

# The Armenian Culture Kit

## 1. Research problematic & questions

Armenian culture flourished some 3000 years ago on the cusp of East and West in the Armenian Highlands. Armenia's geopolitical fault line has exposed Armenians to constant invasion, persecution and occupation. Ironically, these foreign invasions have contributed to forging a unique cultural identity (Bournoutian, 2006). While there are some discernible cultural similarities with neighboring Persia, Georgia and Turkey, Armenians have managed to create a sense of alterity and distinctiveness at the heart of their cultural identity. Armenian traditions, literature and language, mythology, history, geography, architecture and sculpture, food, music and dance, textiles and weaving are all encompassing dimensions of Armenian culture and provide an understanding of the Armenian people and the influences that have shaped their identity throughout history. In this research-creation project, I investigate the construction of Armenian cultural identity, both in its tangible and intangible forms. My interest here lies particularly in understanding the process of national and cultural identity creation and maintenance within the context of the Armenian diaspora. To this end, I attempt to ask research questions such as: What is the nation for diasporic Armenians? What constitutes Armenian culture? How can I mediate an Armenian cultural experience? What aspects of Armenian culture should be communicated in this experience? And how should Armenian culture be preserved for the future?

Initially inspired from NASA's Voyager Golden Records project and its curatorial representation of culture, *The Armenian Culture Kit* became the design space of investigation where I set out

to explore meaning-making processes that can embed Armenian symbolic thought, tangible poetics and sociocultural experience. The purpose of *The Armenian Culture Kit* is to encapsulate significant Armenian values, beliefs, behaviors, historical, social and cultural practices that can enable and reenact an Armenian cultural experience. Furthermore, I conceived of the kit as a medium for weaving various thematic threads inquiring how diasporic Armenians inhabit their *Armenianness* (Panossian, 2002). And I proposed to do that through a pastiche of Armenian literature (poems and proverbs), mythology (myth of origin, legends, gods and heroes), history, geography (symbolic places that carry notions of national identity, homeland and lost lands), food, music, dance, opera, ballet and art.

Within the speculative framework of this project, I wasn't interested in predicting alternative futures, but rather in facilitating a space for cultural discourse that can involve people to "participate actively" in the construction of Armenian cultural identity (Dunne & Raby, 2013). Thus, *The Armenian Culture Kit* is an open-source collaborative time capsule that embeds an assemblage of discursive elements of national identity and a sociomaterial understanding of Armenian cultural histories. Furthermore, the kit contains a series of informative cards, instructions, symbolic objects, a book, and a USB flash drive. This assortment was curated with multiple purposes in mind. On the one hand, it was to enable diasporic Armenians to revisit their past factually and objectively, and at the same time, familiarize non-Armenians with the little-known history of an ancient people scattered around the world (Bournoutian, 2006). On the other hand, *The Armenian Culture Kit* is a means to document collective cultural memoirs and diverse moments in history by juxtaposing factual narratives with physical objects to instigate prevalent Armenian beliefs, memories and practices.

I am not assuming that, in the present, or in the future, Armenian cultural histories can be replicated accurately. Neither am I suggesting to encode Armenian cultural data for "socially

constructive imaginary futures" à la Dunne and Raby (Dunne & Raby, 2013). Alternatively, I am operating from a standpoint which considers national and cultural identity always "in flux, dynamic and evolving" as a "recurrent activity" that demands constant negotiation, interpretation, rediscovery and reconstruction of meaning (Panossian, 2002). Similar to Fluxus boxes, the kit gives those who come across it, the possibility to become author-participants. The loose instructions encourage people to intervene, build on, reassemble, and conversely to reconfigure partially or entirely as they see fit.

## 2. *Armenian matters of concern*

Without having a precise conception of the eventual form the kit would take, at a first stance, I embarked on a historical research to inquire into "what is the nation for diasporic Armenians? And what constitutes Armenian culture?" Evidently, the answers to these questions lie in the relationship of modern diasporic Armenian nationhood to its past (Panossian, 2002). Departing from commonly held views, I set out to debunk the web of *matters of fact* and *matters of concern* enveloping the "thinginess" of Armenian national and cultural identity (Latour, 2004). As per Latour's suggestion, I turned to Sloterdijk and adopted him as my philosopher to decipher the hermeneutics of Armenian national and cultural identity formation (Latour, 2008). As far as I can tell, the question "What is the nation for diasporic Armenians" is discerningly a spherological concern. According to Sloterdijk, "A sphere is 'a place of strong relationships' where one establishes a 'psychical relation of reciprocal lodging' (*S III*, p302) with people and objects nearby" (Janicka, 2016). Through spheres, human beings are connected to their surrounding and immunize themselves with meaning-making processes to form unique beliefs and habits that they can mobilize around as a national collective. These spheres are not only

material, physical and corporeal, but also psychological, symbolic and ritualistic. As such, spheres facilitate the creation of distinctiveness in identity formation.

In the article "The past as nation: three dimensions of Armenian identity," Panossian posits that "there is not a magic moment when a collective becomes a nation." Moreover, there is no scientific method for defining national identity (Panossian, 2002). Therefore, he contrasts and compares several definitions and approaches of identity formulation from various scholars. In effect, there are multiple conspicuous spheres and bubbles in the process of national identity construction. In this research-creation project, I focused on three main spheres. The first sphere is constructed with landscapes of symbolic significance, myths of origin, legendary heroes and traditions that are passed on from one generation to another as cultural dimensions and identity markers (Smith, 1999). The second sphere is the envelope of community belonging; the space in which people organize themselves into a national collective. And finally, the third sphere consists of sociocultural structures and practices that shape the nation's collective understanding of itself and of its past (Smith, 1999). While investigating deeper into the multiple bubbles that lie within each one of these spheres, I realized that Sloterdijk's spherological reasoning was leading me further into an ecological understanding of culture (Ganz, 2012). As a result, I was determined to gather patterns of knowledge that capture as Bateson puts it best, "the stuff of culture, or the bits of culture, or the feel of culture" (Bateson, 1987).

Contrary to my interest, Bateson was adamant on providing a "scientific analysis" of this feel, whereas I was more motivated to achieve a "literary or artistic representation" (Bateson, 1987). Yet Bateson admits to his own consternation while studying native cultures in New Guinea. In his article "Experiments in thinking about observed ethnological material"; Bateson states: "I

complained of the hopelessness of putting any sort of salt on the tail of such an imponderable concept as the 'feel' of culture."

Clearly, there were no straightforward paths or methods here. The historical research felt like a labyrinth, albeit pleasant; but the deeper I navigated, the more uncharted territories, the more the "stuff" of culture was getting opaque. Not only-but also, time was the most stressful factor pressing. What could I realistically accomplish in this time frame that can efficiently tackle my research questions? Moreover, the speculative dictate of this project was adding nebulous layers of complexity to the existing difficult task. The complication here was twofold. First, being of Armenian origin was like a double-edged sword or perhaps, more like a pendulum swaying from forced objectivity to emotional subjectivity. My initial desire for wanting to speculate potential futures for Armenian cultural identity was to veer my own post-Genocide diasporic Armenian self-definition away from the endemic survival mentality. Finding what aspects of the culture should be preserved was to fuel the formulation of more modern definitions of *Armenianness*. Nevertheless, here I was, confronting myself in a situation where I had to question, deconstruct and reimagine my own cultural identity. I struggled with being tiresomely apprehensive when it came to speculation. Every time, I was to project in the future, I felt in the shadow of unresolved history and intuitively plunged back into historical research. I wondered if some notions of the glorious past, now forgotten in the pages of history, could be futurized through speculation. Second, I was having trouble framing my "cone of preferred futures" (Dunne & Raby, 2013) and placing my project in its correspondent speculative spectrum. Was I to "unsettle the present" by offering disruptive possibilities? What kind of "practical fictions" could be useful in creating an Armenian cultural experience? How could I instigate critical reflection that can allow people to question the current political ideologies and sociocultural establishment? Even though Dunne and Raby provided a methodological

roadmap of sorts, designing for unreality still felt unsettling. Moreover, in my understanding, the line between what makes a speculative prop successful or totally absurd was fuzzy. I was persistently questioning and doubting every idea I had, searching critically for holes and contradictions. There was a constant designerly tension between ideas in pure form and how they could physically and realistically be manifested. What was the “thing” supposed to be after all? How could it purposefully capture the “feel” of Armenian culture?

### 3. *Hishatakaran*

In parallel with the constant questioning, throughout my readings, I had stumbled upon Guerigian’s article “Eternalizing a Nation: Armenian *Hishatakarans* in the seventeenth century”. As I was pondering about how Armenian culture should be preserved for the future, Guerigian was reflecting on how Armenians were able to preserve their cultural identity so far, while being dispersed without a nation. The *Hishatakaran* literally translated from Armenian as memoir or memorial, was a historical manuscript and qualified as a literary genre dating back from the 5th century (Guerigian, 2010). Furthermore, it was a cultural preservation tool that documented individual and local histories, sociopolitical events along with eyewitness accounts and religious text to record national memories. *Hishatakarans* were written with the purpose of preserving Armenian cultural identity for the future. In fact, the *Hishatakaran* was reflective of Armenians’ temporal self-perceptions. Similar to colophons, its authors not only included the date and place of production, but also inscribed their personal interpretations and experiences of these historical events (Guerigian, 2010).

Greatly inspired from how *Hishatakarans* transcribed Armenian identity for the future, I decided to design a book that would mediate different aspects of Armenian symbolic thought. The book was conceived to be an integral part of the kit that disseminates a linguistic materialization of Armenian cultural histories. In that regard, it was an interesting medium through which I could unravel the construction of Armenian cultural identity, histories and practices through textual and visual storytelling. I wasn't interested in replicating the exact sequence of historical events, rather by adopting a nonlinear and non-chronological structure, oscillating between the factual and anecdotal, my intention was to tell national and personal stories as a poeticized interpretation of Armenian culture told by an Armenian. At this stage, I was highly focused on synthesizing the knowledge gathered insofar. My objective was to compartmentalize aspects of Armenian cultural histories to their respective spheres and bubbles. Furthermore, the logical and visual structure was to invite the reader to peel off envelope by envelope, the developing meaning of diasporic *Armenianness* through remembrance of national memories, values and beliefs.

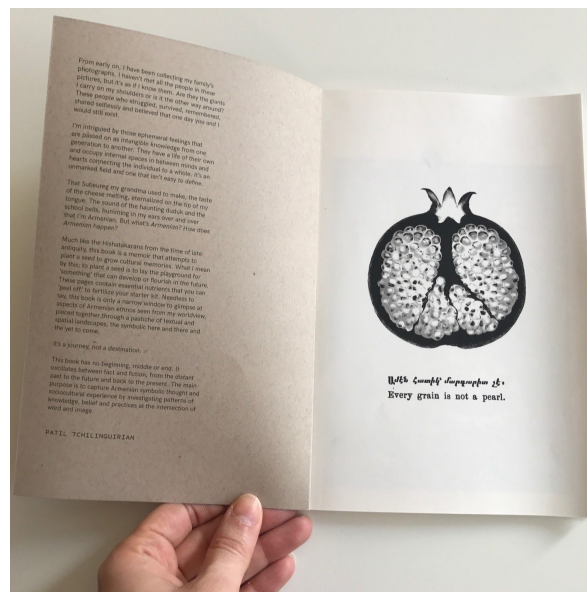
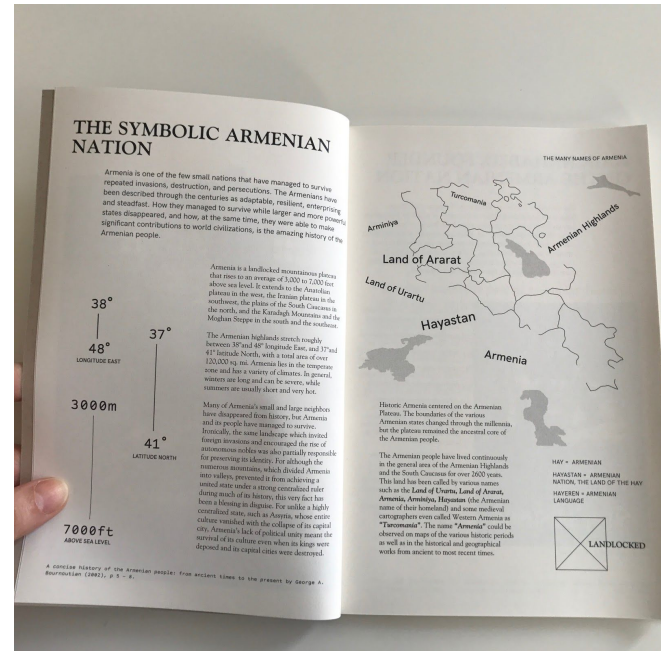
At a first stance, the book situated the symbolic Armenian nation spatially and contextually within a diasporic frame of mind. Next, it explored the prevalent Armenian myths of origin from both mythological and biblical perspectives. The pages were infused with Armenian proverbs, poems and quotes from various scholars to add an additional poetic layer adjacent to the factual and analytical texts. Furthermore, a photographic thread was weaved into the pages providing visual memoirs of people, landscapes and cultural practices from different eras. Some of these photographs were pictures of my family that I had been collecting throughout the years. Others were pictures I had photographed during several trips to Armenia. I wanted the book to exhume a certain honesty, authenticity and aliveness. Flipping through the pages,

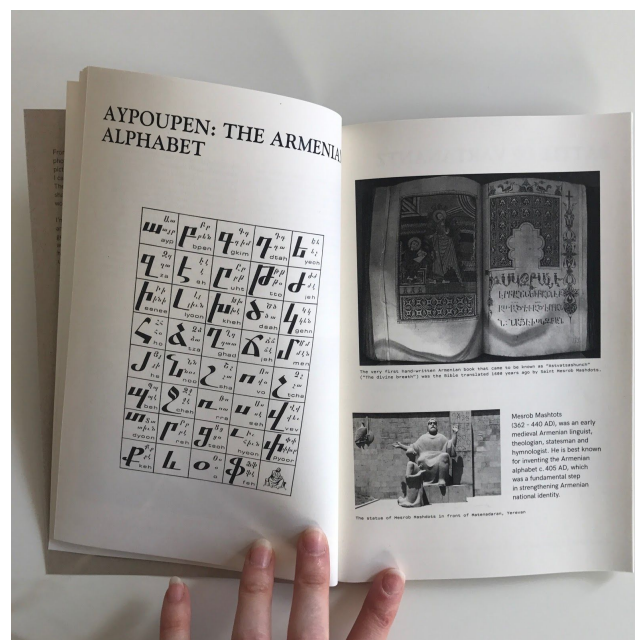
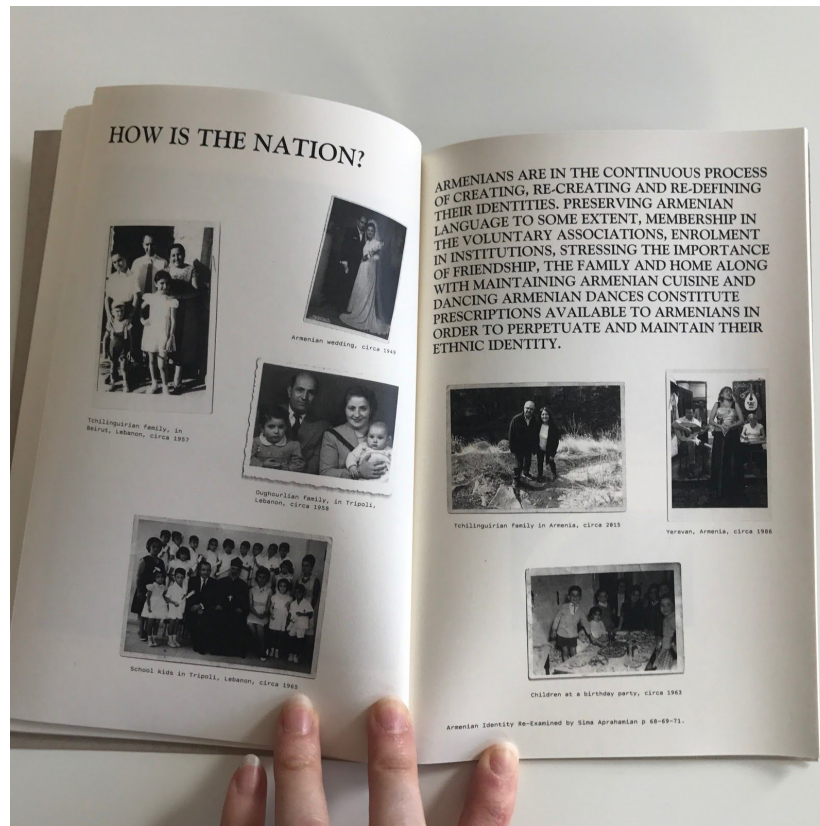
my goal was to create a cultural journey where one can trace the origin, evolution and manifestation of the Armenian people and get an overall informed “feel” of their culture.

The decision to use these personal photographs was a defining moment. It clearly stated how I had chosen to be involved and began to shape my direct implication as a researcher-designer within the project. Early on, I decided the book was going to be monochromatic. Through the representation of one color as one point of view, a monochromatic rendering was to accentuate my personal voice. I believed it was rather important to emphasize that the book presented an assemblage of discursive narratives of *Armenianness* seen from my own lens and diasporic worldview. It was impossible to erase myself completely and bias was unavoidable. Therefore, I decided to play a game of hide and seek, moving from the background to the foreground back and forth, and highlighting these shifts of position and different modes of production in a designerly way. I strived to be reflexive and aware of how I was switching from the researcher role to the designer role. As a researcher, I wanted to avoid fetishizing history, all the while striving to pursue an objectivity that was impossible to achieve. It was imperative not to distort historical data or other people’s writing. In addition, I was adamant on organizing the content in a way that embodies the adopted spherological theoretical framework. As a designer, I desired to paint the “feel” of the culture with my own brush. However, it was very important to remain discreet. The organization of the literary excerpts with their associated images, the choice of typefaces down to the minute detail of all aspects of the editorial layout were considerate of this necessary subtlety to create this intimate linguistic experience. The importance here was for the content to jump out flawlessly with natural accessibility without being overshadowed by excess graphic elements. What aspects of Armenian culture was I



communicating? Why and how? Those were the research questions I was tackling between the lines at this stage of the project.





#### 4. *Auto-ethnographic diary*

In parallel with my historical research, I started an auto-ethnographic diary. It was a great space where I can safely question my subjective curatorial approaches and creative output. I was taking notes of my mental and creative processes, jotting down all my thoughts and dilemmas. At the same time, I was conducting informal skype interviews with family members and friends to find out how they experience their cultural identities and what they relate to the most. Furthermore, I was inspecting how I was studying Armenian culture both as a researcher and as a fellow Armenian. However, I somewhat felt isolated in my own thoughts. Too much reflection was clouding my intuitive vision and I couldn't discern the value of what I was making. I tried taking some distance by talking to colleagues, so I understand if what I was trying to communicate was getting across without any clarifications needed. Most of my confusion was coming from the fact that I wasn't following a classical speculative trajectory.

On one hand, print as a chosen matter was counter-intuitive for a time capsule. On the other hand, the book felt like another rabbit hole. Here, I was already at 58 pages and I realized it was impossible to capture every aspect of *Armenianness*. Therefore, it was important to know when to stop and how to put constructive creative constraints. The crux here lied in methods of curation and representation of content. It was clear, I couldn't synthesize everything but I could choose to reveal certain aspects in ways that would still be capable of permeating a cultural feeling. In this instance, it was equally important to explore sociomaterial prototypes in order to offer a more holistic cultural experience. I envisioned the kit to have several components that would collectively make different arguments and prompt a hands-on understanding of different manifestations of Armenian cultural identity and histories. In so doing, *the Armenian*

*culture kit* would present interpretations accessible to people for comprehension and reenactment with some sense of self-reflexivity and historical symbolism.

#### ETHNOGRAPHIC DIARY

16.11.17

Today, it feels like "things" in my head are finally being sifted. Different ideas are popping up constantly making new connections with previous ones, trying to find a connecting thread and build on top of each other. That's the bigger picture coming together bit by bit. But, when I work on the bits and pieces, I get easily lost in details. I feel overwhelmed with content. Rabbit hole of research. Just absorbing so much content, I even forget what I was looking for or even thinking about in the first place. I start thinking about curation, then I feel so tired. I need to go back to pen and paper. Lay it all out again. What do I want to convey? Restlessly, I start envisioning different editorial possibilities of the different booklets. Need to find the right restrictions and constraints. Setting boundaries will make things finally flow!

17.11.17

Rabbit hole of research continues. Looking at different sources of information and gathering accompanying visual imagery. Getting lost and forgetting the main vision but then realizing how the primary vision is constantly being shaped by new findings. No clear picture yet. Wondering if I should consolidate all booklets in one book instead.

18.11.17

Decision made: it will be a book!

I needed to start visually mapping out the idea of this book. So, I put some graphic constraints. The book will be postcard size and mostly monochromatic. It will have no beginning nor end, it's a journey that goes back and forth in time while it disseminates information at the intersection of word and image that will instill a certain cultural experience. I started a wireframe in Indesign just to see my thoughts on "paper". I like where am going with this, I need to build on this further now!

19.11.17

Finally put down an architectural structure for the content.

21.11.17

Just found out my document was the wrong size. Major setback. Have to redesign so everything fits again.... ahhhhh!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

30.11.17

I guess I think the project is pulled in so many different directions, it's lacking a strong conceptual backbone. The proposal suggested that it would be some sort of time capsule yet it was called a cultural kit that would represent different Armenian cultural expressions such as music, history, mythology, literature etc. So the confusion was there from the start, I didn't really think of this from a futuristic perspective when it came to the format. I drowned in historical research and specifically in understanding the construction of Armenian identity. I wanted to know what does it mean to be culturally Armenian? How have we practiced

#### Glimpses of my ethnographic diary

## 5. Sociomaterial prototyping

While designing the book, I decided that I wanted to consolidate all the components of the kit in a wooden box. By now, my motivation was to create a cultural experience for my peers in class, rather than presenting an abstract speculative digital prototype. After completion of the book, I was highly focused on how I could convey a sociomaterial understanding of cultural identity through physical props. I intended to have a tangible kit that would translate tacit knowledge of Armenian cultural histories into a tangible experience, without making any accurate or cliché historical claims. Furthermore, the physical props were designed as a compilation of suggested symbolic and practical tools that could enact an Armenian cultural experience. All the while, I was aware that any kind of depiction or representation I would choose would still contain “deliberate omissions, purposeful obfuscations, or accidental occlusions” (Sayers, 2015). The opposite was also equally true; whatever inclusions, enthusiastic descriptions or intended magnifications I would adopt would be critical in shaping *the Armenian Culture Kit*. However, I intended these absences or presences to act as meaning-making processes that personalize the kit instead. At the same time, these nuances were to grant a certain kind of agency to others to fill in the existing gaps in their own ways.

Discovering De Landa’s book “1000 years of nonlinear history” was instrumental to this particular phase of the project. De Landa believed that different stages of history coexisted and interacted with one another as materials that would form accumulations and stratifications. Furthermore, DeLanda viewed history and this process of stratification from geological, biological and linguistic perspectives, where each strata coexists and interacts with the other by self-organizing and homogenization processes at the same time. I found refuge in DeLanda’s theoretical understanding of nonlinear history. Interestingly enough, even before reading



DeLanda, I had already a linguistic, geological and biological planned approach to populate the kit. Yet, I didn't know how to articulate these ideas conceptually. Reading DeLanda gave me the theoretical justification necessary to move ahead with the conceptual aspect of the sociomaterial prototyping. Parallel to my previous linguistic representation materialized in the book, now my focus was to incorporate the geological and biological aspects of Armenian culture.



*Geological strata:*

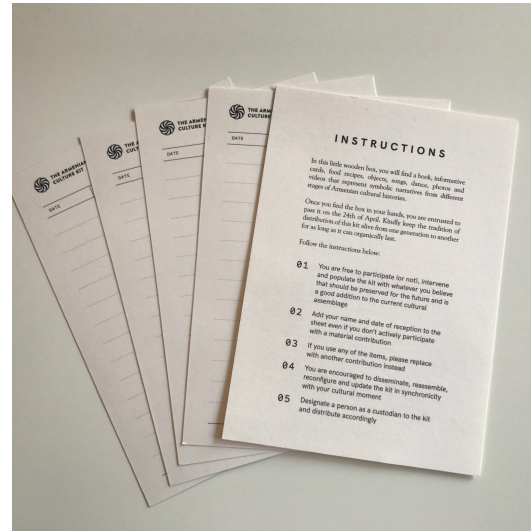
Diasporic Armenians have a fleeting relationship to present-day Armenia. Armenians are genetically wired to hang on to a symbolic nation in their psyche or what they envision as the imagined *Homeland* regardless of the legally constituted modern day country of Armenia. There is a strong confluence between the modern *Homeland* and *Lost Lands* of post-1915 Genocide. This was a point I had explored in the book. However, I believed it was such a detrimental aspect of *Armenianness*, highly anchored in diasporic cultural identity that it was important to physically represent this palpable dissociation. Hence, I went around Montreal and looked for the perfect stones that could add a geological dimension to Armenian cultural

histories. These stones were to carry matter and meaning under dispute, charged with historical interpretations with the ability to negotiate any meaning associated.

*Biological strata:*

An essential part of experiencing the kit was the private, intimate act of opening the box, examining the different items within, all the while being guided with brief instructions. My initial proposal stated the idea of a “starter kit”. This was a vague concept but it was anchored in my desire to “start” a makeshift cultural experience. Most of the elements in the kit were supposed to be fertilizers to boost the blossoming of Armenian symbolic thought and sociocultural experience. I must note here that all my initial ideas, visions and intuitions somehow found a way to manifest themselves whether independently or by evolving into other ideas and coexisted together as different layers accumulated to produce this cultural experience. Otherwise, the pomegranate seeds constituted the symbolic biological strata that would germinate the Armenian spirit. Furthermore, the spices and recipes were tools to reproduce specific Armenian tastes and flavors. Music, dance and art although limited in disposition, were accommodated in the kit to represent Armenian cultural expressions.







## 6. Conclusion

*The Armenian Culture Kit* was my first research-creation project. While writing this paper, I've come to the realization that the more I write, the more there are things to write about. And just the way, I had to stop populating the kit at some point, I must put an end to this paper.

I tried my best to give an honest account of my creative process, struggles and tensions, as well as my intentions and motivations. I sincerely enjoyed observing myself throughout the duration of this project as both a researcher and a designer and noted how differently I operated. In hindsight, it would have been equally interesting to focus on one aspect of Armenian cultural identity and design a physical speculative prop accordingly. However, every time I attempted to design speculative narratives and infographic timelines to be included in the kit, I quickly abandoned those possibilities. I was pulled by the need to cover a repertoire of Armenian cultural histories as wide as possible. Therefore, I resorted to incorporate speculation with my style of curation rather than in the actual designed outputs.

I learned that information is heavily embedded in serving culture and integral to any form of cultural transmission. However, the true value lies in the process of selecting, filtering, representing and arranging in ways that make any kind of information accessible. As such, *The Armenian Culture Kit* is a vessel that channels cultural information at the intersection of matter and meaning demanding constant negotiation, interpretation and rediscovery. Furthermore, I will continue developing these research questions to revisit Armenian cultural histories throughout my masters program and bridge them with wearable technologies to create new possibilities of dissemination. Through my research, I hope to produce translatable epistemologies for cultural preservation that can be in return applicable to other cultures. In

closing, I would like to recite a traditional ending to Armenian fairy tales: “Three pomegranates fell from heaven: one for the storyteller, one for the listener, and one for the whole world”.

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