

Autoethnographic Documentary *We Are* and Facing Issues of Belonging, Othering and Identity
Expression within the Armenian Diaspora Community

A SENIOR CAPSTONE PROJECT

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By

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Abstract

Through this research project and the production of the documentary *We Are*, my aim is to show the complexity and diversity of a community that was created through the harsh realities of the 1915 Armenian Genocide. *We Are* presents diverse voices from the Armenian diaspora, with an autoethnographic focus which allows me to show how individuals from different backgrounds could have similar issues of identity crises, belonging and othering. Through the different methods utilized in the pre-production, production and post-production, such as visual and theoretical inspirations, journaling/reflection, ethnographic and autoethnographic observations, documentary interviews, cinematographic choices and the editing process, this paper aims to shed light on the thought development and technicalities used throughout the production of the documentary. Throughout this project, I make the claim that one does not have to belong to a tangible space in order to feel valid as identity is a multiplex and ever-changing concept that fluctuates with one's complexity of cultural and life experiences. This research and the documentary *We Are* aims to demonstrate that the unique identities that are formed within the Armenian diaspora community that is in interaction with diverse cultures is a strength that should be used as an advantage to the Armenian identity.

On my honor, I have neither given, nor received, any unauthorized aid on this project. Honor Code Upheld.

Patil Khakhamian

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Dedications and Acknowledgements

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Introduction and Background History

What does it mean to be born and raised in a community that longs to return to their ancestral lands? *We Are* is an autoethnographic documentary that unfolds the filmmaker's decision to leave her Armenian diaspora community in Lebanon to search for a connection with her homeland Armenia, only to realize her ambiguous identity feels foreign everywhere. While living in Armenia for the first time, Patil understands that the Motherland she and her community in Lebanon have been longing for is an idealized idea rather than a physical place, increasing her struggles with identity and belonging, and catalyzing her move to Brazil away from both her cultures. For the first time, she is in control of how she expresses her cultures and identity in a country that welcomes her without questions. However, unable to flee from her internal struggles, she returns to Armenia with a fresh perspective and an objective to overcome her challenges of belonging and othering. Finally, Patil realizes that she shares these issues with a wide variety of Armenian diaspora members from all over the world which pushes her to embrace her ambiguous identity as a diaspora member who belongs nowhere and everywhere simultaneously.

Growing up in an Armenian diaspora community in Lebanon I could not take my cultures for granted. I constantly needed to put effort to connect because I felt Armenian in Lebanon and Lebanese in Armenia, never enough for either. Diaspora communities are bound to disappear if we are not intentional about keeping our culture alive because of integration with other cultures, the inability to bear the burden of passing on the culture or running away from strict and impossible expectations. I have grown up in a strong-knit Armenian diaspora community opposed to many Armenian diaspora members who have lost touch with a big part of their culture. This documentary is not only a way for me to raise awareness about the challenges

diaspora communities face but also in a way, it is my way of connecting with Armenia and the variety of the diaspora communities who face similar challenges.

My goal for this documentary is to show that the complexity in multicultural and diaspora identities is one to cherish rather than oppress and other.

Even though *We Are* explores my own story, it is a story of many people who have grown up with multiple cultures and identities, especially those from diaspora communities who deal with the fear of losing their cultural heritage. Thus, I found it vital to include multiple other voices from various Armenian diaspora communities to fortify the themes and topic presented in showing the beauty of diversity and a common connection to our sense of Armenian identity.

Methodology: Pre-Production

Producing any type of research material, especially in documentary production, requires an extensive amount of pre-production preparation. An initial proposal material is essential to keeping the core of the idea grounded even if the methodology and anticipated conclusion shifts throughout the process. This section is about the different methodology used during the pre-production stages of *We Are*, including inspiration from other creative works, theoretical framework and journaling my impressions and thoughts on the subject.

Inspiration

Before diving into a creative piece, it is always important to expose yourself to as many relevant works as possible that will eventually inform your own final piece. For *We Are*, I had to familiarize myself with methods of how to make a personal documentary, watch several documentaries relevant to my topic and stylistic vision and read articles that present historical

background, research and theory related to diaspora studies, multiculturalism and identity to deepen my knowledge on the topic.

In terms of creative stimulation, *We Are* uses elements inspired by various creative works. The first one is an autobiographic documentary by Agnes Varda called *The Beaches of Agnes* (2008). I use Varda's voice-over narration as guidance to *We Are* in terms of its interaction with the image, pacing, poetic manner and even her calm tone. Structurally, the documentary is quite chaotic but fits the theme of life, death and memories as they all present themselves in a chaotic manner in our lives. Similarly, I wanted the structure of *We Are* to fit the theme of belonging and othering as it goes back and forth between footages portraying loneliness and community. Furthermore, she contextualizes the time periods she was living in by using archival footage of major historical events such as the rise of the Black Panthers, the Hippie and Feminist movements and the Vietnam War. *We Are* uses archival footage, however they are all from my family's archive showing my upbringing. To keep it personal, I wanted to focus on my family rather than using photography of people I did not personally know, hence I use my great grandparents' photos while talking about the Armenian Genocide instead of archival photographs captured during that tragic moment in history.

Another influential documentary is *Notturmo* (2020) by Gianfranco Rosi. The director shows us the aftermath of war and invasion by capturing the everyday life of people living between the borders of Iraq, Kurdistan, Syria and Lebanon. *Notturmo*'s ample use of long static shots immerses us into the world of the locations and people and the careful sound design engages us even further. Similarly, *We Are* uses static shots of locations and people in Armenia, Lebanon and Brazil with meticulous sound design to amplify the emotion of the moment. For instance, I added non-diegetic sounds of chimes in the beginning on the footage of the art

installation. Even though they would never make that sound in real life, it changes the way we perceive the object and the place making it more pleasant and welcoming. I was also inspired by Rosi's use of light and darkness in his cinematography; I have used this stylistic choice in my last section when I return to Armenia as a metaphor of finding light in the darkness.

The final documentary inspiration I want to highlight is *The Other Side of Home* (2016) by Nare Mkrtchyan. This documentary directly deals with the topic of having conflicting identities as the Turkish protagonist tackles her newly discovered Armenian roots and what that means for her identity and place in this world. *We Are* has multiple characters, other than myself, who have multiple identities and nationalities and similar to the protagonist in *The Other Side of Home*, share their experiences and feelings of being in Armenia either as their first time or for a longer period of time from previous visits. In *The Other Side of Home*, Mkrtchyan also includes herself in the narrative of the documentary, showing us that she is also part of this community. *We Are* uses a similar narrative structure where I use my story and voice-over narration to bring the audience into my internal world as well as insert a few footages of me and one of the interviewees together to show my emotional involvement even in the other diaspora members' stories.

Another creative inspiration is from a podcast called *Armenian Enough* hosted by Lara Vanian-Green, a diaspora member from the US. This podcast deals with different life and identity topics that the Armenian diaspora faces such as being multiracial, being a Middle-Eastern Armenian immigrant in the US, being queer and Armenian... The first episode highlights the host's father's story of moving from Syria to Lebanon and then to the USA, and the cultural shock and othering he has faced in each place. I could relate to these topics and wanted to include them in my personal story such as not belonging to the Lebanese Arab

community or the local Armenian community in Armenia and having to adapt, grow and accept myself to combat the feelings of being othered.

Theory: Doug Block's Theory on Personal Documentary Filmmaking

We Are uses Doug Block's theory of Personal Documentary Filmmaking to make it an effective autoethnographic documentary. As the filmmaker and the protagonist of my documentary, it is important to view myself merely as a character and detach my ego while making the film. As Block says, "...the whole art of the personal doc is to appear as if it's not really so much about you [...] but, honestly, in the end, it's really all about you" (Block 2007). It was necessary to include diverse voices from the Armenian diaspora community to demonstrate the shared pain, responsibility and struggles the Armenian diaspora faces even from completely different parts of the world. Block's advice only fortifies my use of Anderson's theory of *Imagined Communities* in my documentary in showing that even though we come from different countries, backgrounds and levels of exposure to the Armenian culture, we are all connected through an imaginary bond united through our history and concepts of survival and perseverance. Another point Block makes is "don't tell us your feelings. Show or indicate your feelings" (Block 2007). *We Are* uses a balance of voice-over narration and carefully curated footages that transmit the idea through feelings rather than words. For instance, in the first section where I show archival footages of my upbringing, it was important to show my connection to the Armenian culture in my everyday life activities in Lebanon rather than tell it with words. Block also points out that the story should be put in context with themes that appeal to a universal human experience. Even though *We Are* focuses on the Armenian diaspora community, it talks about general themes of community, identity clashes and the challenges of being othered and wanting to belong to certain cultural and social groups which are very human experiences

because we are complex social creatures yearning for connections and a sense of belonging. The final point *We Are* focuses on from Block's theory is to "maintain [...] distance and objectivity" while dealing with a personal story. Although it is impossible to remain objective while dealing with such a personal topic, it is indeed important to view yourself from a distance while in personal documentary filmmaking. The filmmaker needs to pick and choose relevant parts of themselves following the theme of the story and in some cases, exclude certain irrelevant details even if it seems relevant to the filmmaker's person. For instance, in *We Are* I mention that I went to a small boarding school in an Armenian village. A detail, important to myself but not to my character in the documentary is that the boarding school is an international one that brings students from all over the world to study together. This is how I get introduced to so many different cultures which prompts me to leave Armenia and Lebanon and live in Brazil and several other countries (which again I do not mention). It was indeed integral to my personal growth as a person but a detail that feels unnecessary to my story as a character.

Theory: Benedict Anderson's Theory of Imagined Communities

What makes one belong to a community? How does one evaluate cultural authenticity? Do you have to meet its members to be part of that community? These questions of culture, identity and belonging have continuously been sources of endless questioning and evaluation for my community. Diaspora communities are often born out of *forced* geographical dispersion away from their indigenous community and lands due to horrific historical events such as an ethnic cleansing (the Holocaust, ethnic genocide) or involuntary displacement (slave trade). The Armenian diaspora community, which I identify with, is found everywhere around the globe as a result of the Armenian Genocide committed by the Ottoman Empire in 1915 in order to eradicate the Armenians and our culture. We do not have to travel across the globe to understand that

somewhere on the other side of the world exists a community which understands my words, shares my grief and fights for existence. Our communities are not necessarily separate but connected through a collective consciousness.

In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson defines nations as imagined communities. Anderson compares “Nationalism” to a “neurosis” which one cannot escape from and that it is incurable. He states that the ambiguity of Nationalism should be taken into consideration in order to escape its generalizations as an ideology. His non-essentialist approach to “Nationalism” interprets nations as imagined communities in which personal relationships of its members is replaced with an “image of their communion” (Anderson 2006, 16). According to Anderson, the nation is imagined as “limited,” because of its finite boundaries, out of which another nation exists, as “sovereign” to protect its “divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm,” and “a community,” because despite inequalities and exploitations arising, a nation abides by “a deep, horizontal comradeship.” It is important to note that Anderson does not think of “imagined” as “falsity/genuineness,” but takes an idealistic understanding in which nations become imagined “by the style in which they are imagined” (Anderson 2006, 17).

Members of diaspora communities are born and raised in countries far from their ancestral lands. Consequently, their citizenship and cultural upbringing, even though intertwined in many ways, may not always be the same but can be mutually inclusive in their own contexts. Armenian members often find each other in different countries and form hubs of communities which enables members to find familiarity while being far from the Armenian “nation,” which we call our *Motherland*. These pockets of Armenian diaspora communities unquestionably differ from one another because of the cultural context of the host country and community; however, in all our differences, we share a common, collective consciousness, one that connects us all to our

Armenian ancestry. Therefore, even though the wider Armenian diaspora community does not live on one nation that is “limited” and “sovereign,” as Anderson defines, we do share a deep sense of “community” insofar as we share a collective consciousness through our historical connection to the *Motherland Armenia*. As a result, the diaspora community can be seen as an imagined community belonging to an *imagined land* through an *imagined collectiveness* even though dispersed. As in, despite never having met the Uruguayan-Armenian diaspora community, and even if the Argentinian, Greek and Lebanese Armenians live on differently termed imagined communities (based on Anderson’s definition), we form an imagined community of our own that is created through a collective consciousness of Armenianness. The idea of the homeland is shaped by personal memories and associations with the imagined place. Anderson confirms this analysis by highlighting the cultural aspect of a nation with the statement, “nationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which – as well as against which – it came into being” (Anderson 2006, 22). The *Motherland* here would be an *imagined land* because it exists as an idealistic symbol that grounds our collective consciousness rather than having a material meaning based on its location.

Furthermore, Anderson raises an existential inquiry in claiming that the “extraordinary survival over thousands of years” of world religions in various social formations suggests an importance of the “imaginative response to the overwhelming burden of human suffering.” In doing so, he validates religion’s ability to unite people in face of hardships, giving it the value of immortality (Anderson 2006, 21). Similarly, the collective consciousness of the Armenian diaspora serves to create an imagined bond among dispersed communities through an “echoed physical realization of the imagined community” (Anderson 2006, 139), making it bearable to

face the common grief of the Genocide. This collective consciousness, expressed through a culture of Armenianness, not only creates an imagined bond in which one feels supported from all sides of the world, but also, turning back to Anderson's existential inquiry, creates a positive feedback loop in which the imagined community thrives to fight eradication, in turn creating a stronger than ever connection to the collective consciousness through culture.

However, it is important to note that grief alone does not make up an imagined community.

Anderson brings up this topic when he says, "if nationalness has about it an aura of fatality, it is nonetheless a fatality embedded in *history*" (Anderson 2006, 139). Therefore, for Anderson, however much fatality is absorbed by a culture, it is not its core, for fatality is a consequence of history, not a result of a conception of "nationalness." He continues stating that the start of a nation is "conceived in language, not in blood" and that "seen as both a *historical* fatality and as a community imagined through language, the nation presents itself as simultaneously open and closed" (Anderson 2006, 139). Here, Anderson emphasizes the role of language in building imagined communities. He states that nations can be open in the sense that people can get naturalized; however, language becomes an untranslatable insight into the imagined community. He says, "What the eye is to the lover [...] language – whatever language history has made his or her mother-tongue – is to the patriot. Through that language, encountered at mother's knee and parted with only at the grave, pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures dreamed" (Anderson 2006, 145). Therefore, according to Anderson, the collective pain and grief the Armenian diaspora hold is not what makes us an imagined community, it is the language which we conceptualize life through that allows for a physical realization of an imagined community. This brings up the controversial issue of authenticity and acceptance as it seems to reinforce language as a vital criterion.

This concept can be looked at through different lenses. If not analyzed literally, and looked at through the framework of idealism, what Anderson refers to as language could be seen as verbal symbolism in which a deep understanding of words allows one to belong to this imagined community. For example, a member of an Armenian diaspora, even if they do not speak Armenian fluently, could understand the emotions of a melody created by the *duduk* (a traditional Armenian woodwind instrument), or feel *home* upon the smell of *Sarma* (stuffed grape leaves), or possess some sort of object or ideology that symbolizes the *Motherland*. Even if this member might not be able to hold lengthy conversations in Armenian, they have an insight into the culture insofar as they understand the symbols of the imaginary community.

Nevertheless, this is not to neglect the importance language plays in the sphere of imagined communities. On the contrary, as Anderson states, “there is a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests – above all in the form of poetry and songs [...] national anthems [...] At precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to each other utter the same verses to the same melody. The image: unisonance” (Anderson 2006, 138-139). However, if language, through its untranslatable properties and ability to verbalize symbolism, is able to secure a spot in an imagined community, the lived experiences and the reality of a person undeniably touched by symbols of Armenianness should be sufficient in the invitation of them as a member of this imagined community. Unfortunately, numerous factors play part in not speaking Armenian fluently, as a first language or at all; judging ones Armenianness based on language alone is ignoring the context and external pressures that might have led to its incompetence and the fact that one does not always have the privilege to be brought up in a language different than the one spoken in their birth countries.

The imagined community of the Armenian diaspora is not necessarily the same as the imagined community created by Armenians born and raised in the imagined community of the Republic of Armenia. Historically, Western Armenia (currently Eastern Turkey) under the influence of Turkey had a different imagined community than Eastern Armenia (current Republic of Armenia) under the influence of Russia. Everyday life of both sides was naturally governed by different contexts. While Eastern Armenians spoke Eastern Armenian, borrowing words and expressions from the Russian language, Western Armenia spoke Western Armenian, with Turkish expressions making their way into the language. After the Genocide in 1915, Eastern Armenian became the official language of the officially recognized country of Armenia, while Western Armenian became a language spoken by a dispersed imagined community with no legitimate land of our own. The concept of Motherland Armenia became a blend of the ghost of Western Armenia with *Mount Ararat* as a symbol and the current Armenia (Eastern) as a tangible validation of our ancestry (Karamanian 2019). However, it is no surprise, that diaspora members are met with cultural shock upon the arrival to the Motherland. Anderson states, “new synchronic novelty could arise historically only when substantial groups of people were in a position to think of themselves as living lives *parallel* to those of other substantial groups of people – if never meeting, yet certainly proceeding along the same trajectory” (Anderson 2006, 177). Whereas the wider imagined community of the Armenian diaspora lives life in parallel with each other because of historic and contextual ties, the imagined community of the Republic of Armenia did not necessarily face the same fate of historical fatality. Whereas Armenian diaspora share a collective consciousness based on alienation and make part of multiple imagined identities, Armenians in Armenia continue their lives attached to a land that automatically legitimizes the existence of their imagined community. Understanding this,

however hurtful, it is of no surprise when an Armenian brother (from Armenia) questioned my authenticity as an Armenian using language as a justification. Although I had to learn multiple languages upon birth because of preserving my ancestral roots as well as belonging to my birth country, he had taken language for granted and could not fathom *my* imagined community, one that spoke Western instead of Eastern Armenian, one that clutches to Armenianness with dear life in face of cultural extinction, one that creates a “unisonance” through the echoed words of the national anthem (sung through a Western Armenian accent). His “synchronic novelty” was parallel with *his* imagined community, the community born and raised in the context of Eastern Armenia, not necessarily parallel to the imagined community around the globe that emblemizes Armenia, longing for it, while belonging to an imagined community separate from the one actualized on its land.

Personal Journaling and Reflection

Since *We Are* is such a personal project, diving deep into my thoughts and perceptions of my identity and feelings were important in deciding how to tell my story, what aspects to focus on and what feelings I want to transmit to the audience. I would occasionally write journal entries of my struggles with identity and attempts at overcoming them and accepting myself. Sometimes, I would document moments and experiences related to being Armenian, being in Armenia as an Armenian diaspora and being surrounded by so many different Armenians from various diaspora groups.

Here is an example of a journal entry that shows my thoughts:

My story? How am I any special? I'm struggling to see my story unique. I look around my community, so many faces, so many stories, yet they seem to ring the same bell. Genocide, trauma, displacement, immersing, accepting, rejecting. Who am I? Which road to choose? I am nobody here, I am nobody there. No! I cannot be reduced to your words. I am here, I am there, my heart

can never be just mine. It floats there when I'm here, and swims its way here, but I'm not. You don't understand and you'll never. I do not choose one. I cannot. Does it make a difference to you what I say? Why play me this way? It's like choosing sunsets kissing the sea to pure white snow resting on magnificent mountains. I cannot choose, no, I will not choose.

Who are you? Why do you ask? I am here and I am there, I know how to be in more than one place, because we had to. We had to keep our community together, teach to love our culture, learn to love ourselves again, get past the trauma. I am more than my past, I am more than my trauma, I am not your this or that game. I belong, how could I not? Alas, how could I not fall in love? When the sun was glowing bright reminding me I can enjoy this, I can be present, now and not then. Who am I now? It's hard to tell in words when life happens without my permission. I can only record moments, snapshots, but they will never show the full picture. I will never be my full self. Because I have many selves.

Another entry of an experience I had with other diaspora members:

We were approximately 8 Armenian diaspora sitting together at a bar in Armenia, drinking beer. One was from Australia, another from France, USA, Lebanon, Syria... We were from all around the world, from different continents, life contexts, grew up within different environments, yet we were all there, around that small table in a tiny bar that had flags hung from different countries, drinking beer. This is what William Saroyan was talking about!

One of the volunteers noted how crazy this way, it was an encounter of miracles as we are the descendants of survivors who endured all the pain and suffering. Yet there is so much life in us. We were there on a night out trying to enjoy ourselves, we couldn't help but have a collective existential moment. We all felt it I have no doubt. I can't explain, it's a feeling. I was dumbfounded and so emotional, it's tragic yet so beautiful how we are so different yet so similar simultaneously, it's a connection I cannot explain. Having been away from the Armenian community for almost 4 years... it's bizarre and heartwarming to be reminded how beautiful the community can be and the joy of being with people who FEEL the culture is a part of themselves, rather than coming into it as outsiders, even those who weren't raised with it.

Journaling not only aided me in writing my narration script for *We Are* later during post-production, but also helped me process my feelings before and during the production stages of the documentary.

Immersive Experience

Alongside diving deep into my internal thoughts and feelings, I needed to immerse myself within the local Armenian community in Armenia as well as the different diaspora groups during my participating in the program Birthright Armenia, which brings diaspora members from all over the world to Armenia so that we can connect with our roots. It was easier to connect with the other diaspora members because we share a similar sense of discomfort that could stem from feeling othered and trying to find our place in a new setting and an inevitably different culture. However, it was equally important to try and immerse myself in the local community and culture in order to overcome my own sense of othering. At my volunteer positions, I tried to speak Armenian even if my dialect, being Western Armenian, is different from the local dialect, Eastern Armenian. I tried to familiarize myself with Eastern Armenian while trying to feel comfortable responding with my dialect. The result was rewarding, we were mostly able to understand each other and I felt more included, even though it was far from being effortless. I came to a conclusion that I will never fully fit in nor would I want to, I am different because I have lived in so many different contexts and cultures, and I found beauty in this rather than shame and discomfort.

Some situations were less straightforward when it came to expressing my Armenianness. For instance, I had to pretend I do not know how to write in Armenian while getting official papers for a visa I was applying to because it was easier than explaining how my dialect uses different spelling and vocabulary. The officer was confused because they were holding my Armenian passport and we were having a conversation in Armenian when I said that. They immediately said, “you are not from here, are you?” in a way that reminded me of the othering I had felt when I first lived in Armenia. Accepting myself was not always linear, it is a constant work.

Methodology: Production

Interviews

Even though the documentary is an autoethnography, I thought it was important to include different voices from different Armenian diaspora communities to show the diversity of the community as well as the similar issues that we all face as diaspora. The interviews ended up being the base to the themes I wanted to present during the post-production stage. The interviews were casual and I wanted it to be more of a conversation rather than a one-sided interview so I decided to also film myself and allow the interviewees to ask me anything they wanted to know as well. This was simply a method I used to make my subjects feel comfortable and connected with me as the filmmaker but I would later exclude my voice from the interviews because the documentary primarily focuses on my story anyway. I wanted to give them the space to express themselves but not feel spotlighted because I deeply connect with the topics represented.

I had originally filmed four interviews, even though I only used three. The one interview I chose to exclude was with a friend from my Armenian-Lebanese community whom I had met in Armenia. Even though she came from the same community as I, she shared completely opposing opinions. She did not face conflict with her identity, she did not feel othered, she did not talk about serious challenges a diaspora member could face while moving to Armenia. I tried different methods of opening her up, telling her my experiences and conflicts, assuring her she was free to stop the interview if she felt unsafe or changed her mind, asking further questions, but she persisted that she had no identity issues. I was initially going to include her voice as a contrast but then realized it lacked depth and supporting arguments to her opinions, so I chose to

exclude it. However, it was interesting to see someone from my community have an opposite experience to what I have faced.

Cultural and Environmental Shots

The aim of the documentary was also to show the culture in different ways through our music, dances, traditional clothes, artforms and food, so I made sure to attend any cultural event happening and document it. Doing this allowed me to also connect with the culture and meet new people. I also wanted to show the environmental and architectural diversity of the country so I participated in a lot of trips around Armenia and walks in Yerevan to document the nature, architecture, art and different Armenian cultural symbols (alphabets, carved rocks, paintings, carpets...)

Verité Scenes

I made sure I had my camera ready to film anything spontaneous that could be relevant to my topic. One of the scenes in *We Are* where my friends are arguing about what it means to be Armenian is shot in discrete because I wanted to keep the authenticity of the moment and not let the presence of a camera affect anyone's opinions and expressions. I also did not participate in the argument because I did not want to influence anyone's opinions. Interestingly, the scene captures a summary of everything I wanted to say through my documentary (which I had to majorly trim to avoid repetition).

Another verité scene is the Beirut explosion commemoration march we did in Yerevan. I wanted to capture the moment because it connected my Lebanese and Armenian identities together and was shared with other diaspora members who came to support us. We experienced a shared

collective moment where we felt connected not only to our Armenianness but also to our Lebaneseness.

Side Projects

There were a few side projects that I took on thinking I could add to my documentary. For instance, taking a short video of different Armenian diaspora members saying they are Armenian in the language of where they are raised. I ended up only using their faces but it was effective because it shows there is no one way to be and look Armenian.

Another side project was when I went to Goris, a village in the south of Armenia to document a bag-making project that employs locals and refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh and allows them to have a community and deal with the trauma and loss they recently faced. I ended up using only parts of my shoot as B-roll but the experience itself was enriching and reminded me of how different it is to be in the capital versus a village which a completely different dialect (I could not understand a word there! I would have stood out even if I were from Yerevan).

Another project I had started was to document the Armenian traditional carpet weaving process. The experienced ladies were intricately showing how an Armenian carpet is traditionally made and how long it takes to complete a single carpet. Even though I found it interesting, the documentary did not have a space for this to be included. It goes back to having to be picky and choose wisely what to include and exclude. Unfortunately, this was one of the scenes that did not fit into the narrative of the story but I hope to use it in my later works.

Methodology: Post-Production

Voice-Over Narration

Writing a script for my voice-over narration was a long process of writing many different drafts, versions and recording myself for hours trying to find the right tone. The first draft of my script was quite descriptive and informational. But the beauty of making a documentary opposed to writing an essay is to make the audience feel through my words and images rather than be dumped with a bunch of information. Once I caught the audience's attention, I would be able to give important informative piece which would be taken more at heart. The final version of the script was more poetic, specific and personal. For instance, instead of talking about the Armenian Genocide in a personal way, I decided to talk about my own great grand-parents who had to flee our homeland.

Editing Process

With an overwhelming amount of footage and information, starting the editing process was quite challenging. I decided the easiest way to start was to trim the hour-long three interviews as much as I could, condensing the important messages and quotes in about ten minutes each. Then I started interweaving the different interviews with each other based on similar themes. This ended up creating a conversation between the three separate interviews which lined up with my initial vision of including myself in the interviews as a conversation but also giving the interviewees space to express themselves without my intrusion.

In terms of creative and narratives structures, *We Are* is divided into four sections: my upbringing in Lebanon, my first time living in Armenia, going abroad, and returning to my roots in Armenia. I have used my voice-over narration to guide the audience through each section of my story in a chronological timeline to keep its clarity and bring the audience into my internal world. In between each section (excluding the section in between my childhood and first time in

Armenia), I have included three voices from other members of the diaspora community to broaden the topics and themes I introduce and place my story into a bigger context as well as show the individual realities each member faces based on their intersectional positionality. Stylistically, each of the four sections presents a different mood through the color grading, content and editing style. The first section entirely consists of archival footage from my childhood, introducing the audience to my family, community and context as an Armenian diaspora growing up in Lebanon. The old, lower quality home-videos give a nostalgic feeling and put the audience in the context of the early 2000s. My goal here was to show with the footage and only essential and minimal narration how I grew up in a multicultural environment of a community that holds on to their heritage while also interacting with Lebanon's culture. For instance, I juxtapose dancing to Armenian music with Arabic music, I show how my family speaks Armenian to each other and watches Armenian TV while singing "Happy Birthday" in Arabic as well. It was important to provide some context with narration to define what it means to be diaspora from the start. Additionally, I purposefully chose to show photographs of my great grandparents instead of tragic archival photographs of the Genocide to keep it more personal without the graphic content as the documentary is about hope and moving forward instead of being stuck in the past's pain.

The second section consists of footage provided by my friend during my time studying in the boarding school in Armenia. I purposefully chose footages involving snow, storms and rain color graded in a colder tone to portray the feelings of othering and identity crisis I faced while in Armenia as well as a gloomy mood.

For the third section, I used bright colorful footages of people dancing, singing and playing from my time in Brazil. The contrast of bright colors and a sense of community and

freedom are perceived stronger here after the portrayal of loneliness and coldness in the second section. I chose to include footages of me interacting with people and Brazil to show my character growth. One of the important scenes in this section is the last one where I share Armenian-Lebanese food with my Brazilian host family and friends. This scene immerses the audience in that exact moment opposed to recalling memories with my narration, bringing them closer to my world and feelings.

The final section involves recent footages from the last time I was in Armenia. The mood here is completely different from the second section of Armenia because I use warmer tones, happier people and green nature instead of snow, cold and storms. I play with lights and darkness to portray the metaphor of hope in finding light in darkness. The editing is faster faced to show my impression of Armenia and the community and that there was so much to enjoy and share with the world. I include clips of myself the most in this section because this section is where I connect most with myself and my identity. I also decided to add a scene where different Armenian diaspora groups gather in Yerevan in solidarity with Lebanon, with a protest and memorial for the 2020 Beirut explosion. My goal with this scene was to remind the audience of my Lebanese side and that there are more Lebanese-Armenians trying to balance their connection with both countries and cultures. This section also includes a verité scene of my friends from Birthright Armenia arguing about what it means to be Armenian (specifically diaspora), filmed in discrete to maintain the authenticity and the natural flow of the conversation. I have filmed at an angle that gives the feeling of being a “fly on the wall,” placing the audience in my seat as the conversation unfolds in real time.

Another important stylistic choice is the use of sunsets as a metaphor for closing a chapter and welcoming new beginnings. The first words I narrate are about the orange sunsets I

grew up watching from my balcony, accompanied by an archival footage of the sunset from my house. Throughout the documentary, I keep bringing this idea back by showing time lapses of sunsets in between transitioning sections. It also acts as a reminder of where my story starts and the context in which my character is taking decisions (remembering the beginning of my internal questions).

Language and music play important roles in *We Are*. I feature all the four languages I speak (Armenian, English, Arabic and Portuguese) throughout the documentary with English subtitles. This was one way of showing my multiculturalism without stating it in my narration. As for music, I mostly use diegetic music coming from the clips I have shot during my time in Armenia or Brazil. The editing in the last section makes it evident that the music is live since I show the musicians playing either at the start or end. The music selected are ones from each respective culture (Armenian music in Armenia, Brazilian music in Brazil) as music acts as an important cultural representation.

The documentary ends with the editing choice of combining archival footages from my childhood with the footage of people dancing in Armenia, bridging the different generations together. The goal here is to show that we have survived and still exist despite the Genocide and to show the diversity of our community; we come from all different contexts and backgrounds but still hold hands and dance to Armenian music.

Conclusion

Through the methodology of dividing the process between pre-production, production and post-production, I was able to explore the topic in depth before, during and after the filming of the documentary. *We Are* uses documentation methods used in visual anthropology as it is a documentary film that dives deep into personal thoughts, feelings and analyses on what it means

to be raised within an Armenian diaspora community, making it accessible to even those outside the field of anthropology. However, this project's contribution to anthropology can be attributed to the offering of a unique personal perspective through visual methods such as cinematography, color grading, sound design and editing which all interact in order to present an audio-visual experience of feelings and information intertwined together. My multicultural background as well as those of my subjects' offers a unique window into what it means for each of us to connect with our Armenian roots and how we choose to express it and overcome challenges of feeling othered within the dominant Armenian culture of what is currently known as the Republic of Armenia.

The Armenian diaspora exists in all parts of the world and is in a constant interaction with other cultures and identities. The diaspora comes from all sorts of backgrounds but what connects us is our collective consciousness of an Armenianness that is individually defined. For the majority of the Armenian diaspora, it was not a choice to be born and raised in countries outside of their ancestral lands but it is an active choice the diaspora can make to stay connected with their Armenian ancestry and identity. Identity is individually defined but is also strongly influenced by opinions and attitudes of those around us; therefore, what it means to be Armenian for me and the level of commitment I show towards my culture is different than to those who have not had the privilege to grow up within an active Armenian diaspora community. Furthermore, diversity within the Armenian diaspora should be celebrated rather than considered a weakness because despite the inevitable assimilation of the diaspora within their individual majority cultures and the different evolutions of the Armenian identity post-Genocide, we are all bonded through our diverse ways of identity expression related to what it means to be Armenian.

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