“Trans-state-al Productions at Sea: The Armenian Heritage Cruise in the Caribbean”

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Every January, hundreds of Armenians come together on the Armenian Heritage Cruise aboard a Costa® cruise ship that departs from Ft. Lauderdale, Florida and sails around the Caribbean. Ports of call include the islands of Jamaica, St. Thomas, and Puerto Rico, where the passengers visit beaches, buy local handicrafts, and eat local fare. This themed cruise, organized by the Armenian Cultural Association of America (ACAA) “for the promotion of Armenian fellowship and awareness among the Armenian communities,” manifests as a temporary Armenian nation-state. At sea, the same passengers take part in a non-stop program of constructing the Armenian nation, participating in what organizers term “authentic Armenian” activities, including Armenian language courses, dance classes, lectures, church services, and attending Armenian concerts, variety and comedy shows, dance performances, and theatre. While past studies that examine the role of tourism on the economic, social, and cultural development of the areas around the Caribbean and Latin America have tended to address the perspective of the “guest” more than the “host” (Rosa, 2001), more recent scholarship speaks to these limitations by addressing the value of comparative approaches between the two (Montero, 2011). This paper, based on ethnographic interviews and on-site research of the Armenian Heritage Cruise, will go beyond the host/guest binary and include additional actors that contribute to national building and national production. In particular it will examine how host “paradise” islands, members of the nation, employees of the cruise lines, transnational cruise line companies, and the ACAA “government”—produce the Armenian nation at sea. The inclusion of these additional political actors merges the fields of Transnational American Studies and Tourism while examining the production of an Armenian nation-state whose members are simultaneously citizens of other nation-states including the United States, Canada, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the Republic of Armenia. Armenian citizens of the MENA physically travel to the Americas to form the Armenian nation-state, supported and served by members of additional nation-states that employ the locality of the Caribbean. The particularities of this annual (since 1998) voyage, which reinforces the tourism conditioned economy, provides the opportunity for the researcher to go beyond the host/guest dichotomy and examine the complex interplay of various actors and their role in the production of the nation, paradise, and tourism based economy. In so doing it will also compare these processes to other Armenian experiences and other “off shore” nation making activities.