

ARA SARKISSIAN

Interviewed by Heather Tosteson

WHERE IS THE 'WE'?

Fatherhood is wonderful. It makes you think about many things. It doesn't necessarily offer answers, but it puts out questions. I do wish I had had my daughter fifteen years ago because I can't live with the lack of sleep—and back then I felt I had the answers. But hopefully I am a bit wiser now.

What is America?

If you think about America as an ideal—it's a very unique nation-state that is not based on any ethnic allegiance, as opposed to most other places. In Germany, most people are German, and in Poland, Polish, etc. Perhaps in South America it might be a little different because people came from elsewhere, but in most other places there is a ruling ethos tied to the character of the nation-state. There is the mass culture idea of America with people obsessed with how white their teeth are, the extra large Diet Coke bottles and Disneyland. But when you think about what the heart of the country is, for me it's the South. It's true that the South has a past filled with things that are so obviously problematic, yet it seems to me the place where one can find the roots of the non-mass American culture—Appalachian music, banjo playing, cooking, hospitality, a sense of independence from *center*. Maybe it will take another generation or two for this culture to disappear into the *mass*. People often describe the U.S. as a place where people will give you a coffee, and then point to the time, whereas in most other places people would stay for hours and hours. But it feels like in the South, you could visit with someone for six hours, quite unlike in Boston.

I think, having been here for twenty years now, that this idea of America as a homeland is starting to take hold here. The notion of "I was here before you," prevalent in many other places, is starting to take hold here as well. Perhaps it just happens when a country gets to a certain age. People are developing the same sense of attachment and protectionism that you find

other places. I don't know if it is controllable. Is it just something that is natural? I can't figure out if it is something you can control. Perhaps it is just a result of thinking in a box. I think about this a lot. People assume they share a lot and a lot gets brushed under the rug for them to think this way. But every twenty or thirty years here there are riots. What is interesting is that people have very selective memories. Each time it is as if it never happened before. Everything is in the past and "the past" is always untouchably far away.

This is strange for me being Armenian, because we remember what happened 1300 years ago, where battles took place, who won and who lost, and how it affected the future. Why can't people here remember what happened in L.A. in the 1990s? Maybe there's something I can learn from them here. Maybe it is good to forget. And then I think, maybe there's something they can learn from me, maybe they should learn what they shouldn't forget. When you get your citizenship, no one tells you what is the right answer.

Growing Up in Lebanon

I just visited Lebanon last January for the first time in ten years. My last visit was twelve years before. It seems I go about every decade. For me, it felt like a normal place to live growing up. War was something we just grew up with. I was four years old when war began. This was a civil war, so in addition to invading armies, there were invading sub-armies invading neighborhoods. In a way it was bizarre, to be honest—like a very bad movie we just stopped watching.

There were many of us Armenians in Lebanon then. There aren't now. Maybe there were about 150,000 Armenians out of about three million people living in Lebanon. Armenians congregated mostly in the capital. We had our own neighborhoods where maybe half the people spoke Armenian. It didn't feel like a transitory environment. The only choice other than making it a home was to emigrate again, which after a while becomes tiring. Even if you yourself did not emigrate originally, after the immigration of the previous generation, you felt as if you needed to stay a while.

The Lebanese system was set up to distribute rights along sectarian lines, and Armenians, like other groups, had representation based on their population. We knew we were not Arabs, the dominant population in Lebanon, yet we were Lebanese, which is a multi-layered concept.

We were citizens of a nation-state, there wasn't necessarily allegiance to a tribe. It wasn't that different, at least legally, from being a citizen of the