

Critics' Forum

Diaspora

Repositioning Diaspora and the Role of Its Intellectual

By Talar Chahinian

Over the last few decades, the term “diaspora” has rapidly spread and expanded to take on multiple meanings both inside and outside of academic disciplines. So much so, that this proliferation of meaning, configured as the dispersion of the term in a semantic and conceptual space, has been referred to as “‘diaspora’ diaspora.”ⁱ In response to the concept’s growing discursive popularity, the founder and editor of *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, Khachig Tölölyan, while providing the site for much of the proliferation in academia, has warned that “diaspora” is “in danger of becoming a promiscuously capacious category that is taken to include all the adjacent phenomena to which it is linked but from which it actually differs in ways that are constitutive, that in fact make a viable definition of diaspora possible.”ⁱⁱ

As the term “diaspora” moves toward encompassing multidirectional states of being (figurative diasporas, internal diasporas, post-nationalist diasporas), the Armenian diaspora, often cited alongside Jewish and Greek diasporas as being closest to the term’s classical definition,ⁱⁱⁱ has undergone radical shifts of its own.

Over the last 20 years, following the independence of the Armenian Republic from the former Soviet Union, the global Armenian landscape has changed drastically, calling our attention to definitions and narratives that have become outmoded in describing the Armenian diasporic experience. In an effort to work toward new frameworks in analyzing, understanding, and approaching the concept of diaspora as it relates to the Armenian context post-1991, the ARF Western US, with the co-sponsorship of the USC Institute of Armenian Studies, ACF Western US, and the *Armenian Review*, organized a one-day, international academic conference that took place on April 27, 2013, in USC’s Davidson Hall.

The conference, entitled *Independence and Beyond: In Search of a New Armenian Diaspora Post-1991*, took the 1991 Independence as its departure point to ask why and how the backdrop of a nation-state complicates our long-standing conceptualization of the Armenian diaspora.

In throwing a retrospective glance over the last century, we see that the trajectory of the concept of diaspora has evolved in two contradictory directions in the Armenian context. On the one hand, diaspora has evolved from its pluralistic beginnings toward a more concrete and singular terminology. For instance, what was once referred to during the years of post-genocide dispersion as *trkahayutiwn*/Turkish-Armenians, *tsruadzutiwn*/dispersion, *kaghutahayutiwn*/community Armenians, *kaghtahayutiwn*/migrant Armenians, and *ardasahmani hayutiwn*/Armenians abroad, becomes solidified as *spiwrk*/diaspora, as community institutions form and begin to cultivate a transnational network and a corresponding grand narrative. Yet in the last several decades, the once-uniform post-genocide Armenian diasporic populations have

evolved to take on more pluralistic profiles, as new diasporas were formed due to the waves of migration from the Middle East, the ex-Soviet Armenian space, or the current Republic to Russia or Western countries.

While this transition from “diaspora” to “diasporas” marks a move in the opposite direction from the evolution of the discourse of diaspora, it is often left unchallenged or unproblematized. In our current moment, central to these oppositional shifts inherent in our understanding of diaspora is the presence of an Armenian state, which creates a point of contention for a transnational conceptualization of Armenianness, whether that’s manifested through language, culture, politics, or identity.

The April 27 conference attempted to examine this point of contention within our formulations of the Armenian diaspora through four thematic panels, two of which consisted of traditional paper presentations and another two that were moderated discussions around an umbrella topic.

The first panel, “Revising the Narrative of Return,” moderated by Hourii Berberian (California State University, Long Beach), discussed the effects of independence on the myth of return that the post-genocide diaspora has sustained through its grand narrative. The presentations, by Sossie Kasbarian (Lancaster University) Viken Yacoubian (Woodbury University) and myself (California State University, Long Beach), examined the conflation of Eastern and Western Armenian language and culture necessary in the process of return to a homeland that officiates only the Eastern. Since homeland, real or imagined, is central to the myth of return, the Republic punctures the myth’s potency. The concept of return is then re-invented either through what Kasbarian called “sojourners” visiting Armenia for nation-building projects, or as an impossibility, thereby marking diaspora as a more permanent than temporary state.

The second panel, “Cultural Narratives, Subjectivity, and Language in an Evolving Diaspora,” chaired by Anahid Keshishain (UCLA), built a case for culture as the only measurable definition of national belonging. The papers of Hagop Gulludjian (UCLA), Marc Nichanian (Sabanci University), and Fr. Levon Zekiyan of Universita Ca’Foscari (this last read by Myrna Douzjian) all seemed to demand a shift of priorities from diaspora institutions. Ultimately, all three papers argued that in order to secure its survival, particularly as the only site available to the Western Armenian language, diaspora life needs to supplement or even substitute the realm of the “political” with that of the “cultural.”

The third panel, “Online Space and the Politics of Information Exchange,” set out to examine how the online sphere generates convergences or schisms between national and diasporic space. The discussion was led by Hayg Oshagan, professor and director of the Media Arts and Studies Program in the Department of Communication at Wayne State University. The panelists represented key US-based news and analysis sources; the panel featured Ara Khachatourian of *Asbarez*, Nanore Barsoumian of the *Armenian Weekly*, Liana Aghajanian of *Ianyan Magazine*, and Asbed Bedrossian of *Groong*. Their discussions revealed that contrary to the immense community-building role that

newspapers traditionally played in the diaspora, in the English-language diaspora publications online, a wider, global audience dictates content production. As such, the content becomes Armenia-centric, reflecting the global readership's interest. The local, upon which diasporic identities are constructed, and the collective of local communities, which forms the transnational understanding of belonging, no longer mark the terrain for representation, for sources, or for audience.

The fourth panel, “(Re)Defining Diaspora and Nationalism,” produced a lively discussion about diaspora's moment of crisis among its four participants: Asbed Kotchikian (Bentley University), Razmik Panossian (Director of the Armenian Communities Department at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation), Stephan Astourian (University of California, Berkeley), and Simon Payaslian (Boston University). The moderator, Khachig Tölölyan of Wesleyan University, launched the discussion by setting notions of transnationally scattered Armenian people against ideas about the Armenian nation-state and by urging the panelists to consider questions of centrality and marginality. All four panelists seemed to advocate a transnational model of the Armenian people, consisting of multiple centers or nodes on a network rather than communities in a hierarchical relationship with the Republic. From its forward-looking perspective, the discussion highlighted the importance of recognizing the changing face of the traditional diaspora communities, as well as the emergence of new ones, particularly in Russia. Here, as in other panels, the question of re-cultivating the exilic Western Armenian language emerged as the final frontier and the final defining challenge for the post-genocide diaspora, which in itself can no longer be identified as such, especially outside of the Middle East.

The process of rethinking diasporic formulations and revisiting existing frameworks in our approach to the concept of diaspora addressed in the April 27 conference drew attention to the need to revitalize diaspora communities' and institutions' sense of agency, particularly in the face of an Armenian government whose institutions fail to develop or promote a horizontal relationship with diaspora communities at large and the Western Armenian culture specifically. Through the process of inquiry emerged the parallel need to revitalize the space of the intellectual within diaspora's cultural and political imaginary. After all, only a distanced gaze, a requirement for productive critique, can lead us toward progress.

All Rights Reserved: Critics' Forum, 2013. Exclusive to Asbarez.

Talar Chahinian holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from UCLA and lectures in the Department of Comparative World Literature at Cal State Long Beach.

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.

ⁱ Brubaker, Rogers. "The 'Diaspora' Diaspora." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 28.1 (2005): 1-19.

ⁱⁱ Tölölyan, Khachig. "Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment." *Diaspora* 5.1 (1996): 3-36.

ⁱⁱⁱ Early discussions of diaspora marked forced exile as the originary moment of dispersion and conceptual homeland as a fundamental characteristic of its definition. William Safran's proposed definition in the inaugural issue of *Diaspora* is often cited as an example of the term's classical understanding. See "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return." *Diaspora* 1.1 (1991): 83-99.