

Critics' Forum

Literature

Disregarding the Diaspora's Cultural Production? The Diaspora Ministry's Essentialist View of Armenian Identity

By Myrna Douzjian

In 2008, the Republic of Armenia announced the establishment of the Diaspora Ministry. Since then, this newly established governmental department has been implementing its primary mission, furthering the development of economic, social, and cultural ties between Armenia and the diaspora.

Considering the Diaspora Ministry's mission, it is perhaps surprising that the diaspora news media (with the notable exception of the consistent critique offered by *Nor Harach*) has by and large reported on its efforts in a tone ranging from neutral to positive: the ministry's activities have yet to generate broad-ranging critical inquiry from the diaspora. Perhaps diaspora institutions and individuals simply consider themselves unaffected by the ministry's activities. After all, the diaspora has more pressing issues to address. The Diaspora Ministry does its thing, and we do ours. Or, perhaps the diaspora even welcomes the ministry's efforts.

A few weeks ago, I received an announcement that the ministry had forwarded to the Society of Armenian Studies (or, SAS, a US-based organization that represents the community of Armenian Studies scholars around the world): "The Ministry of the Diaspora of the Republic of Armenia will be holding a scientific workshop on 'The Problems of Preservation of the Features of Armenian Identity in Mixed Marriages' (April 25-26, 2010)." The announcement presents the opportunity of offering a cultural critique of the ministry's position vis-à-vis the diaspora, one that is long overdue. And the area that deserves serious attention is precisely the one suggested by the announcement: the rhetoric regarding Armenian cultural identity.

Let's begin with the aims of the workshop, as described in the call for abstracts: "To discuss and reveal the difficulties and problems (such as language, traditions, religion, children's upbringing, family relations, participation in Armenian community life, being accepted by the Armenian community) typical of the Armenian families of mixed marriages, to find ways and means for solving those issues through constructive discussions and analyses, to work out programs meant at preservation of (*sic.*) national identity in such families."

The description, while problematic from the perspective of race relations, also assumes that Armenian communities ostracize couples in interethnic marriages, an observation that may have been valid decades ago but ignores the current cultural and social realities of life in the diaspora. Armenian communities worldwide have changed and evolved, especially over the last few decades, and they have come to embrace what might be more accurately described as a "hybrid" identity – in interethnic marriages as well as in monoethnic ones. As Khachig Tölölyan has convincingly shown, the elites and

institutions of the Armenian diaspora advocate competing visions of diasporic identity. The acceptance of a gamut of options for identity construction attests to the diaspora's transition "from exilic nationalism to diasporic transnationalism" (Khachig Tölölyan. "Elites and Institutions in the Armenian Transnation." *Diaspora* 9:1. 2000). In other words, the various articulations of "Armenianness" throughout the diaspora interact differently with their historical and social contexts – they include, exclude, and manipulate, to varying degrees, the cultural intricacies of the locale in which they exist.

The workshop seems instead to be moving in the opposite direction – towards an essentialist view of the Armenian identity. It proposes to find a prescription for "preserving" a singular, national(-ist) identity in the diaspora. The announcement's list of recommended topics for discussion, for instance, refers repeatedly to "national identity" and "preservation." In effect, it parades the "problems" of the diaspora, while ignoring the diaspora's potential to contribute its own rich, hybrid cultural complexities to the national cultural discourse. Countless examples from socio-political and cultural life demonstrate that the understanding of being "Armenian" (except as a language) cannot be compartmentalized and isolated. These realities include not only the basic fact of a rise in interethnic marriage, but the establishment of organizations like the Armenian American Democratic Leadership Council, the production of a tri-lingual film like Egoyan's *Ararat*, and the formation of culturally hybrid bands like System of a Down, Visa, and Element, to name just a few. The phrases "national identity" and "preservation" imply instead that the authentic source of culture is the nation-state, ignoring in the process the historically "mixed" sources of Armenian culture, even and perhaps especially in the Republic of Armenia.

According to its official line, the Diaspora Ministry embraces the Armenian diaspora indiscriminately and in its entirety. However, the announcement's release suggests a different and disturbing pattern of alienating just that constituency. The members of the SAS, for instance, received the call for abstracts only a month in advance. The seemingly inclusive announcement welcomed papers based on academic research and/or personal experience. However, by failing to provide ample notice, it also helped ensure the exclusion of diasporic communities, most of which are geographically considerably far from Armenia, where the conference would be held.

While the points I'm making may seem to ascribe a purpose to the workshop where none exists, its announcement echoes the ministry's larger, exclusionary ideological agenda, suggested on other occasions. For instance, the minister, Hranush Hakobyan, explains one of the principle reasons for the Diaspora Ministry's creation this way: "Preservation of Armenian identity (*hayabahbanum*) in all its forms. By preservation of Armenian identity we mean the Armenian family, Armenian culture, faith, and our mother tongue. If these four great pillars remain steadfast and strong, then we will be able to resolve the many issues of our preservation" (Qtd. in Vincent Lima. "Hranush Hakobyan: 'The Diaspora Ministry Is the Home of Every Armenian.'" *The Armenian Reporter*. 21 November 2008).

Among the aforementioned “four great pillars” of Armenian identity, language is the only concrete concern that can actually benefit from state-sponsored intervention. The references to the Armenian family and faith hint at an undeniable intolerance for homosexuality, agnosticism, atheism, and, more tacitly, other religions. On the whole, Hakobyan’s explanation entails a belief in the rigidity of Armenian identity. The imposition of such a specific framework and a mold that diasporics must fit ignores the social circumstances and historical realities of diasporic life. It also severely diminishes the creative independence and agency of the diaspora. A belief in the freedom to construct identities challenges such an approach and is amply demonstrated by the literature of various diasporic centers.

A vast body of Armenian literature produced by various diasporas problematizes the notions of ethnic authenticity and homogeneous cultural identities – from Shahan Shahnour, Hagop Karapents, and Vahe Oshagan to Krikor Beledian, Khoren Aramouni, and Vahe Berberian. The works of these authors, however distinct, demonstrate that cultural identity is not *preserved* anywhere, let alone in the diaspora. Rather, it continually evolves, along with the social and political circumstances of its context and interactions. In other words, Armenian diaspora literature is a testament to Arjun Appadurai’s assertion: “The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order” (Arjun Appadurai. “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy.” *Theorizing Diaspora*. Eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2003).

One hopes that the Diaspora Ministry, despite its function within an ideological state apparatus, will develop a more sensitive approach that embraces the Armenian diaspora’s complexities and the heterogeneity of diasporic identities. As Gayatri Spivak aptly puts it, “Armenia [has been] pluralized in diasporas for many centuries” (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Other Asias*. Blackwell Publishing: Malden, 2008). Reconsidering its state-centered outlook would allow the Diaspora Ministry and similar institutions to recognize the diaspora’s plural and fluid reality – one that contributes variously to a multiplicity of imagined Armenias. Such a recognition would also facilitate the cultural growth and diversity that helps enrich the web connecting the diasporic communities with the Republic of Armenia.

All Rights Reserved: Critics’ Forum, 2010.

Myrna Douzjian is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Comparative Literature at UCLA, where she teaches literature and composition courses.

You can reach her or any of the other contributors to Critics’ Forum at comments@criticsforum.org. This and all other articles published in this series are available online at www.criticsforum.org. To sign up for a weekly electronic version of new articles, go to www.criticsforum.org/join. Critics’ Forum is a group created to discuss issues relating to Armenian art and culture in the Diaspora.