for the 2015–2016 academic year. During this time, I worked as a lecturer at the American University of Armenia (AUA). At this institution, I undertook extensive participant observation and conducted several interviews with colleagues—many of whom were

Armenian Americans. In addition, I interviewed various Armenian Americans from a wide range of organizations. While observation and field notes played a pivotal role in my fieldwork, the content of this article comes largely from in-depth interviews.

By living and working in Yerevan for a full academic year, I was able to use snowballing methods to engage fifty respondents in in-depth interviews. Those interviewed work as officials from various diasporic and local organizations. The interviews were conducted largely in English, or a combination of Armenian and English, as respondents were mostly native English speakers. The interviews ran from approximately sixty to ninety minutes on average.

Those interviewed can be broken up into three categories: (1) those who arrived in Armenia within the last three years, (2) those who lived in Armenia between three and five years, and (3) those who lived there for over five years. There exists an even sampling among all three groups. Many of the narrative themes were consistent across all three groups. The majority of interviewees lived in Yerevan throughout the year. The Armenians I interviewed come from a range of cities throughout North America: Los Angeles, Boston, Detroit, San Francisco, Detroit, Toronto, Montréal, and Ottawa, among others. I have not included Armenians who visited Armenia (Yerevan) on holiday, those who lived but did not work locally, or even those who owned properties. *To be included in this research, one must have consciously and volitionally opted to move from North America to Armenia, where he or she works and spends a considerable part of the year—in most cases, the entire year.*

The individual narratives provide a dynamic and intimate snapshot of the experiences of ethnic and diasporic Armenians who have immigrated to Armenia in recent years. Each individual interviewed brought his or her own emotional, political, and ideological orientation to the interview. It is not the intention to disabuse any of these perspectives nor to use any single

one as definitive and representative. Rather, the interviews, taken as a whole, provide varieties of experience from which consistencies and inconsistencies can be gleaned systematically. Sifting the inconsistencies and yielding a consistent set of patterns provides a useful characterization of returnees' motivations and experiences.

Demographic Character of Sample Set

As stated, this article focuses exclusively on diasporans from North America.[3] To be sure, this population pales numerically to other diasporic groups currently inhabiting Armenia— particularly Syrian Armenian refugees. This article's focus is narrow so as to sharpen its analysis. A more inclusive demographic approach might have convoluted the theoretical frameworks advanced here.

In addition, the North American population is a relatively recent type of immigration to Armenia: while Armenian repatriation movements have existed in several iterations throughout the twentieth century, this population is unique in the resources and wherewithal it brings, as well as its geographical origins. It is also relatively distinct in the scholarship of immigration because the population studied does not consist of economic immigrants, refugees, or tourists (although several had partaken of short-term return visits prior to immigration). Rather, their ethnonational sense of belonging features as a prominent pull factor. They therefore fit more comfortably into a specific subset of return migrants—the sort whose rationale is not purely economic and/or political (although, in some cases, it largely is). As such, they invert the *dual frame of reference* often used in migration studies to identify migrants' willingness to accept low

status jobs in anticipation of an ultimate payoff (Massey, Durand, and González 1987; Waldinger and Lichter 2003).

Despite the relative smallness of this population, within the demographic limitations of my sample set, I have a diverse range. Those interviewed range in age between twenty-eight and sixty-eight. Approximately half were male and half female. Consistent with other case studies of return migration, those whom I interviewed largely came from relatively privileged, middle-class backgrounds (Reynolds 2008; Teerling 2011). Also, all except one interviewee had college, often graduate or professional, degrees.[4] All moved to Yerevan from North America; however, many of those interviewed were not born in the United States or Canada. As such, the population under discussion manifests considerable intra-ethnic diversity, both geographically and generationally. Individuals not born in the United States (but outside of Armenia) typically moved to the United States or Canada from countries in the Middle East or Iran in their teenage years.

All those interviewed live and work in the country's capital, Yerevan.[5] As such, the realities they perceive frequently reflect the capital far more than the rest of the country.[6] Even when the entire country of Armenia is evoked, the respondents largely refer to Yerevan. As a result, the following analysis pertains to Yerevan and does not attempt to account for the influence of North American diasporans outside of the capital—particularly since so few live outside of Yerevan.

Also, I tried to select among North American Armenians who work in a variety of sectors—some exclusively diasporic, others exclusively local, and still others a combination of both—but with the criteria that they needed to be gainfully employed on a consistent basis. This approach proved helpful, since the work diasporans do often bears on their orientation to Armenia.

Background Motivations for Returning

Many North American Armenians only recently "awoke" to the country and its harsh realities. In its short-lived history, the contemporary Republic of Armenia has experienced several tragedies. Prior to the fall of the Soviet Union, an earthquake measuring 6.8 in magnitude leveled Spitak (northern Armenia) and its environs in December 1988. This earthquake resulted in the deaths of approximately twenty-five thousand people. In the wake of this earthquake's destructive aftermath, the landlocked country experienced acute hardship with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Soviet Russia, crucial to Armenia's economy, was succeeded by Yeltsin's chaotic Russia, which in the 1990s was in a state of disarray. Thus, after years of depending on the Soviet Union for resources, protection, and support, Armenia found itself incapable of confronting a new set of harsh realities. Amid this difficult transition, an even more momentous tumult arose. What had begun in early 1988 as border skirmishes and unpredictable acts of aggression eventuated in outright war and population exchanges over Karabagh (now Artsakh) in 1992, following Karabagh's parliamentary vote to secede from Azerbaijan and join Armenia. This conflict with Azerbaijan, matched by increasingly tense relations with Turkey, restricted Armenia's access to resources and kept its attention on survival as opposed to infrastructural development. Although Armenian soldiers managed to wrest control of Karabagh from Azerbaijan in 1994, the conflict had taken its toll, locally and internationally. To date, Karabagh-Artsakh remains largely unrecognized, and the two countries remain in a state of "cold" war, with periodic clashes recurring near the border. Deprived of natural resources and depleted by war with Azerbaijan, Armenians were forced to live without sufficient electricity, gas,

foodstuffs, security, or employment, especially in the early nineties. Armenians frequently refer to this tremendously bleak period of the early- and mid-nineties as the "dark ages."

Amid this three-pronged clamor, the country reeled in its infancy at the prospect of building a sustainable post-Soviet infrastructure. The inability to develop infrastructure or secure itself affected the country's demographic composition significantly. During this period and through the late nineties, Armenia lost nearly a third of its population to emigration—largely working males from rural regions. Things only began to pick up, although gradually, in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As stated, this was a period of intense emigration and very little immigration.[7] In such dire circumstances, Armenians sought aid from the international community, including the diaspora.

It was in the aftermath of earthquake, independence, and war that the diaspora "woke up" and cultivated a new connection to Armenia. I asked all the individuals interviewed what Armenia signified to them when they were growing up. Most provided a similar response— virtually nothing. Although earlier orientations toward Armenia, often mediated by major diasporic organizations, had been characterized by ambivalence, the North American Armenians I interviewed reflected a more recent and distinct reality: rather than feeling oriented toward a "homeland" with ambivalence, interviewees merely had not felt oriented to Armenia at all.[8] In response to a question about her association to Armenia during high school and college (pre-1988), one respondent in her mid-fifties, who has been living in Armenia since 2001, stated, "Nothing. I knew it was there. It just wasn't something I even thought possible of visiting. Didn't have a great big desire to visit. It was just there." The executive director of a volunteer organization said something quite similar: "I never consciously thought of it growing up. It was this abstract, far-off thing that you did reports about." This sort of vague association recurred in

many interviews. Thus, it was the above-mentioned triangulation of sudden and intense collective hardships besetting Armenia that helped catalyze Armenian consciousness about Armenia in North America and elsewhere. As such, the prospect of "returning" to Armenia only began to take shape in the late 1990s. Indeed, for many interviewees, Armenia not only had not registered as an ancestral homeland; it was not a palpable reality until quite a bit later in their lives.

The perceived newness of the Armenian republic and its new role in the imagination are important factors when understanding motivations prompting return among North American Armenians. As stated, while each person interviewed presented unique varieties of opinion and perspective on motivations underlying relocation, two, often overlapping, themes arose in my interviews: people interviewed often fall into the categories of builders and/or branders.

Theoretical Approaches to Ancestral Return Migration

In the existing literature, return migration covers diverse motivations and outcomes. It involves the migratory circulations of displaced persons/refugees, economic immigrants/guest workers, retired seniors, visiting students and businesspeople, and so on. The focus in this article is on a specific subset of return migration—that is, on long-term ethnic return by migrants whose motivations are far more affective and sentimental than economic or political. The limited scholarship on this subset typically designates it as "ancestral return" (King, Christou, and Levitt 2014).

In the scholarship treating this subset of return migration, there consistently recurs a paradoxical tension. Following Urry's (2007) "mobilities" model, King, Christou, and Levitt

(2014) attempt to expand the definitional power of return migration. Of Urry's five mobility types—corporeal, material, imaginative, virtual, and communicative—King and colleagues see return as a corporeal mobility that creates tension between the mobility of leaving one's home and the stability of settling in the homeland. Return migration, for King, Christou, and Levitt, is framed in the language of tension and paradox—a migratory cycle to end all subsequent migratory cycles. They argue that "the return can be—often is—a chimera in that the *status quo* does not exist; it can be a journey of profound disillusionment, so that the first return provokes another 'return' to the place once inhabited before the first return took place, or to another real or imagined 'home-place'" (King, Christou, and Levitt 2014, 4). The authors acknowledge the "profound disillusionment" of many returnees, but *the mobilities scheme is employed, because it accepts the tension rather than attempts to resolve it*. For most scholars of return migration, this disillusionment, as here, "provokes another 'return'." However, for many others, it does not; several who confront these same feelings of disillusionment or disengagement remain. The scholarship acknowledges the disappointment of those whose motivations are affective, but it does not attempt to explain what sustains the many that remain anyway. This is an important yet overlooked problem in the literature of return migration, especially from developed to less developed countries.

Without resolving this problem, several scholars have provided important insights on how this disparity between expectation and outcome takes shape pre- and post-return (Schein 1998; Žmegač 2005; Cook-Martín and Viladrich 2009; Tsuda 2009; Levitt, Lucken, and Barnett 2011). These studies often investigate the degree to which identity is constructed (or "forged") in the diaspora and the extent to which this constructed social, political, or even religious identity inhibits settlement of and integration into the homeland. This construction explains the strong

affective sense of connection many prospective returnees feel toward the homeland. However, as with King and colleagues above, scholars consistently identify the disillusionment returnees confront in the homeland and their subsequent disengagement from local realities (Panossian 1998; Christou 2006; Cook-Martín and Viladrich 2009; Kasbarian 2015). These studies employ the language of disillusionment, disappointment, and ambivalence to characterize returnees' long-term settlement experiences. A paradox arises: If returnees confront post-settlement disappointment and disengagement, why do many continue to see their future in the perceived homeland? Anastasia Christou (2006a) articulates this paradox in her analysis of Greek returnees:

> They find that their ancestral homeland does not meet their expectations in
> a number of ways. In their narrative accounts they express: disappointment … and
> dissatisfaction with their material circumstances and prospects following "return
> migration." Yet all this is to some extent tempered by the participants' beliefs
> that, despite these elements of disillusion and questioning, their future still lies in
> the "ancestral" land (832).

As Christou summarizes, returnees often feel disappointment and dissatisfaction with the homelands they encounter. Nonetheless, many remain emotionally connected to and physically present in the perceived homeland despite their disengagement from the local realities. Why this occurs has yet to be broached. To be sure, the existing research explains fundamental aspects of return migration—it explores the motivations prompting return and narrating the post-settlement experiences of returnees. However, it also leaves unaddressed the paradoxical question: If sentiment largely motivates migration, why do many return migrants inure themselves to the

unexpected difficulties they encounter for extended periods of time? What sustains them in the face of disappointment or feelings of disengagement?

In terms of what motivates return and the difficulties encountered post-settlement, North American Armenian returnees validate many of the insights earlier scholarship has yielded. They also begin to resolve the paradox that inheres in long-term return. Historically, North American Armenians are quite distinct. Perhaps the closest analogue is American Jewish Zionists who migrated to Israel prior to the Six-Day War of 1967. As Rebhun and Waxman (2000) have noted, American *aliya* between 1948 and 1959 did not exceed several hundred annually (66). This migration, in number and type, is the closest parallel to contemporary North American return. What Kevin Avruch (1981) says of American Jewry who migrated over fifty years ago is true of Armenian Americans today: "they are not fleeing pestilence, famine, or war; nor are they seeking a haven from institutional or ethnic persecution. Even more important is the fact that economic or pecuniary concerns are among the least important factors in motivating a decision to immigrate" (4). While North American Armenian returnees, as with American Zionists of the mid-twentieth century, reflect only a subset of return migration types, their experiences can have disproportionate influence in the perceived homeland. It is quite useful, therefore, to uncover and reconcile the paradoxes intrinsic in the study of this subset of return migration.[9]

Returnees as Builders

There exists no single unified narrative among those who have settled in Armenia from North America. The motivations for their resettlement and personal histories vary. The diversity of their responses reflects the internal diversity of the group itself—representing several urban

origins in Lebanon, Iran, Egypt, Europe, North America, and so on. Despite this internal

diversity, certain themes do arise that highlight the motivations prompting many North American

Armenians to immigrate to Armenia. In this section and the following, I will explain two distinct

yet related motivations—builders and branders. These motivations surfaced in practically every

interview.

I define builders as those who have come to Armenia in order to participate in its

development. Those in this group typically root their motivations to repatriate in a desire to

contribute to multiple sectors of nation building—political, economic, social, et cetera. As one of

my interviewees articulated:

I realize that we [diasporan Armenians] have a role to play … it's not

humanitarian aid, it's not building churches and buildings, but it's participating in

making Armenia what we want Armenia to be. It's working in the areas that our

know-how and our influence can make a change. In human rights, in

environment, in LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender] and disabled areas …

Be a participant in civil society and work for civil liberties … If I can participate,

a little bit with that, that is my mission right now.

The theme of wanting to "participate in making Armenia what we want Armenia to be" recurred

in most interviews. North American diasporans frequently identified a desire to participate in the

development of a fledgling nation, one that they perceive as nascent and malleable. In fact, the

worlds "build," "create," "participate," and "develop" occurred in a staggering majority of

interviews.

But the desire to build also often stemmed from diasporans' feeling they could not build

as significantly in the United States or Canada. Interviewees often confessed that their

contribution in Armenia could prove meaningful; in the United States or Canada, they would not have a comparable opportunity. A diasporan in his early thirties from Los Angeles observed the following:

I would want to be a part of building a country. And it wasn't an opportunity that would be afforded to me in the United States. The United States has been built already. You could be a part of its refinement, but you're not going to be a part of its foundational work. And … the only place I would want to be a part of that, other than the United States, would be Armenia.

The desire to build in Armenia very often reflected a concomitant feeling of not being able to do so in North America with the same results. Again, this reflects the perception that Armenia, for North American diasporans, is a malleable nation, a new land or frontier. Some came to Armenia for lack of a better opportunity, whereas others gave up lucrative careers; however, this theme emerged recurrently and existed among those of varied regional backgrounds and educational attainments.

Respondents identified a great breadth of skills offered up to nation building. Areas of aspirational development included sectors as broad as information technology (IT), architecture, filmmaking, restaurant management, university pedagogy, social consciousness (women's and gay rights), chess, hospitality, literature, ecotourism, national security, engineering, international law, and more. For example, a filmmaker articulated this motivation nicely: "I came with a purpose. I want to see if I can bring Armenian cinema to the global platform in a more dramatic, more traditional independent film market. And, hopefully, change the kind of films they're making here." In the legal arena, a lawyer and founder of a successful international law practice stated:

Basically, wherever you work, you build. And, you know, as I was working in [omitted] you know, I said, I'm building all of these things in these countries and it's a good thing that I'm doing it. But there's [*sic*] other people who can do this. Who is going to be building in Armenia if Armenians don't do it ourselves? You build where you live … It's been a national aspiration, to build our own place, for centuries our people have been striving to do [it], and finally we had the opportunity to do it.

This sense of building a new Armenia underlies the motivations of many North American Armenian returnees. But this is not necessarily unique to Armenians. As Skrbis (1997) argues of this phenomenon a bit more abstractly in the context of Australian Croatians, "… the previous diasporic perception of Croatia as an 'enslaved' homeland has been successfully replaced by the notion of 'bleeding' homeland and/or homeland which can succeed with the process of post-war reconstruction and democracy building only with the ideologically constructed 'unfailing support from the Croatian diaspora'" (452). But the North American Armenians in Yerevan have gone one step further: they have actually relocated to Armenia to build the previously "enslaved" post-Soviet nation.

Building efforts of returnees are manifest. North American Armenian returnees currently manage prominent technological centers, hotels, cafés, restaurants, law offices, and more; they run official political parties; they have founded transnational IT businesses and other corporations; they have facilitated the circulation of hundreds of millions of dollars through international law offices; they have founded and run Armenia's only Western-accredited university; and they have helped build hundreds of schools around Armenia.

In addition, the desire to build in Armenia often occurred alongside disenchantment with the diaspora and its ability to preserve Armenian culture in North America. According to several interviewees, this disillusionment results from rigidified practices and deluded perceptions in the diaspora. Thus, many North American Armenian returnees immigrate to prevent assimilation and, ultimately, cultural loss. As an engineering university instructor in his early thirties articulated:

> Armenians don't want to assimilate. When they do, they don't want to admit that they're assimilated. The definition of being Armenian is not changing. Or they don't want to accept that it is. So then, I don't know, it's just, I feel the diaspora is in limbo, and it is not coming out of it, okay? But that limbo of "I don't know what's happening," and let's say, if it's a spectrum, one extreme being cultural preservation or identity or Armenianness or Armenia, and the other end being completely lost and assimilated. So Armenians are somewhere caught in between in that limbo. But in that limbo, we're not coming out of it; we're going toward the losing everything end. I don't know, I feel the communities haven't evolved; there's absolutely no evolution in the diaspora communities. They don't consider changing life and stuff … I'm not saying the best way to change [diasporans] is to come here. I'm saying it's the only way!

As such, builders often think of themselves as building a new country for the diaspora itself—one in which other Armenians from abroad can inhabit and resist assimilation. A middle-aged IT specialist made the following claim:

> I feel like a lot of the things diasporan organizations and diasporic Armenians preach and do ring very hollow to me because I think there is this

eventually losing battle to try to remain Armenian in a world that is going toward

assimilation. I think that genocide recognition has been a complete drain of our

resources, and not just of our resources, but also the way people perceive us. I

don't want to be perceived as someone begging for someone to give me

something back. I would much rather be in a position in which we create a strong

country, and we're in a position to demand or take actions to take something back,

without having to be dependent on someone else's good will.

Thus, for many returnees, the desire to resettle reflected disillusionment with diasporic practices

in the United States—the sort of practices, they feel, that are accelerating assimilation. Rather

than continue living this perceived "fallacy" in the diaspora, as the same interviewee expressed,

many return migrants believe that diasporic Armenians need to transform Armenia into a hub

and to build, to "create," a new, "strong" country, one that preserves Armenian culture.

Returnees as Branders

Just as builders intend to place their stamp on the perceived fledging state's development,

branders are motivated to stamp a new image of Armenia abroad. Those I call "branders" also

attribute the desire to participate in the development of Armenia; however, their participation

couples with a desire to alter the perception of the country. Amid the tri-pronged clamor of war

with Azerbaijan, independence from the Soviet Union, and hardship from material shortages, the

first years after Armenian independence were fraught with difficulties. The country developed a

negative reputation among diasporans and others. Many considered it uninhabitable, stilted,

backward, impoverished, and corrupt. According to branders, this negative perception persists

and prevents greater diasporic immigration and investment in the local economy. That is, these negative associations (or brands) stymie potential progress, both locally and abroad. As such, branders are attempting to change the perception of Armenia to the diaspora and, to a certain extent, to local Armenians. This change, they believe, will hasten Armenia's development in multiple spheres. One interviewee argued that:

> Narrative change is the most important part of changing what we actually end up doing. Those who are stuck in the old narratives are the ones who will not invest. Once you start changing that, because people are going across borders and having their own firsthand experiences, then they see beyond their initial narratives … Narrative change happens when you yourself become convinced by firsthand experience that reality is different than the narrative. So you start talking differently. Once you start talking differently, you start affecting those that hear you. The more passionate are people, they become more forceful ambassadors … Practicality comes only as a result of mindset shift.

This "narrative," or, as I frame it, brand, of Armenia has significant impact for many North American diasporans living and working in Armenia. They believe that their presence helps them participate in the country's development and alters the emotional orientation toward those abroad and at home. This emotional shift (or narrative shift), as the interviewee above articulates, affects the willingness of others to invest their resources in Armenia.

The media through which branders broadcast their narrative are various. Some include free youth excursions to Armenia. Through an organization like BirthRight Armenia, young North American Armenians (as well as diasporans from all over the world) are given opportunities to work, travel, and live in Armenia between four months and a year. Relocation of

everyone involved is not the intention of the program. Some remain while others leave. Those who return to North America, infused with a new understanding of the "homeland," endorse the program and repatriation to friends and family back home. Another organization, Repat Armenia, also promotes a pro-Armenian brand among Armenian adults who consider moving to Armenia from abroad. The organization facilitates transitions from other countries to Armenia in terms of housing, employment, and social networking. Yet another organization, the Armenian Volunteer Corps (AVC), helps, largely, non-Armenians (over the age of thirty-two) find volunteer work in Armenia. Although less interested in repatriation, AVC encourages their volunteers to spread the word and brand of Armenia to other non-Armenians. These organizations maintain websites that carry their message of a new, promising Armenia. In addition, they use social media platforms such as Facebook to rebrand Armenia and promote return migration among diasporans.

Apart from these organizations, other media platforms also exist to rebrand the state to diasporans and local Armenians. North American Armenian diasporic newspapers and online reporting websites are media sources that also attempt to rebrand Armenia. Those involved with these media sources acknowledge their obligation to portray Armenia in a favorable light. Even when some of the North American Armenian newspeople confessed their desire to evaluate matters more objectively, they conceded to the fact that they put a positive spin on the more negative accounts. As the chief of a North American Armenian news outlet confessed:

> We have a really big responsibility … Yes, we will report on what is
>
> going on in the country, but we will always try to leave hope at the end of it.
>
> Because if you decimate that hope, then it's so easy for the diasporan to turn their

back on Armenia. So that's the one message I try to give here all the time … you

[have] got to leave hope.

Among the in-country diasporic media establishments, there recurs a desire to inspire hope among diasporans so that they do not "turn their back" on Armenia. An internationally recognized photojournalist who has lived in Yerevan for the last two years admitted something similar, saying, "When I was doing the [exempted] story, I realized I didn't want Armenia to look bad [laugh]. Now this is not what I'm supposed to do as a journalist, but, still, there was a sense of me, because there's good and bad in Armenia, and I wanted to present some of the positive parts." A repatriated novelist from New England said something similar about the function of his work:

There's always been an element of, how do I help see the value of staying

here, citizens, and not giving up? You know, saying things like, "this is our

country; I can't fit in." These strange things. [pause] So I guess my writing about

Armenia and about Armenian issues … it's been calling attention to movements

of change, like the politics, that we can get over this corruption, we can get over

all the craziness that's happening internally by working together. And the

Armenian diaspora needs to play a bigger role.

Whether online, in newspapers, in literature, or on television, North American Armenian branders are actively engaged in attempting to alter the perception of Armenia, a perception whose negative spin, they feel, stifles potential growth and development in Armenia.

As builders build in various sectors, branders also brand in multiple domains. For example, an engineer from Boston whom I interviewed has launched a successful campaign of branding Armenia as the "chess nation." When asked about this, he responded:

I was very much a part of the effort in the last few years that has resulted

for the first time [in] a national school system of any country [that] has

incorporated chess into the school curriculum … We talk about national branding,

what is Armenia going to be famous for … I always found Armenia to brand itself

with this chess thing, that would be a good one.

Thus, even in the context of introducing chess to Armenian school curricula, the participant

quoted here had "branding Armenia" at the forefront of his mind. This has been a successful

campaign. Frequently, when Armenia appears in international publications or travelogues,

references to chess occur.[11] As these returnees' diverse experiences reflect, the instinct to

rebrand Armenia takes various shapes.

Connection without Engagement

The builder/brander framework helps in understanding of what ostensibly seems like a

paradox in how those interviewed described their lived experiences in Armenia. I'm calling this

paradox "connection without engagement."[12] As in other studies of return migrants, North

American Armenian returnees confirmed feeling a strong connection to the country yet a

simultaneous disengagement from the local population. As a result, many diasporans form their

own social bubbles and rely heavily on other diasporans to socialize. As one interviewee

confessed, "My days are diasporan … When I think about it, it's mind-blowing. I'm surrounded

by diasporans. They [diasporans] want to live here; they want to help it in some way. When you

come here you feel connected to a goal—developing Armenia." As described in this article,

North American Armenians wish to develop or build a new Armenia; the locals do not feature prominently in their experiences and/or agendas.[13]

But might not this feeling of disengagement from the local population cause many diasporans to doubt their experiences of living in Yerevan or their own identity as Armenians? To be sure, it does. But the builder/brander framework helps reconcile this ostensible paradox of connection without engagement. Since the primary motivation of many diasporans is to participate in the creation of a new Armenia—that is, to build or brand a new Armenia—their experiences with individual members of the local population remain somewhat secondary. Builders immigrate to Armenia in order to participate in the development of a country suitable to themselves and prospective future generations. Branders attempt to instill a desire for more diasporic Armenians to come to Armenia and/or help contribute further to its development. Since integration is not the main goal, disengagement from the local population is not an insurmountable problem. For North American Armenians, the local Armenian culture is in large part a distinct culture; those interviewed frequently expressed no intention of making it their own. This goes both ways: as a thirty-one-year old professional who has lived and worked in Yerevan for four years confessed, "I'll never be one of them. It will never happen. They appreciate me as an American. They'll never appreciate me as an Armenian." While local Armenians identify diasporans as co-ethnics, they do not feel a sense of sameness, just as the diasporans do not feel a sense of cultural sameness to locals. The motivations to build and brand a new nation helps fill the gap return migration scholarship has implicitly opened. By building and branding a new Armenia, return migrants sustain their connection to a country from which, upon settlement, they feel disengaged.

To be sure, returnees consistently spoke of how regrettable their lack of engagement seemed to them. Although many interviewees discussed having some local friends, when asked about their personal lives, they usually identified cultural, and sometimes linguistic, barriers that inhibited meaningful interaction. However, only rarely did any speak of genuine efforts to bridge the gap between the local and diasporic populations; practically no one identified a desire to become one of the locals.[14] In fact, of the over fifty people interviewed, only three had obtained citizenship. The overwhelming majority had obtained special residency status (SRS).[15] In addition, I did not interview any male respondents who expressed a desire to serve in the military, though all but two stated they were open to their children serving in the military or attending a local university. Evidently, relations between Armenians of Armenia and those of North American diasporans remain hospitable yet somewhat distant.[16]

The level of disengagement from the local involves both a reluctance to be immersed fully after resettlement and, when probed further, the persistence of consistent loyalties to North American values, traditions, and institutions. This disengagement is compounded by the fact that North American Armenians occupy a privileged position in Armenia. They bring resources and capital to which most of the local population cannot have access. They can afford to live quite comfortably and aspire to accomplish rather lofty goals. In addition, they possess significant social capital. Coming from the United States or Canada brings with it a certain social cachet and earning potential to which, again, most locals lack access As a university instructor who has lived in Armenia for about three years noted, "I live a relatively privileged life, something I'm still not altogether too comfortable with. Being a graduate student in the US, you're in the bottom of society when it comes to income. But over here, you're closer to the [privileged] minority. So I feel that weird shift." As Tsuda (2009) has argued of Japanese Americans as

opposed to Japanese Brazilians, North American Armenians undoubtedly benefit from their place in the global hierarchy of nations.[17]

Still, North American diasporans' ability to work and live apart from the local population stems from the jobs many take. While a small segment does work closely with the local population through local initiatives and organizations, a significant number of North American Armenians work for organizations founded by other diasporans. In these organizations (such as Tumo, AUA, Repat Armenia, BirthRight Armenia, AVC, etc.) the relationship between local Armenians and diasporans who staff them tends to be somewhat limited. Even the person who founded one of the first expat/repat haunts in Yerevan, a middle-aged woman who immigrated to Armenia in 2001, acknowledged virtually no connection with the local population. As she said, "When I hit my tenth year, I had friends from Boston visiting. So one of the friends asked me, 'How many local friends do you have?' 'None,' I said." Even after spending sixteen years living and working in Armenia, this business owner confessed that she did not feel it was possible to engage with local Armenians. Most expressed the same sentiment; they believe the differences between themselves and local Armenians were too great. A middle-aged engineer from Canada acknowledged this point, claiming:

> We are very different. In the way we eat, in the way we marry, in the way we [pause] everything is different. For us, it was a learning experience … If you [ask] me, out of ten friends, how many are locals and how many are diasporans, I shamefully have more diasporans. This has turned into a joke for my wife and me. When we first came here, we jokingly said we should put a personal in the newspaper. Seeking a local family to be friends with. But it's not that easy!

Exceptions

Nonetheless, some whose work requires closer partnership or personal interactions with local Armenians felt more integrated and criticized this tendency to remain aloof. A middle-aged business owner who spent most of his formative years in Los Angeles asserted the following:

My other diasporan friends, they tend to hang out with other diasporans. And I tell them that … when in Rome, do as the Romans. You don't live in a country if, all day, you're hanging out with people like you. So among all of my diasporan friends that I know, I have assimilated more than they have.…They moved to Armenia, and I think they have a lot to learn from the locals.

Although this business owner identified a strong distinction between himself and locals, he criticized diasporans for living apart from the local population and not learning from those from Armenia. Still, even among the most ardent builders and branders who have lived in Yerevan for over five or ten years, the gap they felt between themselves and the local population remains acute. As a successful IT manager from Silicon Valley conceded:

I've made it an effort not to live in a bubble. Interestingly enough though, and I was really not expecting this, Danny, over the last few years, if I look at my social life, I've started to spend more and more time with diasporans or repats and less with truly local friends. And I was not expecting that; this was not by design.

In addition, connection without engagement has generational limitations. Those who have raised families in Armenia noted a significant difference between their own orientation to local Armenian culture and their children's. For the children of repatriates, local Armenian culture may still not be their own, but they feel far more intimately connected to it. The director of a

successful technological center shared with me a note sent from her son, who moved back to the United States for college. Recounting a business interview experience, he provided the following anecdote:

> I pulled that moving to Armenia when I was ten, and finding myself exclusively hanging out with diasporans instead of embracing the local culture card. And I explained how I had nothing in common with the locals because I was into Saturday morning Cartoon Network and made a lot of pop culture references they didn't understand. But then I decided to hang out with locals and I discovered they had their own "cool" culture.

This respondent's son, who moved to Armenia at the age of ten, identifies his own evolution: by spending his formative years in Armenia, he eventually learned Armenia had its own "cool culture." Although most North American Armenians do not feel capable of engaging meaningfully with the local population, those who have raised children in Armenia acknowledged that their children did. Despite the fact that the respondent, as with many others, had sent her children back to the United States for education, *they acknowledge that the impact return migration has had on their children is sizeable*. Another respondent who has had two children since coming to Armenia said something similar: "My two boys completely self-identify as Hayastancis (Armenians from Armenia) because they were born here. And it's funny because once we were at a swimming pool and my son was like five or six and someone asked, 'Are you from the States?' And he turned around and said, 'No, they [his family] are from Canada; I'm from here!'" For these children born in Armenia, their identity is unequivocally local Armenian. Although the respondent said she would be glad to see her children study at AUA and remain in

Armenia, she acknowledged that none of her four children (two born in Canada and two in Armenia) has Armenian citizenship.

Nonetheless, the number of North American Armenians who acknowledged feeling integrated into and engaged with local practices and people was quite small. Those who work closely with locals most of the time (particularly in more intimate settings, such as a women's domestic abuse center) tended to feel a bit more engaged than those working at diasporic organizations. But apart from the intergenerational differences among children, the North American Armenians I interviewed perceive themselves as building an Armenia that they can inhabit, one that may not involve direct engagement with the local population.

Conclusion

North American Armenians' transformative efforts reconcile the disparity implicit in many return migration discussions. Sentimentality and imagination may motivate return migration, but what sustains them post-settlement? Many return migrants wish to participate in the development of their homelands; this involves transforming many aspects of society. The more active and transformative role of return migrants warrants attention in case studies focused on return migration, particularly when economic and political motivations are otherwise absent. By neglecting this dimension of return migration, the scholarship has allowed a paradox to remain unanswered. This dimension helps clarify how return migrants can at once feel tremendously connected to their homelands while remaining largely disengaged from local issues. The desire to build and brand a new country—that is, to play an active transformative role in the development and image of the home society—sustains North American Armenian

returnees. For those who remain and commit their resources to Armenia over the course of many years, the builder/brander framework helps close the gap that connection without engagement opens. As such, North American Armenians introduce new ways of understanding what can sustain many ethnic returnees once they have settled. As the cases above document, the desire to build and brand Armenia has resulted in the founding of universities, law offices, technological centers, news media organizations, exported services, and more. But this active and transformative consideration also helps to explain the paradoxical connection without engagement many return migrants experience after moving to the perceived homeland. While North American Armenian diasporans are not exhaustively representative of return migration in its various complexities and iterations, they do, I believe, provide new ways of thinking about and studying return migration.

Notes

2   This article analyzes migrants whose connection to the homeland has been intensified and constructed via sentimental immigration. For the opposite, see Waldinger (2012), "Beyond Transnationalism: An Alternative Perspective on Immigrants' Homeland Connections." See also Waldinger's (2015) *The Cross-Border Connection: Immigrants, Emigrants, and Their Homeland*.

3   Armenian inhabitation of North America dates back to the late nineteenth century. For a more detailed analysis, see Robert Mirak's (1983) *Torn Between Two Lands*.

4   This is not to say I targeted those with college degrees. The majority had higher education degrees. This suggests that, at present, a mostly educated elite group among North American Armenians undertakes repatriation.

5   North American Armenian returnees, unlike other groups in Armenia, only infrequently operate as business owners. The vast majority are employed within an organization. Of the fifty people interviewed, only two owned and operated their own businesses in Yerevan.

6   At this stage, very few North American Armenians live and work outside the capital.

7   I should note, however, that four of those individuals interviewed did move to Armenia during this period.

8   See Sosie Kasbarian's (2015) article on a similar topic, "The Myth and Reality of 'Return'—Diaspora in the 'Homeland'." Her article reflects the dynamism of the diaspora's evolving orientation to Armenia.

9   Different case studies involving historical or contemporary Armenian return include those of Pattie (1997, 1999, 2004), Panossian (1998), Yousefian (2011, 2014), Kasbarian (2015), and Karageozian (2015).

11   The BBC, WSJ, Der Spiegel, Canal+, and CNN have all covered Armenia's involvement with chess.

12   My original, less refined framing was "the paradox of connectivity." I thank Khachig Tölölyan for suggesting this revision after listening to my description of the phenomenon.

13   In fact, the only experience involving locals that emerged consistently in my interviews pertained to dealing with disgruntled taxi drivers.

14   Many did identify the desire to marry a local (generally males desiring to marry a local female) and raise children, on account of the safety and community Yerevan provides.

15   SRS is intended largely for people of Armenian descent. It enables Armenians to live and work in Armenia for ten years—they receive a ten-year contract, which is renewable. While securing privileges and the right to open businesses and acquire property, SRS exempts holders from voting, running for political office, and serving in the military (Kasbarian 2015).

16   Some who have lived in Armenia for over five years identified an inverse experience: they articulated a desire and effort to integrate during their initial years; however, over time, they said that their social lives had become increasingly (often exclusively) diasporan. One participant who had lived in Yerevan for over ten years confessed,

> At one time I really connected with them. I tried to identify with people here as much as I
>
> could. But, in the last few years, I've been realizing that their mentalities are just so far
>
> off, their personalities, that I don't see how sustainable it is to think that I can relate to
>
> them because I can't. I'm moving back closer to diasporans … I became closer to
>
> diasporan circles.

This trajectory is a bit counterintuitive. However, as this participant observed, his disengagement from locals has not affected his feeling of connection to Armenia or altered his commitment about living in Armenia.

17   In the scholarship on return migration, discussions about "privileged" returnees recur. They typically pertain to ethnic immigrants who receive special recognition from the state. For example, the "Pontic Greeks" (that is, those coming from the USSR) receive full citizenship status and special assistance from the state, whereas Greek Albanians receive nationality but not citizenship (Triandafyllidou and Veikou 2002). Similarly, ethnic Germans from Russia or Eastern Europe (or *Aussiedler*) receive citizenship upon arrival (Joppke 2005). Park (1996) notes the more extensive rights afforded to Korean Americans as compared to ethnic Koreans from China (the *Joseonjok*), and concludes that South Korea has established a

"hierarchical diaspora"—that is, the legal rights of a migrant is determined by where the country from which they come ranks in the global hierarchy of nations.

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