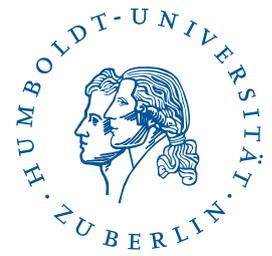
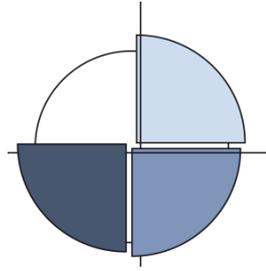


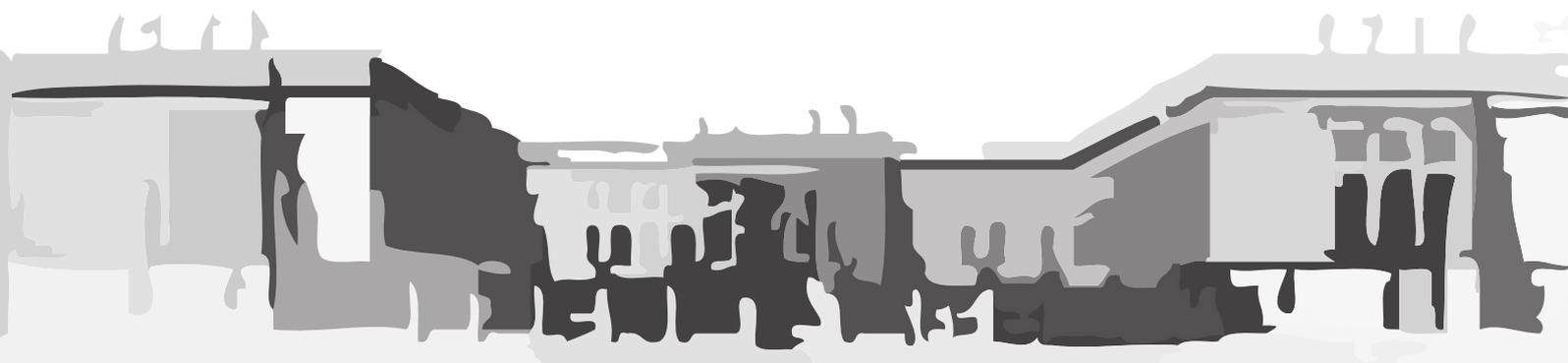
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Anna Harutyunyan

Challenging the Theory of Diaspora from the
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Abstract

Challenging the Theory of Diaspora from the Field

This paper argues that the theoretical categories, descriptive and analytical frameworks applied to the phenomenon of Diasporas have become overused, overtheorized, yet at the same time uncontested and taken for granted in the scholarly discussion. In most cases, the classical Diaspora theoretical framework focuses on ethnic representations, the reasons and conditions of dispersal, traumatic pasts and connections with the *homeland*. It also concentrates on integration issues in host societies, but not on where and how these people lived before actual migration to their current place of residence and, most importantly, what cultural baggage (symbolic or otherwise) they continue to bring with them from their countries of (re-)migration to a concrete local community.

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Challenging the Theory of Diaspora from the Field

Introduction

The classical debate of the Diaspora group revolves around the concept of ethnicity as the unifying category, as the proof of origin, which reasserts the group solidarity and commonality. This paper argues that the concept of ethnicity alone is not enough to explain constructions of identity. Floya Anthias claims that applying ethnicity as the main analytical category in Diaspora studies makes it difficult to examine trans-ethnic commonalities and relations.¹

One of the first scholars to establish the main criteria of the classical theory is William Safran, who in his short article »Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return« describes a number of groups and classifies them according to the following points:

- dispersal from a center to two or more peripheral or foreign regions;
- retention of collective memory, vision or myth;
- the belief that full acceptance by the host country is not possible, resulting in alienation and insult;
- regard for the ancestral homeland as the true or ideal home and place of final return;
- commitment to the maintenance or restoration of safety and prosperity in the homeland;
- and personal or vicarious relations to the homeland in an ethno-communal consciousness.²

The criteria listed in Safran' article have become central and guiding themes for future research in the field of Diaspora studies. Diaspora research and use of the word »Diaspora« itself has proliferated since 1991, however in most cases without challenging Safran's criteria.

Most scholarly discussions focused on the criteria proposed by Safran in 1991 continue being rooted in the conceptual framework of »homeland«, its loss and the desire to return.

Another significant major perspective in classical writings on Diaspora has always been the focus on paradigmatic cases, such as Jews, Armenians, Greeks, etc. Sheffer argues that the Jewish case has become so central to the Diaspora discourse that dictionaries define the word »Diaspora« by describing the Jewish Diaspora experience.³

The orientation towards classifying paradigmatic cases as *classical* has been predominant even in

1 Anthias, Floya, »Evaluating »Diaspora«: Beyond Ethnicity?«, *Sociology* 32 (1998), No. 3, p. 558.

2 Safran, William, »Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return«, *Diaspora* 1 (1991), No. 1, pp. 84–99, 1991, p. 84.

3 Sheffer, Gabriel, *Diaspora Politics: At Home Aboard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 9.

critical discussions of Diaspora theory. In his influential article »Diasporas«, James Clifford states that »we should be able to recognize the strong entailment of Jewish history on the language of Diaspora without making that history a definitive model.«⁴

The so called classical model of Diaspora theory has become a *descriptive typological tool*, which does not allow one to go beyond accepted characteristics such as *ethnicity, dispersal, homeland, and origin*; neither does it provide an analytical framework to fully understand the phenomenon of Diaspora as a *social condition and societal process*.

Finally, the use of the concept of Diaspora has become dispersed through different semantic, conceptual and disciplinary spaces and the Diaspora term itself has become »Diaspora«.⁵ The dispersal of the term has alerted scholars involved in Diaspora research to reconsider the theory; Khatchig Tololyan has suggested limiting the definition.⁶ Before proceeding to the critical review and proposing alternative approaches to Diaspora studies, let us first present the accepted classical definition of the concept of Diaspora in more detail.

Summarizing the main characteristics of a Diaspora group as described in the contemporary literature and against which this paper attempts to argue, one can mention the following:

1. the fact of dispersal from one to many locations and the existence of the triadic relationship between original homeland (defined as the center), ethnic community and host-land;
2. the everlasting feeling of longing for and belonging to the homeland and collective knowledge of the ethnic group about its history and identity;
3. a continuous wish of return to and idealization of the homeland;
4. the process of transnationalization and networking among the communities of a given ethnic group;
5. and finally strengthening connections with and involvement in the homeland.⁷

In this paper I seek to draw attention to the problematic aspects of the classical definition and to suggest three alternative approaches to re-understanding Diasporas. These three approaches are an attempt to go beyond the main icons of the classical Diaspora theory – namely the concepts of *ethnicity, unitary homeland and global Diaspora* – and to juxtapose them with a new conceptual framework composed of the following analytical categories: *cultural identities, emotional places and local community spaces*.

While this paper is a contribution to the theoretical understanding of Diasporas, its argumentation is based on the results of ethnographic research undertaken in Berlin, Germany (2006 November – 2009 October, with some breaks in between) and Krakow, Poland (April – May 2008). This

4 Clifford, James, »Diasporas«, *Cultural Anthropology* 9 (1994), No. 3, p. 306.

5 Brubaker, Roger, »The »Diaspora« Diaspora«, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28 (2005), January No. 1, p. 1.

6 Tololyan, Khatchig, »Elites and Institutions in the Armenian Transnation«, *Diaspora* 9 (2000), No. 1, WPTC-01–21, <http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk/working%20papers/WPTC-01–21%20Tololyan.doc.pdf> (last accessed February 8th 2012).

7 Armstrong, John, »Mobilized and Proletarian Diasporas«, in: *The American Political Science Review* 70 (1976), No. 2, p. 394; Braziel, Jana Evans and Anita Mannur (Ed.), *Theorizing Diaspora* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003), p. 4; Butler, Kim, »Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse«, *Diaspora* 10 (2001), No. 2, p. 189; Cohen, Robin, *Global Diasporas: an Introduction* (London: UCL Press, 1997), p. 17; Safran, »Diasporas in Modern Societies«, p. 84, op. cit. (note 2).

paper was delivered at the International Conference on the Armenian Diaspora held at Boston University in February 2010.

Classical Diaspora Theory and its problems

There are a number of problematic aspects within contemporary Diaspora theory. First of all, the classical theoretical definitions present clear criteria for which groups can or cannot be Diasporas. Traumatic dispersal, longing for and belonging to an ancestral homeland, collective knowledge of the ethnic identity, alienation from the host society and the wish to return to the lost places of the ancestors. Although this paper offers an alternative to these categories, this it does not intend to deny them. Indeed these categories place a group into a certain historical, political and cultural context and make up a common umbrella for a respective group. But by placing these categories at the center of the theory, there is a risk of homogenizing and essentializing the diverse experiences, memories and representations within the group itself.

Let us briefly cast a critical look at the main criteria of the Diaspora definition mentioned above.

The two fundamental concepts for Diaspora studies are the notions of *dispersal* and *common ethnic origin*. The collective story, often based on a traumatic (hi-)story from the ancestral homeland, becomes an important component of Diaspora identity. But what additional information can be gathered about a particular group by applying these two descriptive concepts? What type of dispersal qualifies the group to be labeled a Diaspora? How can Turkish *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers) of Armenian origin, those who continued living in Turkey after the Armenian massacres in 1915 and were the founding members of the Armenian community in Berlin, qualify as a part of the Armenian Diaspora? Can a group which has not been dispersed (such as in the case of Turkish Armenians in Turkey) or a group whose memory of dispersal has already been transformed into symbols and rituals (such as in the case of Polish Armenians) be given the Diaspora label? How can today's generations of Polish Armenians, whose ancestors migrated from the Ottoman Empire or from Crimea or Walachia to the Polish Kingdom back in the eighteenth century or even earlier be called a Diaspora group and belong to the Armenian Diaspora?

During my fieldwork in Krakow, both the generations of so called »old« Armenians⁸ or, as they called themselves »Poles with Armenian origin« and the »new« Armenian migrants, i.e. *Hayastantsis*⁹ denied belonging to a Diaspora: the former did not position themselves as such because of the temporal distance from their Armenian origins; the latter group (those who emigrated from Armenia) did not associate themselves with the Diaspora identity because of the real existence of their homeland, the Republic of Armenia. The question is: when scholars position a group as a Diaspora because of an ethnic origin or by the fact of dispersal, do they position real experiences?

Another criterion of the Diaspora studies that raises a set of questions is *the concept of homeland*

8 »Old« Armenians are those generations of Armenian families who migrated and settled in Poland back in the 18th century. »New« Armenians refers to the Armenians from the Republic of Armenia who mainly emigrated to Poland in 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The terms »old« and »new« are emic terms and are taken from the fieldwork in Krakow in 2008.

9 *Hayastantsi* in Armenian means citizen of the Republic Armenia.

as *imagined center*. The Diaspora-homeland relationship is often seen from the perspective of the so called »Solar System«,¹⁰ where the Diaspora is viewed as a »periphery« connected and belonging to one »center«, namely the homeland. In this regard, classical Diaspora theory has been criticized for paying too much attention to the dispersal of people from the center without challenging the notion of the center in and of itself: where was the homeland? What do we remember as the homeland/the center? From which historical moment do we proceed when connecting today's Diaspora group with the lost homeland? And finally, and most importantly for this paper, how was life before migration? How and where did people live?

The need for reconsideration of the theoretical approaches has become more visible in the field of Black Diaspora group research. The seminal works by Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy question the ability of the theory to adequately accommodate the diverse experiences of many Diaspora groups into the available framework.¹¹

The classical theory is preoccupied with the reaffirmation of the value of the collective myth, common shared ethnic identity, unitary homeland, integration and assimilation of the Diaspora into the host societies, etc. Hence the classical Diaspora framework concentrates on the reasons and conditions of dispersal, on connections with the center and a common ethnic umbrella, as well as on integration issues in host societies, but not on *where* and *how* these people lived before their dispersal/(re-)migration and, most importantly, *what* cultural baggage (symbolic or otherwise) they continue to bring with them from their countries of (re-)migration to a concrete community space in the Diaspora.

Furthermore, the proliferation of the concept of Diaspora itself adds more meanings to its understanding, which leads to a new quality of Diasporas denominated as *hybridity*. Stuart Hall argues that the Diaspora experience is defined:

... not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity: by a conception of identity, which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity...¹²

However, even if hybridity breaks through the essentialist and homogenous definition of the Diaspora group, the condition of hybridity makes the frames of the theory blurry and risks leaving the concept of the Diaspora without definition(s). Diaspora scholarship thus returns to ground zero – so, what kind of definition does the term Diaspora encompass? If the groups are represented by hybridity, what defines a Diaspora?

Finally, the popularity of Diaspora studies and the blurred borders of the theoretical framework

10 Levy, Andre, »A Community That is Both a Center and a Diaspora: Jews in Late Twentieth Century Morocco«, in: *Homelands and Diasporas: Holy Lands and Other Places*, ed. by Andre Levy and Alex Weingrod (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 74.

11 See most notably Hall, Stuart »Cultural Identity and Diaspora«, in: *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), pp. 222–237; Gilroy, Paul, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp.153–223; Gilroy, Paul, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 1–41.

12 Hall, »Cultural Identity and Diaspora«, p. 235, op. cit. (note 11).

lead to the universalization of Diaspora, which as Roger Brubaker argues, »paradoxically means the disappearance of Diaspora... If everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so«. ¹³

Summarizing the definition of the Diaspora given in the recent literature, one can say that the Diaspora is »a stateless power in transnational moment«, ¹⁴ consisting of communities of hybrid identities positioned in-between host and original cultures, with a shifting character of »home«, ¹⁵ a structure to be researched beyond ethnicity and through multi-dimensional lenses, such as gender, class, internal power relations, etc. ¹⁶

Alternative Framework and Three Approaches

This paper offers, to some extent, a methodological rethinking of the theoretical framework. The offered approach deals with the method of research, rather than theoretical categories. The paper analyzes the community as a space of cultural diversity, where people bring not only their own understanding of the ethnic identity, but their different cultural representations, symbols, practices, different understanding and imaginations of the homeland, the community, their perceptions of fellow compatriots and self-imaginings, as well as connections with the places of their life before migration, which in many cases do not coincide with the acknowledged *homeland*.

1. Local Community versus Global Diaspora

The Diasporic condition is a combination of being uprooted and placed in a temporary setting. Diaspora is in constant search for a *place* where it will reconstruct its pasts, imaginary future, identities, roles, rituals and beliefs. This kind of place becomes a concrete community space.

As soon as one enters a concrete community, a number of important questions arise: where is the community located? What is the historical, political and cultural context? What is the history of migration, settlement and formation of the particular community within national borders of a respective host country? Who is the leadership of the community? How is religion represented in the community? What is the networking of the concrete community on the national, regional and transnational levels? How is the image of Armenia as a new homeland represented in the community? How are other places, sites of life before-migration of the community members manifested in the community space?

The two »Hay Dun«-s/»Armenian Houses« in Berlin are unique for the range of people gathering at these community centers, consisting of Turkish, Iranian, Lebanese and Armenian Armenians. Berlin's Armenian community, like other German Armenian communities, was established in

13 Brubaker, Roger, »The ›Diaspora‹ Diaspora«, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28 (2005), January No. 1, p. 3.

14 Tololyan, Khachig, »(Re)thinking Diasporas: Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment«, *Diaspora* 5 (1996), No. 1, p. 18.

15 Bhabha, Homi, »The World and the Home«, *Social Text* 10 (1992), No. 2–3, p. 148.

16 Brah, Avtar, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, the chapter »Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities« (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 181; Anthias, »Evaluating ›Diaspora‹«, op. cit. (note 1).

the 1960s¹⁷ when many ethnic Armenians arrived from Turkey along with other Turkish migrant workers. These Turkish Armenians and their generations constituted the core of today's communities in many German cities. At the end of the 1970s, the Armenian communities in Germany, including the one in Berlin, grew in size after the arrival of Iranian and Lebanese Armenians¹⁸, followed by constant a flow of Soviet and post-Soviet Armenians in the late 1980s and early 1990s. While Turkish Armenians migrated to Germany as a labor force, the Iranian and Lebanese Armenians came and settled as war refugees and students at German Universities. Many of them also became politically active: among Iranian Armenians there were many adherents of the Socialist Party, whereas Lebanese Armenians mostly had strong Armenian national aspirations and sought recognition for the Armenian Genocide. Berlin currently has two community centers, both of which are named »Hay Dun«/»Armenian house« and comprise people from diverse migration flows.

In the case of the Krakow community, »Old« Polish Armenians are the descendants of those Armenians who migrated and settled in the territories of today's (Western) Ukraine and Poland from the Ottoman Empire or from Eastern Europe since the 18th century (some interviewees claim an even earlier date of migration). »New« Armenians are those who migrated to Poland from the Republic of Armenia shortly before or after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Armenian independence in 1991. The Armenian Cultural Association of Krakow is the symbolic space for »Old« and »New« Armenians to assemble, interact and share their diverse imaginations of »Armenian-ness«. Even though the space of the community is only symbolic (there is no concrete place as a community center such as in the case of Berlin), there are a number of alternative places where people meet: the Sunday school in the Krakow City Library (which children of »new« Armenians attend for Armenian language, history, literature and dance classes), the monthly lectures held at the Krakow Ethnographic Museum in Kazimierz (attended mostly by the »Old« Armenians) and the yard of the St. Nicolas Church, where an Armenian Khachqar/Cross Stone¹⁹ is located and the only place where »old« and »new« meet on the 24th of April every year to commemorate the Armenian Genocide of 1915.

In both cases, the increasing number of Armenians from Armenia and their involvement in community life to theas strengthening strengthened of the image of Armenia within the community. The study of the community space dynamic reveals a slow transformation from representing *Diaspora* towards representing *Armenia*.

2. Cultural Identity versus Ethnicity

Another methodological approach towards Diasporas is the prism of cultural identities. Research has shown that the communities are not only places where people come, gather and meet because

17 Though, the first Armenian Community of Berlin was registered in 1923 by the genocide survivors and a number of students, as well as enlarged by the Prisoners of War after the WWII, who soon re-moved from Germany to other countries, mostly to USA. The Community association of 1923 was closed in 1955 and then was reopened in 1966.

18 Most of them were escaping Iranian Islamic Revolution and Lebanon Civil War in the end of the 1970.

19 Armenian Khachqar or Cross-Stone is a memorial stele with a cross carved on it.

of their Diasporic condition, but are also a terrain for the manifestation and negotiation of their cultural diversities.

By looking at examining a particular community through local perspectives, it becomes possible to trace the internal diversity of imaginations, memories, experiences of migration, experiences of the diasporic condition and knowledge of the ethnic capital. In the two communities where fieldwork was conducted, the identity does not proceed in a straight, continuous line from some fixed origin. It is a contradictory combination of continuity and similarity under the ethnic umbrella on the one hand, and of rupture and difference linked to their lives before migration on the other.

In his writings on cultural identities of the Caribbean Diaspora in the United Kingdom, Stuart Hall suggests rethinking the positioning and re-positioning of Caribbean cultural identities and uses a metaphor of »*Presence*«, in the sense of »being there«. By discussing the black subject, Hall underlines *Presence Africaine*, *Presence Européenne* and *Presence Américain* of the Caribbean identities.²⁰ Hall's notion of *Presence* is similar to Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital.²¹ Armenians in Berlin and in Krakow not only share a common Armenian ethnic umbrella, but also a diversity of cultural capitals or »*Presence*«-s collected from the countries of migration and re-migration. There are Iranian, Lebanese, Turkish, Soviet, post-Soviet, Russian »*Presence*«-s carried on not only by the first generation, but also the young generations born and raised in Berlin.

When big upheavals took place in 2009 in the streets of Tehran between the opposition and the ruling government around the disputed presidential elections, a number of protest rallies organized by the Iranian Diaspora were held in Berlin. Among the crowd, I met Iranian Armenian interviewees from Berlin's Armenian Community. To my frequent, provocative question »What are you doing here?«, I would hear the reply »How come what I am doing here? It is all about *my* state.«²²

Meinhof and Triandafyllidou reshaped Bourdieu's concept into transcultural capital and proposed to use it as a link between the three forms of capital (economic, social and cultural), which would enable »the strategic use of knowledge, skills and networks acquired by migrants through connections with the country and cultures of origin, which are made active at their new places of residence.«²³ In the hope of taking one step forward in the application of Bourdieu's remade concept, this paper argues that (*trans*)*cultural capital* is not only significant in terms of connections, ties and networking between the home(land) and host societies (in this case between Armenia versus Germany and Poland), but also with the country of people's migration. Thus, when one looks at one concrete Diaspora community from the inside, not the ethnic capital matters, but the whole

20 Hall, »Cultural Identity and Diaspora«, p. 230, op. cit. (note 11).

21 Bourdieu, Pierre, »The Forms of Capital«, in: *The RoutledgeFalmer Reader in Sociology of Education*, ed. by Stephen J. Ball, (London: Routledge, 2004), pp.15–30; previously published in: *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. by J. G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 241–258

22 Conversation held with Iranian Armenians during the Iranian opposition rallies in Berlin, 2009.

23 Meinhof, Ulrike Hanna and Triandafyllidou, Anna, »Beyond the Diaspora: Transnational Practices as Transcultural Capital«, in: *Transcultural Europe: Cultural Policy in a Changing Europe*, Basingstoke, ed. by Ulrike Hanna Meinhof and Anna Triandafyllidou, (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 202.

diversity of (trans-)cultural capitals that people continue collecting, bringing in, manifesting and sharing.

3. Emotional Places versus Shared Homeland

The last approach in the proposed alternative methodological framework is the concept of *Emotional Places* juxtaposed with the accepted term of unitary *homeland*. An important component of *transcultural capital* is not only the capacity to use resources, but it is also the sense of belonging to a certain place from the past.

There is an intimate and emotional attachment to a place connected with their personal and family (hi-)stories of life before Germany; *it is the sense of belonging to the places they came from*. Coming, for instance, from Anatolian cities, Istanbul or Tehran, they feel themselves emotionally attached and intimately belonging to that geography. One important point to take into account is that for every member of the community, independent from the cultural, social and other backgrounds, it is of utmost importance to represent his/her own *belonging to a place*. »*There are different Armenians in the community, they all represent very different places*«, you can often hear this sentence uttered during the interviews.

»Belonging to a place« becomes an alternative to the »homeland«. First and foremost, this is the place of their birth, childhood, as well as maturity. The memory of real places, for example of Istanbul, Vakifli, Diarberkir, Elazig, Adana, Van, Beirut, Tehran, Urmia, Isfahan – is still alive and passed on in family stories from one generation to another. These family or personal memories shine through during the interviews by »transporting« the speakers to their places of origin for a few minutes, places which might seem »insignificant« (if viewed from the perspective of classical Diaspora theory), but nevertheless provoke further questions: what does yesterday's and today's Turkey, Iran, Lebanon and other countries of immigration mean for today's Armenians living in Berlin?

The fieldwork in the Armenian community of Berlin has shown that there is a division between the concepts »homeland« and places where the community members were born, raised and spent some significant periods of their lives before coming to Germany. The »homeland« is more often referred to in the singular and denotes the Republic of Armenia, whereas the places are always plural. It is also interesting to mention that the difference between the homeland and these significant places can also be noticed in the language of stories told by the community members: how they talk about Armenia, their real experiences and imaginations of Armenia on the one hand, and how they describe those places and details of their lives before their journey to Germany on the other.

Conclusion

This paper argues that the refining and reworking of the understanding of today's Diasporas should be done through a) juxtaposing the concepts of *local community space* vs. *transnatio-*

nal/global Diaspora space, b) exploring the local community from the perspective of cultural representations and beyond an ethnic »umbrella«, c) symbolically »returning« to the *emotional places* of life before migration and re-migration, which in most cases does not match the publicly acknowledged *homeland*.

By approaching a concrete community as a space of cultural identities and seeing the emotional places in the memories of the community members, one can trace a diversity of internal processes, which would construct a very different picture from the one we have by looking through the prism of classical Diaspora theory.

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