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# “A ‘Little Armenia’ In The Caribbean”: The Armenian Heritage Cruise As A Simulacrum

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*First held in 1998 with only a couple of hundred Armenians in attendance, in its last incarnation in 2020, the Armenian Heritage Cruise (AHC)—the “Original Armenian Cruise”—hosted over 1,000 participants coming from over ten countries including the United States, Canada, Argentina, Venezuela, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, France, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Australia, and Armenia. Based on on-site participant observation and twenty open-ended interviews with cruise attendees between 2007–2015 and the chair of AHC committee in 2018, in addition to the analysis of the AHC promotional and published material (2007–2020), this article argues that the annual AHC is a simulacrum of the organizers’ and participants’ fantasies of Armenia (Baudrillard 1994, 6). The simulacrum, an exclusive and serviced tropical fantasy in the middle of the Caribbean, catered to passengers with buying power who consumed the messages of an idealized, “better” Armenia. It likewise “freed” Armenians from a marginalization they claimed to experience in the communities where they usually live, even as these places were also a source of pride, had established Armenian institutions, or were even in the “real” Armenia.*

*Keywords:* simulacrum, simulation, Armenia, Armenian cruise, diaspora, Caribbean

## Introduction

In 2017, over 1,000 Armenians from countries like the United States, Canada, Lebanon, Australia, Argentina, and Armenia gathered in Miami, Florida, to embark on a week-long getaway aboard the twentieth annual Armenian Heritage Cruise (AHC). Boasting a full-size basketball court and skating rink, in addition to the more common cruise amenities such as a roof-top pool and sun lounge, most came for camaraderie, fun, and the “non-stop Armenian entertainment and cultural events” (Haroutunian 2017). As one of the first organizers, Barbara Haroutunian wrote, “The Armenian cruise is about fun and culture, and on the ship Armenians from all over the world stand together as one group and one nation” (Haroutunian 2017).

Meanwhile, the presence and pomp surrounding the former ambassador of the United States to the Republic of Armenia, John Evans, his wife, and Bishop Anoushavan Tanielian, the Vicar General of the Eastern Prelacy of the Armenian Church, added a component of formality: an indication that this was not your average themed cruise (Schwartz 2019).<sup>1</sup> Evans gave a series of talks including “Truth Held Hostage: America and the Armenian Genocide—What Then? What Now,”

while Tanielian delivered the lecture “The Current Armenian Situation in the Middle East” and led the daily Armenian mass at nine o’clock in the morning, shortly after the late-night dance party would have ended. These lectures were integrated within the twenty-four-hour a day Armenian activities developed by the organizing committee of the AHC.<sup>2</sup>

This article argues that the annual AHC is a simulation of the organizers’ and participants’ fantasies of Armenia. Because the AHC does claim to simulate a “real” Armenia, it can be analyzed as a simulacrum, a term adopted from Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard 1994, 6). Baudrillard (3) differentiates between representation, or the simulation of the real, and simulacra, or the loss of the distinction between the two, using Borges’s fable in which cartographers of an empire draw a map so precise that it covers the territory itself. With the disintegration of the map and the empire’s own decline, what remains is the frayed map without an empire. In other words, there is no mirror of “the real and its concept.” Baudrillard calls these models of the real without origin or reality, simulacra, the proliferation of which gives rise to “hyperreality” (17).

Baudrillard’s simulacrum is a useful tool to frame the AHC. The AHC was *the* place where differences were put aside and unity was achieved as people came together as one (Haroutunian 2010). This claim demonstrated that the everyday lived experiences of participants outside of the cruise differed, while revealing the desire for such unity. Likewise, that many commented on how the AHC promoted “pride in their Armenian ancestry, heritage, religion, and culture” indicated that it was both absent and wanted (Haroutunian 2016). Its point of departure from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, heading south via the tropical waters of the Caribbean Sea in January, offered welcome respite to the many traveling from colder climates. Finally, the AHC’s superior and all-inclusive lodging, food, and beverage, serviced by hundreds of waitstaff, and non-stop entertainment was a far cry from Armenia’s more unfavorable conditions, such as its poverty rate of more than 23% recorded in 2018 (World Bank 2020a).<sup>3</sup> It was, as Baudrillard, stated, “better than the reality” or the hyperreal (Baudrillard 1994, 3).

Scholars working on themed tourism and leisure argue that the historical foundation and workings of such spaces as a “cultural creation” should not be underestimated (Ong and Jin 2017, 228). They foster national identity and create the experience of a particular country (Hitchcock 1998, 124–35). Likewise, others have not only investigated how leisure sites, such as theme parks, construct identity, but also how participants in these activities can “(re)negotiate” meanings “from below” and “co-construct heritage making” (Muzaini 2017, 245). In her study on the replicated versions of iconic cities in Europe, including Venice, Amsterdam, and Paris, in urban cities in China, Bianka Bosker (2013, 3) argues that rather than instinctually labeling them as “temporary,” “kitsch,” or “fake,” these spaces both shape “the behavior of their occupants while also reflecting the achievements, dreams, and even anxieties of their inhabitants and creators.” Similarly, the AHC’s hedonistic, fun, and self-indulgent descriptions create an Armenia based on these very characteristics (pers. comm., 2007–2008). This idealized Armenia is united, without political and religious differences, and prides itself in various public displays of national pride. This showcasing, however, is connected to an exclusivity: part of the pride is that not everyone can

belong. An idealized Armenia thus enjoys controlling space, and in so doing creates enclaves. This simulacrum cannot be “exchanged for the real,” and is not merely a “false representation” (Baudrillard 1994, 6). Rather, the AHC’s simulation of these fantasies “envelops the whole edifice of the representation itself as a simulacrum” (6).

In what follows, I will discuss key elements of the cruise, many of which form empirical aspects of Baudrillard’s conceptual discussion of the fundamental dimensions of simulacrum.

## Purchasing, Messaging, And Commercialization

Costing hundreds of dollars (not including airfare), taking part in the AHC simulacrum is an expression of prestige, luxury, and power (Baudrillard 1998, 16). The fee to participate in the AHC and be part of “promoting Armenian fellowship and Armenian awareness” begins at just under US\$900, which helps fund the entertainment, staff, food services, and guest speakers.<sup>4</sup> This fee does not go directly to the owner of the cruise line, Carnival Cruises, but rather to Travel Group International, the official travel agency with which the AHC has partnered since 1998. While other cruise patrons boarded to fill the ship to capacity, only those who purchased their trip through Travel Group International were part of the AHC. Those who purchased through Carnival Cruises or other travel agency intermediaries were excluded from the Armenian spaces and activities on board, and were prevented access to the simulacrum (Haroutunian 2011; pers. comm., 2007–2015).<sup>5</sup>

Aboard, AHC participants collectively enjoyed and consumed the messages of the simulacrum: they became Armenian. They took part in the group activities and entertainment, lounged in groups aboard the deck, and ate their meals in designated areas at specific times. AHC participants were issued an official AHC membership/identification card that not only acted as the key to their cruise cabin, but more importantly, was also *the* key identifier for those taking part in the simulacrum. Adorned with the Armenian flag and the AHC seal, it stated the member’s name and room number, and was required to be shown at AHC security stations manned at the entrance of each activity. It also indicated the boundaries of the designated “Armenian spaces” and where Armenian activities took place throughout the ship (Haroutunian 2011; pers. comm., 2007–2009). These “signs” doubled as messages that in turn gave shape to the simulacrum (Baudrillard 1998, 13). They created a sense of comradeship amongst the Armenian passengers that otherwise would never have existed (14). Also, similar to advertisers who, according to Baudrillard, imitated something personal to produce a sense of intimacy, AHC organizers demarcated areas for their participants that created a sense of shared belonging (14).

The AHC ID cards also helped participants recognize one another, differentiating Armenians from non-Armenians or non-AHC participants. Since non-Armenians could—and did—pay the rate as determined by the cruise organizers to participate in the AHC, the AHC also “created” Armenians (pers. comm., 2007–2015). Non-Armenians (and not only spouses or partners of Armenians) joined the cruise to spend a leisurely week with their Armenian friends and relatives. In this way, the

simulacrum offered a flexibility of including non-Armenians irrespective of marriage and partnership—something that regular, permanent Armenian communities did not want or could not do.

In addition, the AHC created an Armenia where belonging was not quite predicated on purchasing power. Yes, certain rooms, be they luxurious suites or those with ocean views and/or balconies, manifested the buying power of the participants. However, purchasing the most expensive room still would not procure access to Armenian activities and spaces aboard if the passenger had not paid through Travel Group International, the AHC's agency. Alternatively, a passenger could have booked the cheapest room on the ship, but because they had done so through the AHC, they were entitled to take part in the simulacrum with access to all areas of the ship.

Cruise-goers in turn commented on how exciting and appealing it was to be with Armenians that they otherwise presumably would never have met. And yet, bringing together Armenians was carefully orchestrated—another key trait of a simulacrum (Baudrillard 1998, 14). It took months of planning amongst committee members that also negotiated with the entertainers and their agents over fees (Kzirian, pers. comm.). The AHC committee, usually comprised of seven people, the majority of them men, 35–70 years old, was a non-elected body that selected the entertainment and scheduled the AHC's near twenty-four-hour daily activities (Kzirian, pers. comm.). The committee was not overhauled yearly, but one or two members usually did rotate in and out, so its composition changed (Kzirian, pers. comm.). All activities included an educational component: there were lectures on the role and history of the Armenian Church, the current situation in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabagh, and the ongoing efforts to gain worldwide Armenian Genocide recognition (Armenian Heritage Cruise 2018). While some activities were repeated yearly, such as daily Armenian dance and language lessons, church services, and lectures on Armenian topics, new activities were always introduced to appeal to both the repeat-participant and potential new customer base (Kzirian, pers. comm.). As AHC cruise goers participated and consumed these orchestrated messages, they adopted, or in effect believed in Baudrillard's view, that they were likewise affluent, fulfilled, happy, and liberated. Indeed, AHC cruise-goers loved the cruise and consistently commented on it (pers. comm., 2007–2015). In Baudrillard's (1998, 19) words, it was a “fantastic world.”

AHC activities took place daily and throughout the day, sometimes twice, to maximize audience participation. Open from nine in the morning until ten at night, the *Hairenik* bookstore, named after the *Hairenik* Armenian-language newspaper, sold Armenian and English-language texts on Armenian history, politics, language, and literature.<sup>6</sup> Aside from the educational events, its social events, such as the “single mingle”—an attempt to introduce unattached Armenian men and women with the hope that they would pair off—doubled as a nation-making activity. By attending the event, one presumably signaled one's availability (Haroutunian 2011). It was also one of the only events that offered complimentary alcohol (Haroutunian 2011; pers. comm., 2007–2015). In 2011, AHC organizer Haroutunian boasted that “after 14 years of cruising, we have 20 couples that have met on the ship and later married”

(Haroutunian 2011). They did so in a “venue where Armenians of all backgrounds come together in a lavish setting” “as one people and one nation” (Haroutunian 2018 and 2010).

It was in this luxurious venue, however, that the AHC simulacrum differed from cities, towns, theme parks, new neighborhoods, and designs that scholars have studied using Baudrillard’s works. Unlike Bosker’s (2013, 3) work on Chinese towns and cities, this was not a replication as mimicry of existing places. Rather, it was a new geographic surrounding. Similarly, there was no actual riverscape like in Chin Ee Ong and Ge Jin’s (2017, 233) study of a North Song Dynasty theme park. Yasmin Buchrieser’s (2019, 100-1) works, which focus on simulating the style of two famous posthumous architects, Antoni Gaudí in Barcelona and Charles Rennie Mackintosh in Glasgow, do help us fill the gap between replication and simulacra that the AHC presents. However, though realized only after Gaudí and Mackintosh’s deaths, these projects are still based on actual drawings from the architect in question (Buchrieser 2019, 103). The AHC has no such mold to draw from. Rather, it comes together based on the organizers and participants fantasies of an improved Armenia, one that is united, happy, full of entertainment, and exhibiting (exclusionary) national pride.

Still, Buchrieser’s (2019) analysis of the development of the Willow Tea Rooms, one of the only surviving tea rooms designed by Mackintosh, comes close to modeling the AHC simulacrum and connecting to its commercialization. In the 1980s, the second floor of the tea room, which by that time had been partially destroyed, was recreated to simulate Mackintosh’s tea room of the early 1900s (Buchrieser 2019, 104–5). With its popularity, the owner continued to refurbish the remaining rooms in the building to simulate the original Mackintosh’s tearoom. In 2014 the building was sold to a trust named “The Willow Tea Rooms Trust,” which planned to restore the rooms and rename the tea room “Mrs. Cranston’s New Tea and Lunch Rooms,” a nod to the original business owner who had commissioned Mackintosh in the 1900s. The former owner went on to reopen her tea room in another department store on the same street, thus creating a simulacrum of the Mackintosh teahouse “without any direct connection to the original Mackintosh heritage” (Buchrieser 2019, 106–7). While the simulacrum in Glasgow is “inspired by Mackintosh,” Buchrieser likewise demonstrates how it moves away from the original work and is used for commercial activity (Buchrieser 2019, 107). While the AHC did not quite have an original to similarly move away from, it was likewise a source of commercial activity.

At the same time, the AHC was distinct from other events occurring in the diaspora or in Armenia that required payment to participate, such as galas, concerts, dances, or lectures.<sup>7</sup> First, these other examples were singular events and could not be compared to the weeklong, near round-the-clock events organized for various age groups aboard the ship. The repetition of these events aboard the AHC made them part of the daily life of the participants regardless of age, and embedded an instructive element within the everyday of the participants. Even overnight Armenian day camps that do organize day-long activities, such the ARF-affiliated Camp Haiastan in Franklin, MA, or the Institute of St. Gregory of Datev organized by the Armenian Prelacy of New York, cannot be compared since these camps are geared only towards children

or young adults. By contrast, aboard the AHC, people from all ages participate in the morning mass led by an archbishop, Armenian dance and language lessons, and other daily social and educational events. Moreover, no other event brings together so many participants from all over the world. Just as an example, Beirut, Boston, Los Angeles, Paris, Sao Paolo, and Yerevan all have their own Armenian institutions, demonstrating that the AHC simulation of a dream Armenian in-gathering is extraordinary. As Madlen Tchrian from Buenos Aires, Argentina, was quoted as saying “This huge ship has been converted into an Armenian town” ([Haroutunian 2010](#)).

## Improving The Simulacrum

No such Armenian town ever existed, of course. In fact, the AHC was better than any Armenian town, in that it articulates the wishes of participants and organizers ([Baudrillard 1994](#), 10, 32). Aboard the cruise, Armenians come together as one nation, irrespective of political or religious affiliation differences ([Haroutunian 2018](#)). James Kzirian, chair of the AHC committee in 2018, noted how they alternatively invited the North American prelates of the Cilician and Echmiadzin Sees (the two highest bodies of the Armenian Church, the former located in Antelias, Lebanon, and the latter in Armenia) to make sure “we aren’t perceived as favoring [one over the other] and that we are open to all Armenian elements” (Kzirian, pers. comm.).<sup>8</sup> Historically, Armenian political parties and their affiliated organizations actively discouraged and even excluded Armenians of rival political ideologies from taking part in events.<sup>9</sup> And while socialization and intermarriage between these two sets of political persuasions has become far less rare since the 1988 Karabagh conflict between then Soviet Armenia and Soviet Azerbaijan, they continue to play a factor in Armenian communities globally.<sup>10</sup> Political ideologies, such as adherence to an Armenian political party or religious see, are often still present as rivalries. This is evidenced in the continued establishment of multiple churches, organizations, and community centers under the jurisdiction of different Armenian Sees in the same town or city.<sup>11</sup> Aboard the AHC, however, “We put aside our political and religious differences and come together as ARMENIANS to support one nation, one people and one purpose—‘A Free and Independent Armenia’” ([Haroutunian 2017](#)).<sup>12</sup>

A relevant study here is [Bosker’s \(2013\)](#) work on architectural mimicry in contemporary China. Bosker noted how some architects working in China declined working on such projects, calling them “fantastiscapes” that copy the original (12). She cautioned against the flippant label of “imitation,” however, noting that many Chinese consider such landscapes “ultra-modern” and “connoting progress” (13). In the simulacrum, too, there was a sense of progress: due not to architectural mimicry but to the composition of those aboard the AHC. Lily Balian of Los Angeles, California described how “the enjoyment was contagious, as fellow brothers and sisters from all over the world came together sharing their stories, history, and pride in their Armenian ancestry, heritage, religion, and culture” ([Haroutunian 2016](#)). This pride gave way to a sense of advancement. Diana Papazian of San Diego, California stated “This cruise has enlightened me as to where the Armenian community stands today and how far we have progressed” ([Haroutunian 2010](#)).



## Duty

AHC goers expressed their enjoyment with taking part in the AHC (pers. comm., 2007–2015). And yet, according to Baudrillard (1998, 79), consumption does not bring enjoyment. How can one make sense of this if cruise goers talk about a “wonderful time” and are “anxiously awaiting to sign up” for next year’s cruise (Haroutunian 2010 and 2009)? For Baudrillard (1998, 81), fun and enjoyment have become institutionalized, not as a right or a pleasure, but as the duty of the citizen. This sense of duty—tinged with a nationalist sentiment—was also apparent among AHC patrons discussing future participation on the cruise: they vowed to continue to take part. Karekin Gurumlian promised, “It is my second time but, God willing, you can bet it will not be my last” (Haroutunian 2010). They must keep the simulacrum going to maintain its benefits. Tamar Kelleyan recommended it “to every Armenian who has the opportunity to take this cruise, as it takes you back to your roots” (Haroutunian 2017). Even organizers advertised future iterations as a way to awaken the Armenian: “Join us next year and you are sure to enjoy a ‘Hye [Armenian] Adventure’ on the ‘Hye [Armenian] Seas’ ... where the Armenian spirit comes alive on the Caribbean Sea” (Haroutunian 2017).<sup>13</sup> Without it, would it never awaken?

Many AHC participants expressed a sense of urgency and responsibility to attend (and re-attend) the cruise, as if without it Armenian identity would be in jeopardy. This manifested in pledges to bring more Armenians from their individual communities to future cruises (Haroutunian 2010). Boghos and Sylva Deradourian of Philadelphia stated “I have been on the AHC 17 times, and I am anxiously waiting to sign up again for next year’s cruise. Hope to see everyone again next year” (Haroutunian 2018). While Beta Nahapetian clearly enjoyed the AHC, her experience was entangled in intense commitment to the simulacrum; she even expressed concern that she had not attended before she did. “I am upset with all of my friends for not encouraging me more to come on the AHC cruise earlier. How did I miss all of the previous 11 cruises? My husband Ara and I are having a wonderful time and we are planning to come next year and bring our children and grandchildren with us” (Haroutunian 2009).

Duty, but of another sense, this time to the *real* Armenia, was also brought up. Aran (last name withheld) was not a participant, but in reading about the cruise in *Armenian Weekly* commented on its success. Given the expenses spent by each participant he wondered, “could the same amount of work, money, and entertainment be created in Armenia, with profits being kept there?” They acknowledged that these “foreign countries” were beautiful, but “their profit was a loss for our Armenia” (Haroutunian 2010). Did the “duty” that drove one to participate in the simulacrum and consume its messaging endanger the “real” Armenia?

The AHC did attempt to educate participants about Armenia, however. While attending Armenian events was not a requirement, AHC organizers ensured that at least one lecture took place every day. As the lectures took place while the cruise was at sea, attendance was maximized. In the 2018 version of the Armenian nation, lectures included “Current Situation in and Around Artsakh: The Conflict Settlement Process,” “The Armenian Cause: Today, Tomorrow, and Into the Future,” “International



Recognition of Artsakh: The Legal Case,” and a panel discussion called “Once Turks Recognize the Armenian Genocide: Now What?” that brought together all of the speakers (Armenian Heritage Cruise 2018).

In other moments, Armenian organizations used the simulacrum to target Armenians on board for their political efforts in “real” life. On 19 January 2007, Hrant Dink, editor of the Turkish-Armenian newspaper *Agos*, was assassinated in Istanbul, a couple of days into the cruise (Arsu 2007). Authored by the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA), AHC organizers circulated a petition during the dinner meal to each table calling for an investigation, condemning human rights abuses in Turkey, ordering Turkey to admit to the Armenian Genocide, and pleading for it to protect its Armenian minority (pers. comm., 2007).<sup>14</sup> These dinners transformed into an automatic base for the lobbying group, ready to be mobilized at a moment’s notice. And this captive base was happy to oblige. Almost every single guest, over 1,000, signed the petition (pers. comm., 2007).

## Language

While for some the appeal of the simulacrum was the political and religious unification of Armenians, for others, it was the ability to speak Armenian. Silva Alactian stated she was “able to speak my beautiful Armenian language without anyone wondering what language I am speaking” (Haroutunian 2009). This was a curious desire, however. Daily use of Armenian, both its Western and Eastern dialects, existed outside of the simulacra: in Armenia but also in France, where Alactian lived, and in other Armenian communities worldwide, including Los Angeles, Montreal, and Beirut, where many participants came from. In addition, there were multiple Armenian language radio station and TV programs to choose from in each of these communities, and Armenian TV and satellite stations (mostly in Eastern Armenian) that have gained popularity over the past few years. Accordingly, outside of the simulacrum, Armenians could watch Armenian TV globally, in real time, and simultaneously follow and engage with Armenians in Armenia.

The Armenian TV stations that ran on the AHC, however, only played Armenian song and dance programs (Haroutunian 2010). Armenian news programs were likewise absent (pers. comm., 2007–2015). This indicated that passengers and organizers alike yearned to hear and see both Eastern and Western Armenian associated with visuals of entertainment and performance. At the same time, it regulated the information, or messaging, about Armenia to the participants. After all, even though most lectures focused on contemporary Armenia, the AHC organizers selected the lecturers and their topics.

Moreover, knowing English was essential to operate in the simulacrum and participate in most of the daily Armenian activities. Aside from educational lectures given in English, all other social events were conducted in English (pers. comm., 2007–2015). In addition, all entertainment events were introduced in English, even if the acts themselves were in Armenian. Accordingly, a musician or performer could speak (or sing) in Armenian during a performance but would be introduced and speak to the audience in English. Similarly, while daily announcements played over the ship’s loudspeakers

were made in Armenian, they were also made in Italian, French, German, and English (Haroutunian 2009; pers. comm., 2007–2015).

Yet Armenian was not only the language of song and dance and announcements; Armenian was also used to exclude, and thus express power over, certain participants. A few key words and phrases were used to transmit specific messages in a particular situation to a segment of the population aboard the cruise. It was likewise understood that the majority of cruisers and cruise staff could not understand what was being said. Armenian became a tool to communicate a joke or a slur, but also to advise on bargaining and shopping, thereby demonstrating and fashioning an intimate connection between certain Armenian members on the cruise (pers. comm., 2007–2009).

Armenian-speaking AHC cruisers also delighted in teaching non-Armenian speaking members of the AHC, other non-AHC guests, and the cruise staff certain Armenian words. While this act was encouraged by Armenians, and ostensibly done in an atmosphere of fun, it was also at times something of a power game. Armenians were thrilled by the (incorrect) pronunciations and seemed to relish in the spectacle of getting others to play along in the first place, even at the expense of their co-nationals (pers. comm., 2007–2009). Armenian had turned from a shared mode of communication to a shared national symbol (Bakalian 1993, 264; Pattie 1997, 190), but one whose purpose was to exclude. While this transformation was not completely new, as many Armenian speakers may not understand literary or formal Armenian, such as the Armenian liturgy, its innovation lay in its deployment as a proud moment of power for those Armenians who could understand. And it seemed that they wished it would remain so. During the daily Armenian lessons, for example, the instructor did not include a lesson on how to barter or the uses of slang and other colloquialisms that may have aided those who were not as familiar with Alactian’s “beautiful language” (pers. comm., 2008).

In the simulacrum, Armenian was the language of code, religion, and song and dance. For some, it likewise expressed power and both the ability and desire to exclude. And yet, if one only spoke Armenian (or another language other than English), one was unable to take part in the Armenian simulacra. For AHC participants, the pride and comfort that Armenian instilled was not merely in its presence, as this existed outside of the simulacrum. Rather, it was in its forms and usage. Ironically, the unfamiliarity of Armenian that Alactian complained about became a medium to communicate with only a specific segment of those in the simulacrum. This segment, in ways, doubled as its “community elites” (Tölölyan 2000, 110), as AHC organizers and Armenian speakers controlled how it was used, including and excluding those as they saw fit.

## Enclave

At the same time, these community elites who engaged in language inclusion/exclusion tactics along with all of the AHC participants as a whole, together sought “out an exclusion of their own in order to set themselves apart, to some degree, in an enclave created by conscious cultural territorialization” (Tölölyan 2000, 110). For AHC guests this atmosphere aided in the feeling that they were *in* Armenia. Multiple-time

AHC cruiser Lily Sarkissian of New Jersey said as much: “This is the fourth time I am taking the Armenian Heritage Cruise and I have always had a fabulous time. Everywhere I turned they were speaking Armenian ... it felt like I was in Armenia” (Haroutunian 2019). The Armenian flag flew above the ship, welcome banners for Armenians adorned the boat and its deck, and the colors of the Armenian flag were ubiquitous (pers. comm., 2007–2009). It was likewise the stated plan of the organizers: “Armenians from all over the world gathered here as one community and one family. We shared one common language, not only the Armenian language but the language of unity, happiness, and contentment” (Haroutunian 2009).

Other non-AHC cruisers on the ship probably did not feel the same, however. In fact, non-AHC vacationers were not told beforehand that they were to be aboard an Armenian simulacrum. Moreover, they had no idea that their presence was so vital for its maintenance: without them, the simulacrum could not come together in the way it did, showcasing the fantasies of AHC organizers and participants. While excluded, their role in the simulacrum lay in their inability to access the “Armenian” activities on and off the ship and the spaces where many of these events took place, thereby reinforcing the exclusivity for Armenians. This exclusivity, in turn, made Azat Guven of British Columbia, Canada, say “Having an opportunity to come together to celebrate and honor our culture has been very important to me” (Haroutunian 2018). Certain lounges and ballrooms on the ship were closed off to non-AHC participants at different times during the day. AHC committee members wore badges hanging from their necks identifying them as “security,” and with the approval of the cruise liner, prevented non-AHC card holders from accessing particular areas aboard the ship and even some off-board ones (pers. comm., 2007–2009). Non-AHC participants also ate dinner in a separate location of the ship (pers. comm., 2007–2009). This reinforced non-AHC vacationers as a minority group and AHC participants as exclusively belonging, even if they did not correspond numerically to a majority and minority. In fact, these minority and majority characterizations occurred irrespective of the number of people aboard in any given year. Even if AHC numbers decreased, they continued to exert disproportionate influence over space and attention aboard the ship. Carnival’s permission to the AHC organizers to display the visual symbols of the simulacrum, including the flag aboard the ship and the banners of the Armenian flag, for the next seven days also communicated that it was an Armenian space, signaling that the non-AHC vacationers did not quite belong.

This was not the intention of the AHC organizers, though it certainly served their purpose. After all, they presumably could have organized a similar AHC aboard a smaller ship, one that would avoid the cruise industry’s objective of maximizing profit by selling out all of the rooms available. Aside from this possibly being a prohibitively expensive option, the presence of these non-Armenians furthered the entertainment for some AHC participants, contributing to the overall experience of the simulacrum. Some Armenians merely ignored the non-AHC vacationers, with AHC organizer Kzirian claiming, “they love joining in on the fun” (pers. comm., 2018). However, a number of them lined up at the service desk protesting their inability to access all areas of the ship as well as the increased noise levels throughout the boat at all times

of the day and night (pers. comm., 2007–2009). In one instance, young Armenian men, seemingly under the influence of alcohol, reveled in shouting “Armenians only” in cruise elevators, preventing entry to non-AHC cruisers, and laughing as the doors closed (pers. comm., 2007–2008).

While they did not belong to the simulacrum, there were specific spaces where non-AHC passengers overlapped with the AHC passengers on the ship. The pool and deck facilities were usually open to both, and both seemed to enjoy the toga night. Even in these shared areas, however, AHC participants often dominated these spaces, suggesting that part of the appeal of the simulacrum was the ability of AHC participants to assert their presence demonstrating their power. Jack and Aida Dakessian rhetorically asked, “1,300 happy, joyous, festive and boisterous Armenians in the midst of a tropical paradise. What could be better?” (Haroutunian 2017).

At the poolside Armenian Festival Day, held usually when the ship was at sea (this maximized both attendance by both AHC participants and non-AHC vacationers), prizes were awarded for the best Armenian tricolor outfit for children and adults (Haroutunian 2011). Many contestants had come prepared, designing and sewing their costumes for months prior to the contest (pers. comm., 2007–2009). There was also a poolside fashion show “where several ‘lucky Armenian ladies’ were selected to participate” (pers. comm., 2009). While non-AHC vacationers could, and did, watch these events, especially because they were directly adjacent to the lunch buffet and pool area, they could not partake in the parade contest or the fashion show. Still, the non-Armenian enclave was seen as a potential market for those aboard the simulacrum, even if they could not take part in the event like an AHC participant could. Non-AHC vacationers could purchase the clothes and accessories featured during the fashion show and at the *Hairenik* bookstore should they desire. In fact, by viewing, observing, and thus “consuming” these products and associated messaging, they actively participated in their own exclusion. This, in turn, supported the Armenian simulacrum and empowered the Armenians aboard the AHC. The AHC participants, the numerical minority, delineated belonging. This flipped the traditional diasporic history of Armenians: rather than reacting to or debating integration with the host society, *they* claimed space as their own.<sup>15</sup>

The simulacrum’s ability to make Armenians the dominant population clearly appealed to AHC participants. Alecco Bezikian of Bergamo, Italy, asked the organizers to “invite all Armenians from all over the world not to miss next year’s cruise. We will show the world the Armenians are united in the diaspora” (Haroutunian 2010). Aline Kayianjian Ohanian stated, “When I go back to Lebanon, I will cherish the memorable time we spent together making new friends from different backgrounds” (Haroutunian 2017). And Karekin Gurumlian of Montreal, Canada, said “Aside from the good food, fabulous scenery, and fantastic entertainment, it awakens the *hidden warm feelings of belonging* to a nation of wonderful people from all over the world” (Haroutunian 2010).<sup>16</sup> This desire to show presence suggested a marginalization “back home.” Why else, after all, would such pride regularly be hidden and only to be shown in the Caribbean? AHC participants articulated a joy not felt in their everyday lives back in the communities they came from. This was curious especially



**Figure 1:** Armenian Festival Day on the deck in 2008.

(Source: Photo taken by author)

since many came from locations with established Armenian communities and organizations, including Armenia. And yet, one could argue that outside of the simulacrum, Armenians neither exerted as much authority, nor enjoyed an exclusivity that could come with it.

The ship's staff, who serviced all cruise attendees, was also integral to the simulacrum, making them another "minority" non-Armenian enclave. While some came from the same countries as the cruise passengers, most hailed from the Global South. The simulacrum intersected with the cruise and island tourism industry, and additional socio-economic groupings emerged. Most of those representing the "outside face" of the cruise liner were European. The captain, the vice-captain, the staff along the reception desk, and the announcer who broadcasted the ship's daily events were of Italian origin. These employees were at the top of the service hierarchy. Entertainers were also largely of European origins, with a few exceptions. Waiters, cleaners, and cooks came from South and Southeast Asia.

The operation of the Armenian simulacrum depended upon the continuation of economic disparity in the global workforce. Also here, [Bosker's \(2013\)](#) text is a relevant reference. For her, the success of the simulated European and American copies in China demonstrated how they were (also) part of a larger consuming culture (105–7).



In addition, part of their appeal in China, she explained, was in their separation (105). The rigid boundaries that set these compounds apart helped “underscore the advantaged status of the homeowners within the elite and unattainable territories” (105). Likewise, AHC participants enjoyed the privileged status that distinguished them from non-AHC vacationers and cruise workers. The AHC simulacrum, then, was part of this larger consuming culture.

## The Diaspora And The Sub-Simulacrum

Despite expressions of consumption, class, and economic disparity, passengers like Nerses Artan of Los Angeles continued to identify the AHC as the closest thing to living and working in Armenia (Haroutunian 2009). “Most of us on the ship live in the Diaspora and do not have the experience of living and working in Armenia. The repeat booking by most on this trip is an encouraging success story. This ship should be renamed ‘Costa Armenia’” (Haroutunian 2009).

Nevertheless, they simultaneously emphasized characteristics of the Armenian diaspora at large and the importance of their individual American-Armenian communities in particular. For example, on one day of the cruise, the AHC served Armenian food, and did so to all those aboard, offering shish kebab, hommos (chick-pea dip with sesame seed oil), and tabbouleh (parsley and mint salad) (pers. comm., 2008).<sup>17</sup> These foods, of course, were not exclusive to Armenian communities. In fact, they revealed the Middle Eastern background of the cruise organizers. While the cruise may not have privileged Armenians from the Middle East, cruise organizers identified Armenian food based on their own experiences, ipso facto fashioning Armenian food in the likeness of their own backgrounds.

Armenians aboard this united “Costa Armenia” demonstrated an additional sense of pride for their “backgrounds” in their home communities and pledged to increase their participation in future iterations of the AHC. Likewise, the AHC became a place to demonstrate a national, but not only Armenian, sense of joy. Michelle Tokatlian vowed to “definitely promote this cruise with our friends and family in France, hoping to enlarge the ‘Fransa-Hyes’ [French-Armenians]” and Madlen Tehrian of Buenos Aires, Argentina, held “this year there were over 30 Armenians from Argentina on the ship, and I am sure this number will triple next year” (Haroutunian 2010).

However, such pledges were dependent on the procurement of a passport—and if not an American one, then one bearing a US visa. A US passport or visa permitted the disembarking at the various Caribbean islands, and not just the United States and its territories. In fact, the Armenian-American community wielded considerable power vis-à-vis the activities organized on the AHC. It was not merely that most AHC committee members and participants came from Armenian-American communities and thus imagined Armenia through their positioning, but rather, that the Armenian activities catered to them. For example, in 2017 and 2018, cruise organizers worked with Armenian health care professionals to offer accreditation for continuing medical education (Haroutunian 2017 and 2018). They established a medical committee, which



in turn invited five health care professionals who worked on increasing the standards of health care in Armenia. While the speakers used their on-site experiences in Armenia to discuss how to improve health care there, credits offered (10.0 Category 1 ACCME, CDE & CPE) demonstrated that it would be US accredited physicians and medical professionals who would benefit from this information (Haroutunian 2017 and 2018). In other words, aiding Armenia, which came up as a common theme amongst participants, served Armenian-Americans AHC cruise goers.

These accreditations were not the only evidence of extra services for Armenian-Americans. In promotional emails, AHC organizers reassured potential participants that they would not miss any American sports games; thus, all NFL games would be televised on multiple flat screen TVs at the sports bar on the ship (Haroutunian 2010). While Armenian activities changed yearly, these services were constant. At the same time, the watching of American sports teams collectively on TV became a general activity, as Armenians from all over the world partook in it during the simulacrum.

Other Armenian diasporic organizations, including the Armenian General Athletic Union (HMEM) and the Melankton & Haig Arslanian Djemaran, an Armenian primary and secondary school in Lebanon, have hosted reunions during the cruise (Khachatourian 2009). To be sure, some school reunions, most notably those from Lebanon, have a precedent of taking place far from the location of the school due to the Lebanese Civil War and the general dispersal of their alumni. Nevertheless, the decision by Djemaran attendees to meet aboard the simulacrum simultaneously marked it as a site of “double simulation,” (Ong and Jin 2017, 229–30) or what I call a sub-simulacrum.

In their study on the North Song Dynasty theme park, Ong and Jin (2017) argued that there are two levels of simulation: first, that of the actual riverscape in the iconic historical painting known as “The Riverscape on Qingming Festival,” and second, the simulation and manifestation of the painting landscape on the grounds of the theme park. School reunions usually combined memory of something “actual”—for example, the school—within the larger simulacrum—an Armenia that does not exist. In the case of the Djemaran, however, the school has since moved. During the Lebanese Civil War, it relocated from its original location in Zokak al-Blat, a neighborhood in Beirut, to the east of the city to Dbayeh, and then in 1986–1987 to Mezher. The buildings of the old Djemaran still stand but now house the Learner's World International School-City International School, a private international English-medium school.

The alumni who attended the AHC Djemaran reunion in 2009 had either emigrated from Lebanon prior to the relocation of the school or had graduated from it prior to its moving (pers. comm., 2009). Accordingly, the reunion reconstituted something that no longer existed—another simulacrum: the Djemaran located in Zokak al-Blat. This sub-simulacrum finds a parallel in Buchrieser's (2019) analysis of the “House for an Art Lover.” The drawing of this house was designed by Mackintosh (and his wife Margaret MacDonald), but it was never built, as he had failed to win the bid for the project in 1901. Instead, it was built in 1987, sixty years after his death in a different location than originally planned, with modifications to its design, and even with a different purpose, as a visitors' center (102–4). Similarly, the Djemaran “adapted to the conditions and requirements that change over time” by relocating to the east for



**Figure 2:** “Armenia” carved in ice at the buffet (open to all passengers) aboard the final night of the cruise in 2008.

(Source: Photo by author)

safety and renting out its premises to another school (Buchrieser 2019, 103; pers. comm., 2009). In the case of the alumni that attended the reunion in 2009, they came together forming a simulacrum of a school that was no longer there, with another school having long since taken its space. In addition, other AHC cruisers joined in on the reunion activity for fun, never having attended the school (Khachatourian 2009; pers. comm., 2009).

## The Simulacrum And The Real Armenia

The simulacrum that brought to life an Armenia that did not exist was nevertheless concerned with the real Armenia. In fact, participants connected their enjoyment with the AHC to bettering Armenia. Osep and Nadya Sarafian of Michigan stated, “One week on the Armenian Heritage Cruise not only strengthens the Armenian spirit in each guest, but also makes a great social contribution by bringing the Armenian Diaspora together and shaping its future, incorporating its role towards our homeland” (Haroutunian 2016). This sentiment was not just expressed by those living outside of Armenia. Lusine Gasparyan from Yerevan, Armenia, commented, “I am taking with me a feeling that the Armenians in the diaspora are united, which will help Armenia”

(Haroutunian 2010). For Gasparyan, her participation in the simulacrum, one without the more unfortunate realities of Armenia such as poverty and class stratification, served Armenia, where she actually lived.

While Gasparyan's sentiment is just one perspective from someone from Armenia taking part in its simulacrum, it does offer an additional way to understand the relationship between the simulacrum and the "original." In her work on architectural copies of Western cities in China, Bosker (2013, 23-4) discussed "Western anxiety" as a response to the emergence of simulacra in China, as the presence of these reproductions challenged both the distinction and meaning between authentic and fake. This dynamic was not quite the same in the case of the AHC and Armenia. Instead, the AHC adopted the wish of its participants to aid Armenia, despite never directly doing so. In addition, there was no evidence that Armenians from Armenia felt threatened or angered by the AHC, at least in the simulacrum. This may be related to a difference from Bosker's (105) findings, which explored how residents who lived in simulated geographies related to the perceived threats to their wealth from those who were not living in the simulacrum. In the case of China, those who have fear threats from those who have not. Inequality, competition, and jealousy have been fostered by the rapid rise enjoyed by some and the lack suffered by many (Bosker 2013, 105).

Like in other fantasies, however, tensions between the "haves" and "have-nots" did not exist in the AHC simulacrum. Rather than engage with the wealth disparity between the AHC and Armenia, or with how unattainable this cruise would be to the vast majority of Armenians in Armenia, AHC participants instead fantasized that their participation in the simulacrum helped the real Armenia or otherwise served the larger Armenian nation. Roza Harutyunyan of Yerevan, Armenia, stated, "We attended wonderful lectures, concerts and in the evening saw how Armenians from different countries dance. I was able to meet people who were on the cruise for the 20<sup>th</sup> time. Every activity on the AHC cruise supports with confidence that Armenians are alive and will continue to live and prosper" (Haroutunian 2017).

## Conclusion

The annual AHC did not aim to replicate a reality, namely the real Armenia. Rather, it created an exclusive and serviced tropical simulacrum in the middle of the Caribbean that catered to passengers with buying power and fantasies of an idealized, better Armenia. In this simulacrum, the Armenian language was used as a daily expression of entertainment and exclusion, and Armenians consumed the messaging with gratification. They emphasized and felt a duty to express themselves as Armenians aboard the ship, often at the expense of the non-Armenian population. The simulacra freed Armenians from a marginalization they claimed to experience in the communities where they regularly lived, even as these places were also a source of pride, had established Armenian institutions, or were even the real Armenia. With the holding of reunions aboard the AHC, such as that of the Djemaran school, the AHC also created a sub-simulacrum. While the AHC could be considered hedonistic, fun, and self-indulgent (pers. comm., 2021), these were also the characteristics desired of the simulacrum of Armenia.

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## Notes

- 1 The Eastern Prelacy is associated with the Catholicosate of Cilicia, or the Cilician See, located in Antelias, Lebanon. On the 2018 cruise, a bishop affiliated with the Echmiadzin See administered the daily mass. AHC committee chair Jim Kzirian commented that the committee wanted everyone to feel welcome, so they alternated see representation every year (Kzirian, email exchange, 25 February 2018).
- 2 The AHC schedule of events was also posted on <https://armenianheritagecruise.com/>, and publicized on social media websites (see <https://www.facebook.com/armenianheritagecruise> and <https://www.instagram.com/armenianheritagecruise/>).
- 3 Poverty rates in AHC’s ports of call varied (Jamaica in 2018 at 19%; the Bahamas in 2013 at 13%). Many stops such as Mexico (41.9% in 2018), Haiti (39% in 2018), and Puerto Rico (43.1% in 2019), had much higher poverty rates than Armenia. Nevertheless, the AHC is not a simulacrum of these countries but describes itself as a “Little Armenia.” (World Bank 2012, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, and 2021; The Borgen Project 2020; Haroutunian 2010).
- 4 As advertised for the last iteration of the AHC, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, for the 12-19 January 2020 cruise ([https://3ree0x1hi1b72y7e4k3siv24-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2019\\_01\\_Jan-25\\_Entertainers\\_OnBoard-Eblast\\_v3\\_1.jpg](https://3ree0x1hi1b72y7e4k3siv24-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2019_01_Jan-25_Entertainers_OnBoard-Eblast_v3_1.jpg)).
- 5 In 2007, AHC participants made up about half of the total cruise guests. This varied from year to year. It should be noted however that AHC participants never encompassed the numerical majority. Organizers were likewise aware that they would never fill the entirety of the boat (Kzirian, pers. comm.).
- 6 The *Hairenik* is also the official Armenian language weekly newspaper of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), published in Watertown, Massachusetts.
- 7 On how Armenian identity is performed and produced in diasporic communities, see for example Anny Bakalian, *Armenian-Americans: From Being to Feeling Armenian* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1993); Lalai Manjikian, “Collective Memory and Diasporic Articulations of Imagined Homes: Armenian Community Centres in Montréal” (PhD diss., McGill University, 2005); and Susan Pattie, *Faith in History: Armenians Rebuilding Community* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997). On how music became a space to practice post-Armenian Genocide identity, see Sylvia A. Alajaji, “Exilic Becomings: Post-Genocide Armenian Music in Lebanon,” *Ethnomusicology* 57, no. 2 (2013): 236–60. For an example of how such activities act as fundraisers, which have historically been used to support other Armenians in need, see Sevan Yousefian, “Picnics for Patriots: The Transnational Activism of an Armenian Hometown Association,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 34, no. 1 (2014): 31–52.

- 8 For an example of the instrumentalization of political differences by the Echmaddin and Cilician Sees, or Catholicosates in the United States, see Tsolin Nalbantian, “From Violence in New York to Salvation from Beirut: Armenian Intrasectarianism,” in *Practicing Sectarianism: Archival and Ethnographic Interventions on Lebanon* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022), 116–37. For more on the power struggles between them in the 1940–1960 period, see Tsolin Nalbantian, *Armenians Beyond Diaspora: Making Lebanon Their Own* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2020).
- 9 This was not limited to one Armenian political party. While there was no outright ban imposed, there have been moments where supporters and affiliates of rival Armenian political parties were prevented from attending church services (which included burial, baptismal, and marriage rights), such as in various cities on the East Coast and in the Midwest of the United States following the murder of Leon Tourian in 1932, and even neighborhoods, such as in Beirut in 1958 during and after the larger Lebanese conflict. For more on the lead-up, murder, and aftermath of Tourian’s death, see Nalbantian, “From Violence in New York to Salvation from Beirut.” For more on the 1958 intra-communal violence in Beirut and Armenians participation, see Nalbantian, *Armenians Beyond Diaspora*.
- 10 See for example Nalbantian, *Armenians Beyond Diaspora*, 202.
- 11 For more on this “parallel” historical development, see Panossian, 365–367.
- 12 Original emphasis.
- 13 Original emphasis.
- 14 The ANCA is the lobbying group affiliated with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF).
- 15 For innovative works on Armenians and the diaspora, and the relationships between diaspora and the “host society,” see Sylvia Alajaji, *Music and the Armenian Diaspora: Searching for Home in Exile* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); Talar Chahinian, Sossie Kasbarian, and Tsolin Nalbantian, eds., *The Armenian Diaspora and Stateless Power: Collective Identity in the Transnational 20th Century* (New York: Bloomsbury/IB Tauris, forthcoming 2023); Sossie Kasbarian, “The ‘Others’ Within: The Armenian Community in Cyprus,” in *Diasporas of the Modern Middle East: Contextualizing Community*, eds. Anthony Gorman and Sossie Kasbarian (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 241–73; Kasbarian, “Between Nationalist Absorption and Subsumption,” in *Cypriot Nationalisms in Context: History, Identity and Politics*, eds. Thekla Kristi and Nikos Christofis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 177–97; Susan Paul Pattie, *Faith in History: Armenians Rebuilding Community* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997); Susan Schwalgin, “Why Locality Matters: Diaspora Consciousness and Sedentarianness in the Armenian Diaspora in Greece,” in *Diaspora, Identity, and Religion: New Directions in Theory and Research*, eds. Waltraud Kokot, Khachig Tölölyan, and Carolin Alfonso (New York: Routledge, 2004), 72–92; Khachig Tölölyan, “Elites and Institutions in the Armenian Transnation,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 9, no.1 (2000): 107–36; Tölölyan, “Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 5, no. 1 (1996): 3–36; Tölölyan, “Exile Government in the Armenian Polity,” *Journal of Political Science* 18, no. 1 (1990): 124–147; Tölölyan, “The Role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in the Diaspora,” *Armenian Review* 41 (1988): 55–68. See also Vahe Sahakian, “Identity: Family, Language, and Culture are Defining Constituents of Hyphenated Armenianness,” in *Armenian Diaspora Public Opinion: Armenian Diaspora Survey 2019*, ed. Hratch Tchilingirian (London: Calouste Gulbenkian Institute, 2020), 11–16.
- 16 Emphasis added.
- 17 When asked how the ship’s kitchen staff knew how to make such dishes, the waitstaff explained that a group of Armenian women, solicited by the AHC committee, had volunteered to instruct them.

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