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Ethnographic Storytelling:

Sharing an Armenian Tradition through Collaborative Digital Media

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Abstract

This research investigates the potential of ethnography to generate knowledge informed by community-centered storytelling and participation. Collaborative ethnographic methods are used to create a 25-minute multimedia video of the *Madagh*, an Armenian cultural tradition in Racine, Wisconsin. The purpose of this project is to utilize multi-media formats—a short video, website, and social media platforms—as strategies to build a collaborative process that democratizes fieldwork. Visual forms of representation are used to produce media content that will sustain and clarify cultural values and practices and foster appreciation and engagement across audiences. This research follows two threads: the first explores how Armenian identity and belonging are conceptualized and expressed by Racine, Wisconsin's diasporic Armenian community through the *Madagh* tradition in an ethnographic video. The second examines whether visual ethnography furthers the values and methodology of collaborative ethnography. This project asserts that when used in conjunction, both collaborative visual and written ethnography may be used to further an ambitious goal: to serve a practical purpose to benefit the community while also increasing the accessibility of ethnographic scholarship to widen the scope of discourse and expand contributions to anthropological thought.

Key Words: Collaborative ethnography, visual ethnography, Armenian, tradition, identity

Introduction

At the outset of this project, I imagined that my “anthropological point” to emerge organically through the collaborative input of the community in deciding the narrative of the video. I imagined--even expected--for people to contest and assert what they felt the story of the *Madagh* tradition, and their community should be. Like collaborative ethnographers before me, I felt I could help facilitate those discussions with the appropriate anthropological theories and in a reciprocal process of knowledge-sharing bring about new insights and deeper questions. This form of participation did not occur. I was left with the responsibility to decide how to tell the story with the alternative mode of collaboration offered by the community, namely, their narratives and media contributions. To craft the video, I identified the five major themes across the interviews and used their voices, stories, and images alongside my own documentation to convey why this tradition is so beloved. At first glance by an anthropologist, this video does not, perhaps, include the rigorous application of anthropological critique and theory expected of ethnographic fieldwork. It is documentary in style and largely promotional, putting the community and the *Madagh* tradition in a positive light as reflected in their narratives. This makes the video quite useful and meaningful for the community, who is using it to bring more appreciation and awareness to their small Armenian community in Wisconsin. It does not however, get at the reasons behind those themes, and explore why those were the dominant narratives. I did not want to dominate the video with an overt anthropological perspective that was not the product of community-centered discussion which also motivated my decision to leave myself out of the video. However, this paper is an opportunity to discuss why people talked about the picnic with such nostalgia and sentimentality and what that means to broader conceptions of diasporic Armenian-American identity. Additionally, in conjunction with the

video, this paper may also encourage that discussion with the community that did not occur at the beginning of this project. By reading my analysis in comparison to the video, the collaborators can see and hear themselves in relation to my observations. For anthropologists or a broader public audience, the video conveys the significance and meaning of this tradition to this Armenian community. To borrow the old maxim, these two products in conjunction can render “the strange familiar and the unfamiliar strange.” The benefit of collaborative visual ethnography is that it increases the accessibility and engagement across audiences while contributing ethnographic insight to the discipline as well as practically serving the community collaborators.

The Story of this Thesis

In combining collaborative visual ethnography with the *Madagh* Armenian picnic, I brought together scholarly and self-reflexive questions. This project has been a unique opportunity to explore some of the nuances of a collaborative project when conducted within my own cultural community. My notions of collaboration and what collaboration looked like were shaped by previous ethnographic scholarship and theory. This project has expanded my initial presumptions about collaboration. My orientation towards co-authorship methodology of the video followed a feminist decolonizing approach to collaborative ethnography. This was contradicted by people’s alternative forms of collaboration that were nonetheless equally important in defining this project. This included offering home video footage recorded on 8mm reels of film, family photographs, personal ephemera, even a scholarship from the community chapter of the Armenian Relief Society. The product of this work has been defined by the process. By using the interviews and media provided by collaborators and coding, analyzing, and organizing, the final

video allowed people to see and hear their perspectives and values reflected back to them.

Ethnography can be used to help tell a story when people are uncertain or hesitant to tell it themselves. This process has equally impacted my personal understanding and experience, and I have gained a deeper sense of this tradition, this Armenian community, and my place within it.

This paper is guided by three essential questions: “Why is collaboration important?” which covers my theoretical orientations and methods; “What form did collaboration ultimately take in this project?” discussing how collaboration actually transpired and the ethnographic process and questions that arose from crafting the video; And finally, “So what?” where I reflect on the impact and insights resulting from this work.

This thesis emerged from the amalgamation of experiences throughout my undergraduate career. My anthropology classes have debated the implications and impact of ethnographic scholarship, which often does not make it back to the communities being studied, or if it does, is so full of academic jargon that it loses its practical relevance. Meanwhile, my environmental studies classes advocated for participatory action research models. I debated how narrative voice influenced people’s experience of a story in an English honors class, “Crafting Point of View,” and considered the question of truth in storytelling and how to represent and convey experience. Outside of the classroom, I attended conferences such as the Allied Media Conference, American Folklore Society General Meeting, “Why Do Stories Matter?” Conference by the Vermont Humanities Council, Vermont Story Lab Conference at Bread Loaf, and others, where I talked to ethnographers, media-makers, scholars, and community collaborators grappling with issues of representation, equity, and collaboration in their work.

I was also engaged in a series of internships including the Vermont Folklife Center, an experience that provided unexpected insight into the relationship between anthropology and storytelling. I worked on their Apprenticeship Program, interviewing, filming and editing video and audio footage create concise, five-minute videos to convey the cultural significance master artists and apprentices engaged in a local art form. I was thrilled and intimidated. Thrilled, because this was exactly the kind of work that felt meaningful, and intimidated, because *what if I told the story wrong?* Length, pacing, transitions, font style, media quality were some of the surface-level considerations that went into video editing. But more important was the self-scrutiny of my decisions on what parts of an interview to include and exclude, how to make the story understandable to a wider audience who was not already familiar with the culture. Through the process of creating a video about Bhutanese-Nepali dance group, I saw firsthand the impact that documentation of people's stories symbolizes a kind of support, that, to use the words of one Bhutanese-Nepali immigrant, gives people the "courage" to honor and celebrate their culture with confidence and pride. That experience showed me how storytelling occurs at both ends on the part of the researcher and the co-participants. Anthropologists tell stories to make their "point," to explain and describe cultural processes, but it is important to recognize that the "point" is embedded in the stories themselves.

Together, these classroom, extracurricular, and professional development opportunities prompted the idea for this project. I was swept up in ideas of the power of storytelling and wanted to use methods that democratized ethnographic research and the story I was going to create. My

excitement was exacerbated by the chance to apply an ethnographic lens to my own culture and peruse a project with the potential to benefit a community close to my heart.

Positionality

I have grown up with annual summer trips to Racine, Wisconsin, a small post-industrial city that is a 35-minute drive from Milwaukee. Since childhood, I looked forward to a week filled with cousins on the beach of Lake Michigan, Kewpees hamburgers, Fourth of July fireworks at Uncle Pete's house, frozen custard, and best of all, the *Madagh* Armenian picnic. This week has a comforting predictability to it all. The planning for the trip is minimal and my family has followed the same pattern for so long that we already know how the week will play out. Always the last Sunday of June, the *Madagh* is the heart of this trip. I have never felt more "Armenian" than during this time. It is the only time I am ever called my full name, Talar, rather than Tali, it is the only time I hear Armenian being spoken, participate in Armenian dancing and eat Armenian food. Growing up in Northern California and Vermont, I have never lived in an Armenian community. I was never sent to Camp Haiastan or Camp Nubar with my cousins, never went to Armenian Youth Federation (AYF) Olympics, never attended an Armenian Apostolic church or learned to speak the language. I have struggled to answer the question, "What does it mean to be Armenian?" but nevertheless, feel like Armenian is a central part of my identity. My college application essay narrated my experience of the *Madagh*, volunteering at the kebab tent and the sharp reprimands of the elder Armenian women working alongside me. Spotting a last name ending in "ian" instantly prompts the Armenian question and delight in sharing that connection. This thesis is part of my exploration into the meaning and complexities of cultural heritage as it is experienced and enacted by Armenian-Americans. It seemed a natural

site to pursue my inclination towards collaborative fieldwork to benefit a community I care about.

An advantage having attended 20 of Racine's annual *Madaghs* over the course of my life was that I entered this project with a familiarity of the participants, schedule of events, and the work involved with organizing the picnic. However, a question I posed to myself at the outset of this project was whether I was "Armenian enough" to have the authority to create a video representing the *Madagh* tradition. This question has become enmeshed throughout this project. Did I have enough understanding of Armenian history? Of the stories of genocide, trauma, and diaspora that inevitably have shaped the existence of Racine's Armenian community? To what extent do I fully understand the nuances of language and other cultural specificities? Regardless of my participation in the *Madagh* over the years and personal connection to Racine, my previous experience within the community was limited to one unusual week out of the year. The picnic, though significant, was a narrow slice of the overall life of the St. Hagop Armenian community.

I expected the tension between navigating my insider/outsider role would inevitably influence the *Madagh* video. Rather than avoid that tension, I attempted to use it to inform how I crafted the video providing collaborators with the chance to respond to my interpretations. I have tried to use my position as an outsider in conjunction with the insider perspective of the community to generate holistic analysis of the video and produce a richer and more meaningful research process. The *Madagh* is also an entryway for collaborators to reflect on cultural changes and innovations, values, and what it means to "be Armenian." I entered this project with an idea of

what facets of this tradition were important to highlight, however, I wanted the video's story to be guided by collaborators. The *Madagh* covers a range of cultural attributes: religion, food, music, dance and language are all prevalent aspects of this tradition. In having agency in crafting the video, participants are empowered to articulate, control and actualize their sense of being. Guided by Geertz's interpretive research model (1973), I sought to acknowledge the subjectivity of experience and knowledge production and better it by explicitly including the insight of collaborators. This paper examines the extent these methods can be used to democratize fieldwork to be practically utilized to the self-determined benefit of the community and generate new questions and enhance the insights of research.

Although I do not have an objective method to evaluate my Armenian-ness, my intent and approach are genuine. The benefit of having a pre-existing connection to the Racine community is what has made this project possible. I could not have attempted a project within the timeline of an undergraduate thesis that is so rooted in collaboration in a context without the longstanding relationships of a community. I entered this work as a student excited to learn more from this community about our shared cultural heritage. The goal of my collaborative methods was to generate a reciprocal learning environment. As an ethnographer, I bring to the table an anthropological perspective and insight from the theories of the discipline. The collaborators contribute equally valuable interpretations of these analyses so that both of us are exposed to new ideas and questions that deepen our learning.

The History of Armenians in Racine

Racine, Wisconsin is a small city in the very southeast corner of the state on the shores of Lake Michigan. It has a long industrial history and has headquartered companies such as J. I. Case, Belle City Malleable Iron Company and Walker Manufacturing Company (Western Historical Company, 1879). These industries attracted many immigrants to Racine with the promise of jobs and money to send home to their families. In addition to the Danes, Germans, and Czechs, Armenians began settling in Racine as early as the late 1800s. Young Armenian men in their late teens and early twenties came from the Kharpert province in the present-day Anatolia region of Turkey to work in the factories (Racine Heritage Museum, "Passage from Armenia to State Street"). Their original intention was to one day return to their families in Armenia once their savings allowed them to do so. However, the 1915-1923 Armenian Genocide and the murder of 1.5 million Armenians effectively prevented their return home.

The Genocide generated a mass diaspora out of Armenia and families, many from the villages of Tomarza and Jujun in the Anatolia region of present-day Turkey, who found their way to Racine to connect with their relatives already working there (1977, Kamakian). From the United States, they supported relief fund efforts for their country or else enlisted and fought with the Americans in Europe (Savagian, *Encyclopedia of Milwaukee*). Some newcomers brought with them brides for the men of Racine while others temporarily returned to bring young women orphaned and without families to marry and live in Racine. The baby boom of the 1920s corresponded with this influx of Armenians and the population continued to increase (Savagian, *Encyclopedia of Milwaukee*).

Racine's Armenian community originally clustered in and around the State Street neighborhood. Some of the first Armenian-run stores established in this area were the Armaganian/Dadian and the Bornanian Grocery Stores. Families populated the surrounding Superior, Huron, LaSalle, Liberty, West, and Geneva streets. Armenian-owned stores expanded to include shoe repair shops, barbershops, and dry cleaners. Gulbank Gulbankian created the first Armenian attorney's office on Main Street which was an assent to Armenians not yet fluent in English who needed legal representation. An Armenian clubhouse held Armenian language classes in a rented room above the Chinese laundry shop. The coffee house on Douglas and State Street, and the *Marzbed* Clubhouse on LaSalle Street attracted Armenian men who would gather to play *karasoon*¹ and *tavlou*² (Racine Heritage Museum "Racine's Armenian-American Community").

Religious organizations have played a significant role in Racine's Armenian community and Racine currently has two Armenian churches: the St. Hagop Armenian Apostolic Church and St. Mesrob Armenian Apostolic Church. Before either organization was formally established, vesper services were held as early as 1914 by an Armenian priest at Wergeland Hall at 1343 State Street. The St. Hagop congregation was formally founded 24 years later in 1938. Members of the *Marzbed* organization began the process of establishing a second church four years earlier in 1934, electing a board of trustees that spent the next two years fundraising. The *Marzbed* organization bought and managed the church property so that St. Hagop's would remain private and could be independently managed by the Racine community rather than the national church prelacy. In 1937, the committee put a deposit towards a site on 933 LaSalle street. That same

¹ An Armenian card game, similar to pinochle, which literally translates to 40. The origins of the game are uncertain, but it is believed to have originated from the Armenians who came from Tomarza.

² Armenian word for the board game, backgammon

year, the J. I. Case Company that employed many of Racine's Armenians, put Wergeland Hall up for sale. Three of these men approached the president of J. I. Case, Mr. J.J. Biggert, and asked him to donate the hall for an Armenian Church. Mr. Biggert agreed, and plans were made to transport Wegeland Hall from its J. I. Case Office location to LaSalle Street next to the *Marzabed* club. By 1938, the church was completed and consecrated on October 16th. For the next 25 years, LaSalle was home to St. Hagop until investigations were started to once again in 1968 relocated to a larger location. Eventually, 10 acres were purchased at 4100 Newman Road in Racine, and the new building was finished in 1965 (St. Hagop Armenian Apostolic Church, 1976).

The History of Racine's Madagh Tradition

The official *Madagh* celebration by St. Hagop's Apostolic Church has occurred since the church's inception in 1938. St. Mesrob also had a *Madagh* celebration that included the traditional *madagh* stew and blessing. It has since evolved into an Armenian Fest which aligns more with other summer food festivals in Racine such as annual Greek, German and Danish Fests. St. Hagop's today is open to the public and Armenians and non-Armenians alike come to enjoy the food, music, dancing, and company of family and friends.

"*Madagh*" actually refers to the stew that is blessed and served for free to the community. The word itself means "offering" or "sacrifice" and is at the heart of this tradition. It is based on the story of Abraham and Isaac in the Book of Genesis. Abraham was willing to offer his son Isaac to demonstrate his love and obedience to God. *Madagh* stew is traditionally made with lamb to represent the ram that God asked Abraham to offer instead. The tradition of *Madagh* originated

in Armenia when the stew was given for free to the poor and needy and has since been continued in diasporic Armenian communities. The *Madagh* tradition acts as an event of reunion and solidarity, demonstrating the resilience of Armenian people. Before the *Madagh* is served, it is blessed by the priest of St. Hagop. The church service is conducted in Armenian and is accompanied by the church choir. It typically lasts 40 minutes and asks for a prosperous harvest and season ahead. Today, the *madagh* stew is made with beef rather than lamb but it is still prepared over open-fire pits dug the previous day in Johnson Park, with the fires lit at dawn to begin the cooking. It is served alongside bulgur pilaf and bread.

The first *Madagh* was held behind St. Hagop on Lasalle Street in 1938. It then moved to Wilnette Park just off of Spring Street for seven or eight years in the 1940s. Wilnette was a small space just off the railroad tracks on the north shoreline. Racine's local newspaper, *The Journal Times*, has written about St. Hagop's *Madagh* since 1948 when the picnic was still held in Wilnette Springs on August 8th rather than the last Sunday of June (*The Journal Times*, 1948). The *Madagh* location moved once again, this time to Riverside Park on Four Mile Road near the historic Mosquito Inn. Then the picnic was relocated to Douglas Avenue behind the Mulligan's Mini Golf & Driving Range for two years. Finally, the *Madagh* moved to its current location to Johnson Park in the early 1960s where it is still being held annually in the last Sunday of June. Video footage collected from 1959 placed the *Madagh* at Johnson's Park and the first reporting of the *Madagh* in Johnson Park from "*The Journal Times*" was in 1961.

In addition to the cultural significance of the *Madagh*, it also serves a highly practical purpose for St. Hagop. The *Madagh* is the largest fundraiser for the church. The 2019 *Madagh* raised

\$35,000, their largest source of income by far, which covers the operating expenses of maintaining the church building. In pavilions, three stations are set up selling platters of shish kabob, *penerlee*³, and Armenian sweets. A beer tent is set up nearby along with a table where attendees can make donations in honor of a family or individual which is announced over the loudspeaker throughout the day. The event planning begins months in advance. By January, emails are sent about volunteers and a letter is sent to regular participants about making a donation to cover the costs of ingredients and dishes that are sold. As lead organizer Zohrab Khalighian put it, “it takes a village” to plan and run the *Madagh* and that a village includes people of all ages and communities. Kids work alongside elders in the community rolling *sarma*⁴ weeks before in preparation or dishing up kebab plates during the picnic. My family, whether we lived in California or Vermont, has attended the picnic every year and are put on the work schedule for three-hour shifts on *Madagh* Day. Non-Armenians also volunteer, working the *madagh* pit with their Armenian friends.

Why is Collaboration Important?

Theoretical Orientations

Ethnography in-and-of itself necessarily involves some form of collaboration. Collaborative ethnography as a distinct practice emerged out of the postmodern development in anthropology. The “crisis of representation” in 1980s saw an emphasis on the politics of depicting cultures and communities in ethnography. During this time, the theoretical underpinnings of ethnographic fieldwork were reimagined by ethnographers, including Geertz (1973), Clifford and Marcus (1986), Scheper-Hughes (1995), Rosaldo (1989) and others. Issues surrounding the unequal

³ Also known as an “Armenian cheese puff” in Racine

⁴ Stuffed grape leaves

dynamics of power that accompany ethnographic writing and cultural portrayals inspired a wealth of new practices and values surrounding fieldwork. Feminist, symbolic, interpretive, and critical ethnography emerged from this period, reshaping research epistemologies and raising questions surrounding the interpretation of narrative, text, and context. Anthropology's reflexive turn emphasized subjectivity in research and produced new perspectives about the implications of positionality that motivated new methodologies surrounding cultural documentation. This paradigm shift moved away from removed "objectivity" to become more reflexive and holistic, taking into consideration the value and legitimacy of local knowledge and interpretation. The theories and practices of collaborative ethnography in particular shares many of the theoretical orientations and ethics of other methodologies of this period. However, *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography* (Lassiter, 2005) demarcates collaborative ethnography as a practice that "deliberately and explicitly emphasizes collaboration at every point in the ethnographic process" (Lassiter, 2005, 16) and that "collaborative ethnography almost always necessitates this extension of research into action on some level" (2005, 152).

Collaborative ethnography as a distinct practice within ethnography has been described by Lassiter (2005) and others (Lawless, 2019; Madison, 2019) to benefit primarily written ethnographic products. Collaborative ethnography is a methodology in its own right, but its ideas and values underpin much of the ethnographic research practice within anthropology since the 1970s and 1980s. Visual ethnography as it emerged in the 1990s draws on the ideas espoused by the reflexive turn including documentation and representation. A method of collecting and presenting ethnographic research, visual ethnography takes many forms including photography, videos, interactive technologies, and internet dissemination (Given, 2008). Visual methods have

been used to reconfigure the role of “researcher” and “subject” in the process of knowledge creation. As an applied methodology, visual ethnography as its been used by Sarah Pink (2007), Darcy Alexandra (2017), Sadaf Javdani (2016), Montserrat Rifà-Valls (2009) and many others to foster a diversified community of practice. Within the domain of visual ethnography are other subfields including digital storytelling, a process of inquiry that uses reciprocal collaborative media-making (Thornburg, Booker & Nuñez-Janes, 2017). This project expressly uses the process of collaborative ethnography and applies it to a visual, rather than written, product. In combining a visual format with a collaborative methodology, this project explores how the two in conjunction impact the goals of collaborative ethnography.

Intersubjectivity & Representation

One particularly influential text that informed my methodology was *Reciprocal Ethnography and the Power of Women’s Narratives* (2019) by folklorist and feminist ethnographer, Elaine Lawless. This selection of essays maps the development of the methodology, “reciprocal ethnography” conceived by Lawless over years of fieldwork experience. It draws on postmodern theory and the values of self-reflexivity and confronts the thorny grey areas of truth and interpretation in ethnography. Lawless advocates for a partnership with informants to foster a collaborative interpretive process. She takes the interviews of her participants, transcribes, and returns them and what follows is a series of conversations about the meaning and possible interpretations of those narratives. Together, they unpack and make sense of the underlying meaning and themes of the interview, which Lawless uses as the basis of her written analysis. In concentrating on the narrative nature of ethnographic work, Lawless asserts that a “multivocal

kind of ethnography” (2019, 81) reveals the ongoing nature of inquiry and enriches and expands the diversity of experience and ways of being.

The strengths of this approach lie in the orientation it provides ethnographers to balance the disparities of positionality in research. Likewise, Lawless’ reciprocal ethnography (2019) is a feminist take on the values espoused during the reflexive turn in anthropology. It integrates phenomenology and hermeneutics into the interpretation and representation of ethnographic narratives. Lawless deconstructs the nature of knowledge and builds a methodology that democratizes the analysis of ethnographic data. She writes,

As ethnographers striving to be conscious of our own ideologies, we are obligated to present ourselves in our texts as we are in our work: humans seeking understanding, engaged in dialogue and interpretation with other people who are engaged in dialogue and interpretation, seeking meaning. (Lawless, 2019, 80-81)

This involves a model of partnership and reciprocity between ethnographer and their informants. Lawless initiates “dialogue sessions” (2019, 135) in which she meets with the interviewees and discusses the meaning of the life story they provided. The result is a mutual interpretation of the fieldwork data. Central to this practice is ensuring transparent dialogue is at the forefront of the collaborative process. Lawless uses the ideological postmodern ideas and applies them in her research. She writes, “I have not relinquished my role as interpreter, as thinker, as objective observer. But I have given up the notion of scholar voice as privileged voice, the scholar’s position as more legitimate because it is the more thoughtful or more credible one” (2019, 92).

Engaging with the narratives of participants with a feminist lens and then corroborating her interpretations with collaborators fosters a more dynamic and inclusive nature of inquiry.

Lawless goes on to attest, “I am forced to see the world of my collaborators through their eyes—rather than only through my own—and to invite them to see their world through mine” (*ibid*).

Exchanges between ethnographer and collaborators informs the way research “data” is interpreted and used. Lawless’ application of reciprocal ethnography is an intersubjective process of knowledge creation and a key component of this project.

Intersubjectivity has been used within anthropology to investigate ethnographic communication. With roots in hermeneutics, intersubjectivity has been used by anthropologists as a means of understanding the relationship and knowledge production. In research, intersubjectivity acts as a self-reflexive tool to investigate how meaning is co-produced between the ethnographer and their collaborators. John Fabian’s work with intersubjectivity investigates “what we know about how they know what they know” (Fabian, 2012, 443). This theoretical question requires ethnographers to take a look at their enacted methods, communication, and performance in an attempt to understand how knowledge is negotiated and represented. This is a shared concern across qualitative research, notably that of performance ethnography.

Soyini Madison’s article “The dialogic performative in critical ethnography” (2006) further discusses the implications of positionality when conducting ethnography. The ethnographer brings with them the inherent bias of their experience and life story. Utilizing dialogical performance acknowledges the subjective position of the ethnographer which prompts new conversations and encourages a greater plurality of stories and knowledge. Madison’s focus on

positionality as it relates to performance and storytelling builds on ethnographer Dwight Conquergood's use of performance ethnography as a method of conducting, interpreting, and applying research (1985; 1991; 2002). Conquergood reimagines fieldwork as an intersubjective experience that happens between people rather than an extractive process for information. Dialogue between the ethnographer and their informants is a form of reciprocity that defies static conclusions and instead is an ongoing process of meaning-making increases the holism and capabilities of scholarship. Conquergood's attempt to de-hierarchize knowledge centers around three points: "accomplishment, analysis, and articulation" (Conquergood, 2002, 152). Accomplishment represents the knowledge stemming from participation, experience, and creative embodiment. Analysis takes a critical lens and contextualization of the process of knowledge production. Articulation is defined by the practical application of that knowledge to serve and benefit others. These tenants widen the scope of research and discourse within ethnography as well as the ways in which ethnographic work is composed and disseminated. Conquergood has applied this methodology in his fieldwork with Hmong refugees in northeastern Thailand (1989) which focused performative aspects of Hmong culture and used his research to create "health theater" as a means of spreading education about sanitation. In the United States, Conquergood applied his knowledge and positionality to advocate and defend Hmong immigrants struggling to find housing in a documentary film, "Between Two Worlds: The Hmong Shaman" (Siegal, 1984). Conquergood advocates for a radical reconfiguration in knowledge politics and uses performance ethnography to model alternative modes of research. He writes,

The ongoing challenge of performance studies is to refuse and supercede this deeply entrenched division of labor, apartheid of knowledges, that plays out inside the academy as the difference between thinking and doing, interpreting and making, conceptualizing and creating. The division of labor between theory and practice, abstraction and embodiment, is an arbitrary and rigged choice, and, like all binarisms, it is booby-trapped. It's a Faustian bargain. If we go the one-way street of abstraction, then we cut ourselves off from the nourishing ground of participatory experience. If we go the one-way street of practice, then we drive ourselves into an isolated cul-de-sac, a practitioner's workshop or artist's colony. Our radical move is to turn, and return, insistently, to the crossroads. (Conquergood, 2002, 153-154)

Conquergood offers performance ethnography as a mode of research that is intersubjective without losing its thorough analysis and presents itself in a way that is practically useful. These three components are at the core of this project on the *Madagh*. Using collaborative methods to create a visual ethnographic product is a “return to the crossroads” (*ibid*) advocated by Conquergood to produce work that is scholarly, intersubjective, and serves the community.

Combining collaborative approaches with creative visual formats is explored by Darcy Alexandria in her article “More Than Words: Co-Creative Visual Ethnography” (2017). Alexandria discusses her experience using visual ethnography in her work to foster alternative means of conveying experience and cultural representation. She asserts that media is a tool that can be used to represent and illustrate ethnographic knowledge in a way that is more immersive than traditional written text. Alexandria’s model of including participants in the process of

producing ethnographic media demonstrates the potential for media-based ethnography to encourage people's engagement with cultural complexity and the polysemous findings of ethnographic fieldwork. This was key in designing the research methods for the *Madagh* project. In addition to collaborators sharing their experiences in interviews, I also wanted to include opportunities for people to contribute their own media and experience my process of revision and interpretation along with me as the ethnographer.

Ethnographers have long acknowledged the importance of fielding ideals of objective knowledge and representation in research. Fostering relativism and contributing new ways of seeing and understanding others is a source of pride within anthropology. Likewise, I share these goals and inviting greater creativity and participatory experience in research is at the heart of this ethnography. Within collaborative ethnography, anthropologists have already experimented with innovative and creative means of representing and communicating their fieldwork. Symbolic, feminist, interpretative and critical ethnography as they accompanied 1980s postmodern anthropology also produced new forms of ethnographic work. Collaborative ethnography has offered new and innovative methods of conducting research across disciplines. However, this project seeks to direct the participatory ideologies borne from the crisis of representation and the reflective turn and combine them with visual methods of ethnographic storytelling. I believe that combining the two has the potential to contribute to the tools and practices of ethnography.

The design of this research model contributes to methodologies at the intersection of folklore and anthropology, using collaborative visual ethnography to investigate and communicate identity, experience and understanding. This process is meant to be utilized across different ethnographic

contexts and be modified and improved upon to further equity in the fieldwork. This thesis explores the epistemology and methodology of collaborative media ethnography to consider the question: How can collaborative visual ethnography be used as a viable method to foster a collaborative and interpretive process that advances and enriches traditional cultural expressions and become an outlet for exploring identity and belonging?

Methods

This project began to unfold in the summer of 2018 when I began documenting the *Madagh* through a series of sixteen audio-recorded interviews. This was part of a separate project with the organization, Conversations from the Open Road, but it prompted my engagement with people's stories and experiences of the *Madagh*. The fieldwork for this project officially began the following summer, where I video-recorded a series of seventeen interviews at the 2019 *Madagh* and shot video footage and photographs of preparations and activities in the days leading into the picnic. In October of 2019, I was able to return and conduct follow-up interviews, record additional footage of St. Hagop's Sunday church service and Sunday School, conduct archival research at the Racine Historical Museum, gather media and materials donated by collaborators, and most importantly, check-in personally with collaborators. As I was collecting the final media and footage, I produced a mini five-minute "teaser" video as a means of sharing some of the footage, increasing engagement, and generating feedback that could inform the final video. Thanks to funding I received from the Dan Higgins Community-Engaged Arts and Humanities Award, I made a third trip to Racine in early March. I coordinated with St. Hagop to host a public screening of the first completed, 26-minute version of the *Madagh* video. Following the

screening was a feedback session where we discussed the content and structure of the video as well as its use and dissemination.

Interviews

The video for this thesis explores the role of the *Madagh* Armenian tradition for Racine's community and how that may connect to a broader understanding and enactment of Armenian cultural heritage. This was investigated through unstructured and semi-structured interviews with willing participants. These interview styles were selected in order to capture the depth and diversity of people's stories and experiences. A key component of collaborative ethnography's methodology is building more flexibility and freedom in the fieldwork process so that participants have a greater agency to represent themselves and their experiences on their own terms. Unstructured interviewing was a means of promoting a self-directed interview process where participants may identify and share what they consider the most relevant or significant information. This follows anthropologist Russel Bernard's interviewing tip to, "get people on a topic of interest and get out of the way" (Bernard, 2011, 160). My "agenda" in this process was to have a conversation that both the fieldworker and collaborator feel is productive and meaningful. Using an interview approach that reduces the imbalance of power inherent in the researcher/informant relationship is best suited for this project.

As these interviews were also collected over different periods of time and contexts, my questions shifted accordingly. The first was in June where I spoke to people before, during, and after the *Madagh*. Activities including assembling *sarma*, making sweets such as *knafeh*⁵ and packaging

⁵ A dessert of layered shredded phyllo dough (tel kadayif) and soft ricotta and mozzarella cheeses that is drenched in a syrup of sugar and rosewater

of food constituted some of the preparation the days before to the picnic and were an opportunity to get the perspectives and stories of the main working crew behind the event. The interviews gathered on the day of the picnic were less formal as the picnic was my one chance to photograph and video record the music, dancing, church service, *Madagh* stew preparation, activities, and final off-site activities at St. Hagop. My questions in those interviews focused on capturing the significance of the event in real-time and I asked for descriptions about what they were feeling and experiencing in the moment. In my later trip in October, I recorded slightly more in-depth interviews asking for details relating to experience living as an Armenian in Racine and people's participation in cultural activities more generally.

Online Platforms & Social Media

I used online platforms as the primary means of providing collaborators with remote access to both me and my work. My literal distance from Racine's community posed a challenge. The majority of the work for this project was completed in Vermont, approximately 980 miles and a 17-hour car ride from southeastern Wisconsin. My strategy for continued communication throughout the project borrowed global tech ethnographer Tricia Wang's concept of "live fieldnoting" (2012), a form of open ethnography that uses social media to make research more visible and interactive. It is a public form of sharing ethnographic data that combines visual image with a short, written account of the ethnographer's experience or explanation. The live fieldnoting technique complemented the focus on visual ethnography. I created a [website](#) as the primary platform to promote accessibility. There, I posted all drafts and surveys related to the multimedia video, photographs and media taken by myself and contributed by others, information about the interviewing process, contact information, links to interesting historical

research, updates, and more. In addition to the website, I used [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#) as an easy way to provide access in follower's daily lives, pairing visuals with a story or explanation. Too often, ethnographic products are simply circulated among other academics without making it back to the people being written about. I was interested in transforming the private archive of the ethnographers' fieldwork into one that was public. A platform like Instagram can democratize access to fieldwork. Increasing access to ethnographic work also means there are more people to hold the researcher accountable and may lead to higher standards of ethnography.

Fieldnotes are at the heart of the ethnographic method, constituting the data that drives the conclusions of research. The ethnographer's self-knowledge regarding how their positionality impacts their translation of a scene is an important step in fostering a more open, relativistic analysis. As can be seen in manuals and guides on writing fieldnotes (Emerson *et al*, 1995; Clifford, 1990; Vivanco, 2017), part of this practice is identifying what aspects of a scene are important enough to jot down, and why. This often reveals just as much about the researcher as it does the scene or people they are documenting. In *From Field to Desk* (1995), Emerson *et al*. writes that "the goal [of fieldnotes] is not merely a picture of the daily life and concerns of others, but rather a picture of this life and these concerns as seen, understood, and conveyed as the ethnographer" (p. 60). Wang's live fieldnoting method (2011) exemplifies the idea that the positionality and point-of-view of the researcher should be made as transparent as possible in their work. Photographing fieldwork allows others to literally see your process and data through your lens and writing a summary or caption indicates your perspective or interpretation behind the image.

Collaborative Media

Visual ethnography presents an exciting new avenue for the ways ethnographic research is collected and shared. The community was asked to contribute their own media for use in the *Madagh* video. This included 8mm reels of film that I had digitized, photo negatives, digital video recordings and photographs, musical recordings, and other personal ephemera. In conjunction with the footage I shot, this donated media constituted the data, or fieldnotes, of this ethnography. This is a way for the community to contribute their own materials or “data” to the ethnographic video project.

In the article, “Going Forward Through the World: Thinking Theoretically About First Person Perspective Digital Ethnography” (2015), social anthropologist Sarah Pink discusses how digital media captures a first-person perspective. Rather than shying away from the subjective first-person view, Pink describes the productive entanglement between fieldworker, environment, and subject, and methods of exploring it through media. Pink describes how visual media can be used to analyze the emic and etic perspective of the fieldworker. First-person media allows the audience to see the phenomenon alongside the fieldworker. In addition to using the fieldworker’s media to examine their positionality, the *Madagh* video project includes multiple first-person footage from different actors to diversify and create more multi-faceted work. It captures and communicates more plural ways of communicating experience beyond that of the ethnographer by inviting collaborators to contribute their own media.

James Clifford’s chapter “Notes of Field(notes)” attested that “it should be stressed at the outset that a focus on the interrelations of inscription, transcription, and description need not imply that

writing is the essence of fieldwork” (Clifford, 1990, 53). Using digital media as a supplement for the ethnographer’s traditional written fieldnotes was deliberately selected as a means to invite more collaboration with participants. Acknowledging that the analysis and findings are inherently shaped by the subjectivity of the fieldworker makes for more careful, thoughtful and introspective research. Rather than rewriting the narratives and scenes of the *Madagh* tradition, media collected both from myself and from the contributions of collaborators is a method to alleviate the inherent bias of “inscription, transcription, and description” (*ibid.*) in ethnographic fieldwork. It gives the participants an opportunity to reshape the “raw data” into something that better reflects their experience and intentions. It shifts the dynamics of power from the ethnographer to the community to democratize fieldwork.

Principal Collaborators

Throughout this project, I relied on a few principal collaborators to troubleshoot, offer more focused critique, and act as intermediaries of this project, providing in-person support to the community while I was in Vermont. Holly and Silva provided exceptional on-the-ground support throughout this project. Holly, an active member at St. Hagop communicated directly with those who did not have access to the online resources or would be unlikely to use them. Silva is the secretary at St. Hagop and oversees the church email list. Email became an important means of communicating with the St. Hagop community at large. I would send emails before trips to Racine explaining what I would be doing as well as periodic updates while I was working on the project in Vermont. Holly and Silva’s commitment to this project was unexpected but ultimately crucial to this work. I was in touch with them most regularly throughout all stages of the project.

These principal collaborators were also the first ones I turned to when things went awry. When a technical glitch left fourteen video-recorded interviews without sound, Holly was my first call in Racine. Together, we brainstormed methods of re-interviewing and decided I could offer to facilitate a self-recorded interview session with those whose audio was lost. I implemented a plan to have collaborator's re-record themselves through a phone interview. Although only four people followed up with my request and two people actually completed an interview, Holly helped spread my step-by-step instructions for finding and using a smartphone's recording application and self-recording, and interview questions. She also offered to facilitate these interviews and provide practical technical support to anyone who might be interested but lack the technology or know-how.

Holly also recommended opportunities that opened new experiences and connections with Armenian Americans outside of the St. Hagop and Racine community. At her suggestion, I attend the Armenian Relief Society's Norian Youth Connect Conference at Columbia University in late February. Over 100 students from across the United States to attend a series of workshops with speakers including Raffi Khatchadourian, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, Houri Berberian, a Professor of History, Presidential Chair in Armenian Studies, and Director of the Armenian Studies Program at UC Irvine, and Stephanie Ayanian, a film producer, director and educator. Stephanie Ayanian screened a seven-minute preview of her documentary "What Will Become of Us" which focused on stories of individuals from all around the United States working to celebrate Armenian culture in new nontraditional ways. This experience was an opportunity to connect with other young Armenians who are interested in engaging with their

heritage and hear from scholars and professionals whose work investigates questions of cultural legacy and identity.

Community Video Screening & Forum

A significant direct opportunity for collaboration was the public community forum held at St. Hagop. There, I screened the first full version of the *Madagh* video which was followed by a discussion and feedback session. Between 50 and 60 people attended with significant turnout from the older demographic including a majority of the people featured in the video. The screening corresponded with an event for the Armenian Youth Federation and many of the young AYF members and their families stayed to participate. This event generated the most substantial feedback about the video as people could address questions directly to me or respond to the thoughts and suggestions of others. One attendee texted his friend from California, Jim Yogurtian, whose interview was used in the video and read aloud Jim's response to the crowd after the movie. In addition to posting a feedback survey online, printed copies were spread across the tables so people could privately share their thoughts if voicing them aloud was uncomfortable. The conversation included corrections for the credits and timing but especially focused on the video's use. Suggestions included making DVDs for family members or to sell at future picnics, share with PBS, the Armenian Consulate in Chicago, the Armenian prelacy, and Racine Visitor's Center. In addition, I walked people through how to find the website, social media pages, and reiterated the resources that were available. This apparently simple step was an opportunity to emphasize remote methods of access. As I could rarely directly communicate with so many people at once, I wanted to ensure the community knew exactly to use the video and other resources independently. After the discussion, I played the full, unedited compilation of

digitized film reels that were loaned for the video and folks lingered to watch an additional hour to watch the old family films together.

What form did collaboration ultimately take in this project?

Collaboration (in)action

My initial plan was to rely on collaborators to help shape the narrative of the film. The possibilities for a theme or focus of a video about the *Madagh* were endless. It could be promotional, informative, persuasive, or documentative. It could focus on any number of cultural elements such as history, organization, religion, innovation, preservation, challenges, families, food, and a host of other fascinating facets of this tradition. With over ten hours of footage and thousands of photos, I had a lot to work with. I took Lawless' idea of a "multivocal ethnography" (2019, 81) and adapted it to a visual, rather than written, format. Collaborators were invited to co-construct and critique the *Madagh* video and before, during, and after video editing. I published [three feedback surveys](#) online so participants could provide input remotely. They asked people to describe their opinions on how to tell the story of the *Madagh* tradition and Racine's Armenian community. The questions included: Is there anything specific you would have liked to see in the video that was not included? Are there any parts of the video you feel should be removed and why? More qualitative questions included: How did the video make you feel? Do you feel the video captured the essence of the picnic? Why or why not? How were your thoughts and feelings about Armenian culture reflected in the video? I also continually publicized my contact information, both on the website and in my St. Hagop emails, encouraging people to reach out with any questions, comments, or concerns.

My requests for input were met with limited success. Only two people responded to the first survey. The message they wanted the video to emphasize was, “[the] importance of diversity, why it is important to involve the community and preservation of culture” as well as “family” “community” “tradition” and “uniqueness.” These were broad ideas that naturally aligned with documenting a cultural tradition. No one took it a step further and offered a particular opinion about what should be emphasized within those themes.

I used the second trip to Racine in October as an opportunity to troubleshoot and investigate the reasons behind the limited input. The primary event I had scheduled for my second visit was the bi-weekly Sunday service at St. Hagop. The previous week I had sent out an email notifying that I would be attending and the dates of my trip. I assumed that church was a practical way to reach a number of the Armenian community regularly involved in the *Madagh*, as the event is both sponsored by and benefits St. Hagop. I also expected that church would put me in touch with some of the older members of the community. I was anxious to reach this particular demographic because I was the least certain whether or not they had been fully introduced or kept up to date on my thesis. Over the summer visit for the 2019 *Madagh*, a large part of my fieldwork consisted of simply explaining my project to as many people as possible. I had also been relying on St. Hagop’s email list, mediated by Silva to reiterate the purpose of this work. Silva has been graciously receiving and sending my messages, but it was difficult to gauge exactly who I was reaching. I knew that my strategy of using the internet as a means to communicate with the community remotely would fall short for those demographics, like my grandmother, who did not own a computer. On the drive into Racine from the Milwaukee airport, my suspicions were partly confirmed by my Uncle Marco, who said that he was unsure whether he saw my last

email. Although not particularly encouraging, our discussion was constructive in helping me identify the specific limitations of the project and process. Ultimately, Marco said face-to-face is always most effective. He said that for him, things get lost when communicating via email or text, surmising, “after about thirty minutes in the car with you, I feel like I’m just now starting to get it.”

For the older community who lack a computer, smartphone, and access to the internet, word -of-mouth is often the most reliable mode of communication. Although I had people like Silva and Holly who would relay information and updates at church, I believe that in many cases the concept of this project was still a little abstract. People were excited about the project when I was in Racine talking about it with them, but the energy was difficult to maintain once I left. This was true even for people who did have access to my resources and a better understanding of this project. Later, a 20-year-old collaborator shared that although she follows the *Madagh* Instagram page, likes posts, and had watched the *Madagh* teaser video there, she did not fill out the feedback survey afterwards. She said she had gone so far as to open it up, but after reading the first few questions did not feel like she had anything to contribute.

This aspect of collaborative research warrants further investigation. I expect a contributing factor to the lack of opinion and direction for the video was due to the practical limitations of the project, most notably my inability to actually live in Racine for a year. This project would have benefited from a long-term fieldwork arrangement throughout all stages of this project. My physical distance from the community prevented me to really “be there” to motivate involvement

and mitigate the technical difficulties and hurdles of remote communication and access to resources.

Revisiting Ideals of Collaboration

The shortcomings regarding sustained personal contact and technology alone do not fully explain the noncommittal responses I did receive when asking for input in person. During the October follow-up visit to Racine, I reiterated my questions in casual conversations, asking for people's opinions about the information they felt was important to include in a video documenting Racine's Armenian community. "I don't know" or "you should decide" [paraphrased] was a common response. I returned to Vermont and speculated that, as said by Marco, people did not quite "get" what I was doing. To provide a concrete illustration, I produced a five-minute mini *Madagh* "teaser" video. The video was also meant to generate more excitement and engagement with the project and was shared via the St. Hagop email list, website, Instagram and Facebook accounts. To ensure it reached people, I relied on principal collaborators including my dad, who shared it directly with his family and friends. I released it along with a survey that asked similar questions including what parts did the viewer like and dislike and what were the most important information or stories that should be included in the final video. The teaser video indicated potential narrative themes for people to confirm or refute in an attempt to provide a substantive example for people to critique. The second survey was completed by four people, one of whom had also completed the first survey. Again, common themes that were suggested included "cultural survival and celebration," "family," "our community survived Genocide; yet today we still live, laugh, thrive and cherish all things great and small," and also, "Whatever the director

wants - I think you've done a fantastic job with the teaser, I can't wait to see what direction the final video takes.”

Throughout this project I struggled to understand what I interpreted as people’s lack of engagement. Since the beginning, I emphasized, as I have throughout this paper, the importance of co-creating a video. An ironic and unexpected response I received was people’s sympathy about how much work this project was for me. They expressed worry that the community did not offer enough “help.” I always said that I enjoyed the work and was happy to do it. However, I wonder if people interpreted my push for collaboration as an obligation to help and felt guilty for not have doing more. What I meant by collaboration was not to force or guilt people into being involved. Rather, I wanted people to know they were my priority in this project. I wanted them to know that they had agency and could be directly involved in shaping the narrative of the video. There were many forms of collaboration throughout this project that took places across multiple levels. However, there was never any decisiveness about what people wanted the video to look like. The community left it up to me, but then expressed concern that I was being “stuck” with all the work. This was not a dynamic of collaborative ethnography that I was expecting. My concern was mirrored back to be as people worried about whether I felt supported and helped throughout this project.

I wanted them to voice their stories, perspectives, and opinions so that the final product would be true to their experience. Based on the feedback I received in person and on the surveys, I feel that the video is an accurate representation of the *Madagh*. However, people still see this as my project. After the screening, three different people approached me with the recommendation that

I should include a copyright on the movie. When I suggested using St. Hagop rather than Tali Gelenian but every single person insisted that it should be me. These responses indicate a disjunction between the ideals of collaboration I borrowed from previous literature of collaborative ethnographers, and the practical concerns of the community.

The lack of input regarding the video's message and storyline was inconsistent with the theories and practices of collaboration that I encountered in my research and my actual experience.

Decolonizing anthropology was at the heart of 1980's politics of representation where my research had focused. Feminist collaborative ethnographers such as Lawless worked to critique and deconstruct hierarchies of power in fieldwork, often serving minority and underrepresented communities. Racine's Armenian community is certainly not the majority, but they were also not explicitly concerned with issues discrimination or subjugation in my fieldwork experience.

Despite emphasizing the importance of their input and providing opportunities to do so, nobody offered guidance or took a position. To be clear, I still think that it is imperative for ethnographers to open their work to the feedback and critique of their collaborators. However, my ideals also obscured the community's ideas of collaboration. They did collaborate. They provided personal home movies and photographs, shared their stories in interviews, invited me to speak at other events, and sent thank-you cards for the video. These are equally meaningful and valid forms of participation, but they were not exactly what I had in mind when I began this project. Ensuring that collaborators were equal partners with agency to voice their opinions motivated my methods. My initial approach operated under the implicit assumption that people would be concerned with the implicit hierarchies of power and subjugation in fieldwork.

However, the feedback I did receive was that I should to “do whatever I want,” which suggests that people were not worried that I would appropriate or misrepresent the *Madagh*.

Holly told me not to worry so much about what other people wanted the movie to look like, but to focus on what I thought it should contain. After the March screening she said part of what she enjoyed was getting to see the picnic “through your eyes.” Holly’s observation brings up a key concern in a collaborative visual ethnographic project. It harkens back to an argument of Sarah Pink in “Going Forward Through the World: Thinking Theoretically About First Person Perspective Digital Ethnography” (2015) who asserted that visual media has the potential to open up their work to new ways of knowing as it is continually re-analyzed in light on the context in which it is viewed. Pink writes, “If, as I have argued, we cannot ‘go back’ when viewing, but are always going forward and learning, then we always add something as we ‘view.’ Commenting on a recording does not only entail commenting on what is ‘in’ it, but where the viewer is moving on with it now, and the implications of this” (Pink, 2015, 250). Holly articulated the same experience of seeing herself and community through the eyes of another. In this case, it was a positive experience. Holly and others said that the video made them feel “emotional,” “nostalgic,” “proud to be Armenian and love for each other.”

The public screening of the *Madagh* video was an opportunity for intersubjectivity. It was a context for people to interact with their own stories and history through a media piece. This follows the methodological goals espoused by Soyini Madison to, “witness and engage cultural aspects of other worlds, witness and engage with others’ sense of self in their own world... we are dependent on each other for the possibility of being understood” (Madison, 2019, 126). Just

as I was attempting to see through the eyes of the community to craft the video, they were trying to do with me. This collaborative visual ethnographic product facilitated an encounter that fostered representation and recognition. This could also be increased when shared to a wider audience, creating additional opportunities for connection and generating a greater variety of interpretations, insights, and questions to further enrich the ethnography.

Crafting the Video's Narrative

The story of the video was informed by the interview footage and media. Creating the *Madagh* video included the same methodical coding process of any ethnographic work. It involved the careful watching and re-watching media and categorizing and sorting it by different themes. The storyline emerged from the themes that were most emphasized or repeated by the collaborators in the interviews. In addition to corroborating the stories between interviewees, I corroborated the narrative themes with the visual media donated by collaborators. This extra step used visual data in conjunction with the interviews to provide additional emphasis and support the video's themes. In the book chapter, "The Visual in Ethnography: Photography, Video, Cultures and Individuals" (2007), Sarah Pink describes the interplay between narrative and visual media and how together they work together to constitute ethnographic knowledge:

When ethnographers produce photographs or video, these visual texts, as well as the experience of producing and discussing them, become part of the ethnographic knowledge. Just as images inspire conversations, conversation may invoke images; conversation visualizes and draws absent printed or electronic into its narratives through verbal descriptions and references to them. (Pink, 2007, 21)

Making the *Madagh* video relied on the correlation and reference between narrative and image. In combining the two, a video allows the collaborators to *both see and hear* themselves to strengthen the impact of the ethnographic product. I decided to let the collaborators' experiences and observations drive the narrative in a first-person ethnographic documentary video. Rather than insert myself and make commentary on the anthropological dynamics at play, I wanted to make space for the collaborators to assert their stories. Visual anthropologist Sarah Elder used this approach in making a collaborative video with Inupiaq and Yup'ik Eskimo communities in Alaska. She writes in her article, "Collaborative Filmmaking: An Open Space for Making Meaning, A Moral Ground for Ethnographic Film," "We try to address anthropological issues within the film text, in the visual ethnography itself. We do not present narration or explicit cultural analysis, preferring to let film subjects speak themselves" (Elder, 1995, 95). The *Madagh* project was an opportunity for me to investigate the boundaries and limitations of mediation on the part of the anthropologist in making an ethnographic product. This motivated my decision to invite media contributions from the community as I contextualized their stories using their donated images rather than just my own. In addition to excluding an overt anthropological analysis in the video, I also decided to exclude my personal story for several reasons. First, for practical reasons because I had received so much media from others that I felt deserved to be used in a video under 30 minutes in length. I experimented with informally including myself in the video during the initial five-minute "teaser" video. You can hear me in casual conversation at a picnic blanket at the *Madagh* and later see me in a shot replacing a new roll of film on a projector during a family gathering to watch old home movies. Ultimately, I decided to cut this material because I did not have enough time in the *Madagh* video to stray too

far from the focus on the picnic. I also decided against inserting an anthropological critique because I believed it would hinder the potential benefit of the video for the community. Thus, I am using this written analysis as the space to assert myself and analysis to increase my transparency and expound and theorize the cultural dynamics at work.

Finding the Five Themes

In the process of reviewing interviews, one emerged to become the backbone of the video's narrative. Zohrab Khaligian provided one of the longest and most detailed interviews which I consequently transcribed and coded. Mapping out the themes and was completed both with the qualitative data analysis computer software, NVivo 12, as well as auditorily, using the audio editing program Adobe Audition to condense the key reoccurring points of his interview. Using the written transcript and audio format in conjunction with one another allowed for more holistic engagement with the narrative. Highlighting text and organizing it into folders according to themes or "nodes" served a functional purpose of finding connections across interviews (see appendix, fig. 1). However, listening to his intonations, emphasis, and tone in editing his audio were equally valuable tools in crafting a compelling narrative.

Zohrab is the driving force behind the *Madagh*. In another interview, he was referred to as "The General" and is known for his organization. Although different people are in charge of the various components of picnic preparation, Zohrab runs the show. As a gatekeeper, Zohrab occupies a unique position and his extensive knowledge and experience are necessary for a holistic perspective of the *Madagh*. He elaborated on many of the ideas expressed by the other interviewees and cross analyzing his interview helped explicate major motifs. From this process

emerged five major themes: the “small but mighty” Armenian community in Racine; the work and workers behind the *Madagh*; the *Madagh* as a time of reunion and connection; the inclusion of non-Armenians; and how the *Madagh* relates to what it means to “be Armenian.”

Small but Mighty

While attending the ARS Norian Youth Connect Conference at Columbia, I noticed a general reaction when introducing yourself as an Armenian from Wisconsin. Asniv, a cousin from Racine’s neighboring city of Kenosha was often met with raised eyebrows, or else a chuckle and disbelieving “there are Armenians in Wisconsin?” I brought it up to her later and we discussed the lack of awareness that often precedes the deprecation of Racine’s Armenian community. In his interview, Jim Yogurtian, a regular *Madagh* attendee currently living in California, made a similar point saying, “I had occasion when I lived in Fresno to tell people about the *Madagh* and they'd turn their head and they'd say, ‘Really?’...And they're surprised to learn... that the St. Hagop Church has this every, every year, this *Madagh*” (Yogurtian, 2020). In another interview, Arakel described a similar experience: “When I go to other places... for Armenian stuff outside of Wisconsin they’re like, ‘oh, you’re from Wisconsin, are there Armenians there?’ and then I can say ‘yeah, there are Armenians here’ but also we have stuff to show...we still make *madagh* underground. So that’s just something to say ‘yeah, we’re really here. No one else does this’” (Arakel, 2019).

Although the Armenian community in Wisconsin and Racine specifically is not well-noted within the United States, it has a strong cultural community. This is best exemplified by the *Madagh*. According to the interviewees, the size of the St. Hagop and Racine population

contributes to the feeling of family and community. Zohrab attested it has helped maintain aspects of “traditional life” that can become lost in larger communities. One unique characteristic of St. Hagop’s *Madagh* is the preparation of the *madagh* stew. It is still cooked over underground open-fire pits that are dug on the picnic grounds of Johnson Park. Zohrab described attending another *madagh* celebration during his visit to the town of Anjar in Beirut, Lebanon. He noted that they no longer cooked their *madagh* underground. The fact that even in the old country villages in the homeland have discontinued this practice is a testament to how tightly Racine has held on to maintain this tradition. According to Zohrab, “They basically transported their village life from Western Armenia to Racine, Wisconsin. And of course, in larger communities, you’re basically in a city or you’re in a suburb of the city instead of Racine is still like it really took their village life and just transferred it there” (Zohrab, 2020). Diaspora studies researcher Sossie Kasbarian uses the term “step-homeland” (Kasbarian, 2009, 359) to describe the reconstructed locations that are created to mitigate the gap between idyllic conceptions of the homeland and the realities of diaspora. Racine has managed to successfully embody those notions. An attribute of “village life” that Zohrab and others noted was the close-knit relationships. A natural byproduct of being a small community is having more intimate relationships akin to family. In an interview, Racine native, Nora Fronjian, describes,

I always feel so blessed to have grown up in this community... I always refer to them as my extended family... everybody knows everybody, and everybody is close to everyone for the most part. Especially when you compare it to some of those larger areas. And that’s always something I’ve been proud of. There have been some moments when I was younger when I wished we were a bigger community, but then when I see the differences

in terms of how close everyone is, it's really something I've become grateful for. (Nora, 2020)

Jim made the same observation based on his experience living in both the Wisconsin and Southern California Armenian communities:

The Armenian community in Racine is pretty much everybody knows each other because they all grew up there. People in the California Armenian communities are pretty much transplants from different communities basically throughout the world... The Armenian community in the California arena is more broad-based and there are a lot of people that we all speak Armenian perhaps, but we don't necessarily know each other. (Jim, 2020)

The small size of the Racine Armenian community is not without challenges. It requires greater sustained participation from all community members in order for events and Armenian organizations to continue. However, it also means that participation is not taken-for-granted. The *Madagh* demonstrates the dedication of people of all ages and all corners of the Racine community coming together, simultaneously strengthening their community bonds and perpetuating an Armenian tradition. Working at the pit on *Madagh Day*, Vache Mikaelian surmised: "You know, maybe in this small community we don't have the clean Armenian that we speak or that other communities might speak. Our numbers may not be strong and heavy as the larger communities, but our heart has always been there, and our fight is always there." (Vache, 2019)

A lot of Work

Thursday, June 27th two days before the *Madagh* around 40 workers, young and old and most of them women, sat around six large folding tables that had been pushed together in the basement of St. Hagop. Metal bowls scattered the tables, some filled with the *achkee chopov* or rice filling, red from the tomato paste and covered with a faint sheen from the olive oil. Others were draped with dark green grape leaves that had been harvested in the early fall in a series of “secret spots” all across Racine. It was *sarma* day and the ladies were hard at work rolling 5,000 of the little cigar-shaped delicacies. As I was filming the scene, one woman turned to her neighbor and laughing, said “it’s like an Armenian sweatshop.” A chuckle went down the table and her older colleague replied seriously “Yeah, that’s what it feels like sometimes. Now you know what we go through every year.” A young girl in her early teens replied, “And I thought making them with grandma was a lot.”

Sarma day is just one of the many prep days that proceed the picnic. Months in advance meat is being ordered, the work schedule is assembled, and a myriad of other variables are organized, primarily by Zohrab. The *Madagh* is more than the last Sunday in June. It requires hours of behind-the-scenes work and a wholehearted community effort. Nearly every worker I interviewed brought up this fact, summing up their involvement with the simple fact: “It’s a lot of work.”

I included the aspect of “work,” not only to spread recognition and appreciation for the dedication and labor of volunteers, but because the work itself brings people together. Zohrab

described the correlation between the community's level of involvement with conceptions of living a "good life."

When people say it's hard work, I say, "This isn't work. What I do Monday to Friday, that's work. That's my living. The *Madagh* and doing things in the community, for me, that's play. That's my hobby. That's what I get enjoyment from." Sometimes it can be frustrating, but when people are on and we're together and we're working hard and talking less, that's when I'm in my glory because then everybody gets what makes me work at that point. When you put your mind to this side and you're just rolling up your sleeves side-by-side, that's what I envision our village life was. That even though it was hard, the reward was, "Hey, we're all together and we're living a good life together." (Zohrab, 2020)

Other interviewees also articulated how the work beforehand consolidates the community and the enjoyment they get from being together. Mary Shamshoian-Olson, a senior member of St. Hagop who has attended the *Madagh* since birth stated:

We work for weeks or months to get ready and we're here all day and all night and it's just a great time because you get to see everybody and talk to everybody... even though we're working hard it's a fun time because if you were here when we're making the *sarma*, you know, you hear about women doing quilting bees and that was a social activity. Well, Armenian ladies didn't have quilting bees, they had *sarma*-making bees. Because you sit and you talk and you wrap *sarma* and you roll dough or whatever it is

and you get caught up on families and you gossip a little bit... (Mary Shamshian-Olson, 2018)

The “hard work” of picnic prep has a softer side as well. It serves as valuable “catching up” time and contributes to the cohesiveness of the St. Hagop community. Sam Buchaklian, 89-years-old during the time of the interview, has worked the *Madagh* his entire life. He described the early days of the *Madagh* and the various jobs he had over the years from scrubbing the *Madagh* pots the day after the picnic, digging the pit, cutting the meat, hauling water and other materials back and forth between church and Johnson Park. He still contributes to the *Madagh*, although has cut back on the physical labor and now works selling tickets.

Zohrab is heavily involved in various Armenian organizations including the St. Hagop church board, acting as a member as the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, and his role as an advisor to the local AYF chapter. However, he picked the *Madagh* as his “catalyst event” because he experienced how it rallied the community unlike anything else.

It's the only time of the year that the entire community is together and they're all working together as one. They really do feel the best that they do. During the rest of the year, some people work hard, other people are like, "Oh, someone else will do it" and they'll walk away. But the *Madagh*, everybody puts their time into it... I mean the key with the picnic is there's a beginning, there's a middle, there's an end so you know it ends. During the whole year, it's ongoing. There is no beginning, middle, and end. You're in it. But it's the idea if you really enjoyed working together, guess what? If you go to church or if

there's a dinner or if there's something, we get to see each other more than once a year. Why wouldn't you? It's kind of that we've come together. Let's look for more opportunities that we can come together and be together. (Zohrab, 2020)

Increasing community involvement and including people of all ages is Zohrab's strategy of strengthening the overall participation and engagement. In particular, he encourages the youth to seek out opportunities to contribute in other ways throughout the year. Ensuring that the younger generations have a sense of pride and joy in the Armenian community is a critical part of continuing the Armenian culture. Zohrab attested that the *Madagh* is a valuable opportunity to instill that pride and an event for kids to contribute. The video is an explicit representation of how that plays out and why it is important as articulated by the participants themselves. In my return to Racine in March, I participated in a day-long Armenian Youth Federation event at St. Hagop. I was asked to present the work of this project and the kids began to recount the jobs that they have had at the *Madagh*. All 13 of St. Hagop's youth members described having a job, and even the youngest had been working for at least the last few years. Their duties including acting as "runners" who would race up and down the hill with raffle donations or else working in the kebab tent or assisting in face painting. In a video interview on *Madagh Day*, Vache Mikaelian described his childhood excitement to help his father work the pit. He compared it to the eager anticipation of Christmas Eve saying, "I just remember as a little kid, like Christmas Eve, going to bed and wanting to wake up with my dad at 4:30-5:00 in the morning... but wanting to be here and wanting to witness and feel like I was part of that *madagh* crew" (Vache, 2019). The *Madagh* is undoubtedly a lot of work. However, the element of work is multifaceted, contribute to building relationships and ensuring the lasting participation of Racine's Armenian population.

Reunion

The theme of reunion connects to a broader cultural narrative of diaspora in Armenian history. Kachig Tölölyan, an Armenian-American scholar and founding editor of the Journal “Diaspora” describes different stages in the timeline of diasporic communities. From older diasporic groups emerge new forms of solidarity and cultural identification. Culture is not “being lost” in this process, rather, it widens the modes of belonging and concept of home even after first-hand connection to the old country fades. Tölölyan writes, “diasporas are resolutely multilocal and polycentric, in that what happens to kin communities in other areas of dispersion as well as in the homeland insistently matters to them” (Tölölyan, 2007, 631). Both “home” and “homeland” are embodied in Racine and the tradition of the *Madagh*. Originally, the *Madagh* served to connect the first-generation immigrants from historic Armenia. Since then, Racine has seen a microcosm of that immigration replicated within their community as people have found jobs and moved elsewhere. Now, the *Madagh* primarily serves families that have left Racine and is an opportunity for those individual to return home and maintain their bonds with friends and family. Jim Yogurtian articulated both of these elements in his interview, stating:

What I remember is that the next generation beyond my father and my mother, that's when the community started to disperse to other parts of the globe for their jobs or education or what it was. But growing up, it was basically the same people... My mom and dad would visit relatives every once in a while, but when we were at the picnic, we would visit with people we didn't normally visit with as relatives. (Jim, 2020)

Another interviewee working the *Madagh*, Sosi Mikaelian, said, “I think the picnic is almost to me like a big family reunion... and the way it is now in assimilation in America you get to come and still really feel Armenian. And hear Armenian music and eat Armenian food and it’s just really exciting” (Sosi, 2019). The *Madagh* acts as the context of reunion for diasporic Armenian-Americans scattered across the country. Reuniting around Racine’s a tradition garners additional significance because it contributes to the feeling of cultural continuation. It also follows the same procedure and layout, so attendees know their roles and what to expect from the day. In his interview, Sam Buchaklian described that familial tables across the picnic grounds. Each family has their own tables. Unofficially designated, generations of families sit at the same spot every year. This system of organization makes it easier to visit and catch-up with people. This “catching up” time was emphasized across the interviews. Sam went on to say, “People will take their vacations just at this time, just to be there and to see family” (Sam, 2019).

In their interviews, both Azniv Khaligian and Nora Fronjian told stories of reconnecting with cousins and the children of family friends at the picnic. Anziv and Nora used the *Madagh* as the way to trace the evolution of their relationships with friends and family. They described a transformation from goofy childhood experiences to connecting more seriously as they grew older. Nora’s story went further, showing the intergenerational relationships that occurred when Nora had her own children: “my mom would introduce my sister and I to her friends’ daughters and sons... and now we’re watching our children bond with our friends’ children. So, it’s really special” (Nora, 2020). Renewing these bonds on a generational level is an important means of ensuring long-term cultural continuation. Especially as individuals continue to disperse, St. Hagop’s *Madagh* acts as a kind of communal third space where for people to return each year.

In the paper “Diasporas through Anthropological Lenses: Contexts of Postmodernity” (2000) Andre Levy Examines the book *Faith in History: Armenians Rebuilding Community*, within the context of anthropological approaches to diasporas. Levy describes the phenomena of a “diaspora of a diaspora” (Levy, 2000, 144) when Armenians move out of their initial diasporic community to a new one. Racine faces this circumstance as people continue to relocate. Thus, a new kind of nostalgia for Racine mirrors that which is felt for Armenia. This is rich with complexity and contradiction but returns to Zohrab’s depiction of Racine as being particularly emblematic of “village life.” The *Madagh* in particular bolsters the association of Racine with Armenian heritage and indicates why people so devoutly return to Racine each summer. This also takes a more relativistic stance on modes of Armenian identity formation. Rather than being tied to a physical location, it is associated with the reunion of families. Jim Yogurtian described the correlation between the reunion and “feeling Armenian” saying, “I would hang around my mom and dad and they'd be talking to a lot of different people their age group and visiting people and hearing Armenian. And it was just, gave me a sense of pure identity...enjoying the company of our family and the other people that we broke bread with at the *Madagh*” (Jim, 2020). When I asked Jim why it was so important for him to keep returning to Racine, he said “It's a sense of community for me. It's a sense of belonging and it's a sense of family. When I come back to a Racine, Wisconsin, go to the *Madagh*, it's like the community makes me feel like, "oh, why did I leave?" (Jim, 2020)

A Racine Tradition

The *Madagh* today rests on the inclusion and the involvement of the community at large, Armenian and non-Armenian alike. Zohrab stated, “I would have to say at least half of the attendees at our picnic are not Armenian. The *Madagh* is not just an Armenian tradition. It's really become a Racine tradition” (Zohrab, 2020). The St. Hagop community recognizes the importance of the active participation of those beyond the members of St. Hagop. The friends, relatives or simply interested attendees from near and far strengthen the *Madagh* tradition. Although their forms of contribution and participation can vary widely, everyone who attends plays a role.

In a 2018 interview with John Katrine, a non-Armenian who works the *madagh* pit, described how his initial experience with the Armenian community was through food. He had been coming to the *Madagh* picnic for several years and was curious about how the *madagh* stew was prepared. Laughing, he added, “And I wanted to get more and more involved because I figured if I got involved more, I could get more food... And I watched the people and the people are fantastic... So, one of these years I finally took an oath and said, ‘I’m gonna wake up at four in the morning and get here’...and now here I am. It’s my second year and it’s great” (John, 2018). Other appreciative members of the broader Racine community include the mayor, Cory Mason, who sent a letter to St. Hagop in 2019 commending them for the *Madagh* calling it “a staple of the community” and acknowledging that “Such community events are the backbone of Racine, and the church has helped the surrounding area and community flourish with this generous event. Arriving at the H.F. Johnson Park at 5:00 AM and cooing the delicious meal is an arduous responsibility and I want to say thank you for helping make out city a better place” (Cory Mason, 2019, personal correspondence).

According to Sam Buchaklian (2019), the food of the *Madagh* was an important part in increasing the picnic's recognition over the years. He cited the *penerlee* or "Armenian cheese puffs" as one of the most popular items. *Penerlee* is flakey phyllo-like square of dough stuffed with cheese and deep fried. Beloved by Armenian and non-Armenian attendees, *penerlee* takes a traditional Armenian recipe and fuses it with a quintessential Wisconsin ingredient: brick cheese. In combining the best of both worlds, this innovative take on an old-country dish is now a staple of the *Madagh*, selling out consistently over the years. It is perhaps emblematic of the larger point made by interviewees, that the picnic transcends cultural boundaries and has been strengthened because of it.

In another conversation during the October trip to Racine, a 16-year-old member of St. Hagop described balancing American "school life" and Armenian "church life" and the gap between those two parts of her life. The *Madagh* is an opportunity for them to converge. Over the years, this has occurred in a number of surprising ways and lead to new connections and reconnections. Azniv Khaligian, another young member of St. Hagop, described the experience of meeting her freshman college roommate at the *Madagh*. They had met over their college's Facebook page and agreed to room together. Both were from Wisconsin and in trying to converge their busy schedules Azniv suggested she come to the *Madagh* so they could meet in person. Her roommate arrived accompanied by her mother while Azniv was in the middle of her shift and after a brief introduction had to return to work. The two guests were placed in the charge of Azniv's mother who seated them at the family's picnic table with plates of food. Over the course of their conversation both mothers realized that their fathers had been close friends. Blue Jenkins and

Eddie Shamshoian had worked together in Belle City Malleable Iron's factory where Blue had been prominent union official. As an African American in the pre-civil rights era, Blue was faced with racially-motivated housing discrimination and moved in with Eddie for a time. The symbolism of this rekindled connection was significant for Azniv. "Tears were shed... and to this day the church still asks me about my roommate whose grandpa was Blue and was friends with Ed. Yeah, definitely special that had happened there" (Azniv, 2020).

Nora Fronjian articulated the same point in her interview. She has invited her American friends to the picnic who have grown to love the *Madagh*. Nora spoke to the reason behind the cross-cultural appreciation: "Any time I've brought friends of mine to the picnic it's like, you come to one picnic and you're coming every year... I don't think I've ever brought anyone who hasn't come back... and one of my friends, my American friends always jokes around and says, 'I'm your adopted Armenian sister because they just feel like a part of our family'" (Nora, 2020).

Zohrab emphasized this as well, stating that the *Madagh* demonstrates a mode of belonging that is rare in today's society:

They [non-Armenians] see it's, in some cases, two, maybe three generations working side-by-side. We're lucky that with Armenians, we're trying to maintain our heritage that we put a big emphasis on family and maintaining these traditions. But sometimes for outsiders who don't have that same type of family tradition or that longevity, they're yearning for that belonging... just the idea of seeing this picnic ground of families all joined together at tables, even the individuals that aren't a part of those families coming

and viewing that and they feel it, that's what it is. It's something that is really unique in this day-and-age. (Zohrab, 2020)

It is significant that an immigrant community, most of whom were forced to Racine as a result of genocide, has been able to cultivate a sense of belonging strong enough to extend to non-Armenians as well. The *Madagh* is not an insular strategy of preserving community, but one that welcomes diverse participation to strengthen and celebrate the perpetuation of Armenian culture.

“Being Armenian”

What it means to “be Armenian” is fundamentally intertwined throughout the previous four themes. From the outset of this project, I was interested if and how people discussed and connected the *Madagh* to being Armenian. When I would ask “what does being Armenian mean to you?” people initially offered various standard cultural markers such as language, music, community, tradition and food. However, as the conversation continued many people arrived at the element of choice in Armenian identity. Choice underlies the broader cultural elements, it determines people’s level of participation in carrying on the traditions, food, music, and language. Choice also shapes community, particularly a small one like Racine. People must elect to maintain their relationships with one another and to participate in organizations like St. Hagop. Thus, choice is central to the efforts of maintaining Racine’s Armenian community. The *Madagh* exemplifies people making the decision to come and contribute their time and energy into their Armenian heritage. Zohrab stated:

The things I've noticed is being Armenian in this day and age, or being any ethnicity, it's a choice... Unfortunately, across the world, across society we're losing--and it doesn't have to be ethnicity--that sense of belonging. Everyone wants to belong to something, a group... With Armenians, we have this built-in sense of belonging, but it's gotten to a point where it's a choice because in a lot of ways, being Armenian is not easy because you almost have this dual life. All right. Do I speak Armenian, or do I speak English? Do I eat American food, or do I make Armenian food? In a way, it is a struggle, but the struggle is worth it when you basically can carry on, again, not just the tradition, but then you're looking at the future. (Zohrab, 2020)

Armenian lecturer, activist and community leader, Antranig Kasbarian published an article in the newspaper, the *Armenian Weekly* (2019), discussing cultural strategies to maintain Armenian identity in the diaspora. The term *hayabahbanum* literally translates to “armenopreservation.” Kasbarian traced the evolution of this concept over time as diasporic Armenians have found new ways of enacting their identity to reconcile the dualism of being both Armenian and American. Kasbarian contrasts the original strategies first employed by recent Armenian immigrants to that of the United States’ current Armenian youth. Forming strictly Armenian spaces through community groups, churches, schools, benevolent organizations was an initial tactic to preserve the elementals of Armenian identity, namely language, religion, and tradition. Today, a growing number of subsequent Armenian descendants have lives outside of those spheres. Many do not speak the language or attend church; however, they have actively created new methods of engaging and enacting their Armenian heritage. I see this in myself in deciding to pursue this project for my senior thesis. I see it in my cousins who have created popular blogs of Armenian

memes, and in others who have returned to Armenia through recently established birthright or music programs. I noticed rhetoric of Armenian nationalism and cultural pride throughout both the presentations and informal conversations at the Norian Youth Connect Conference. From the beginning of this project, I have been interested in ways that Armenians engage with the “homeland” and the connection to identity in diasporic Armenian-Americans. According to the interviewees, for a largely diasporic ethnic group like the Armenians, choice—rather than community size or “pure” Armenian ancestry—is the most important factor in truly being Armenian.

In her interview Sosi Mikaelian took it one step further, stating that the most important determinant of Armenian ethnicity is the spirit, rather than bloodline:

You hear people say, ‘oh you’re not Armenian if you don’t speak Armenian or you’re not Armenian if you don’t do this’ and I think what it is really just a feeling and if you have it in your heart that you’re Armenian then my position is that we welcome you. As you can see there are many people here who are not actually ethnically Armenian, but we claim them as ours. They’re Armenian. So, to me you don’t have to be ethnically Armenian to be Armenian. You can have the spirit and not be ethnically Armenian. (Sosi, 2019)

Zohrab echoed this point, discussing non-Armenians who have contributed to Armenia through the Peace Corps and have since returned to work for Armenian organizations. According to this perspective, perpetuating Armenian heritage is open to anyone who cares enough to make the choice to do so. The leniency may be a product of the Genocide and resulting diaspora. With

people spread across the world, adopting a more inclusive criteria for “being Armenian” is a practical strategy to keep the culture alive.

Choosing to be Armenian is also seen as an obligation, linked to the element of survival associated with the genocide. Jim, Zohrab and Vache brought up the genocide and legacy of their ancestors. The best way of honoring the ancestors and their sacrifices is active participation in traditions such as the *Madagh* picnic. Jim said, “Out of the vast array of nationalities and cultures in the world, Armenians have survived millennia. And so basically, here I am, a survivor of a person who survived the Armenian genocide and my grandparents did too, to some degree. And basically, that's the identity, is that we're survivors” (Jim, 2020). Vache also cited the forefathers as a reason behind his participation in the *Madagh* saying, “It’s a good way to pay some homage, again like I said, those forefathers, the first generation that came here and brought this tradition from their villages. And we’re still continuing it. So, I love this” (Vache, 2019).

Zohrab elaborates on this point. He asserts that in addition to identifying the Genocide as a deep motivation for sustaining Armenian culture, the methods of perpetuating it must be open to change:

I don't like to always go back and look at the tragedy in our history, but because of the genocide, we also have this drive to say, "Well, listen. They tried to wipe us off of the earth. We need to make sure and prove them wrong that you can never wipe us off the earth." And so, being Armenian is, whatever aspect, choosing something and then keeping that and moving forward. The key is, again, it's important to keep the tradition

and what we have, but also to realize that things have to change in order to maintain that and make it attractive for the next generation to want to continue that. (Zohrab, 2020)

While acknowledging the Genocide as a provocative source of action, Zohrab empathizes that the choice to participate cannot be limited solely by how things were done in the past. Rather, he, like scholar Kachig Tölölyan, identifies that new forms of honoring and enacting what it means to “be Armenian” is required “when it becomes obvious to the diaspora that it can no longer presume an automatically shared “sameness” with the people in the homeland” (Tölölyan, 2007, 651). In this endeavor Zohrab sees the most potential in Racine’s youth.

In March, before the screening of the video, I gave a presentation of the project to the Racine chapter of the Armenian Youth Federation. Again, the conversation shifted to the challenges and strategies of Racine’s younger community members, from the ages of approximately 13 to 23, to incorporate their Armenian life into their everyday school or “American life.” They discussed social studies projects about their ancestors or the genocide. Including the youth and taking their participation seriously is a critical strategy for continuing Armenian culture. Zohrab spoke at length about his efforts to ensure that kids of all ages were brought into the process of *Madagh* day, not only for the purpose of learning the traditions, but also so those traditions could be innovated and improved upon.

The key is that we can't expect the kids or that younger generation to do it exactly like we did. It's important to empower them first. We need to teach them, show them the tradition, but then also let them take that and build upon it. They need to make it their

own. That empowering is important. If we just basically sat there and looked over their shoulder to make sure they did it exactly like we did, they wouldn't be learning anything at all, and they wouldn't feel that pride. They would just be mimicking what they saw their parents do. The key was is to get each of them jobs that then they could start to do, develop, and make better... But it's key that once they feel that pride, then they'll start looking, "What else can I do to help my community or my village out?" (Zohrab, 2020)

In the interviews, I tried to find where people drew the line between innovation and tradition. What were the cultural elements that needed to remain “untouched” and what were open to change? This was a difficult question, and I did not get a firm answer from the interviewees. The only conclusion I can draw is that there is a fine line between the two, and people have different perspectives on what should and should not be changed about the *Madagh*. Zohrab, as a leader of the picnic seemed receptive to new suggestions. At the very least they indicated genuine engagement in the *Madagh* and Armenian heritage.

Anthropologizing the Narrative

Anthropology of the 1970s and 1980s highlighted the difficulties of collaboration in ethnographic fieldwork stemming from dynamics of power and hierarchies of cultural knowledge and authority both between anthropologist and the community and within the community itself. Removing my personal and professional narrative from the video was a decision I made to try and forefront the perspectives and experiences of the *Madagh* community. But this choice is still fraught with issues regarding ethnographic honesty. In “Ten Lies of Ethnography: Moral Dilemmas of Field Research” (1993) Gary Fine makes a pointed critique of

the illusions of qualitative methodology, scrutinizing the constraints and expectations that accompany academic scholarship and the various positionalities ethnographers take to lend their work legitimacy. The “unobtrusive” or “honest” ethnographer are two positionalities often held by researchers to lend accountability to their work. Fine makes a bold claim that the observations and positionality put forth by the researcher inherently avoids alternative interpretations and meaning. The ultimate danger of ethnographic work is the guise of complete truth. For this reason, I do not claim my decision to not appear in the film as a better or sounder alternative. It raises its own set of issues regarding who has ultimate control and authority over the story and requires justification of the decisions I made while putting together the video. All I can claim is that from the start of this project I hoped to make a video that tried an approach that centered around the narrative put forth by the community. Whether or not it compromises that legitimacy of the product as a “true” ethnographic work is, perhaps, contentious. This is not the only way to have gone about making this video. Given a longer timeline and additional resources I could have continued to incorporate these insights in further interviews and continue intersubjective conversation about the motivations behind their original interviews. I hope that sharing this paper alongside the video on my website will encourage these exchanges both with the community and academia. Ultimately, while making this video I did not see my role as an ethnographer to evaluate the truth of people’s experience or posit a singular causation to the meaning behind their narrative. However, discussing the constraints and implications of my process can help unpack possible meanings behind the stories themselves.

There are many anthropological observations that could be made about the video but the point I would like to investigate is the romanization of the *Madagh* and notions of what it means to be

Armenian. How people selectively choose to discuss the picnic and what it means to be Armenian contains valuable insights into those very questions. One factor is that these narratives were inherently mediated by the context of the conversation as a video or audio-recorded interview. This fact alone alters how people talk about the *Madagh*, knowing that their opinion will be made public and reflect this event and the Armenian community. Rather than compromising the video, I see this as a fascinating opportunity to consider the implications and underlying meanings of these accounts and how they fit together in the video's overall narrative. In a conversation with Holly following the completion of the video, she said in passing that "no one wants to say anything negative to you in the video" [paraphrased]. This is an important point and conundrum in any ethnography, but particularly for ethnographic films. The dynamics of recording immediately and significantly alters the context of the conversation. While using an open-ended, conversational-style interview format was my method of mitigating that fact, people were undoubtedly aware that their testimonies were going to be public and used to represent the *Madagh* and Racine's Armenian community.

Many of the conversations about the *Madagh* connected to a broader conception of idealizations of "village life" and harkening back to the homeland. Zohrab specifically introduced this term in his interview and used it extensively to describe the *Madagh*. However, he also identified how that nostalgia for the homeland of Armenia can be misplaced and overgeneralized. The first generation of Armenians to come to Racine, came from western villages that were part of the Ottoman Empire and currently Eastern Turkey. Additionally, the romanticization of "village life" often excludes the same characteristics that are present in Armenian communities outside of Armenia. Celebrating only old ways of life obscures opportunities of the present. Armenians are

a global diasporic community. The Genocide forced Armenians to relocate across the world, garnering considerable resentment and grief, exacerbated by the fact that the Genocide is still not formally recognized by Turkey. However, Zohrab made the point that having a global community has accrued some benefits.

The benefit, though, was that at the same time that we have the country of Armenia, the Armenian nation truly is a diasporian nation. It's Armenians wherever we are, we're around the world. Having Armenians in the United States helps. For instance, the United States finally recognized that Congress adopted the Genocide Resolution. That couldn't have been done by Armenians living in Armenia. The same way that the United States provides economic aid to Armenia could not be done by Armenians living in Armenia. You have that reliance, and that's the importance of having Armenians in the diaspora, in the United States, and around the world. (Zohrab, 2020)

Even when people emphasized the benefits of innovation and inclusion for the Armenian community, it was hard to talk about “being Armenian” without invoking idealistic rhetoric and metaphors about the past. The nostalgia and pride in continuing an old country tradition like St. Hagop’s *Madagh*, especially one that has been largely discontinued, suggests a larger cultural anxiety and nostalgia. The attention given to articulating the benefits of maintaining tradition is coupled with the paradox of existing as naturalized American citizens. The first Racine Armenians have passed away, and over the course of this project many people expressed regret that I would not be able to document their stories and original memories of life in their villages. In the book chapter “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (2014) sociologist and cultural theorist

Stuart Hall asserts that identity creation comes from the specific context and position. The way people talk about the *Madagh*, harkening back to the ancestors and invoking the importance of maintaining traditions from the villages *is not precisely what it claims to be*. Hall (2014) writes that:

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematises the very authority and authenticity to which the term, 'cultural identity', lays claim. (Hall, 2014, 222)

Without the ongoing articulation of direct experiences from the homeland, the consequential generations continue to reconstruct the idea of Armenian identity and “village life” through their imagination and traditions, most notably the *Madagh*. By re-telling stories of the past, people are reconstructing experiences and memories, fundamentally impacting conceptions of Armenian identity over time. This looks different for different people based on generational and gender-based experiences and positionalities. However, the *Madagh* is a place where all of these people can come together, work together, and together mitigate the boundaries and expectations for “being Armenian.” For small and largely unrecognized Armenian communities such as Racine, this determination to prove their validity as Armenians is perhaps heightened. Armenians are still grappling with the tension of dual identity. The first Armenian immigrants to come to Racine originally expected that they would someday return to Armenia. The emphasis on keeping that

“village life” for that eventual return coupled with the lack of closure surrounding the Genocide makes it more difficult.

This is currently playing out on a macro scale in the increase in return migration of diasporic Armenians to Armenia. Relatively new opportunities have arisen for third-generation Armenians to return to Armenia which corresponded with Armenia’s sovereignty from the Soviet Union in the late 1990s. Daniel Fittante, writes about Armenian “ancestral return migration” (2017, 148), which investigates diasporic Armenian’s motivations for returning to their ancestral homeland. Fittante found that the sentiment and ideologic responsibility to “the homeland” was not only strong enough to motivate later generations to return, but it was also strong enough to keep them there throughout periods of disillusionment or alienation. Periods of culture shock or lack of acceptance into local communities demonstrates the uneasy and sometimes uncomfortable position of diasporic Armenians in finding their perceived homeland. Sossie Kasbarian (2009) adds another crucial point to the motivation for return stemming from the pressure and standards of their diasporic community that restricted conceptions of Armenian identity. Kasbarian uses the term “sojourn” to describe the phenomenon of return migration. She asserts that these instances of sojourning are significant because they indicate the ways diasporic Armenians are subverting the status quo and independently creating their own Armenian identity by direct return.

Nevertheless, balancing and reconciling both aspects of identity is challenging. Racine’s Armenian community is fortunate to have the support and acceptance of the broader community.

However, with naturalization and agency comes a whole new set of pressure and perhaps even stigma stemming from the Armenian community for losing their ethnic “purity.” Hybridity of this dual identity both reimagines and reinforces concepts of “Armenianess.” The *Madagh* brings this to light, and the ways it plays out indicate the multiple localities of Racine’s Armenian community. It balances the successful integration and acceptance in the Racine community, with a pride and nostalgia for conceptions of the past. The narratives provided by collaborators highlight the importance of retaining this tradition while balancing its expansion to non-Armenians and the practical service for the church. The *Madagh* is not emblematic of just enculturation or disintegration, but the paradox of doing both. It includes the idealism and adherence to traditions from the past with the functional purpose for the present. It is a site where the dualism of Armenian-American identity and belonging has evolved over time and continues to be negotiated. Social anthropologist Frederick Barth (1969) uses socio-cultural boundaries to study and demarcate culture rather than cultural elements. Organized cultures of difference are not beholden by any one tradition, religion, language, or other cultural trait, but by the way the boundaries of their “cultural stuff” (Barth, 1969, 15) is drawn and mediated. The boundaries that people invent can be used as a strategy to evaluate and standardize acceptance and status within a cultural group across contexts but are ultimately self-defined and imposed. How people talk about the *Madagh* tradition and how they discuss being Armenian is enclosed by tenuous social boundaries. Reconciling a nostalgia for Armenia with present life in Racine problematizes maintaining the segregation of the two. The picnic is significant because it is a context for that negotiation to play out, where the Armenian-Americans can be both proud Armenians while simultaneously feel accepted and supported in their home, Racine.

So What? Impact & Insights

Project Outcomes

The collaboration in this project has been heterogeneous and involved people across different ages, genders and level of participation in the *Madagh*. There were 43 different collaborators in total that participated in an audio or video interview or contributed personal media to the project. However, several people were involved in multiple forms of collaboration. There were 35 different interviews, both audio and video. Ten media contributors loaned 8 mm film, photo negatives, digital photos, and other ephemera. In total, I had around 166 video and audio clips on my hard drive that totaled 10:22:17 in length. I had 104 photo negatives digitized and hundreds more digital photos that were taken by myself and collaborators. This media was made accessible to collaborators via the website. In addition, between 50-60 community members attended the March screening of the *Madagh* video and gave their written and oral feedback to the video. The Racine *Soseh* Chapter of the ARS contributed \$700 dollars to help fund this work. Outside of the Racine Community, collaborative photographer and artist Dan Higgins encouraged the community-based work of this project and provided \$1,500 which enabled the March screening of the *Madagh* video.

The screening was the greatest opportunity for direct feedback and gauge the impact of the video. I wanted a sense of how the video was received, interpreted by the St. Hagop audience and how they imagined it should, and/or should not, be used. This was the focus of the discussion following the screening. The outcomes that the community wanted from the video took various iterations of the same sentiment: to generate more awareness and support of the Racine (St. Hagop) Armenian community. The conversation largely consisted of people offering

suggestions about means of disseminating the video. From the local Racine Heritage Museum and Visitor's Center, to the universities and colleges in Wisconsin, to Armenian cultural institutions and museums across the United States and even Armenia, the community wanted to send the video far and wide. In the days following the screening I received calls from people who did not attend the screening but watched the video from home. Jim Yogurtian sent a follow-up email to say thank-you and let me know that he had filled out the online survey. Several days later he sent another, writing, "I enjoy your efforts so much I have viewed the video six times!" (Jim, 3/10/20, email correspondence) In addition, people who came to the screening watched the video multiple times afterwards and approached me with more detailed advice regarding technical edits. Holly also began talking about methods of showing the video during the 2020 summer *Madagh* and hosting another screening that was publicized to the Chicago and Milwaukee Armenian communities as well.

It was also important to understand how the collaborators interpreted the video and whether they identified and agreed with its themes. I felt the added responsibility of having been the only one to create the video's narrative. Despite people's apparent disinterest in taking part in this form of collaboration, negotiating representation in visual narratives still requires the ethnographer, "be accountable for why and how we listen to stories, which stories we listen to, and if and how we acknowledge and retell these stories" (Doucet, 2018, 749). Since much of the conversation focused on the use of the video, the printed surveys I put on all the tables generated the most substantial insight about how people responded to the video's themes and story. People wrote that the video demonstrated, "the sense of community to make the picnic a reality every year through generations," "strong sense of family and community," and "how we made the picnic a

success by all working together.” People were also able to identify themselves and their personal experiences of the *Madagh* in the video. Viewers wrote that they “saw many family members in the video along with myself.” This was a means of recognizing and honoring the past as it, “brought back memories of past picnics,” a powerful experience that people said, “brought me to tears at times.” The use of family photographs and video footage supplemented this experience and people commented on the digitized film and use of the music from the St. Hagop Junior Choir. Integrating personal and historical media was a powerful means of evoking a sense of identity. In discussing the use of family photographs in decolonizing ethnography, Andrea Doucet writes, “there are spaces of vulnerability that one enters when we look again at our own family histories and we rethink, renarrate, and remake those histories, the cherished people in them, and the many narrative identities that were made in the emplotment and reemplotment of particular stories across time” (Doucet, 2018, 750). Together, the use of visual media and interview narratives were an effective means of ethnographic representation according to the feedback of the community. This returns to Sarah Pink’s point that public and applied visual ethnography can, “allow, in a very direct way, the experiences of those who are normally invisible to be seen and their voices and feelings to be heard... explore particular, and often affective, dimensions of experience in ways often not approached using conventional methods... creating new empathetic routes through which to broker everyday knowledge” (Pink, 2011, 450-451). Collaborators wrote that, “I thought you portrayed the essence of the culture,” “you did a wonderful job capturing the essence of a wonderful tradition,” “I’m so proud. It’s an old and revered culture” or simply, “you caught the feeling.”

Beyond the data that easily translates to numerical and recorded forms of data are the less quantifiable forms of collaboration and support. I want to make sure that these are acknowledged as well. This includes the people who have suggested names of possible interviewees, who have provided background on the community dynamics of Racine, the people too young to be interviewed but still talked and listened about my work and shared their own experience growing up as an Armenian-American. There were people who have called me on the phone to say thanks after watching the video online. There were others who recommended resources and likewise asked for resource recommendations for similar projects of their own. If this work has taught me anything, it is to be adaptable and appreciative of collaboration in all its forms. Together, all of these people and their contributions have shaped and made this project possible.

Self-Reflexivity in Retrospect: Was I “Armenian enough” to do this project?

This final point on what it means to be Armenian is by no means universally agreed upon, but the element of “choice” as it was described across interviews has expanded my understanding. It has helped me situate myself in the murky waters of “Armenianness.” I have come to find the fact that there are so many conceptions of what it means to “be Armenian” quite exciting. However, at the beginning this project and throughout, I faced moments of insecurity about whether I was qualified to tell the story of St. Hagop’s *Madagh*. I was confused as to why I received such an apparently passive response to my requests for input. I was daunted by the responsibility of having to craft the narrative myself. It flew in the face of my research on collaborative ethnography and I was convinced that it was due to some error on my part. Did people feel like they were unable to provide feedback? Did they think I did not care or would not listen? This could still in part be true; however, I have come to see the fact that I *wanted to do*

this work in the first place is exactly what Zohrab and others meant when describing the importance of choice in Armenian identity.

Over the course of this project I have come to meet new people beyond my family sphere in Racine, it has opened the door to new experiences such as the Norian Youth Connect Conference in New York City, I have done extensive research into the history of Racine and the *Madagh* tradition. In coding interviews, research, organizing and re-organizing the storyboard, sharing this work with the community—in short, the collaborative ethnographic process—demonstrated my genuine attempt to engage with my Armenian heritage. I think that it why people initially responded with “we’ll leave it up to you” [paraphrase] from the outset of this project. Occupying the role of both ethnographer and legitimate cultural insider has been an asset as a researcher and individual. I would like to return to Elaine Lawless quote: “As ethnographers striving to be conscious of our own ideologies, we are obligated to present ourselves in our texts as we are in our work: humans seeking understanding, engaged in dialogue and interpretation with other people who are engaged in dialogue and interpretation, seeking meaning” (Lawless, 2019, 80-81). I have come to understand this point as the fundamental condition of collaborative ethnography. Presenting our approach, our questions, our positionality, and ourselves personally is not only an internal expectation, but also an expectation set by the community.

Above all else, I believe this should be the goal of any ethnography. Anthropologists and ethnographers long before me have attested that impartiality is impossible, and knowledge is inherently situated and subjective. Therefore, entering fieldwork with transparency, openness to collaborative interpretation, and genuine attempt at understanding has proven to be the most

important precursor to this project. The support of the collaborators throughout this process has been inspiring and heightened my standards and try and exceed their expectations. The St. Hagop community trusted and understood my choice to attempt and better understand my heritage. They knew before I did that I was, in fact, “Armenian enough” to participate in the story of the *Madagh*.

The Next Chapter

Lassiter ends his guide on collaborative ethnography reiterating the foundational practices that make collaborative ethnography unique. It honors, “the interrelationships of ethical and moral responsibility, ethnographic honesty, accessible writing, and collaborative reading and editing all come together to create the basis for collaborative ethnography” (Lassiter, 2005, 154). However, Lassiter continues to say that beyond the ethics and good intentions, collaborative ethnography must be directed towards a mode of action, both on the individual and disciplinary level. Over the course of this project, I have learned that ethnographic collaboration exists on a continuum. It can result in a written analysis that applies anthropological insight to a cultural practice based on ethnographic practices including interviews, research, and participation in a cultural community. It can also result in a creative visual media made for and by the community. This project is both. It is a collaborative documentary-style video made as a resource to practically benefit the Racine Armenian community. It is also this paper, which analyzes that collaborative process and interprets the cultural and social dynamics at play in this tradition to further academic research. Together, both the video and this paper can reach and serve both academics and the community collaborators. These two products inform and build upon one another. When used in conjunction they potentially disseminate anthropological insight to a wider audience. The video de-abstracts

the academic theories so community collaborators can actually see and hear themselves in relation to the anthropological observations written by the ethnographer. These narratives are used as the basis of ethnographic analysis in the paper. Making the video and my analysis accessible is beneficial because it increases the accessibility and relevance of ethnographic work for both academic and community audiences. This has the potential to promote collaboration and encourage new questions, contestation, and analysis to increase self-reflexivity and widen the scope of knowledge.

The best ethnographies are the ones that are not only well-researched, brave, honest, pieces of scholarship. They also leave a tangible impact. The video was a tangible and accessible record of the *Madagh* tradition and community. It made people laugh, tear up, and invoke a sense of pride in their community and heritage. This was by no means a flawless ethnography. I still have a lot to learn about methods of community engagement, interviewing, filming, editing, writing, research... the list goes on. But even a project as imperfect as this one could be returned to the community and be meaningful. This experience has given me something I can build upon, methodological tools that can continue to be developed in future projects. I believe that the fundamental legacy and potential for ethnographic research rests on its ability to communicate new ideas, questions, and understanding about the world's cultures and people. To do so ethically and effectively we also must practice that same open-mindedness in our research process. Like the *Madagh* picnic, the success of this ethnography rests on inclusion, relativism, and an endless amount of energy and enthusiasm. The tradition of the *Madagh* persists because of the dynamism and innovations that strengthen its fundamental story and legacy. This is the secret recipe that has powered this project and fostered new forms of engagement and understanding.

The end of this project corresponded with the beginning of the spread of COVID-19 in the United States. For the first time in St. Hagop's 82-year history the *Madagh* has been canceled. This was a difficult decision for Zohrab, Holly, and the rest of the leaders of the picnic. The implications range from emotional, as people are unable to reconnect with family and friends they only see once a year at the picnic; to financial, as St. Hagop will lose its biggest source of income; to cultural, as the heightened traditions and pride surrounding the picnic are disrupted. Silva reached out to me before the church had formally released the news with the idea for using the video as fundraiser. We are making plans to sell 100 copies of the *Madagh* video on DVDs purchased with some of the funds from the Dan Higgins scholarship. I continue to share media and resources on the social media platforms for this project. To date, the *Madagh* video has over 1,000 views on YouTube and people have continued to contact me via my website to send me their photographs and share their memories of the picnic or St. Hagop. At this point, I see my role as a kind of archivist working to collect, organize, and share these resources to help people stay connected.

Now more than ever, ethnographers across disciplines—anthropology, folklore, and the visual arts—must seek and develop methods of both gathering ethnographic data and disseminating their work. I have been encouraged by the plethora of emails from listservs of ethnographers and cultural organizations that are refocusing their attention to creative uses of media to pursue new projects or provide greater access to existing ones. The ultimate benefit of producing a visual ethnographic product is it can be multipurposed and put to a variety of immediate and future uses by the community. As is the nature of collaborative ethnography, this project does not end with

the final tweaks to the video or the thesis defense. For as long as Racine's *Madagh* is valued by the Armenian community, we will continue this work.

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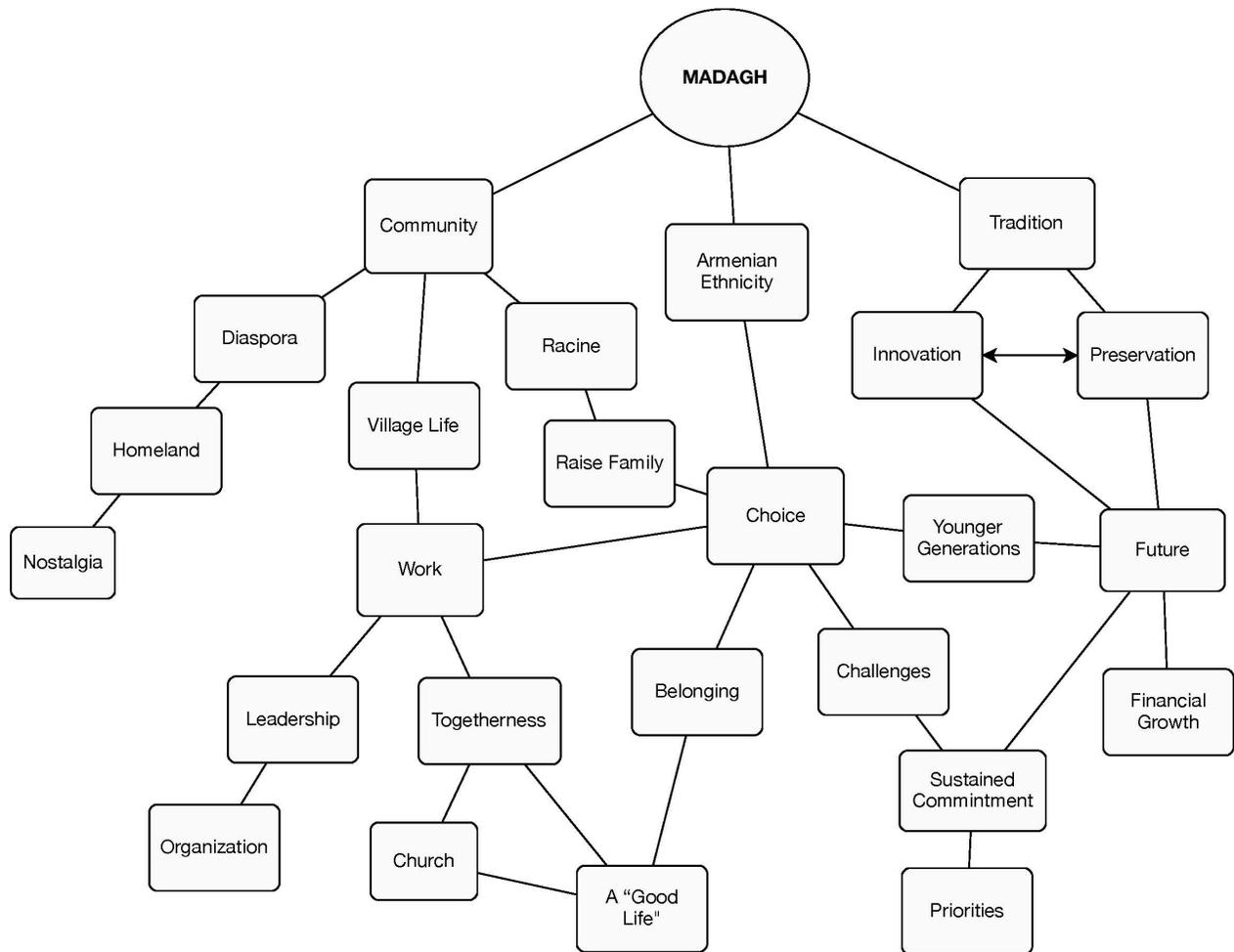
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Appendix

Figure 1: Thematic Map of Zohrab’s Interview



This “Thematic Map” was created with NVivo 12 software program to visually represent the connection between the various themes of the interview. This was used as a starting point to identify and corroborate reoccurring themes across interviews.