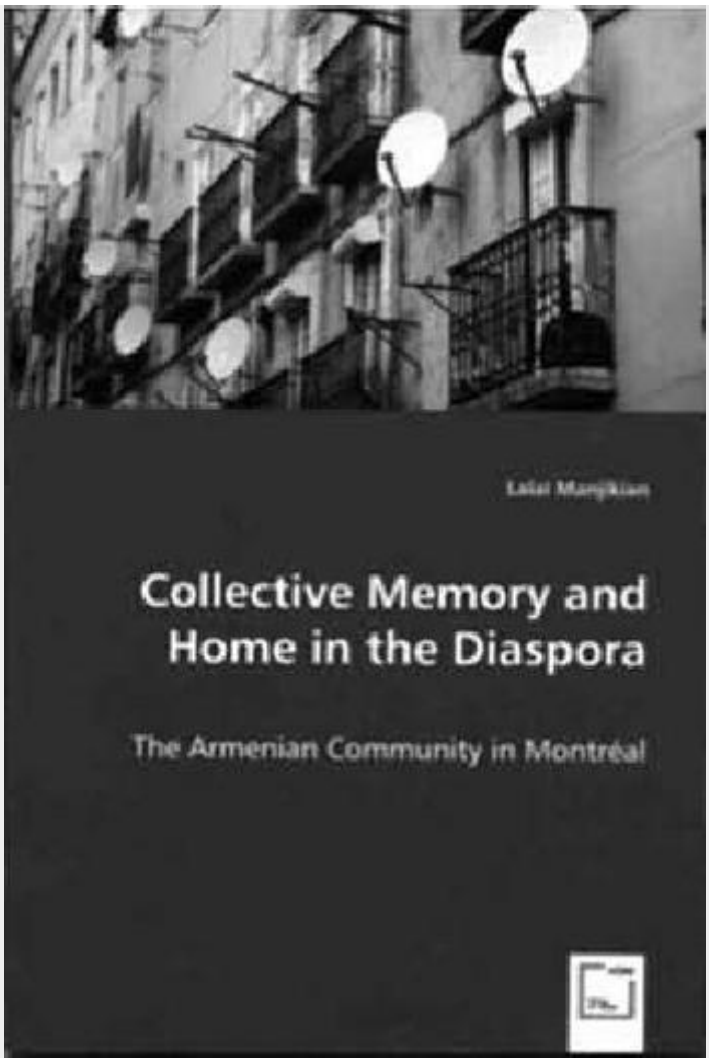
WORRIED BEADS: THE FUTURE OF THE DIASPORA

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Category: Opinions

By Lalai Manjikian, PhD Candidate, Montréal, The Armenian Weekly, 29 August 2009

The Population Reference Bureau projects that the global population will reach 7 billion in 2011. This growth is measured based on several variables, including birth and mortality rates, as well as migration patterns. Is there a bureau somewhere that can project the future of the Armenian Diaspora? It is growing, stagnating, or receding? And what would be the measuring variables in order to predict whether the diaspora is headed for disaster or growth? Is the Armenian Diaspora vanishing?

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I have been witnessing the involvement and commitment of those generations preceding mine—at times in awe, and at times critically, yet always in great admiration. Trailblazers for justice, guardians of schools, community centers, and faith, grassroots activists, conservers of culture, have all played an instrumental role in maintaining the structures and nurturing the identity needed to survive in the diaspora. I wonder if we, the current generation, have the same dedication, drive, and endurance to carry out the work ahead. I like to think that we do.
An optimist by nature, I usually dismiss the worried appeals made by community leaders or intellectuals who express concern about the future of the Armenian diaspora as over-reaction or strong protectionism. Some lament the fact that in places like Poland, India, and Singapore, Armenian graveyards, churches, and a lone school are all that stand, whereas in the past Armenians were a thriving community there. They once made considerable contributions to the local economy, culture, and society, as well as to Armenian diasporic life. Undoubtedly, it is a loss and how exciting would it have been to live in a place like Calcutta! On the other hand, it also seems like such extinctions are a natural occurrence for a diasporic people whose fate is far from being sedentary. Life decisions, unstable local economic and political conditions likely led Armenians once residing in these places to set roots elsewhere or even blend in local society, also an inevitable reality intrinsic to diasporic dwellers.

More recently, hearing a family friend talk about the Armenian community in Addis Ababa, where she was born and spent most of her life, I realized the prospects there look grim. I followed up by reading about the community and indeed, it seems as though the diaspora's days in Ethiopia are

numbered. The country's political upheaval in the past, an aging Armenian population, the youth heading abroad for education and employment opportunities, as well as the low chance of Ethio-Armenians reproducing within the group, have led to a considerable decrease in the Armenian population.

Again, it is an unfortunate loss that hardly seems salvageable, but not surprising considering that diasporas are in constant movement and evolution and cannot be viewed as a static object.

Despite the mobile nature of diasporas, I doubt that diasporic communities in the West will be but a memory in decades to come. Nevertheless, preventively speaking, two conditions should increasingly prevail within our diasporic circles, in order to avoid potential dissolution. First, we need to seek ways and opportunities for creating sustained relations with the local society and other ethnic communities living in our respective cities. This need to open up and break free from insularity for good is a fundamental key to our survival. Marketing ourselves, establishing dialogue, offering our community and cultural space to the city at large, just as other cultural communities do, should be sought out actively. The days of protecting Armenian culture for Armenians are long gone. Instead, sharing and exchanging are in.

My second concern is ensuring that our most powerful resource—active and engaged individuals—are prepared to take up the challenge for generations to come. Community leaders are desperately trying to reach out and recruit the youth segment, sometimes successfully and on occasion unsuccessfully. As it is now, a solid core of active youth does exist within our diasporic communities. Though what can seem discouraging at times is a dangerously slim number of active individuals. The same faces are on the frontlines and the pool is too small in comparison to the overall number of Armenian youth. I fear that too many remain on the peripheries of diasporic communities. In an age where modes of communication such as the internet facilitate and strengthen diasporic networks in place, the time is now to mobilize and engage fresh, educated, and talented beads.

So, are we ready to step up to the plate? Will our diaspora consciousness survive for years to come, or will it weaken and drown in assimilation or indifference? Will it grow and be open to new formulations, or is it destined for a gradual demise? Is the ultimate antidote our now-independent and accessible homeland which feeds our diasporic consciousness with nostalgia and purpose, in turn, strengthening our commitment both towards Armenia and the diaspora? Either way, a blossoming diaspora only equates to a blossoming Armenia and vice versa.