THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Haygagan Bar: Embodying the Homeland through Armenian Dance

Abbie Tarpinian Porto

August 2023

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in the Master of Arts Program in the Social Sciences

Faculty Advisor: Hripsime Haroutunian
Preceptor: Mary Elena Wilhoit

Abstract:
In this paper, I investigate how diasporan Armenians in the United States experience an embodied, affective connection to Armenia and Armenians through dance based on interviews and ethnographic data. I start with a general discussion of what homeland means for Armenians and situate dance within these understandings. Then, focusing on the desire for cultural preservation, I examine how Armenians use dance to present particular narratives, sometimes stemming from romantic nationalism. This romanticized presentation can alienate those who do not fit within a narrow version of Armenianness, and I further explore how many Armenians shift away from this fixity by making dance more relevant to their own contexts. I show how these Armenians create community while incorporating dance into their everyday lives. Moreover, dance evokes strong emotions that reinforce these social connections and elicit embodied feelings of homeland. In this way, Armenians dance to establish community and experience a sense of homeland through feeling and being with other Armenian people.

When Armenians still lived throughout Anatolia, a deep connection to the Armenian Highlands inspired folklore and religious belief. Mountains were the homes of dragons, the birthplaces of heroes, the earthly ancestors of the Armenian people, and even the resting place of Noah's Ark, a belief still widely held today (Petrosyan 2001, 35-37). Then, the perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 took Armenians away from their mountains, securing this land as a part of the modern Republic of Turkey through forced deportation and systematic killing. Turkish authorities attempted to completely remove any trace of Armenians from the land on which they had lived for centuries. Mount Ararat, a prominent symbol of Armenian culture and identity, stands just outside of the Republic of Armenia's borders. Immediately to the west is the mountain range called *Haygagan Bar* in Armenian, literally "Armenian Dance" in English.[1] Though these mountains reside within current Turkish borders, Armenians still view them as part of the Armenian homeland.

Haygagan Bar represents an Armenia that is lost to Armenians, a piece of the earth that is materially inaccessible but retains its *Armenianness* in cultural memory. The name of this mountain range, "Armenian Dance," points to a link between ideas of Armenian cultural identity and the physical land. The mountains themselves are dancing with Armenians. Dance is a strong cultural symbol for Armenians, serving as a "language for expressing national realities" (Abrahamian 2008, 179), suggesting a connection between dance and the Armenian concept of homeland. Armenians also use dance as symbolic political resistance, as exemplified by the Armenians in Martuni who danced a *shurjpar/shurchbar*[2] this past Orthodox Christmas, January

[1] I choose to use the romanization of Հայկական Պար (Haygagan Bar) that more closely reflects the Western Armenian pronunciation, as opposed to the more standard Eastern Armenian "Haykakan Par." The Armenians who lived in this region (and their descendants currently in diaspora) largely spoke (and speak) Western Armenian. Throughout this paper I use the transliteration of Armenian words from quotes and writing consistent with each speaker's own pronunciation or usage, reflecting the linguistic diversity of Armenians in the US.

[2] Շուրջպար (Eng: circle dance)

6, 2023, during the ongoing blockade of Artsakh by the Azerbaijani military.[3] Faced with asserting the contentious idea of belonging to the land, in many cases, the Armenian response is to dance.

Here, I investigate the link between dance and homeland among members of the Armenian diaspora in the United States. Having a concept of homeland is intrinsic to the diasporic experience and informs diasporan identity. While living in dispersion, diasporans contend with both cultural memories from the homeland and daily realities in the home country. With these various, sometimes contradictory, influences, Armenians in diaspora often use music to navigate their identities and form communities. I focus here on how Armenian-Americans use dance in this way, examining the ties between dancing and enacting Armenianness. I thus explore the many roles and expressions of Armenian dance; as a connection to homeland, as preservation of cultural memory, as community and identity formation, and as an affective, embodied experience of being Armenian.

When I refer to Armenian dance, I include what I understand to be three distinct types. First, staged dance, called *bemakan/pemagan* or *bemadrvats/pematrvadz*,[4] is the most visible form of Armenian dance. It is choreographed and presented typically as a narrative to an audience, often using elements of ballet, and the dancers wear pristine costumes inspired by traditional Armenian clothing. Second, the *azgagrakan/azkakragan*[5] dance style, called ethnographic or vernacular dance, is based in the ethnochoreology (or dance ethnography) of traditional Armenian dances, and its practitioners emphasize the communal aspect of dancing and its cultural revival. Though an audience is not necessary, groups like the Karin Folk Dance

[3] For a video of this dance, see TheScarmind, "In besieged Martuni region of #Artsakh, Armenian circle dance (Shurchbar) next to Avo's (liberator of Martuni, Monte Melkonyan) statue…" Twitter, January 6, 2023, https://twitter.com/TheScarmind/status/1611325672621998080.

[4] Բեմական (Eng: relating to the stage), բեմադրուած (Eng: staged)

[5] Ազգագրական (Eng: ethnographic; also sometimes translated as “vernacular” in the context of dance)

Ensemble in Armenia and Lernazang Ensemble in Los Angeles teach and perform *azgagrakan* dance to a wide audience. Finally, I use *shurchbar* to refer to the casual kind of dance seen at parties, picnics, and other events, and I specifically focus on the *shurchbar* context developed by Armenians in the United States. While *shurchbar* can refer to any Armenian circle dance, even in ethnographic and, to a lesser extent, staged dance, I primarily use the word to refer to dances that are not performed for an audience but danced for fun in the context of a social gathering. In this sense, ethnographic dance and *shurchbar* certainly overlap, but their tones slightly differ, since ethnographic dance, as a conscious act of cultural revival, often has a more serious approach. All three forms, staged, ethnographic, and *shurchbar*, are part of what I consider here as Armenian dance, as people dance each form to enact their Armenianness and connect to the homeland, as I explore in this paper.

Literature Review and Background

This research is located at the intersection of ethnographic work on Armenian experiences, studies of diasporic identity, and ethnomusicology, principally dance ethnography. Armenian ethnomusicology itself starts with the work of Komitas,[6] the priest and scholar often credited with being one of the first ethnomusicologists, as he collected and studied music in Armenian villages beginning in the 1880s. Most discussions of Armenian music are almost obligated to mention Komitas because his work is a main reason there is still access to much Armenian folk knowledge after the Genocide. This collection of folk songs was in part a nationalist project for Komitas, as he intended his work to promote Armenian national unity. In the late 19th century, urban Armenians in the Ottoman Empire started taking more political

[6] Komitas is widely known simply as his ordained name, Komitas, sometimes followed by the title *vardapet/vartabed* (վարդապետ, a title in the Armenian Apostolic Church of highly educated priests and teachers, similar to a doctor of theology). The Western Armenian transliteration, Gomidas, is used much less frequently in academic literature. His birth name was Soghomon Soghomonian.

action informed by an increasing Armenian national consciousness (Bournoutian 2018, 203-206). This period of growing nationalism was not unique to Armenians, of course, as people throughout the Ottoman Empire and Europe started to attach ethnic and national identity to cultural expressions like music, creating the idea of folk culture.[7] Komitas grew up during this period of national self-awareness, undoubtedly influenced by the popular sentiment that Armenians are their own unique group of people deserving of a distinct national identity. For Komitas, folk music was a valuable element of culture to include in the effort to uplift Armenia as a nation (Poladian 1972, 87-88). Komitas sought Armenians who created music with little to no foreign (i.e., Arab, Turkish, Persian, or European) influence, and he claimed to find this in rural villages (Komitas 2001, 26). It was important for him to note these distinctions because he wanted to show that Armenians have their own culture, and therefore deserve their own place in the world. In fact, Komitas purposely ignored some forms of Armenian music because they did not fit his idea of authentic Armenianness, such as the urban music more susceptible to diverse cultural influences (Poladian 1972, 87). This desire for authenticity still affects the creation, reception, and scholarship of Armenian musical culture, which I discuss later.

Alongside the documentation of songs for which he is best-known, Komitas provides the earliest written accounts of Armenian dance that attempt to discuss the practice's social functions (Komitas 2001, 32). In particular, he details how people create folk songs while dancing a *shurchbar*, in this case a circle dance during a holiday, special occasion, or time of recreation. During a circle dance, a group of people stood in a circle while a song leader started the dance by singing a melody. The group then repeated the leader's song while continuing the dance, and

[7] The concept of folk culture as something to be claimed and preserved comes from ideas of romantic nationalism that prioritize a national or ethnic culture that is distinguishable and clearly defined. In this sense, folklore is intentionally created and sustained through an imagined continuity. For more on nationalism and folk music, see Martin Stokes, ed., *Ethnicity, Identity, and Music: The Musical Construction of Place* (Oxford: Berg, 1994); and Donna A. Buchanan, ed., *Balkan Popular Culture and the Ottoman Ecumene: Music, Image, and Regional Political Discourse* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007).

once this first melody ended, the group leader changed. The new leader sang their own version of the song, adding complexity and personal touches. This process continued as new people took over the leader position, and the group elaborated upon the song until the end of the dance. Komitas explained the circle dance as a collaborative endeavor that fostered community and reflected the importance of living and working together in village life (Ibid., 27-32). Since this early look at dance in rural Armenian villages, over a century has passed, and Armenians now also dance in places like US cities, bringing elements of the homeland with them in diaspora. With this in mind, I examine the purposes dance serves particularly for diasporan Armenians while also questioning the romantic nationalist sentiments tied to the preservation of culture.

As members of one of the oldest recognized diasporas, Armenians abroad still contend with unresolved questions of identity, belonging, and home. The concept of homeland among Armenians in diaspora is a contentious issue that can elicit emotionally charged and ambivalent responses. As Susan P. Pattie, Khachig Tölölyan, and Sossie Kasbarian have described, an Armenian homeland is no longer accessible to Armenians in diaspora, leading to various understandings of what the homeland actually is. Each of these scholars generally concludes that there is no single definition of an Armenian homeland, yet the idea remains important in the overall cultural imagination. For Pattie (1999), Armenians in diaspora generally share a growing comfort in treating the diaspora as "home," meaning they feel secure living outside of Armenia (86). According to Tölölyan (2010), "The homeland is not home. It is a place to *care* about, but not a place in which and to which one can whole-heartedly *belong*" (36, emphasis in original). In this sense, there is a distinct difference between home and homeland, further complicating the desire of diasporans to "return" to the homeland (Pattie 1999, 89). Diasporans feel a pull between these places, unable to strictly define the place they call home.

Likewise, Kasbarian explores this myth of return, examining how some Armenians conceive of what it might mean to return to the homeland. Kasbarian works from the common assumption that Western Armenia is inaccessible, gone forever to Armenians, and that it is completely out of the question to think about returning to Western Armenia (Kasbarian 2015, 359). Nevertheless, many view the Republic of Armenia as what Kasbarian terms a "step" homeland, an actual state that serves as a kind of surrogate homeland (Ibid., 359). This is why some diasporans consider moving to the Republic of Armenia as a kind of return, even though neither they nor their ancestors have lived in that particular land. At the same time, having an idea of homeland, no matter how precarious, is important because diasporan identity is always oriented towards a homeland (Tölölyan 2010, 35). Diasporans must be dispersed from somewhere. Because of this, many diasporans support the Republic of Armenia in various ways, such as donating money, visiting for vacation, or supporting different political efforts (Kasbarian 2015, 367), but most ultimately do not make the decision to move their homes and families to the Republic.[8]

Each community of Armenians in diaspora is shaped differently by their respective home countries, contributing to various ways of being Armenian. Generally, Armenians in the US have adopted the kind of hyphenated identity that many ethnic groups claim while living in the US, effectively becoming Armenian-Americans. Anny Bakalian's (1994) work with Armenian-Americans in the 1970s and '80s is a foundational source for understanding the idea of Armenianness in the US and the social and cultural changes in the larger Armenian-American community. Bakalian lays important groundwork for discussions of Armenian identity in diaspora with her depiction of people moving from "being" to "feeling" Armenian the longer a

[8] For discussion of those diasporans who do actually move to the Republic, see Daniel Fittante, "Connection without Engagement: Paradoxes of North American Armenian Return Migration," *Diaspora* 19, no. 2/3 (Spring 2017).

family lives away from the homeland. In other words, an Armenian who moves to the US has specific lived experiences of "being" Armenian, while they raise their children to "feel" connected to these experiences that are not their own, adopting what Bakalian calls "symbolic ethnicity," an internal understanding of self rather than an outward behavior (Bakalian 1994, 6). This process continues as later generations move towards an emphasis of cultural memory further removed from the experiences of their Armenian ancestors, claiming their identities through ethnic signifiers (Ibid., 44). For example, symbolic expressions like cooking Armenian food only for special occasions are easy to integrate into daily life in the United States without appearing too far outside the American norm (Ibid., 45-46). In this way, Bakalian argues that Armenian-Americans do not actively practice Armenianness, at least not in the same way as their ancestors or relatives did in the homeland. According to her, Armenian-Americans feel Armenian without strictly enacting Armenian social practices, thus creating a specific identity informed by but not quite the same as being Armenian.

While my research interests certainly stem from Bakalian's assertion that Armenian identity is something that people "feel," I maintain that many Armenian-Americans do in fact enact Armenianness. Perhaps this reflects a shift in Armenian-American identity since the 1980s and early '90s, especially as the world has now seen two wars in Artsakh, and Armenians continue to face threats from their political neighbors, intensifying the impulse to claim and enact Armenian identity. As I will further explain, the Armenian-Americans that I interviewed emphasize their actions and participation in Armenian culture as important facets of their Armenian identities. This contemporary view of Armenianness aligns with Bakalian's understanding that Armenian-American identity shifts between time and place, with constants being the collective memory of genocide and a perceived connection to a common homeland

(Ibid., 8). Taking this idea of a felt connection to homeland, I consider how music and dance maintain this connection and how the act of dancing facilitates the ongoing creation of Armenian-American identity.

Scholars of music in the Armenian diaspora Anahid Kassabian and Sylvia Alajaji provide evocative accounts of the ways diasporic identity and music inform each other. Kassabian discusses the ways that sound and music interact with diasporan cultural production and identity. In particular, while problematizing the idea of a unified Armenian diaspora, Kassabian (2013) also shows that music is a connective force between Armenians and their perceptions of their own cultural identities (21). In her own life, Kassabian mentions feeling disconnected from the Armenian community, but eventually finding other diasporan Armenians like herself through experimental music that combines elements of "post-Ottoman" musical styles with jazz (Ibid., 74-75). This combination of disparate musical elements into something new and unique resonates with Kassabian as an Armenian in diaspora, and she expresses the strong relief and comfort she felt upon forming a community around this blended diasporic music (Ibid., 78). This Armenian jazz fusion evokes such powerful emotion that Kassabian describes it as "a healing balm for the scars of fragmented identities…. When we can hear ourselves so beautifully sung, some of the strangeness of living diasporically becomes, itself, beauty" (Ibid., 82). Experiences with music such as these exemplify how music and Armenian diasporan identity inform each other.

Similarly, Alajaji explores how Armenians have used and created music in the diaspora since the Genocide, claiming that Armenians in exile have found the idea of home in music itself. Through archival research and ethnographic interviews, Alajaji reconstructs the musical landscape of four different centers of the Armenian diaspora (pre-genocide Ottoman Empire,

New York, Beirut, and California) during specific points in the twentieth century. Alajaji (2015) explains that for Armenians, music provides a way to control the narratives of Armenian history and identity (2-3). For example, Armenian choirs in Lebanon performed songs that spread nationalist ideas of a romanticized Armenian homeland that existed only in collective memory (Ibid., 15). Additionally, the near obsession with preserving folk music from Western Armenia, in the tradition of Komitas, served the desire to claim a presence in and a right to this lost homeland (Ibid., 17). Alajaji describes this impulse to use music as a means by which to create identity best when she writes,

> When the past and present are in question, the need to control the lens through which they are seen becomes urgent and palpable. Music's flexibilities–its negotiable and permeable boundaries–allow it to traverse and prioritize the many layers that threaten and complicate a people's semblance of meaning. For the Armenian diaspora, the layers and traumas are many, and, as these snapshots will reveal, so are the meanings. (Alajaji, 22)

Thus, when dealing with the legacies of genocide, cultural adjustments during life in exile, and alienation from wider society, music seems to be the only thing that makes sense (Ibid., 165). Although several scholars of Armenian diasporan culture (e.g., Kassabian and Alajaji) take an ethnomusicological approach to study this kind of affective connection to the idea of Armenianness and homeland, I suggest there is something specific about the physical act of dance, or perhaps a combination of this particular type of listening and movement joined together, that facilitates a strong emotional link to a distant land.

To better understand the distinct role of dance in culture, I look to dance ethnographers Theresa Buckland and Adrienne L. Kaeppler, who provide extensive consideration of how anthropologists use dance as an ethnographic tool. According to Buckland (2006), the human body contains and transmits culture through dance (16). In order to examine this, scholars use dance ethnography to study embodied cultural knowledge (Ibid., 8). Kaeppler (2004) proposes

an understanding of dance as "a socially constructed system of knowledge" that "creates new meanings by combining old forms in new ways" (22-23). This conception of dance is similar to the ways Kassabian and Alajaji treat music, suggesting that the aural cultural production in music exists in tandem with the physical cultural knowledge in dance. In practice, Anthony Shay uses dance ethnography to examine state folk dance ensembles from the former Soviet Union. He views traditional dance as an embodied representation of unspoken social realities while emphasizing the limitations of state dance ensembles to be completely "authentic" in their representations of folk culture (Shay 1999, 35, 51). He indicates that although state dance ensembles do not convey the same meanings as folk dance in its original context, they do offer a means of social analysis of their particular political situations. Much like Shay, I aim to treat both staged and social forms of dance as "related but separate genres" (Ibid., 31), using the three dance types of staged, ethnographic, and *shurchbar* to inform a more comprehensive understanding of Armenian dance in its entirety.

This leads me to ask, does dance lead to the formation of Armenian community? How might dancing connect one to the idea of "Armenianness?" How is dance used to educate and connect young people to their Armenian culture? How might dance connect diasporans to the idea of an Armenian homeland? Scholarship on Armenian dance in particular largely follows from the work of Soviet Armenian scholar Srbuhi Lisitsyan, who documented both staged and traditional Armenian dances starting in the 1930s, providing an extensive foundation of Armenian dance knowledge (Kamajian 2022, 16). In the foreword to the 2013 edition of one of Lisitsyan's volumes, *Ancient Armenian Dances*, Tigran Hakobyan compares Lisitsyan to Komitas, claiming that she showed the "purely Armenian" character of the dances she documented (Lisitsyan 2013, 4). Indeed, much like Komitas, Lisitsyan focused on ethnographic

material to preserve and record an Armenian dance heritage that might otherwise have been lost and is now deemed truly "authentic."

One unique, socially-focused treatment of Armenian dance comes not from a dance scholar or even an ethnomusicologist, but from Armenian historian Levon Abrahamian in his essay detailing the 2005 circle dance around Mt. Aragats to celebrate the Republic of Armenia's independence day that year. The goal of the national event was to "recreate the ethnographic mosaic of historical Armenia" by having Armenians representing the different regions, including diasporan Armenians, all join hands in a circle dance around the tallest mountain in the country (Abrahamian 2008, 169). Participants in this dance expressed feeling a strong sense of unity, some even mentioning a physical sensation they likened to a spiritual experience (Ibid., 185). In discussing the cultural symbolism and significance of that particular political moment, Abrahamian writes, "Even the mountains were imagined as participants of the circle dance" (Ibid., 179). This explicit connection between Armenian dance and Armenian land leads me to question how Armenians in diaspora experience this embodied relationship.

More recently, current PhD student at UCLA, Natalie Kamajian, who studies the differences between *bemakan* and *azgagrakan* Armenian dance and their respective socio-political implications, has found that the types of dance Armenians practice and watch inform their understandings of Armenianness itself.[9] In her Master's thesis, Kamajian (2022) examines the ways that *azgagrakan* dance, or "vernacular dance" as she calls it, is associated with a perceived revival of indigenous Armenian culture (6). By learning and participating in dance forms originating from historic Armenia, Armenians actively remember an idea of homeland while attempting to combat cultural erasure (Ibid., 39). Kamajian stresses the two

[9] For more on Kamajian's work, see Shushan Karapetian and Natalie Kamajian, "Language Therapy with Dr. K | Vernaculars of Armenian Dance," June 10, 2021, in *Unpacking Armenian Studies*, podcast, audio, https://armenianstudies.libsyn.com/language-therapy-with-dr-k-0.

defining features of Armenian vernacular dance, reciprocative movement and groundedness, as physical enactments of connection to community and to the land (Ibid., 6). Kamajian thus claims that "dance not only functions as a survival strategy but also affirms a particular corporeality rooted in the collective memory of a lost homeland" (Ibid., 93). The physicality of dance directly relates to Armenian understandings of homeland and community. As Kamajian's work strongly informs my own research, I include an interview with her in the ethnographic section of this paper to provide the unique perspective of an Armenian-American dancer and researcher focused on ethnographic dance, as opposed to staged dance or *shurchbar*.

Finally, in looking at the experiences of Armenians specifically in the United States, I consider the particular context of Armenian-American *shurchbar*s. In the 1970s, Gary and Susan Lind-Sinanian published a collection of dances they observed and learned at Armenian-American parties. They aimed to provide a teachable list of popular dances stemming from Western Armenian tradition, though they mention that the dances listed "might be Armenian, Greek, Turkish, Arabic, or simply made up [by Armenian-Americans]" (Lind-Sinanian 1978). Here the Lind-Sinanians describe the new dance form created by Armenians in America:

> The dances done today at Armenian-American parties are often not the dances done back in Armenia, but are of American origin. These constitute a new dance form uniquely Armenian-American, the Contemporary Party Dance. Often several different dances will be done to the same music, so that at a party different groups will do their particular favorite dance simultaneously. The dances notated here are some of the popular dances done to this music today by the present generation at social functions. Several of the traditional village dances, now largely ignored by the young, are also included here for those like ourselves who are interested in preserving the old village dances, which can still be seen occasionally at picnics. (Lind-Sinanian)

They mainly include dances from the Armenian communities in the northeastern United States,[10] but they also mention that some dances, such as some variations of the "Hop," were originated by California Armenians (though the most popular version in New England is called the "Michigan Hop") (Ibid.). Nearly every dance in the collection has several variants based on regional differences and closeness to Western Armenian tradition. The Lind-Sinanians note the difficulty of tracking and recording these dances, mentioning that, "Many of the new dances have no 'official' names, and are called different, ambiguous ones. There are literally dozens of different contemporary party dances called 'Shuffle,' 'Hop,' 'Two-Step,' 'The Greek Thing,' and other similarly vague names" (Ibid.). Since the Lind-Sinanians' writing in the 1970s, Armenian-Americans have continued dancing these contemporary *shurchbar*s, keeping them largely in memory and practice rather than consistently documenting the steps in writing, thus allowing them to change over time.

From Komitas to Kamajian, people have wondered about the cultural significance of Armenian dance, some even bringing this curiosity with them in diaspora. I tie together these discussions of dance, diaspora, and Armenianness itself to look closely at what dancing does for Armenians in America. In navigating the complexities of diasporic identity and feeling the need to preserve and enact Armenianness while separated from Armenian land, diasporans dance to both feel and be Armenian.

Armenian Dance in Chicago and Beyond

My research includes interviews and conversations with members of Armenian dance groups in the United States and other Armenian-Americans, not in ensembles, who dance for fun

[10] For a brief look at the history of Armenian-American dance on the East Coast, see Carolyn Rapkievian, "'One, Two, Three; Step, Swing' Armenian Dance Across Generations," *Smithsonian Folklife Festival*, May 2, 2018, https://festival.si.edu/blog/armenian-dance-across-generations.

in casual Armenian settings like parties or events. Thus, my interviews include perspectives from across the staged, ethnographic, and *shurchbar* contexts of Armenian dance. These dancers are young Armenians, ranging in age from early 20s to early 30s, and active in their communities. The Armenians represented here are: several dancers from each of the Armenian dance ensembles in Chicago, Jirair, Elen, Levon, Lilit, Lusineh, Chris, Alice, and Sevag; Natalie, the PhD researcher of Armenian dance at UCLA and co-founder of Lernazang Dance Ensemble; and Van and Gaïdz, college students from New Jersey and California respectively, both involved in their school's Armenian Student Association (ASA).[11] As a fellow Armenian student, I participated in ASA meetings this year and got to know the school's small Armenian community. Additionally, I attended performances of both of Chicago's Armenian dance groups: the Sardarabad Dance Ensemble of Hamazkayin Chicago in March 2023, and the Siragan Armenian Dance Company of Chicago in June 2023. I use observations from these events to supplement the conversations I had with their dancers. As an Armenian-American myself, though not previously involved in Armenian community events, I am able to access these spaces both as a researcher and as a fellow Armenian. I use my own Armenianness as a lens to contextualize and understand how others experience being Armenian while still accepting some distance as a researcher, a person not already involved in these established communities, and a person with one non-Armenian parent.

In this paper, I investigate how diasporan Armenians in the United States experience an embodied, affective connection to Armenia and Armenians through dance. I start with a general discussion of what homeland means for Armenians and situate dance within these understandings. Then, focusing on the desire for cultural preservation, I examine how Armenians

[11] All names used are pseudonyms, except for Natalie, who allowed me to use her name as she also works in this academic field.

use dance to present particular narratives, sometimes stemming from romantic nationalism. This romanticized presentation can alienate those who do not fit within a narrow version of Armenianness, and I further explore how many Armenians shift away from this fixity by making dance more relevant to their own contexts. I show how these Armenians create community while incorporating dance into their everyday lives. Moreover, dance evokes strong emotions that reinforce these social connections and elicit embodied feelings of homeland. In this way, Armenians dance to establish community and experience a sense of homeland through feeling and being with other Armenian people.

Understanding the Armenian Homeland

"I am so glad to celebrate dances from all the regions of our great nation," says the head priest of the local Armenian church from a projection screen hanging in front of the stage. He ends his video by saying to the audience, "God bless you all for preserving the Armenian culture."

The screen raises, and the curtains open for Sardarabad's last performance of the night, a dance titled "Vaspurakan" after the region of historic Armenia centered around Lake Van. A lively song plays, with brass, strings, drums, and of course, zurna. About 20 men and women dance onto the stage wearing bright taraz[12] *costumes in a warm yellow-orange color with red aprons, vests, and hats with deep blue detailing. They hold hands and dance in a line, stepping, hopping, and shouting "hey!" to the music. The dancers move to form a circle, spinning and clapping to change formation. Then, they are joined on stage by the younger dancers of the ensemble, boys and girls in shiny blue and silver* taraz *costumes, holding Armenian flags; the youngest girls, around 5-7 years old and in sparkly silver dresses and headbands, are looking to*

[12] Տարազ (traditional Armenian clothing)

the older dancers to remember what to do. Everyone on stage dances together in a joyful finale to a night of Armenian dance.

Before going into the role dance plays in understanding the homeland, it is necessary to discuss what the Armenian homeland actually is. The idea of homeland is contested among Armenians, with each person experiencing this idea differently. For many diasporans, homeland is tied to the places their ancestors were exiled from. Western Armenia, currently part of the modern Republic of Turkey, is inaccessible to most of the descendants of the people who lived there a century ago. In terms of modern nation-states, other regions with historically Armenian populations include Javakhk in the Republic of Georgia, Nakhichevan as a nominally autonomous republic within Azerbaijan, and Artsakh, the region currently fighting for independence from Azerbaijan. The dispersion of Armenians ignited by the Genocide, and the subsequent migrations throughout the twentieth century and through today, continue to cause conflicting relationships to place. Because of this, homeland is multi-layered, and Armenians often think in degrees of homeland. For Van, Western Armenia is the place of his ancestors. He can trace his mother's family's generational journey from Western Armenia to Iraq to the east coast of the United States. In each place, his family made a home. No matter where they lived, they remained Armenian. Yet his father's family story is a bit less traceable. An ancestor from Western Armenia was already living in the US when most of his family died in the Genocide. From what Van has learned of his paternal great-grandparents, "They were never happy. They, you know. They died sad. And I think that's a reality of a lot of Armenians. It's, you know. No one's happy that they made it out of the Genocide. There's no, that's not… That's not how it works. So my dad's side is kind of less talked about, especially since a lot of his cousins ended up just assimilating and going away. I don't know them." While his mother's family is close-knit

and active in their Armenian community, his father's side lost some of their connection to their heritage. Van sees having these different familial ties to Armenia as "not the best of both worlds, but the reality of both worlds." He views the more "assimilated" Armenians as continued victims of the Genocide, as many of the survivors dealt with their trauma by distancing themselves from Armenianness, their qualities that were targeted by perpetrators of violence, and they tried to shield their children from being labeled Armenian. The other "world" that Van inhabits through his mother's family is one of "lore, glamor, [and] victory" that celebrates and emphasizes being Armenian, according to his family's stories of resilience and community-building. But Van himself has never seen Western Armenia, and his connection to those lands is primarily through these family stories in the absence of a physical connection. In this way, his family stories from Iraq and the US also become tied to his idea of Armenian homeland, adding levels or degrees that come from being in diaspora.

Similarly, when asked how he understands the Armenian homeland from his own experience, Jirair took me through the various places his family has lived since the Genocide. He reflects,

> That's a good question, because it's definitely a question I've asked myself as I've come up with my identity. So my parents are Syrian Armenians, right? We're 100% Armenian as far as I know. In 1915 we fled Marash, Zeytun, and Dikranagerd or Diyarbekir. And they fled to Aleppo, Syria, and they stayed for the next 80 years until they came to Chicago, and that's where I was born. So if we wanna go in order, those old villages, right? Zeytun, Marash, Dikranagerd, like, if I go back there now, they're unrecognizable to me. They're not even… of course I will feel something, and I do wanna go back. But it's not somewhere I can go call home, you know. So that's not it, right? Next is Syria. My parents kind of raised me as a Syrian Armenian. They raised me as they were raised there, and the stories I hear about, and I actually went there in 2007, and I remember quite a bit. But since the war started, the majority of the Armenians there left. It's like, growing up, I was yearning for a place that doesn't exist anymore. Since the war, Aleppo is barely a city. There's barely Armenians left. None of my family lives there anymore, and it's like yearning for a Western Armenian place that isn't there. It just doesn't exist. So that brings me to Chicago. This is my house, this is my home. I feel like, I was born here, but I don't have any ties to Chicago-ness, or, you know, being from Illinois. So homeland, it's, it's…

> Armenia is our home. It's our home. There's no way around it. Anywhere that historically, Armenians have been, and Armenians are still there, that is our home.

To find an answer to what the Armenian homeland is for him, Jirair traces his family's journey of exile, ending up in an Armenia that is not restricted by the borders of modern nation-states. Armenia is determined by the presence of Armenians.

As an Armenian born in Turkey, Elen has a unique understanding of homeland. For many Armenians, Turkey feels completely inaccessible in its current state. The Armenians who currently live in Turkey are largely underrepresented as they are not part of the Republic of Armenia, but they are also not quite in the same position as the diaspora. Although most of the old Western Armenian villages and communities are long gone, Armenians still live throughout Turkey, most heavily concentrated in Istanbul. Elen describes her thoughts about the idea of homeland:

> My perspective is different because I'm from Istanbul, from Turkey. So Armenians in Turkey, I won't speak for all of them, but a majority doesn't really feel like they're *not* in their homeland. Because, like, it *is* our ancestral land. So, from like a Turkish Armenian approach, to me, [the homeland] is all of Armenia. All of that land I connect with. When I go to an Armenian church in Turkey, it's like, "Wow, this is ours." Or any Armenian church, really, even in Chicago. I think I personally identified and connected myself so deeply to the roots of being Armenian and going to church, and like growing up in that. So I feel like for me, I can connect with Armenia, or that region, like the land, easily. I can just picture myself there.
>
> But being there [Republic of Armenia] already, now I feel like I know there's a difference. 'Cause like in my imagination, everywhere was Armenia, but now that I was there personally, physically, it's more of a reflective point. Like Armenia the homeland, the pictures, the churches, the mountains, I just close my eyes, and just picturing the scenery, that for me feels like home. But it's so crazy because I wasn't even born there. So we were raised to know all of that… while at a distance.

From her Turkish Armenian perspective, Elen was born in the homeland, which is not something that many Western Armenians can relate to. Elen also finds homeland wherever she finds Armenians, specifically through the Armenian Church. However, since visiting the Republic,

Elen places a certain distinction on that land. There is something particular about that place that "feels like home" in a way that she does not find elsewhere.

In Gaïdz's case, he "[has] the privilege of being from just about every corner of historic Armenia," meaning he can trace his family roots to Artsakh, Javakhk, Nakhichevan, and Western Armenia. He expressed to me, "That's crazy, like my family is from everywhere *but* what is now the modern Republic of Armenia. [Actually] I think maybe I have some family from Lori? Or Syunik? [Those are] like opposite points of Armenia. Point being, the lines are blurred for me, but [my homeland is] that however many square miles or square kilometers that is a historic Armenia. And no one can tell me otherwise." When Gaïdz says that "the lines are blurred," he does not totally separate historical lands and the current republic into disparate entities. All of these places are parts of one Armenian homeland. Gaïdz hopes that one day, a free, independent, united Armenia will exist, echoing the sentiments he learned from his community in LA:

> I was born ten years after an independent Armenia, right? For me, I've only grown up knowing that there is this independent and hopefully soon united Armenia. When I say united I mean like, Nakhichevan, Western Armenia, Javakhk, Artsakh, and Armenia. There is this united Armenia that is waiting for me. I was told that at school. I went to an Armenian school for nine years. We would draw these maps. *Azad, Angakh, Miatsial Hayastan*,[13] a free, independent, united Armenia! *Dzovits Dzov*,[14] a sea to sea Armenia! That's something that for me was a reality, or it was... It was an aspiration that really was sort of achievable, and we, I mean, we were told that this was something that we could seek out and try to accomplish and realize for our ancestors, and so… my homeland is, when you look up the historic map of Armenia, that's my homeland.

These phrases, "*Azad, Angakh, Miatsial Hayastan*" and "*Dzovits Dzov*," are common refrains of Armenians who intend to regain lost lands, particularly those involved in the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) and its youth organization, the Armenian Youth Federation (AYF). Gaïdz uses them here to describe his view of homeland, that is, a conceptual Armenia

---

[13] Ազատ, Անկախ, Միացիալ Հայաստան (Eng: Free, Independent, United Armenia)
[14] Ծովից Ծով (Eng: From Sea to Sea)

that includes lands from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean where Armenians historically lived. At the same time, Gaïdz recognizes that as a diasporan several generations removed from his family's initial exile, he is in a unique position to conceive of homeland in this way. Thinking of his own family, Gaïdz explained, "If you ask my grandparents, hey, Lebanon for them is home. They love Armenia. My grandfather dedicated half of his life for the last 40 years to the modern Republic of Armenia, deeply involving himself in the sort of current state of the modern Republic. But for him and his wife, my grandmother and my grandfather, Lebanon is just as much a home as Armenia is." Gaïdz perceives the levels of homeland for his grandparents as Lebanon, their home for a significant part of their lives, and the Republic of Armenia, a site of their committed political involvement. According to Gaïdz, Lebanon and Armenia are equal homes in their eyes. What, then, ties his Western Armenian grandparents to the Republic of Armenia, a place where they had not lived and to which they have no familial connection?

For diasporans, even those with roots in Western Armenia, the Republic of Armenia can serve as a kind of surrogate homeland (Kasbarian 2015, 359). The Republic is where Armenians can assert Armenianness in a way that is recognized by the modern global understanding of nation-states, and Armenians in diaspora are also able to partially claim this recognition through an association with the Republic. Though actual cultural expressions are diverse, Armenians broadly share language, history, and other elements of culture, giving diasporans at least some sense of home in contemporary Armenia. As Van explains,

> My homeland is where my family was from, [but] those are lands that are not ours anymore. Those lands are not gonna be ours for a long time, but I guess the next best thing is the lands that belong to other Armenians, which is, you know, the lands in Armenia and Artsakh today. I think any Armenian can be able, or should be able at least, to relate to those lands as theirs, even if there's no, you know, family connection, because in one way or another it's just the whole idea of a nation. It's all encompassing to a people, at least ideally.

In this sense, an Armenian can connect to any land that "belongs" to Armenians because of their shared nationhood. As long as "Armenians" constitute one, united nation, the Republic of Armenia can be home to diasporan Armenians as part of an extended national people. The connection here between diasporan and Republic is based in claiming Armenian identity and, therefore, the Armenian nation-state. For example, Natalie discusses how she interacts with the Republic as a diasporan Armenian:

> Going to Armenia, when I went for the first time in 2012, shifted so many things for me. Even though it's not like, let's say I was still diaspora, but let's say like my parents were born in Armenia, so then that would really be very easy to consider that to be my homeland. But [the Republic] sort of became an adopted homeland because *it's where Armenians are*. In a global format of nation-states, that's what Armenians have. So that's become this idea of homeland. It's where I return to those roots. It's like, where I go to study, it's where I go to learn, it's where I go to engage in an environment that is very much Armenian, and you know, top to bottom, the language is just there. I don't have to try hard to remind myself to speak Armenian, or the food and the people and just like the way people live, it's like, experiencing that… is homeland. (Emphasis added)

Similarly, Levon mentions that visiting the Republic contributed to his understanding of his own Armenianness:

> Later on in my life, like once I visited Armenia, and kind of went there and spent several months there at a time, I think that also incorporates aspects of [what makes me Armenian]. And plays a role like just being in the homeland if you will, although again, you know, it's a difficult thing sometimes for the diasporan to say. None of my family is from any of the lands within the borders here. But obviously there's still shared elements of culture and language and things. So it still is your homeland, so like, forming that connection as well then in turn contributes [to being Armenian].

Here, Van, Natalie, and Levon all mention sharing something in common with Armenians in the Republic, making it easier to adopt the nation-state as a homeland even without family ties there. Part of this idea of homeland requires being in community with other Armenians, and the Republic is the most centralized place to find that.

In fact, Jirair considers moving to the Republic someday, but he worries that being diasporan Armenian will not be enough for him to be welcomed into this surrogate homeland. He explains,

> I think about repatriation, one day in the future. *Asdvadz medz e*,[15] you know, that's all I can say. But a homeland, idea of a homeland, it's, it has to be *Hayastan*. And this is the biggest disconnect with diaspora and Armenia is, you know, for us diasporans, we don't get it. We haven't lived in Armenia. They have a point. My family hasn't lived in Armenia for a hundred years, over a hundred years, you know, so they have a point there. But at the same time, a lot of times diasporan Armenians don't feel like in Armenia they are Armenian enough.

Jirair anticipates criticism or distance from Armenians in the Republic because he is not from the homeland. Lilit echoes this sentiment:

> Growing up in the diaspora is a really interesting challenge, I think, because you feel like everything that you're trying to do, you're doing from afar, and you don't know if it's helping. You don't know if the people there oftentimes are not accepting our help or don't feel that we're as Armenian as them. I mean, it's part assimilation, but it's just a completely different version of being Armenian. But having, like oftentimes, conversations with other people who have grown up in the US and trying to not feel guilty for the fact that we're like, you know, weren't born in Armenia, or aren't there as often as maybe we want to be.

In her experience, Lilit notices a bit of insecurity when comparing herself and other diasporans to Armenians from the Republic. The feeling of guilt appears as she seems somehow less Armenian than those born and raised in Armenia. Yet, Lilit pushes back against those feelings, recognizing that hers is simply "a completely different version of being Armenian." Further, the Republic cannot encompass the entirety of the Armenian homeland. Western Armenia, other areas deemed lost such as Nakhichevan, regions now in other nation-states still with large Armenian populations like Javakhk, and the presently contested area of Artsakh, are all part of a greater understanding of Armenia among Armenians. Without these lands under control of an Armenian nation-state, and in some cases only accessible to Armenians under threat of discrimination or

[15] Աստուած մեծ է (Eng: God is great)

violence, many Armenians associate these places with a great sense of loss and desire for justice or return.

One way of navigating these intense feelings of loss and longing is through dance. At Sardarabad's performance, for instance, the emphasis on homeland was overt, especially in the name of their show, "*Dzovits Dzov*: A Journey of Historic Armenia through Dance," using the phrase explicitly associated with a desire for return. Outside the auditorium, the hallway was decorated with a poster showing illustrations of people wearing *taraz*, traditional Armenian clothing, from different regions of Armenia, including Artsakh and some areas of Western Armenia. During the show, the host proudly announced that this performance is "inspired by our love for our homeland," and that "the lands our ancestors were removed from is still in our dance." The dances themselves included imagery invoking the physical land of Armenia. For their dance entitled "Ararat," the dancers formed two circles with their arms towards the center to create the appearance of two mountain peaks. The dance ended with the dancers lifting a large, white sheet, dancing under the sheet to cross the stage, then finally letting the sheet fall on top of them to form the figure of Mount Ararat. This dance in particular highlights the link between dance and homeland, as the dance visuals literally represent lost Armenian land, conjuring one of the most iconic symbols of Armenia, Mount Ararat. Armenian dancers do not just honor these lands, but also desire them. Siragan describes one of their dances in their program as "Return: The time will come when we will march back into its embrace." As lively music played, the dancers twisted and spun, and the screen behind them displayed pictures of ancient Armenian buildings, now abandoned. This dance clearly insists that where Armenians once lived, Armenians will live again. In these choreographed presentations, Armenians use dance to claim their homeland, and to pointedly say that this land is Armenian. It is a way to vocally and

expressly pin feelings of loss to a real, physical place on earth by declaring that place part of the Armenian homeland.

Beyond the visuals of this kind of staged performance, dance also enables Armenians to embody homeland in themselves. When Gaïdz dances *shurchbar* with his Armenian friends, he can connect to an Armenia that he has never actually seen:

> It felt like, damn, I was in Aintab or in Gesaria with my homies dancing like it was 1820 or 1750. I felt physically like I was there, and it was less the, for me it's less the dance itself. It's more this weird recognition, this sort of subconscious recognition that you and I, socially, are participating in this unique cultural act, right? That can't be replicated elsewhere, but rests on our mutual understanding of it, and the way we're speaking to one another through dance. Like for me, dance is a social and cultural practice above it being a, like, physical one. Like those, it can be physical, but… I wasn't conscious of it. It's a mode of sort of articulating collectivity or togetherness.

This imagined homeland, for Gaïdz, is a site of emotion brought on by being together with Armenians. Dancing facilitates the strong social connection he has with his friends, and their "mutual understanding" of an Armenian cultural context imbues this social connection with ideas and feelings of homeland. Thus, a simple *shurchbar* becomes a felt Armenian homeland among the dancers in that moment. For Lusineh, Armenian dance explicitly creates her feeling of homeland. As she explains,

> The Armenian homeland to me is, it's not Armenia the country. It's Armenia like my community here. That is the homeland to me. So, personally, the dance group is a huge component of my Armenia, and going back to the idea of the homeland, I don't have any family left in Armenia. All of my family abroad is in the Middle East and Cyprus, so I think in that fact, in that sense, it's very interesting how my homeland is my homeland, right? Armenia the country is my country, I guess, but it's not really where I feel at home. I feel at home when I'm with the Armenian dance group, when I'm in the downstairs studio. When I'm performing at these productions, at these picnics. That is my homeland. But then again, I did go to Armenia last summer, and it was undoubtedly the most meaningful experience of my life. So I think in that sense, it's kind of like a double sided thing. But for my purposes, the emphasis is on the community and the people that I have.

Even having been to the physical Republic of Armenia, Lusineh feels more at home with the Armenians she knows and loves in Chicago. The community is her homeland, and her community is found through dance. Thus, as Gaïdz and Lusineh exemplify, Armenians can use dance to bring a sense of homeland with them in diaspora, even as their lost lands are inaccessible, perhaps indefinitely.

Preservation, Narrative, and Fixity

"The men went to war, homes and families rested on the shoulders of women," reads the program description of Siragan's dance called "Pillars." The women appear on stage wearing taraz *costumes of white dresses with sparkly black detailing and gold headpieces. They dance to a slow song with string and woodwind instruments, holding their arms in a careful and upright posture and flicking their wrists to the music. Their movements flow with the steady pace of the music, their control exhibiting a quiet strength. The screen at the back of the stage provides a backdrop of the famous* tatik-papik *monument in Artsakh. The music fades, and the lights dim.*

"The battle is not done, and there is no more retreat," the program describes the next dance, "Battlefield." Loud zurna and drums play as the men come onto the stage in brown taraz *shirts and black pants, and Yerevan's statue of David of Sassoun, the Armenian hero of legend, shows on the screen in the background. They perform the ancient martial dance* yarkhushta[16] *with intensity and rhythm. The dancers jump, clap, and hit their shoulders together with incredible energy. The audience claps and cheers along. With their vocalizations and forceful movements, the dancers create a powerful energy.*

[16] Յարխուշտա (an improvised martial dance from the Armenian Highlands in which partners clap each other's hands); for an example, see "Karin - Yarkhushta Armenian traditional dance / Կարին - Յարխուշտա," video, YouTube, posted by KARIN Folk Dance and Song Group, October 26, 2013, https://youtu.be/b_DjLqYzDDg.

The insecurity of exile and disconnect from homeland, as well as the legacy of the Genocide (which is still unrecognized globally) has contributed to the intensity of cultural preservation efforts. Armenians grow up learning that they must preserve and keep sacred Armenian culture. As the head priest of the local Armenian church said at Sardarabad's performance, "God bless you all for preserving the Armenian culture." This preservation is an effort to rebuild what was lost from the Genocide and to assert a cultural presence in the world. In some ways, this idea is very motivating. For Levon, Armenian dance is "a tradition that we're carrying on for grandparents' and parents' generations, or great grandparents for some people, and there's a pride in knowing we're the only ones carrying that." It's a matter of pride to know and to do these dances. It is a way to honor ancestors and to remember those lost. Similarly, Lilit mentions,

> I think the thing that centers us is the preservation of the Armenian culture. It's never been a question that that's the language that we're speaking in our house with our grandparents, and that's the thing that they've preserved and has stood the test of time regardless of where they grew up in the world… our family is really proud of the fact that we still put being, or we really want to put being Armenian first, and we'll preserve that, even with my kids.

The purported goal of preservation is central to her understanding of what makes her Armenian, and she intends to continue to emphasize this with her own children in the future. Armenians generally like being Armenian, and they want to continue what they know and love. Like Chris queries, "Why would anybody try and preserve something that makes them happy, or something that can spread love? It is because you want to feel that again, like you felt it once. You felt, you know, you were watching a performance once, you were dancing once, and you go, I want to feel that over and over and over again." Yet the strongest force behind this intention to preserve the culture comes as a response to feeling threatened. Elen explains, "It's always felt like I have a responsibility to keep my culture, because if my generation doesn't, then where does it go?

Right? We're literally seeing Armenia in turmoil over land. So just like, let's think about, though it's hard imagining the worst case scenario, what if we didn't have a land, then what?" Elen speaks to what many Armenians feel; the Genocide already took so much, so it is necessary to preserve what we still have, especially now, as the Azerbaijani government pushes Armenians out of their homes in Artsakh.

One way for Armenians to contribute to this sense of preservation is to narrativize their understandings of Armenianness, particularly through dance. Sardarabad's show centered around the idea of a wide-ranging historical Armenia, presenting the narrative of Armenians coming from and honoring an expansive homeland. Meanwhile, Siragan's show told the story of Armenians persevering and thriving through turmoil and joy, comparing Armenia's history with the current situation in Artsakh. Both ensembles performed narratives that touched on specific aspects of Armenian experiences, aiming to present a story that remembers the past and continues to promote ideas surrounding homeland, survival, and continuity. Lilit describes how the narratives presented in a dance performance contribute to the idea of preservation:

> With a performance, you really are like, sharing this narrative, and maybe sharing some slower dances, ones that like provoke some more emotion in people that's not just happy.… Being able to have a little bit more imagery, or like, bring some other type of emotion to it that shows like, maybe we've lost some of our lands, but the culture is still there, the traditions are still there, the dance moves that we've learned in those areas have stood the test of time.

For many of the dancers I interviewed, centering their shows around a narrative gives more meaning to their performances. Lusineh sees dance as a way to touch on the subtleties of Armenianness that words cannot quite express:

> I think from the Armenian perspective, there is just so much to tell, right? And that's not just to say, "Oh, the Genocide happened, you know, all of our slow, sad dances are about the Genocide." No! I think that there's just so many nuances in the Armenian history that deserve to be represented. Not just, you know, in a random Powerpoint slide at something, but I think dance is a unique way to tell that story. And it helps keep the dancers aware of what they're doing and why they're doing it.

In this sense, dance can wordlessly express and tap into emotions to share a story that is difficult to talk about. This emotion connects the audience with the dancers, potentially sharing a message that is more comprehensively understood through affective connection. Because of this, Jirair encourages using narrative dance as a means of presenting issues that Armenians face to the world:

> You're able to craft a story nonverbally with, you know, music, rhythm, your body, and we have a lot of stories to tell. I think Armenia could really benefit on the global stage if we were able to tell our story in a clear and more concise way. You know, because we, I don't wanna dive too deep into politics, but we had Artsakh for 30 years, right? We weren't able to get it internationally recognized. And now the narrative coming from our own government [of the Republic of Armenia] is that it's not even Armenian anymore.[17] And so people look at it, and they say this is the story. If Armenians are telling their story as "Artsakh is no longer Armenian," if literally *we* are saying that, then like, who is anyone else to tell us different, you know?

Jirair suggests the emotion this specific kind of storytelling evokes can help people see and understand Armenians better, perhaps changing how the rest of the world views Artsakh and provoking the desire to help. To this end, Jirair calls Armenians in diaspora "the PR committee" for Armenia and Artsakh. It is not my goal to determine whether this would be materially effective, but for many of the dancers here, narrativizing dance is a way to work through and raise awareness of the complex issues Armenians face. Hopefully, this emotional, physical storytelling fosters a strong connection with the audience that leads to sympathy for Armenian struggles.

The opportunity to share both the sorrows and the joys of Armenianness with non-Armenians is one of the more unique parts of being in a dance ensemble, according to a few of these dancers. One of Elen's most memorable times dancing was during a festival with a

[17] Jirair is referring to the widely unpopular decisions of Armenia's prime minister regarding the Republic's involvement with the conflict in Artsakh. For more context, see Lillian Avedian, "Pashinyan ready to recognize Artsakh as part of Azerbaijan," *The Armenian Weekly*, May 24, 2023, https://armenianweekly.com/2023/05/24/pashinyan-ready-to-recognize-artsakh-as-part-of-azerbaijan/.

mixed audience. As she recounts, “We're putting on a show for our Armenian and non-Armenian audience. And that part feels the coolest to me. It's when it's like, non-Armenians there, because we get to show who we are, or a piece of who we are, to maybe a community that's never even heard of us. Or maybe they're like, ‘Oh, the loud ones that book the street every August, cool, those guys!’” Similarly, Alice is touched by the diverse audiences she has performed for:

> [At] the annual Evanston picnic that we have, there's a lot of people who come just like, from the surrounding streets who come and watch, and even just seeing the videos after and seeing how big of a crowd it is, and people will just come in from the sides who were just walking around. And I know we performed by Northwestern University, so a lot of those students will come by and will watch, and I think it's just cool to see all the intermingling between different cultures, and it's just, very sentimental and special, I think.

It is often exciting and heart-warming when non-Armenians take interest in Armenian culture because it does not happen often, and many Armenians want to share their stories widely. By presenting their dance as a compelling narrative show, Armenian dancers are more likely to gain this kind of attention from outsiders. Conversely, at another festival, Jirair points out how special it was to perform for an Armenian audience:

> Last summer we went to, I think it was Saint Mesrob's hundredth year anniversary in Racine, Wisconsin. And we went there, and like the average age is probably 80 years old. But afterwards, like, they couldn't believe it. Like, grandmas would just come up and start crying. And they're like, “My parents lived through the Genocide,” you know, and these people would say this, “They didn't teach me Armenian, it was too painful, but you know it's always in us, and seeing you guys really did something to us.” And so, of course, I wanna be able to do that to the older crowd.

Here it is apparent how powerful the emotions are that dance can evoke, even for those only watching. For those Armenians that remember the impact of the Genocide more closely, seeing a younger generation actively claim and present Armenianness is a sign that preservation efforts can lead to the continuation of a living Armenian culture.

Outside of these kinds of performances, people still dance to remember. According to Van, the intention to preserve is what differentiates his dance from that of his ancestors. He

explains, “Given our situation as a diaspora, it's also a means of cultural preservation. I think that's the one large change that if you looked at why my great grandparents would've danced versus why I dance, I think the factor that makes it different is mine's for preservation as well [as for fun].” Taking this idea of preservation further, though he does not participate in ensemble dance himself, Van sees why people do:

> I also see the instructional element of it as a better means of preserving it, so that there's nothing lost in communication, right? Things are codified, they're written down as like history. That's something that comes only with like a true dance organization, because I don't dance, you know, Michigan Hop [an Armenian-American *shurchbar*], and then write down how many steps I took in the dance. Or like, there's less, I guess, transcription or less codification with doing it casually, but, on the other hand, the heavy-handed element, it doesn't always produce the best result.

Dance ensembles collect and teach certain dances, providing an avenue to preserve and transmit the cultural knowledge of the dances they perform. In casual dance settings, this cultural knowledge is not produced in the same way, making these dances more susceptible to people forgetting them.

Van mentions “the heavy-handed element,” hinting that this strong desire for preservation of Armenian culture can also lend itself to a kind of narrowing of cultural forms. As many Armenians attempt to overcompensate for the trauma of genocide and exile, they promote a fixed and uniform idea of Armenianness, stemming from romanticism and nationalism, inadvertently pushing other Armenians away. Staged dance cultivates a specific image of Armenian culture, originally drawing on techniques from ballet to promote Armenian dance as a part of “civilized” or “high culture” art. Many of the dances that Armenian ensembles perform continue from the Soviet-era nationalization efforts in what is now the Republic of Armenia. To be sure, this history does not detract from the value of staged dance, but it does place it in a certain context

that is not relatable or meaningful to all Armenians, and it carries some harmful connotations.[18] Natalie discusses this legacy in her academic work:

> …[I]n *bemakan par* technique, ballet supersedes vernacular aesthetics and practitioners are simultaneously taught to reify colonial notions of civilization and modernity that mark indigenous Armenian heritage as primitive, devoid of technique, and as needing "development" by way of a Soviet balletic encounter. In the *bemakan* style, traces of Armenian vernacular aesthetics—which are already submerged by balletic comportment and syntax—are reduced to Orientalist ornamentations that are used to add an "ethnic spice" and a sense of authenticity to the form. (Kamajian, 6)

Thus, the state-sponsored dance ensembles of the Soviet era, under the purported intention of preserving folklore, took some traditional dance aesthetics and "balleticized" them to create a dance form more appealing to "modern" European taste (Kamajian 2022, 21-22). As the most visible and widely shared dance form, this relatively new style appears to encompass the whole of Armenian dance. In this sense, the primacy of staged dance minimizes other expressions of Armenianness as seen in the *azgagrakan* dance that Natalie practices with her ensemble or in the casual *shurchbar* tradition that Van grew up with. By taking such strong influence from ballet and ignoring local dance aesthetics that may not fit as well into a narrative, staged dance presents a romanticized version of Armenian culture.

Going back even to Komitas, the romanticization of "folk culture" has been a tool to promote a singular version of Armenianness. Much like Komitas' goal of promoting Armenian national unity by collecting "authentic" folk songs, Soviet dance ensembles used musical culture to popularize a romantic idea of a highly cultured Armenian nation. Further, if a dance ensemble aims to gain positive attention from outsiders or to raise awareness for a particular cause, it follows that they would try to appeal to their audience with attractive dance aesthetics, namely ballet. Though current dance ensembles largely do not have this specific intention, their

[18] I do not want to minimize the meaning and value of staged dance. As the dancers here show, staged dance can be powerful and have a genuinely positive impact. With this discussion, I am trying to open up the popular understanding of Armenian dance to include the forms that are not staged and to caution against an overly romanticized or overly nationalistic view of dance in general.

traditions come out of the Soviet folk ensembles that did, and romantic notions of "high culture" still linger in the form. At the same time, going the route of Komitas and only considering dance forms seemingly untouched by "foreign" influences is inaccurate to how people interact with and create their cultures. Music and dance change and grow as people do. Natalie describes this balance of honoring dance traditions while being careful not to freeze those traditions in the name of preservation so they cannot grow:

> So for us to like kind of, and other *azgagrakan* practitioners, not just us, they're seeking to do something different or in alterity to [*bemakan* dance]. And they do that by looking back to our roots and using ethnographic materials and things like that. And then I think that we're sort of looking at also like, how do you decolonize that? So how do you make choices, like aesthetic choices, but at the same time, you're not kind of looking to create the sense of like, "pure origins," because ultimately, that defeats the purpose of decolonizing. There's no such thing as this, like, pure authentic or whatever, because either way, that's, you know, tradition is constantly changing. So for us, we have to make it relevant for us, but we're also trying to maintain some integrity, some aesthetic integrity, as to what our dance form could look like without leaning towards balletic approaches to dance.

Natalie, in her work with Lernazang, thus aspires to preserve Armenian dance culture without holding to some imaginary of authenticity. Through ethnographic dance, she has found an alternative to staged dance that gives her a way to interact with Armenianness.

Additionally, even outside the world of ethnographic dance, staged dance does not connect with every Armenian. Gaïdz recalls being bored by the *bemakan* dance performances that his grandmother excitedly took him to see as a child and rejecting his mother's attempts to enroll him in Armenian dance classes. Van similarly remembers his childhood dismissal of Armenianness, disclosing that, as a child, "I didn't like [being Armenian] because it meant I had to go to school on Saturday and Sunday, right? I didn't want to be Armenian because it meant I had more school." Having grown out of these feelings, Van now appreciates having gone to weekend Armenian school to learn about language, culture, history, and religion. At the same

time, he warns against forcing a singular view of Armenian culture, especially when raising children to appreciate their heritage:

> You have the forced preservation, right? And then you wonder why the kids who are in that don't like it. Whereas you have me, who was never a part of that forced preservation [in a staged dance context], who eagerly seeks Armenian dance, and wants to preserve it. So I think it's almost, it plays on, like, the rebellious nature of youth, especially diasporan youth. If you force it upon them, there's a chance that they just rebel and don't want to do it or burn out, or they associate it with, like, you know, a trauma of being yelled at or too much discipline.

This disinterest appears in Gaïdz's case, as the more his family pushed involvement in staged dance, the more he rejected it. Being from LA, Gaïdz was not aware of the particular *shurchbar* tradition of Van's East Coast Armenian community until his late teens, and he did not connect with what he saw to be Armenian dance at the time. Thinking about how he felt about his Armenianness when he was younger, Gaïdz describes, "[I] felt very sort of detached. I felt very bored by a lot of things having to do with my Armenian culture, like I think there were certain things that I took, at least at that point, took for granted how deeply ingrained they were in me… but at face value, I was bored by it. I wasn't interested." As a kid, Gaïdz did not feel particularly inspired to explore his Armenianness as the dominant version of Armenian culture in his community did not quite match with his own self-image. During this period of his childhood, Gaïdz encountered such strong messages of Armenian cultural preservation so frequently that he actually distanced himself from participating in Armenian culture.

Arguably, this idea of a singular Armenian culture stems from overly nationalistic preservation efforts. Here, Natalie explains how she understands the way nationalism leads to exclusion or conflict:

> I think it's partly like a nation-state phenomenon, this kind of pressure to sort of abide by and have this one singular sense of identity, because that's just what the nation-state does. Like it just picks something and then it nationalizes it. And so it makes everyone be like, "Oh, this is yours," you know. It's sort of like diversity and variety is a threat to that approach to unify. And then you add this other layer of diaspora,

> and then you actually have this whole other layer in the Armenian context of like, Armenians already being diasporic prior to the Armenian nation-state. So you have Armenian communities growing up and forming themselves in different communities already.
>
> So Armenianness is already diverse, but then you have the nation-state, then you have a diaspora, and then there's all these anxieties that people are trying to sort of funnel into like, "Well, this is what I know. So then this is right. And if you are telling me something different, then that means mine is not right anymore. And now I feel threatened." Instead of us just recognizing that there isn't really a singular way of being anything.

Being recognized as Armenian seems to require an adherence to narrowed national standards that do not allow for diverse expression or experience. When one feels an obligation to connect their Armenianness to a homeland, and the Republic is the most accessible version of homeland, then the idea of a common, global Armenianness is centered in cultural elements from the nation-state. Many Western Armenian words, music, dances, and food that were seen as too Turkish died out as people were shamed out of using them or never passed them down to their children.

Eastern Armenian language is prioritized over Western Armenian, *bemakan* dance in the US keeps its ballet aesthetics, and Armenian-American *shurchbar* is not considered "authentic" enough as a form of Armenian dance. If it were otherwise, being Armenian would mean too many different things, and then how would Armenians be able to preserve their culture and live on in defiance of the Genocide? So goes the logic of those who promote the preservation of one, definitive Armenianness.

Diversity and Change within Armenianness

The drummer begins beating a rhythm, and the other musicians prepare themselves. A dancer shouts, "Hey!" and the two zurna players start a drone and a slow melody. The Lernazang dancers are on stage in a line, shoulder to shoulder and holding each other's hands

with crossed arms. They wear earth-toned, taraz*-like clothing; the women have black shirts, silver necklaces and headbands, and colorful, wide-legged pants, some wearing aprons with intricate geometric patterns, and the men have long-sleeved shirts, vests, and black pants. They bend their knees and dance in a circle with strong steps. Natalie leads the line, waving a red cloth with her right hand, and the dancer at the other end waves a black cloth with her left hand. The dancers vocalize "hey!" to the music and lift their arms as they continue to move in a circle. Then, the music speeds up, and the dancers transition into a faster dance. Still traveling clockwise, they jump to the center of their open circle, swinging their arms forward as they do, then jumping back and bringing their arms in. With their joyful shouts and playful smiles, the dancers generate an air of enjoyment and fun.*[19]

While diversity may be hidden in the name of a unified Armenian nation, people continue to express their Armenianness in different ways. As a dance group outside of the typical expectations of Armenian staged dance, Lernazang sometimes finds that people do not actually understand what they do. Natalie recounts one such situation:

> We gave a performance this past weekend at the Glendale library, and we were the only performance group. We also did like a workshop for the community, and then we had a short performance. And when they were making their flier, they put an image of a *bemakan* dancer, so someone who was dancing in a very like elevated and balletic posture as the main flier, you know, and if there were other dance groups invited, then whatever, I wouldn't really think anything of it. But I did raise issue because I was like, well, this is not really a proper advertisement of the kind of group that you hired, that you are inviting. So, you know, it'd be great if we could change that because it just, that doesn't represent what my group, what we're trying to do.

The risk in prioritizing *bemakan* as the most polished form of Armenian dance is that when others, like Natalie, want to share their unique experiences of dance, people are not as receptive. In acknowledging the variety within Armenian dance, and by extension Armenianness as a

[19] Lernazang Performance at Alex Theater in Glendale, CA, on February 19, 2023; "Մուսալեռան և Կիլիկիո Տապկիներ [Musaleran and Kilikio Dabki]," video, YouTube, posted by Lernazang Ensemble, February 22, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0YrbTlEICZQ&ab_channel=LernazangEnsemble.

whole, Armenianness becomes more real, and more human, instead of a pristine, idealized identity to conform to. When comparing *bemakan* and *azgagrakan*, Natalie maintains, "These two different forms, in fact divergent forms, often tell different things, and they construct Armenianness in very different ways. Even though they are both claiming to be sort of quote unquote 'traditional Armenian folk dance' or whatever. I think they're both. I think they're doing different things in that." There is no one "correct" form of Armenian dance because Armenianness encompasses a wide range of traditions and cultural expressions. Both staged and ethnographic dance speak to some part of the Armenian experience, meaning they both contribute to an active Armenian culture. With the inclusion of *shurchbar* as another form of Armenian dance, Levon agrees:

> Someone would probably argue for like three types of dance.[20] So you'd have *pematrvadz* dance, or like staged choreographed dance, which is like [our] dance group. You'd have *shurchbar*, which is the kind of dancing you do at like a *barahantes*,[21] which is like the circle dance. And then you have *azkakragan* dance, which is like ethnographic dance, which has seen kind of a resurgence lately. It was generally more popular in the last 100 years in like *Hayastan* than in most areas in the diaspora, and there's been kind of a movement to help bring it back…. So for choreographed Armenian dance, you will have Russian elements or ballet elements, or whatever, by the nature of the dance, right? Or you know, *shurchbar*, musically or visually, may be more similar to Turkish or Kurdish. Or *azkakragan* maybe, you know, whatever criticisms people have of those dances. I think it's always worth remembering that like, those dances have all served a role in preserving some form of Armenian identity in the places where they were developed, and so it is important to understand where they came from, and which elements may or may not be Armenian. But it's also important to recognize that each of them have value, right?

Each form of dance is shaped by its surrounding cultures and what is important to those dancing. These influences differ, and the variety in dance reflects this. Still, it all remains Armenian dance, valuable to the dancers who aim to enact their Armenianness. Influence from

[20] Levon's explanation here helped me configure the definitions I provide on pages 2 and 3.
[21] Պարահանդէս (Eng: dance party; ball)

non-Armenians does not detract from what Armenians create, and the differences between regional cultural elements do not make any one more important than another. As Van points out,

> A lot of the songs that East Coasters dance to are fundamentally songs that a lot of people would associate with being Turkish, in like the instruments and the words and the sounds, but those are the dances that we danced in Western Armenia. Whereas on the West Coast and other places, the pool of Armenian immigrants has a lot more representation from Iranian Armenians or people from the modern Republic of Armenia. These groups of people, obviously Armenian as well, but they have very different traditions kind of given where the fault line was between what you consider Western and Eastern Armenia. So the East Coast, funnily, has the Western traditions.

The diversity of Armenian experiences is exemplified through their different styles of music and dance, clearly showing that Armenianness is bigger than a prescribed, romantic nationalist version of what culture should be.

In shifting away from a fixed kind of preservation, people dance what they learned from their community without striving for authenticity, but rather embodying these dance forms as Armenians in the present day. Van does not mind that he does not dance exactly the same as his ancestors did. He explains,

> As much as we try to adhere to where we came from, and preserve everything perfectly, there's also kind of a natural, you know, dynamicism, if that's even a word. There's a natural element of change innate to Armenian dance that you can't really fight. You know, I don't do the Michigan Hop or the other dances the exact way that they were made, but I know that I'm at least doing them nominally to preserve them. But you know, over time they're going to look a little bit different. I think that dance is a little different from music in that sense, because you can hear music from, you know, 100 years ago. But dance wasn't as recorded. It wasn't as, like, viewable. I think [with] dance you kind of have to cut some slack to let it change a little bit. Whether that's, you know, how high you're jumping during a dance, or the footsteps, or if you're holding pinkies or if you're holding hands like, there's certain things that I'm not on a mission to preserve. But I just let, I let be, and you know, whatever happens, happens.

Van prioritizes the memory and spirit of his ancestors' dances over replicating the exact moves that they did. Besides being impossible, exact replication is not the point. Van dances to feel, not to mimic. In this way, preservation for its own sake does not actually keep Armenianness alive,

as not allowing dance to change over time alienates it from those Armenians that are currently alive and dancing. Gaïdz expresses his own feelings about this when he says,

> There's a distinction between *hayabahbanoutiun*[22] and *sdeghdzakordzoutiun*.[23] Right, *hayabahbanoutiun* is preservation, *sdeghdzakordzoutiun* is creation. I was done with *hayabahbanoutiun*. I was frustrated with that. I was interested in the act of creation. Right? How do we create? All right, we're three generations out, four generations out [from the Genocide]. Let's start creating culture again! And so recognizing that a lot of the conversations [from] 150 years ago, in the late nineteenth century, were very much so in conversation with what was taking place currently, and then during the [Artsakh] war, I mean, the parallels were just, I mean. They were shocking, for lack of a better word. And so being thrust into dance during that, like following all of that, dance for me became a way of actually sort of creating and participating, practicing.

Following his childhood distancing from Armenian culture, Gaïdz sought to understand his identity better through Armenian literature, and eventually, Armenian dance. He became committed to creating space for contemporary Armenian life and cultivating a present-day Armenianness, discussed more in the next section. Part of this creation is recognizing that through the diaspora, Armenianness itself has spread wide and changed to fit a multitude of experiences.

Of course, like any group of people, Armenians do not always agree on everything. Despite the general call for Armenian unity, divisive political parties and rival church organizations have divided Armenian communities almost as long as they have existed in the US (Mirak 1983, viii-ix). Unfortunately, the two dance ensembles in Chicago are not strangers to this kind of separation. The major difference between the groups is that Sardarabad is part of Hamazkayin, an international cultural organization of diasporan Armenians that is connected with the ARF, and Siragan is a private group unaffiliated with any specific organization within the wider Armenian community. The few dancers who mentioned this in our conversations did

[22] Հայապահպանութիւն (Eng: preservation of Armenians/Armenianness)
[23] Ստեղծագործութիւն (Eng: creation)

not seem to feel strongly about the original reason for the division and generally supported the existence of both groups. Lilit sums up the situation from her perspective:

> This other dance group has been around for, I mean a fair amount of years now because I was younger when they split off. But yeah, that's the reason why there's two in Chicago. And there's a lot of, a lot of the main disputes in our community comes from that which is really sad, because it became this thing that, like, I say I really interpret Armenian dance as this universal way to bring people together and just express yourself, regardless of what opinions and beliefs and whatever you have. Like it's just one of those things that, it's not split by dialects. It's not split by political beliefs. Like there's, you know, certain representations of dance, but the goal is to really showcase all of them, especially in the diaspora. And so I don't know. A lot of other states in the US have multiple dance groups, but I think ours was just brought on by like some dispute and disagreement which made it a little bit more divisive. It's like, who's involved in which one and who supports each one, and that kind of thing. And that's why I say, especially for being a smaller community, it's sad that a lot of the times we're divided by something like that. Yeah, I give no like, fault or anything to any of the kids that are involved in the other one, because a lot of it was like our parents making the decisions of who was involved in things, and especially because it happened when a lot of us were very young. So I still like, yeah. It just like, stinks a little bit, you know.

Lilit mentions her disappointment that the Chicago Armenian community has this point of tension, especially as she sees dance as a way to bring people together. Although dance is not a magical force that can simply solve disagreements and ease resentment, it can indeed forge critical bonds, as I will now consider.

Community as Homeland

It's summer, and Gaïdz is at the AYF Olympics, an annual athletic event for AYF chapters across the US and Canada. This year it's in Providence, Rhode Island, a city that he has never even been close to before. Hanging out in their small hotel room before tonight's party, Gaïdz's friends decide to teach him the shurchbar*s they know. Someone turns on the speaker and starts playing the musicians they'll be hearing in less than an hour, like Onnik Dinkjian, Ara Dinkjian, Mal Barsamian, and John Berberian, music featuring a mix of oud, drum, clarinet, saxophone, sometimes other accompanying instruments, and often vocals. Gaïdz's friends turn to him and*

say, "Alright! So we're gonna teach you some of these dances so that when you get down there, you know what you're doing." They practice the steps together in the tiny room, running into the wall, moving back, and starting the dance over again. Hopping, shuffling, stumbling, and laughing, the friends dance together, just the three of them, moments before joining a party full of other Armenians ready to dance with them.

In Gaïdz's own words, "I'm in this room with two guys that I've barely known for a year, but I feel like I have deep sort of brotherhood, kinship, with. And they're teaching me these dances that their families have brought over with them 150, 100 years ago. And they're imparting on this, not only West Coast sort of transplant, but also someone who comes from a very different, but also emotionally similar, cultural context."

As the current organizer of his school's Armenian Students Association, Gaïdz works to create a sense of community among Armenians from vastly different origins:

> Somehow I was getting connected with all these different Armenians like, "Oh, yeah, like, I'm half Armenian, my mom's from London, but like I grew up in Calabasas," I was like, okay, cool. So I met him. And there's this girl like, "I'm half Armenian. My mom's from Boston." Her family actually runs this lahmajun shop that my friend's family now owns, it's just crazy, small world. I met her, and we have a lot of mutual friends. And then I met this half Armenian kid from Montreal, who I knew since my first day at school, and is probably one of my closest friends at this school, right? And I was like, "Wait! Why haven't you been coming?" Pull them in. Met this half Armenian, half Black kid from Boston who's more patriotic and more deeply wound up in these things than I could ever be that I've been connected to through the AYF and stuff like that, right? There's this kid from New York, who's full Armenian, but who's like fourth generation New Yorker. Right? Like all these different types of Armenian. I mean. And then, like, the Armenian squad, right? The international students from Armenia, you know. Like you have this whole hodgepodge of Armenians from very different backgrounds, and I was like, alright. It's tough. Because how do you? How do you articulate things so that it's accessible to everyone but that's also rich in content? That's a really tough balance to strike.

His challenge here is to bring together people with varying understandings of what it means to be Armenian while making sure everyone feels welcome. Thinking back on his own experiences,

Gaïdz remembers dance being a powerful way to connect diverse Armenians. At the 2021 AYF Olympics, Gaïdz encountered East Coast *shurchbar* for the first time:

> The music sounds familiar, but I don't think I've ever seen this in person like this. And then one person sort of grabs another person, and then other people sort of excitedly nudge one another and go join. Next thing you know it, you have 20-25 people dancing in unison with one another, a *shurchbar* that I've never seen in my life before. That 20 person dance becomes a 40 person dance becomes a 100 person dance becomes a 300 person dance, and then everyone's in it, and everyone's sweating, and the dance speeds up and it becomes more intense. And being on the sidelines and seeing that is, I mean, it's incredible, but it's also scary if you don't know it. It's like, this is a different culture. This is a completely different world. I've had some great friends who've pulled me into those moments. Like literally, physically, like, "Gaïdz, come here!" and they pulled my hand into the dance, and then I'm like, "Dude, I have no idea what's going on." I'm fumbling. They're moving too fast for me, I'm tripping over my feet, but you're learning through it and figuring out, okay, I've got like one part of it, and so I'm gonna just keep doing that part over and over again. But there is this also element of being pulled into it. You're not sort of ostracized, and you're not pushed out to the boundary, like out to the periphery of those dance spaces which is really neat. And I think if it wasn't for that, if it was, "Gaïdz, you're an outsider, you're from LA. Stay in your lane." I think my relationship would have been different.

This kind of Armenian dance, that Gaïdz had never known before, elicited particular feelings of community and belonging that he had not encountered during his childhood in LA. Remembering how he felt dancing with other Armenians on the East Coast, Gaïdz decided to share this practice with his ASA. At the end of every meeting, he turned on some music and taught his friends the dances he had learned:

> [Dancing] became like a way of orienting the group. Or like, it was an instructional thing, but it was also a way of bringing together this band of really different, these Armenians from these different walks of life and different relationships to their Armenian identity, and it was fun… being in a room on a campus where there's like .05% Armenians, dancing dances from 100 years ago, to which we all have this sort of fractional relationship to, but it's like, in none of our lived experiences did we regularly dance these East Coast *shurchbar*s, right? But here we are learning them, and it's a way for us to sort of speak to one another, but also speak to that sort of common heritage. So yeah, I mean, we kept practicing that together and whatnot, and that became a whole thing.

Gaïdz used the dance with which he had connected to then create connection and community with other Armenians in a new space. In this way, Armenians use dance as a means of

unification. When a diverse group of Armenians gets together, dance can serve as a way to connect these people with different experiences into a group of people with a shared experience of dance.

Developing this unity is important because the sense of community creates a kind of surrogate homeland in diaspora. The communities of Armenians throughout the diaspora allow for people to actively maintain their Armenian identities and to feel connected to a place where they do not live. Diasporans in community are able to navigate these identities and feelings together, as parts of the same whole. As Van puts it, one person cannot solely make up a diasporic community:

> I don't think there's any such thing as like, a one-man diaspora. So, if you, as an Armenian, don't at least try to connect with other Armenians in the diaspora, then you're making yourself a one-man diaspora, and those don't exist. Look, it doesn't have to mean involvement. It doesn't have to mean setting up organizations. It doesn't have to mean starting schools or churches. It honestly just means that if a random, non-Armenian person came to your town and said, "Hi, stranger, I, for some reason, need a list of all the Armenians in this town," you could say, "Yeah, they're there, there, and there." You *know*. You have a network of Armenians, you keep in touch in your own ways. You don't have to keep in touch in Armenian. You don't have to eat Armenian food when you see each other. You don't have to do Armenian things when you see each other. That's all up to you. But I think the core backbone of the diaspora is maintaining a network of all of us.

The crucial element of cultural maintenance, then, is simply being visibly Armenian together. The rest is open for different ideas and expressions. As long as Armenians are together, they can decide how to continue to be Armenian in their particular contexts. Growing up in Chicago, Levon appreciated the group of Armenians that raised him and connected him to his Armenianness. In his context,

> Growing up in the Midwest as a diasporan Armenian, you kind of rely on the community to provide Armenian experiences and Armenian traditions and Armenian everything. So going to AYF meetings, going to community events, going to dance, going to Armenian school. All of those things, going to Camp Haiastan in the summers, right? All of those things contribute an element [to what makes me Armenian], along with my family.

Levon expresses his Armenianness through his community. The events he attends and the activities he participates in allow him to engage in his Armenianness. Without other Armenians, there is no place for this engagement. Stressing the element of community, Lilit also mentions the AYF and its summer camp as formative in her life as an Armenian:

> I went to an Armenian summer camp, an AYF summer camp in Franklin, Massachusetts, called Camp Haiastan. I went there for so many years. I think the first time I went was when I was like 10, and then I worked there for a few years, too. Every Saturday night we had dances, and it was so much fun because you got to know, especially line dances, maybe not traditional Armenian dances, but you know the *tamzara*[24] and all of that kind of stuff that a lot of Armenians will know exactly what the dance moves are regardless of where they grew up in the US or other countries. [We all] come together, and us being so young as kids, able to express ourselves that way, too. And so that's some of my favorite memories, like meeting people at that camp and being able to dance with them on Saturday nights. And just listen to traditional Armenian music and be able to connect with our culture that way, I think, is one, like, some of my favorite memories ever. And also when I was a counselor, being able to teach the kids the dances if they didn't know it, and just have fun that way.

Here, Armenians use dance to welcome children into an Armenian community. Lilit's fond memories of dancing as a kid at summer camp blend into her time as a counselor (an established member of the community) teaching younger kids (new members) how to dance as Armenians. From the perspective of the learner, Van describes his childhood experience with dance:

> At the Saturday school, I just called that *hay tbrots*,[25] which means Armenian school. It was about four hours every Saturday, and during that time we would always have like 45 minutes dedicated to dance, and 45 minutes dedicated to music, and then the rest was language and history. So I would say, since like the age of three, every year for *hay tbrots* we'd have instructional dance…
>
> I mean they were very amateur, right? They expected nothing of us, honestly, you know it was like five kids to a class. It was really just about doing the *hantes*[26] at the end of the year. Looking back at it now, it wasn't as much as like a Hamazkayin, or, you know, different dance group or anything. But it was more focused on the songs

---

[24] Թամզարա (a popular circle dance from the Armenian Highlands with several variants); for an example, see "Karin - Tamzara / Կարին - Թամզարա," video, YouTube, posted by KARIN Folk Dance and Song Group, September 18, 2013, https://youtu.be/yrrRNgqImf0.

[25] Հայ դպրոց (Eng: Armenian school)

[26] Հանդէս (Eng: recital; show; festival; concert)

> you might be singing while dancing. So like, I mean, I remember one time, the one solo I had with another kid was like, we got up in the front from the line and did like the tapping feet stuff, and you know, like heel in front and heel in the back. It was like a little, you know, moment. That's really it. And the other things were like the typical circle dances, and like, the usual. You're in a circle, arms around each other, you're skipping in unison, you're shuffling in unison, you're moving in unison.

Though not part of a specific dance group, Van remembers dance being an important part of his Armenian education. Dance in this context is not only a typical school activity to keep kids engaged and active, but also a means to transmit Armenian culture to the next generation and inspire togetherness. In the ensembles, young children certainly perform as well, often receiving the loudest applause from the parents in the audience. Sardarabad and Siragan encourage young Armenians to dance as a way to start enacting and growing their connection to Armenianness. Alice started dancing when she was a child and has grown up alongside her dance group. As a young adult now seeing a new generation of kids enter the ensemble, Alice feels grateful to be able to maintain and grow her community:

> Every time we come to dance practice, we dance all together, but having the little kids there who will also grow up to be like us and to dance like this… it's always passing it on to the future generation because we'll only be here for so long. So I feel like as long as the other kids see what we do, see how passionate we are to the dancing, like I think it's a very good way of promoting our legacy. And I think by having the younger kids there, it's only helping us grow and promote ourselves.

For Alice, bringing kids into the dance community ensures the continuation of an Armenian legacy. Children participate in these forms of dance and deepen their understanding of what being Armenian looks like in their own lives. Whether at summer camp, *hay tbrots*, or a formal dance ensemble, Armenian children gain the critical knowledge that Armenians dance together, as a community.

As Armenians learn and teach their dances, they sustain these ways of being Armenian. This kind of preservation is centered around keeping communities alive and focused on continuing living traditions. Taking the prescribed responsibility of cultural preservation,

Armenians can promote a nuanced cultural continuity that honors a past, present, and future Armenia. Lusineh tries to keep this bigger picture in mind when she dances:

> There's this bigger purpose that's a lot more significant than just a dance group in Chicago. You know, obviously, with Armenians' history, it's been a survival game since the beginning. And being in Chicago, you know, we're not in Los Angeles, we're not on the East Coast. We're just right here in the Midwest, and I think that us showing up exhibits like, yes, our individual passions for Armenian dance and all that. But it also exhibits this greater commitment to furthering the Armenian cause, and really tapping into, like, trying to respect what our ancestors went through, doing things like this, and coming together.

Since Chicago has a relatively small Armenian community in the US, Lusineh emphasizes how Armenians in the area make the effort to form community and do their part as members of the diaspora. In this way, Lusineh dances to include herself in the global Armenian community. As a descendent of displaced Armenians, she participates in this community to honor her ancestors' survival and continue being Armenian. Van similarly understands dance as a continuation of what his ancestors lived through and worked for:

> I think we continue to dance because we've had the same, both joyous and dreadful, causes that cause us to dance. We've been able to keep all of our *barahantes*es and all of our dances and all of our yearly galas. We've been able to keep those going for so long. So you know, hell yeah, we're gonna dance at all of them! But we've also encountered so many struggles along the way that also require our congregation, and thus our dancing. I would just say it's been a continuation of our ups and downs. And then with each of those comes a time of coming together, and with that inevitably leads to dance.

Continuing Armenianness means being in community, and being in community involves dancing. Thus, Armenians dance to express the importance of being together. For many Armenians, this communal expression of Armenianness is a necessity. As Gaïdz explains,

> We miss our homeland, we miss... There's a reason why Armenians find each other, right? We're all marked by this collective trauma, like that goes without saying. And so the power of being with another Armenian is something that doesn't need to be, like, at least for most of us, it doesn't need to be spoken. It doesn't need to be reiterated. Because we, internally, we feel it, right? We go to a new city and we know nobody. Alright. Well, I guess I'm going to the Armenian Community Center, or I'm going to church, right? I need Armenians. I need my Armenian fix. I went nuts when I came here, and in a moment of deep isolation, like… ugh, it was scary. And so, on a

> personal level, I had this massive hole in my heart. I needed that fix. *And so dancing became a medium through which I could sort of feel good about myself, and myself as an Armenian being with other Armenians*. But like on all these different levels, right? We have this hole in our heart that has been sort of deepened by moments of collective trauma throughout generations, and dancing, practicing culture, which is to say engaging with others, in highly sort of social and cultural dimensions, allows us… it's like medicine. It makes us feel better, at least for the time being. And then hopefully, we actually find a cure, right? (Emphasis added)

The generational trauma of being violently separated from the homeland permeates the various understandings of diasporan Armenian identity. Armenians need to be together to deal with this collective trauma, and those such as Gaïdz use dance to realize this connection. By dancing, Armenians gather into a community, actively participate in their own culture, and assert their narrative of survival.

Dance, then, is a social commitment to being Armenian together. By participating in Armenianness through dance, people create their own homeland in diaspora as a connection with other Armenians. Natalie describes how she experiences this creation of homeland:

> There's also like a homeland, a sense of home that you create in diaspora, too…. There's the classes on teaching [Armenian dance] and maybe creating that little space and that sense of home, you know, for the students who come to the class. And then there's the ensemble, you know, our work with Lernazang, and how we're making it so that the dance and music that we practice as performance is also something that we do, just on, like it's part of our daily lives in the sense that we gather for an event or a birthday, or a friend's having a wedding, and we're just, we know we're gonna dance, and we know we're gonna sing, and we know those things are gonna happen, because it's not just a performance practice for us. It's something that we're doing because we enjoy it. We want it to be part of our lives. So we're creating kind of that sense of "homeland" in dispersion.

People create homeland by intentionally making space to enjoy life with other Armenians. The homeland is a place where one belongs and feels community, so, as the original homeland is inaccessible, Armenians in diaspora must create this place by creating community. As Jirair puts it, "Anywhere there's Armenians, it becomes a little *Hayastan*." This sense of togetherness is also present in staged dance, though it may look different. At the end of Sardarabad's

performance, after the bows and closing remarks, one last song began playing, and the dancers on stage started to dance *yarkhushta*. The host invited the audience to join, and a few people climbed on stage to dance with the performers, laughing and clapping to the music. Similarly, Siragan's performance ended with the musicians playing live music and the host encouraging the audience to join the dancers on stage as they danced without choreography. The band lead the dancers out of the auditorium with their music, and the audience joined their dancing in the hallway. The show may have ended, but now everyone danced together. The invitations for the audience to join the dancing shifts the performance from presentation to participation. Everyone there, members of dance ensemble and audience alike, was part of this moment to enact their Armenianness through dance, creating the space to be together and feel at home.

Practice, Affect, and Embodiment: Feeling the Homeland

What one does informs and responds to who one is. Many Armenians in the US find ways to participate in Armenianness that go beyond Bakalian's idea of "symbolic ethnicity." Beyond making paklava every Christmas and looking for surnames that end in "-ian" in film credits, those Armenians engage with their identities, acting on what they *feel* and considering what it means for them to truly *be* Armenian. Dancing with other Armenians is one such way to enact Armenianness. Natalie explains,

> I think [dance] offers you know, like this embodied way to participate in this active process of identity, right? Like identity I don't think is a static thing that you're like, given at birth. I think it's something that you have to participate in. You have to actively make it, do it, engage in it, think about it. Like it has to be something that you're always working on. And that's not just, you know, [it's for] any identity, like even gender identity too. I think dance is, because it engages the body, it becomes like a very real and very palpable and very important way to kind of do that work.

The work of identity formation is a constant process. For Armenians in diaspora, the separation from homeland and the multitude of perspectives on Armenianness can be isolating and make

one feel disconnected from their Armenian identity. Dance, then, is one action that people take to connect, or reconnect, with being Armenian. In a conversation with Alice and Lusineh, they both stressed the importance of this type of action:

> ALICE: I'm Armenian, and I'm a part of this culture, but it's like, what do you do with that culture? Like, how are you involved with it? So being like, "Oh, well, I'm part of a dance group," it makes us that much stronger and more connected versus like, "Oh, I'm just a part of this culture." But it's like, how do you show it? How do you show people that you're proud to be Armenian?… It's like actions speak louder than words. So you can say all this stuff, you can support the diaspora, things like that. But actually coming to the studio every Friday, going downstairs, listening to the music, being immersed in that culture. I think that's stronger. And being a part of dancing, that's, like Lusineh said, a very tangible thing. It's an action that you can do.
>
> LUSINEH: And it's noticed. It's recognized, acknowledged, you know, in the performances, the picnics. We're saying random Northwestern students are stopping and watching. They're watching us express our Armenia, our identity. And I think that in the diaspora, it's very important to have something like that, that you can implement.

For Alice, it is not enough to say that one is Armenian, but one must act as an Armenian. Dancing is how Alice and Lusineh act as Armenians. The way Gaïdz understands it,

> As a people, as a community, we are deeply tied to our cultural heritage. And it's a way of actually understanding ourselves as people, right? Whether that be understanding where we come from geographically, or it's sort of understanding what it means to be a participant in this community, right? It, dance, is a mode of actually, not just internalizing, but then actually acting on this sort of identifier "Armenian." Like, it's one way in which we practice that, and we tell the world, "I'm Armenian."

In this way, dancing Armenian dances *is being* Armenian, or creating one's own particular Armenian identity. When dance is a part of everyday life, this process is not necessarily a conscious one, but it is consistent.

Dance works as a meaningful piece of identity because it is something that dancers do regularly and that they enjoy. People ultimately dance for fun, and the creation of identity and community that it facilitates is not its outward purpose. When asked why he thinks Armenians in diaspora continue to dance, Levon replies, "Because it's fun. But I think it's, I mean I think that is

an important element of it. Like I think if people didn't enjoy it, we wouldn't be doing it, or there'd be much fewer people doing it. And like, you know, obviously, we're looking for the meaning and all of that, but I think it's important to remind ourselves, or to remember that it's like, for enjoyment." Of the dancers I spoke with, they all emphasized that they *love* dancing. All the other meanings and processes exist because they feel so strongly about their dance. This love of dance is shared by a significant amount of Armenians as evidenced by the dancing that always occurs at Armenian events. Van describes,

> There are galas, dances, fundraisers, any event where it's an Armenian organization hosting, you know there's always a place to dance. I would say that's the given setting, especially, I mean, there's big events every Labor Day weekend, every President's Day weekend. Just a lot of Armenian organizations do things where it's kind of known that you're gonna be dancing. You gotta put on your dance shoes.

At these parties, with the emotions so high, Armenians build their communities on the dance floor. Sevag mentions how he connects with people while dancing:

> With those Armenian parties, right? Like, you know, in most cases you'll be at like a banquet hall, and there's a huge dance floor, and then once the music starts going, and usually it's a lot of the guys in our group will start dancing right away, get the party started. But it's cool to see how people all of a sudden kind of just gravitate towards that. And all of a sudden you look around, you're like, "Whoa, this dance floor is so packed, everyone's having a good time." You're dancing with people you don't even know. But you know, he's an Armenian. So you're like, "Ah, you know what, why not? Let me dance with this guy!" But I think that that's the beauty of it. I truly think that in terms of the Armenian community, dance can really bring people together, and it's awesome to see.

Because people enjoy dancing in this way, they are brought closer to the people they dance with. Certainly, settings like parties are obvious places to dance, but Jirair also notes dancing on a regular day just for the fun of it:

> I feel like we all love dancing. The amount of times we just meet up not even for practice, or after practice. It could be like a Wednesday. We just meet up with friends at a parking lot and we turn on our Armenian music, and we start dancing, and, like the workers come outside, they go, "What's going on? What's that? What's this?" They ask us, you know, "Who are you guys? What is this?" Just like, I don't know.

> It's great being in a dance group where everyone is friends. Everyone loves dancing, and *amen mart hayaser e*.[27]

Making dance an everyday occurrence ensures that dancers uphold their communities and strengthen their connections based on the positive emotions dancing elicits. Being part of a dance group is not necessary to bring dance into daily life, as seen with Van and Gaïdz, as well as most of the ensemble dancers who mentioned dancing outside of their practices and performances. As Armenians experience these strong feelings from dance, they are brought closer to each other and to the homeland.

Along with the emotions involved, dance inherently relies on physicality. The importance of physicality can be as simple as a young girl from Sardarabad almost falling during a *kochari*[28] but catching her balance thanks to the dancers next to her holding her hands. It can also be as impressive as the popular *berd*[29] dance, in which dancers stand on one another's shoulders, using their bodies to create a symbolic fortress. After a long practice that ended with extra time spent perfecting their *berd*, Chris noted being physically connected with his fellow dancers:

> That's something that we actually made a point of today. When you're performing, you're also performing for the people you're with. It's not only for yourself, right? So if you mess up a step, that might throw off someone in front of you, and it has like a chain effect. So you're dancing for your group, you're dancing for these people that you love, right? You do have to focus on yourself, obviously. But you have to remember that you're a unit, and it's kind of like a table. If you have one leg off the table, it will collapse.

Of course dancers need to be cohesive, but Chris also mentions the love shared between dancers. Emotion and physicality are intertwined. Natalie experiences this dancing with her ensemble and while teaching:

---

[27] Ամէն մարդ հայասէր է (Eng: Everyone loves Armenians/Armenian culture/Armenianness)

[28] Քոչարի (a type of circle dance with unique variants from different regions throughout historical Armenia); for an example, see "Կարին - Կարնո Քոչարի | Karin - Karno Kochari," video, YouTube, posted by Tigran Madoyan, December 6, 2017, https://youtu.be/j4H_yFmXDq8.

[29] Բերդ (Eng: fortress); for an example of the dance, see "Beeline & Mush parayin hamuyt BERD," video, YouTube, posted by Stepan Khachatryan, December 28, 2016, https://youtu.be/I0jLr5AKbx4?t=180.

> The majority of the dances require you to be in very close proximity with others. Whether you're holding hands, or like sometimes you're also holding each other's waist and you're very close. Or you have a tight grip on each other's hands, and you're shoulder to shoulder. So all those formations, they require you to be very much in tune with others. And so, like through that, there is like, this very obvious kind of notion of, you know, beyond unity and things, but like actual strength because when you're that connected to one another… I think that oftentimes, we're like, kind of afraid of touch, and I notice that actually when I teach, like people have a really hard time getting that close to each other, which, I mean, especially kids, they're like super grossed out. But you know, the people I dance with are actually some of my closest friends. And then you know, the people who come to my classes, I'm with them, I dance with them too. So that really kind of creates this very strong sense of connection and strength and unity… Especially these types of like, social dance forms that require you to touch and hold other people and require you to dance together. I think they can offer a lot. I mean, I think they function as like a type of morale. I think they make people feel less alone.

By touching each other and being close to one another, dancers grow closer as people. Their physical connection is both a sign and a creator of their emotional connection.

With heightened physical and emotional sensation, the ideas of homeland become palpable. It is easy to think about, and perhaps romanticize, the homeland when one feels this powerful, affective, embodied connection. By dancing, Armenians in diaspora can feel the homeland from a distance. Sevag explicitly imagines the homeland while dancing, as he explains, "Personally, I feel like I'm in the streets of Armenia dancing. I like to picture like, you know, Mount Ararat in the background, I like to picture Armenian villages, and it kind of… It makes things more relatable in terms of my identity and why I'm really doing this." Similarly, Gaïdz mentions how he feels the homeland in dance, "In terms of a homeland, when I was dancing with others, my mind was going, like I was picturing the same group of people dancing in Western Armenia 150 years ago, 200 years ago, like my mind would sort of switch off, like my awareness of my immediate context, where I was physically would sort of turn off, and I would start, like, hallucinating." Some are more romantic or imaginative than others in these

feelings, but the important thing is that dancing facilitates this felt connection between diasporan and homeland. According to Lilit,

> I feel like that's one of the only things, that's what keeps me doing Armenian dance is that physical connection. I think when you're able to express our culture through like traditional dance moves and bodily movements, it feels like a direct connection. And I think it was really cool too, when I visited Armenia, to see that a lot of the same dance moves are happening there. So there was almost that, like, physical aspect of being able to dance the dance moves there, and then also being able to do it here. That's that tie that's not verbal that really connects you to the culture.

The physicality of dance is something shared among Armenians. For the diasporan, dancing is a physical act related to the physical acts of their ancestors and of those currently in Armenia, the people that represent closeness to the homeland. Part of what makes this connection so strong is that Armenians dance together. When this felt connection is experienced through community, the community is intrinsic to the connection. In this way, the community is linked to homeland.

As dance evokes strong emotion and a felt, embodied connection to the idea of Armenia, it thus reinforces the social community tied to it, ensuring its importance for Armenians in diaspora. For Van, dance "is what our ancestors treated it as, it's our expression of joy. So our expression of like, could be something like victory, positive things. It could also be sorrowful. I guess it's just an expression of emotion that's very natural to let loose in a dance." When Levon dances, "There's people getting together, and you kind of feel this hope of, you know, there are this many Armenians, and everyone knows the dances, and everyone is excited and participating and doing all these things. It just kind of feels good." Elen describes this feeling as "an out-of-body high. I don't know how to explain it, because you're part of the art that everyone is enjoying. You're making people happy. That in itself is a cool feeling, but when you're doing it for your own culture, I don't know if I have a word. Magical, maybe." Natalie dances and feels that "those moments are like creating joy and sustaining community connection with your body." And for Gaïdz, ever the romantic, he cherishes "finding some semblance of a brother and a sister

dancing together. That was the hole in my heart then, and dance became the sort of fix that I needed." As emotional expression, as community activity, as physical creation, and as social healing, dance is a meaningful part of the Armenian experience. Armenian dance elicits powerful emotional and physical feelings, strengthening the bonds of community and creating a meaningful experience of homeland for diasporans.

Ultimately, in exploring and sharing this piece of Armenian culture, I hope to foreground the strong emotional ties that people have to Armenia. Public understanding of Armenian experience is dominated by tragedy, from the Genocide of 1915 to the current, on-going conflict in Artsakh. I want to emphasize the enjoyment of being Armenian, demonstrating that though tragedy is inseparable from Armenian identity, it is not all-encompassing. With dance, Armenians nourish their enjoyment of their lives as *Armenians*. In the words of Jirair,

> We have a word in Armenian to sum up this passion, and it's called *hayaser*.[30] *Hay* means Armenian, *ser* means love. *Hayaser* means the love of being Armenian. I really think this one word encapsulates what it means to be an Armenian dancer, what it means to dance Armenian dance. And like we do choreographed, there's [also] folk dances, village dances, party dances, a lot of types. But at the end of the day, it's like, if you are *hayaser*, if you have love for being Armenian, that's, that's all it is. You know, it's all you need.

Through the medium of dance, Armenians engage in joy, pride, longing, sorrow, and other, perhaps unnameable, emotions. Armenians dance *together*, celebrating life, professing hope, and existing in their own cultural space. When we dance together, we embody the homeland in ourselves.

Մենք ենք մեր սարերը, մենք Հայկական Պար ենք:

[30] Հայասէր (Eng: one who loves Armenians/Armenian culture/Armenianness)

Epilogue

At the last ASA meeting of the year, we all linked pinkies and stood in a circle. Van went to stand to the right of Gaïdz, forgetting that Gaïdz was leading the circle.

"What, do you want to lead?"

"Oh! No!" Van laughed and went to the other end of the circle.

Gaïdz started teaching us the steps to the Armenian Shuffle.[31] *"Step with your right foot like this, kind of like, it's called the Armenian Shuffle, so you like, shuffle. Then do the same with your left foot. Okay, let's practice that…"*

We went over the rest of the steps a few times, then Gaïdz pulled up some Armenian music from YouTube. I heard a woman singing accompanied by oud, clarinet, and dumbeg.

"Now we'll show you what you do with the arms," Gaïdz said as we danced. "Look at our hands, it's like this." Gaïdz and the student next to him swung their arms in time with their steps.

I got the hang of it pretty quickly. Shuffle, shuffle, step behind, step in front, cross your right foot back, and step to the left again. Clap in rhythm while you take three steps back, then rejoin pinkies and do it again! In our small room of ten or so Armenians (and a couple odar[32] *friends), we danced together to celebrate our time as a community that year. I heard Gaïdz and someone else singing along. With my pinkies linked with my friends', I shifted my weight through my feet and swung my arms in time as we moved in a circle together. I was so happy to finally be dancing with my Armenians.*

Gaïdz tried to explain the history of the dance, but speaking while dancing proved difficult as he mixed up his words. He told us, through a few pauses, that this dance had evolved

[31] For an example of this type of dance, see "Armenian Shuffle (Shourch Bar - Cross Bar)," video, YouTube, posted by Tomzara, May 22, 2006, https://youtu.be/RRoj1SW_7U4.
[32] Օտար (Eng: non-Armenian; literally "strange" or "foreign")

from what people had danced in Western Armenia. The Armenians who lived in the US in the 1910s and '20s mainly kept dancing what they had danced in the homeland. But by the '40s and '50s, Armenian-Americans innovated their dances and came up with something particular to their style of being Armenian, and dances like the Armenian Shuffle were created. Now, here we were, a small group of Armenians continuing to create Armenianness in 2023.

The music changed tempo, and some of us tripped up in our steps. We stopped dancing, for now. We kept talking, laughing, and eating the rest of the evening, just happy to be with each other in our own, tiny Armenia that we had created together.

Bibliography

Abrahamian, Levon. "Dancing around the Mountain: Armenian Identity through Rites of Solidarity." In *Caucasus Paradigms: Anthropologies, Histories, and the Making of the World Area*, edited by Bruce Grant and Lale Yalçin-Heckmann, 167-88. Münster, Germany: LIT Verlag, 2008.

Alajaji, Sylvia. *Music and the Armenian Diaspora: Searching for Home in Exile*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015.

Avedian, Lillian. "Pashinyan ready to recognize Artsakh as part of Azerbaijan." *The Armenian Weekly*, May 24, 2023. https://armenianweekly.com/2023/05/24/pashinyan-ready-to-recognize-artsakh-as-part-of-azerbaijan/.

Bakalian, Anny. *Armenian-Americans: From Being to Feeling Armenian*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994.

Bournoutian, George A. *A Concise History of the Armenian People*. Seventh ed. Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2018.

Buchanan, Donna A., ed. *Balkan Popular Culture and the Ottoman Ecumene: Music, Image, and Regional Political Discourse*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007.

Buckland, Theresa Jill. "Dance, History, and Ethnography: Frameworks, Sources, and Identities of Past and Present." In *Dancing from Past to Present: Nation, Culture, Identities*, 3-24. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006.

Fittante, Daniel. "Connection without Engagement: Paradoxes of North American Armenian Return Migration." Diaspora 19, no. 2/3 (Spring 2017): 147-69.

Kaeppler, Adrienne L. "The Mystique of Fieldwork." In *Dance in the Field: Theory, Methods, and Issues in Dance Ethnography*, edited by Theresa J. Buckland, 13-25. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Kamajian, Natalie. "Performing Paradox: Balleticized Bodies and the Construction of Modernity in Armenian Concert Dance." Master's thesis, University of California Los Angeles, 2022. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6xz2m9s9.

Karapetian, Shushan, and Natalie Kamajian. "Language Therapy with Dr. K | Vernaculars of Armenian Dance." June 10, 2021. In *Unpacking Armenian Studies*. Podcast, audio. https://armenianstudies.libsyn.com/language-therapy-with-dr-k-0.

Kasbarian, Sossie. "The Myth and Reality of 'Return'—Diaspora in the 'Homeland.'" *Diaspora* 18, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 358-81.

Kassabian, Anahid. *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013.

Komitas. *Komitas Essays and Articles: The Musicological Treatises of Komitas Vardapet*. Translated by Vatsche Barsoumian. Pasadena, CA: Drazark Publishing, 2001.

Lind-Sinanian, Gary, and Susan Lind-Sinanian. *Dance Armenian: A Collection of Armenian Dances as Danced at Contemporary Armenian-American Parties*. 2nd ed. Lexington, MA: Folk Arts Center of New England, 1978.

Lisitsyan, Srbuhi. *Հայկական Հինավուրց Պարեր.* [*Ancient Armenian Dances*]. Translated from Russian to Armenian by Hakob Soghomonyan. Yerevan, Armenia: Hovhannes Sharambeyan Center of Folk Art, 2013.

Mirak, Robert. *Torn between Two Lands: Armenians in America, 1890 to World War I*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983.

"Մուսալեռան և Կիլիկիո Տապկիներ." ["Musaleran and Kilikio Dabki"]. Video. YouTube. Posted by Lernazang Ensemble, February 22, 2023. Accessed June 25, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0YrbTlEICZQ&ab_channel=LernazangEnsemble.

Pattie, Susan P. "Longing and Belonging: Issues of Homeland in Armenian Diaspora." *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 22, no. 2 (November 1999): 80-92.

Petrosyan, Hamlet. "The Sacred Mountain." In *Armenian Folk Arts, Culture, and Identity*, edited by Levon Abrahamian and Nancy Sweezy, 33-39. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001.

Poladian, Sirvart. "Komitas Vardapet and His Contribution to Ethnomusicology." *Ethnomusicology* 16, no. 1 (January 1972): 82-97.

Rapkievian, Carolyn. "'One, Two, Three; Step, Swing' Armenian Dance Across Generations." *Smithsonian Folklife Festival*. Last modified May 2, 2018. Accessed May 6, 2023. https://festival.si.edu/blog/armenian-dance-across-generations.

Shay, Anthony. "Parallel Traditions: State Folk Dance Ensembles and Folk Dance in 'The Field.'" *Dance Research Journal* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 29-56.

Stokes, Martin, ed. *Ethnicity, Identity, and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*. Oxford: Berg, 1994.

Tölölyan, Khachig. "Beyond the Homeland: From Exilic Nationalism to Diasporic Transnationalism." In *The Call of the Homeland: Diaspora Nationalisms, Past and Present*, edited by Allon Gal, Athena S. Leoussi, and Anthony D. Smith, 27-46. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2010.

Video Examples

"Armenian Shuffle (Shourch Bar - Cross Bar)." Video. YouTube. Posted by Tomzara, May 22, 2006. https://youtu.be/RRoj1SW_7U4.

"Beeline & Mush parayin hamuyt BERD." Video. YouTube. Posted by Stepan Khachatryan, December 28, 2016. https://youtu.be/I0jLr5AKbx4?t=180.

"Կարին - Կարնո Քոչարի | Karin - Karno Kochari." Video. YouTube. Posted by Tigran Madoyan, December 6, 2017. https://youtu.be/j4H_yFmXDq8.

"Karin - Tamzara / Կարին - Թամզարա." Video. YouTube. Posted by KARIN Folk Dance and Song Group, September 18, 2013. https://youtu.be/yrrRNgqImf0.

"Karin - Yarkhushta Armenian traditional dance / Կարին - Յարխուշտա." Video. YouTube. Posted by KARIN Folk Dance and Song Group, October 26, 2013. https://youtu.be/b_DjLqYzDDg.

"Մուսալեռան և Կիլիկիո Տապկիներ." ["Musaleran and Kilikio Dabki"]. Video. YouTube. Posted by Lernazang Ensemble, February 22, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0YrbTlEICZQ&ab_channel=LernazangEnsemble.

TheScarmind. "In besieged Martuni region of #Artsakh, Armenian circle dance (Shurchbar) next to Avo's (liberator of Martuni, Monte Melkonyan) statue. 06.01.2023 Our Unbreakable Spirit. #Armenia 🇦🇲." Twitter. January 6, 2023. https://twitter.com/TheScarmind/status/1611325672621998080.