

# Diasporic memory practice on the Internet: Remembering lost homelands

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## Abstract

This article examines the work of two diasporic memory organizations, Kresy-Siberia and Houshamadyan, which have both developed Internet platforms to collect and share information about lost homelands: in the former case, the pre-Second World War eastern borderlands of Poland; in the latter, the Armenian communities of the Ottoman Empire that were destroyed by genocide. The article draws on interviews undertaken with participants in order to examine the activism of these two diasporic memory groups and to analyse the relationship between memory practice and the online space. The article asks what difference the creation of an online platform makes to such groups, both for individuals and for the wider diaspora, and seeks to understand how the possibilities offered by these platforms shape diasporic practice. The article shows how, despite the apparent similarities between the online presences of these two organizations, their use of the Internet facilitates diverse forms of memory practice, which are influenced by the historically specific needs of participants in these different diasporic communities.

## Keywords

Armenia, diaspora, Internet, memory, Poland, practice, Turkey

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## Introduction

Since the advent of the Internet, researchers have noted the potential uses of digital communication technologies for global diasporic communities (e.g. Jeganathan, 1997). Given the accessibility of websites, web forums and social media for people around the world (with the requisite equipment and Internet connection), these still relatively new media can ‘hel[p] diasporas overcome distances that separate members from one another and that separate the diaspora from its homeland’, making the Internet ‘the quintessential diasporic medium’ (Bernal, 2006: 175). The Internet, as a medium arguably characterized by its ‘placelessness’ (Halstead, 2021; Mills, 2002: 81), nevertheless has a significant potential impact on diasporic individuals’ relationships to place: it inserts itself into the diasporic ‘triangle’ (Safran, 1991: 91), in which members of diasporic communities seek to negotiate identities between their country of origin (or that of their forebears), their current home and the community of the diaspora itself. Specifically, Internet-based communication can widen diasporic engagements from those with the ‘physical diaspora’ (Brinkerhoff, 2009: 12) in the individual’s current location to incorporate a transnational diasporic space facilitated by Internet communication, and can also bring the earlier homeland closer to members of the diaspora by providing them with information, and even new opportunities to campaign on events there. Overall, as Brinkerhoff (2009) argues, this leads to ‘new diasporic identities with stronger ties within and among diaspora communities and with the homeland’ (p. 12), while also creating opportunities ‘for exploring [. . .] identities and contemplating agendas vis-a-vis the homeland’ (p. 13).

The effects of the Internet on diasporic communities also raise important questions for Memory Studies, particularly in terms of the relationship between memory and place. Theorists of collective memory have frequently emphasized place or the relationship to particular landscapes as the basis for the formation of collective memory. Maurice Halbwachs, for example, was interested in the relationship between collective frames of memory and the landscapes inhabited by ethnic groups (Middleton and Brown, 2011). In his essay ‘The Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land’, Halbwachs points out the ways in which the ‘truths’ of groups become anchored in concrete forms, such as key events, personalities or localities (Halbwachs, 1992: 200). ‘A society’, Halbwachs proposes, ‘first of all needs to find landmarks’ (Halbwachs, 1992: 222); in other words, in order for the memory of the past to be retained and organized, it needs to find symbolic expression in spatial terms linked to a physical location. For Anthony Smith (1999), a key scholar of ethno-nationalism and memory, these processes can be understood in terms of a ‘territorialization of memory’ (p. 151), whereas in a more recent phenomenological account of the relationship between place, memory and collective identity, Dylan Trigg (2012) argues that such territorialization also emerges from the development of shared spatial practices (e.g. forms of commemoration), instituting a sense of shared ‘worldhood’, ‘the result of which is the assimilated sense of a collection of people having an identity’ (pp. 157–158).

For migrant and diasporic communities, this account of memory is clearly problematic, calling into question as it does their ability to maintain a viable and authentic collective memory of a homeland they no longer inhabit (Creet, 2010: 6). In the eyes of some theorists, the Internet as a medium would not necessarily offer a solution to this problem, given their association of online life with a disengagement from lived place and therefore with the potential loss of the ability to make (individual and collective) memories in place (e.g. Hoskins, 2011). Nevertheless, in the last decade or so, Memory Studies has become increasingly concerned with the ‘transcultural’ (Erll, 2011) or ‘transnational’ movements of memory in order to take account of the ‘multi-layered, multi-sited, and multi-directional dynamic’ of memory (De Cesari and Rigney, 2014: 4). More recently still, attention has turned to the agency of memory activists operating in transnational spaces (Wüstenberg, 2020). Such scholarship does not discard the local or national frame, but

rather recognizes how ‘memory’s labyrinthine transnational and transcultural dimensions’ require memory research to focus ‘on the locatedness of engagements with memories on the move, rather than with their “non-location”’ (Radstone, 2011: 111). Or, as Jenny Wüstenberg and Aline Sierp (2015) have put it, ‘what we need to investigate are the mechanisms by which memories are (trans) formed, displayed, shared, and negotiated through transnational channels, while maintaining their local rootedness’ (p. 324). As Susannah Radstone (2011) proposes, this has particular implications for research on memory and the Internet, which should proceed from the recognition that, for all of its apparent free-floating ‘placelessness’, ‘the senses and sensibilities that we bring to the web are woven through with our locatedness in histories, in place, in culture’ (p. 111). As Huw Halstead (2021) argues, ‘[p]lace and space may well have been transformed in the digital era, but they continue to matter’ (p. 563); never more so, we might add, than for diasporic groups who seek to negotiate their identities between the location of their everyday experience, the transnational space of the diaspora and their former homeland. Digital media may not be tied to any place, but the ‘labour’ of memory is always located (Reading et al., 2021).

In this article, we will draw on interviews undertaken with participants to examine the memory activism of two diasporic memory groups who have created online platforms, in order to examine the relationship between memory practice and the online space. What difference, ultimately, does the creation of an online platform make to such groups, both for individuals and for the wider diaspora, and how do the possibilities offered by these platforms shape diasporic practice? Before we address the definition of practice that we will work with in this article, we will briefly outline our case studies and discuss their relationship to the notion of the diasporic.

## **The characteristics of the Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum and Houshamadyan**

Researchers in the field of Diaspora Studies frequently note the fashionability of the term and its sometimes indiscriminate use to describe a range of phenomena associated with migration and identity (Brubaker, 2005; Butler, 2001: 190; Safran, 1991: 83). Here, we follow Rogers Brubaker’s (2005) lead in considering diaspora less as an entity or clearly bounded group, and more as a stance and a ‘category of practice’ that ‘make[s] claims, [. . .] articulate[s] projects, [. . .] formulate[s] expectations [. . .], mobilize[s] energies, [and] [. . .] appeal[s] to loyalties’ (Brubaker, 2005: 12). We take the ‘homeland orientation’ (p. 5) or ‘homeland myth’ (Safran, 1991) to be key to the ‘diasporan consciousness’ (Butler, 2001: 207–208) of the internationally dispersed group, without assuming that this implies a desire to reclaim or return to the lost homeland in question. In fact, for both of our case studies, a literal return to live in the lost homeland on a permanent basis is not pursued.

The two websites we will analyse here are both online presences created by diasporic civil society organizations: the Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum ([kresy-siberia.org](http://kresy-siberia.org)) and Houshamadyan: A Project to Reconstruct Ottoman Armenian Town and Village Life (<https://www.houshamadyan.org/>). In both cases, the sites seek to tell the story of a specific diasporic experience, which differs in kind from other historical experiences of migration that are characteristic of the wider national group. So, in the Polish case, the Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum documents the fate of those Poles who were deported to the Soviet Union from the *kresy*, usually translated as Polish Eastern Borderlands: multi-ethnic territories, made up of predominantly Poles, Jews, Ukrainians and Byelorussians. After its initial invasion of the *kresy* in September 1939, the Soviet Union launched a series of mass deportations from February 1940 until June 1941. Estimates vary on the number of civilian deportees involved. Recent studies suggest a figure of around 320,000, while the

Kresy-Siberia website suggests a figure of nearer 1 million. Polish prisoners of war were also sent to work in labour camps in the Soviet Union (196,000), while some Poles were conscripted into the Red Army, and others were arrested and sentenced to hard labour in the Gulag (250,000; Kochanski, 2013: 133 and 137). The territories of the *kresy* were incorporated into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic and the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic after the Second World War.

In the case of Houshamadyan, the focus is on Armenian communities destroyed in the Ottoman Empire during the genocide of 1915–1916; a genocide that is still denied by today's Turkish state. The genocide claimed between 1.2 million and 1.5 million lives, according to different sources, throughout central and eastern Anatolia (Chaliand and Ternon, 1980), whether in local massacres, or as a consequence of deportations in which victims died of ill treatment, exposure and starvation. As we will discuss below, some Christian Armenians who were not killed converted to Islam, or were married or adopted into local Muslim families, losing their Armenian identity in the process.

In both cases, a specific tale of suffering and loss is highlighted, not the multiplicity of diasporic experiences associated with the global Polish or Armenian communities. As already noted, a literal reclamation of the lost homelands in question is unlikely: in the Polish case, the *Kresy* are still part of Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania, and the organization behind the *Kresy-Siberia* site in no way makes irredentist claims that the territory should be returned to Poland; in the Armenian case, the territories where the genocide took place were already part of the Turkish state at the time, and members of the diaspora are well established in their new homes. Nevertheless, these websites, and the civil society organizations that create and manage them, offer descendants of those who lost their homeland a space to develop their own relationship to the memory of that lost territory.

While both of the websites in question are hybrid in terms of the pre-digital institutional forms that they draw on, the ways in which the sites are arranged and describe themselves differ. The *Kresy-Siberia* site is explicitly framed as a museum. This choice of form is perhaps unsurprising, given that diasporic, migrant and refugee communities have long sought to establish museums or organize exhibitions that document the trauma of lost homeland and invite empathy from their potential audiences, while also seeking to communicate a narrative of hope and success in a new home (Loutron et al., 2020). Research on community museums and galleries has shown that the establishment of this type of space is evidence of the vested interests that groups have in claiming and documenting their own history and celebrating their place in society by using the dominant cultural format of the museum (O'Reilly and Parish, 2015). Mora Simpson (2001) identifies this trend as an international movement where communities have 'become much more actively involved in the process of making representations and turned the focus upon those who, in the past, were so often neglected by collectors and curators of social history' (p. 71). This aim is foregrounded immediately in the Founder's Welcome on the introduction page to the *Kresy-Siberia* Virtual Museum, which states that the site is '[c]ommemorating a virtually unknown episode of WWII'. That community is thus made to feel heard and empowered through its inclusion in a publicly visible space, while the digital simulation of aspects of museum scenography and the creation of exhibitions lend a cultural authority that simply having a website and Twitter and Facebook feeds would not.

If we look at how the museum galleries are organized on the *Kresy-Siberia* website, we can see how this partial recreation of traditional museum displays using multimedia works. The site is divided into 29 galleries, as well as special exhibitions, the Wall of Names, the Hall of Memories, the Hall of Testimonies and a Museum Store. In the museum galleries, there are nine different sections (rooms) focusing on themes from 'Polish Borderlands' to 'Diaspora', where a historical individual involved in these events guides the visitor through each section. To take one such individual,

Maria, a delegate from the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare of the Polish government in Exile in London, will tell the visitor about Polish refugees in a range of different locations from India to New Zealand. In each of these sections, the visitor has access to Maria's narrative, images in a gallery, facts about, for example, Polish refugees in New Zealand, and a section for testimonies. The depth of information available is impressive, thanks to the Internet providing significant opportunities for multiple and longer texts than we would normally see in a physical museum display, as well as different voices and diversity of languages.

Nevertheless, the museum form adopted by the Kresy-Siberia site is not directly equivalent to that found in the traditional 'bricks-and-mortar' institution. The online space also allows the museum to function as a crowd-sourced archive. In the Wall of Names, Hall of Memories, Hall of Testimonies sections of the site, users are encouraged (and in some cases assisted by the Kresy-Siberia organization) to digitize and upload documents, photographs, testimonies and biographical details relating to the deported, which supplements the work done by Kresy-Siberia volunteers to make available digitized or digitally transcribed versions of important historical sources. This archive facilitates research carried out by members of the diaspora into their own family histories. These users, who are also engaged through the organization's members only Facebook page, are actively encouraged not only to draw on this archive in their own research, but to participate in an equal exchange, in which they make their own family archives available to other users. This collaborative archiving practice sets the website apart from conventional museums. While such institutions do collect documents and artefacts, their collections are normally a closed depository of material that curators draw on for researching and creating exhibitions, not an open resource for any Internet user interested in the topic. As Susan Pearce (1993: 134–143) notes, in conventional museums, collection management and exhibition are two distinct processes, albeit both contributing to the creation of meaning from the artefacts held.

Unlike the Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum, the Houshamadyan project does not present itself as a museum. Indeed, during the interviews, we conducted with those involved in creating the site, there was some resistance to the idea initially proposed by the researchers that it amounted to an 'online museum'. The website aims to tell the story of daily life in the Ottoman Empire through historical archival work and participatory engagement with the diaspora to preserve memories from the Empire and restore family histories across generations. The display of digitized historical images alongside explanatory texts and contemporary illustrative images (e.g. of food and traditional artefacts), coupled with the thematic and/or local organization of the material, certainly recalls features of the local historical museum or even the ethnographic museum, albeit in digital form. At the same time, the website incorporates features of the library, including a video library and a music library (hosted by external providers Soundcloud and Vimeo), and a collection of digitized memoirs.

Rather than the chronological presentation of a historical narrative we see in the Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum galleries, the Houshamadyan site allows visitors to access a range of textual, photographic, audio and video material, in a variety of different ways. This approach is reflected in the preference of some of our interviewees to understand Houshamadyan as an 'archive', although the project does not officially describe itself as such; with the exception of one section of the website (the Open Digital Archive), which displays the digitized contents of individual Armenian family archives that are still held by descendants in specified locations around the globe. Even more so than was the case for the Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum, the digital platform makes possible a 'hypermediated' space (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 203), where not only materials from private family archives can be digitally remastered, but in which a range of older media can be incorporated into a single Internet site.

Although we are using the term ‘archive’ to describe the collection and display of digital artefacts on both the Houshamadyan site and in sections of the Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum, this clearly also requires more precise definition (not least because it is not a term used formally by the organizations to describe the overall purpose of their Internet sites). The notion of ‘the archive’ has been the subject of widespread discussion in the humanities, particularly since the 1990s, although this debate has not always proceeded with a clear and agreed-upon definition of what an archive (or, indeed, ‘the archive’) is. For some commentators, the study of the archive remains that of specific institutions, for others a general archiving principle is at stake that can be observed in culture more widely, whereas still others use ‘the archive’ as a metaphor for any kind of storage (including museums and libraries) that contributes to cultural memory (Ebeling and Günzel, 2009). Nevertheless, these discourses on the nature and cultural significance of the archive do point to two important consequences of the incorporation of archiving features into an online diaspora museum, such as the Kresy-Siberia and Houshamadyan sites.

First, like the museum, the archive has come to be understood as a site of power that is also closely associated with the ‘formation and legitimation of the nation’ (Featherstone, 2006: 592). For diasporic groups whose history may have been marginalized in their homeland or, indeed, in their new home(s), the creation of an archive, like that of a museum, legitimates and makes visible that experience. Arjun Appadurai has argued that the advent of the Internet has made possible the creation of diasporic archives online that free the archive as institution from the disciplinary functions ascribed to it, for example, by Michel Foucault, allowing it to ‘retur[n] to its more general status of being a deliberate site for the production of anticipated memories by intentional communities’ (Appadurai, 2003: 17). This quality of being oriented towards the future of the community is one that Jacques Derrida (1996) also observes in his account of the archive, which he sees as bound ‘to some proper name or to some body proper, to some (familial or national) filiation’ (p. 45), containing both the ‘injunction to remember the past’ and ‘the experience of the promise (the future)’ (p. 76). In the case of the Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum, the purpose of archiving a past presented as ‘virtually unknown’ on the part of members of the diaspora implies both an obligation to the community, but also a desire to make sure that this history is preserved in an anticipated future. A similar impulse can be observed in the Houshamadyan site, which aims to restore knowledge of Armenian communities in the Ottoman Empire both to members of the diaspora and, as we will discuss in more detail below, to citizens of present-day Turkey.

Second, the kind of archive we see created in both of these sites has the effect of working against the experience of dispersal that characterizes diaspora. As Sylvia Asmus et al. (2019: 2) observe of exile more generally, the artefacts associated with that experience are subject to the same scattering undergone by their owners, spreading a fragmented archive of life in the homeland and its traumatic end across the globe. The images and data contributed by users of the Kresy-Siberia website create a new archive from what are in effect many small, private archives by means of a process of digital remediation (Erll and Rigney, 2009), allowing others in the diaspora to close the gaps in their own family history more effectively. Amy Malek (2021: 148) has described this kind of online pooling of remediated family archive with the wider community as productive of ‘affiliative postmemory’: it not only allows participants to create a more complete picture of their family history, but also increases their sense of connection to the lost world of the homeland as they remember it before their families were forced to leave. A concomitant sense of connection with the diasporic community is potentially supported by the interactive nature of the digital archive itself, which allows individual users/producers to experience a new relationality with respect to other contributors (Giannachi, 2016: 13–14). In the case of Houshamadyan, we can observe a comparable gathering of what would otherwise have been dispersed, drawing on archival material from the diaspora and historical sources. Nevertheless, as we will discuss below, the memory practices that



facilitate and accompany this collation of resources differ notably from those we can observe in the example of Kresy-Siberia, so that this production of relationality is markedly different in our two case studies.

Despite the two websites incorporating both recognizably museum-like and archive-like characteristics, it should also be noted that this formal hybridity (or, perhaps, undecidability: is it a museum, or is it an archive?) can be understood as a product of digitization, which, as Wolfgang Ernst (2013: 84) notes, both expands the capacity of institutions like museums, archives and libraries, while also undermining the distinction between them, by rendering all of their contents as digital code. In the case of the Kresy-Siberia website, images, documents and testimonies sourced from members of the diaspora are digitized and displayed both in the 'Museum Galleries' that visually echo the museum space and in the more archive-like sections of the Wall of Names, Hall of Memories, Hall of Testimonies. The use of architectural terms (wall, hall) to describe these latter sections of the website at once gestures towards the physical museum (and potentially also the memorial) as medium, and presents information in a recognizably archive-like way: for example, as a searchable database in the case of the Wall of Names. In this sense, not only does the site remediate family archives as digital objects, it also remediates other media (the museum, the archive, the monument) and incorporates them seamlessly into a single online space in order to borrow their functions, without always explicitly acknowledging the older media on which it draws (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 203–204).

Houshamadyan offers a different user experience, while nevertheless drawing on features of both the museum, through the presentation of annotated digitized artefacts, and the archive, through its documentation of lost communities and family histories. Nevertheless, Houshamadyan steers away from structural replication of the physical museum, preferring to offer users the ability to filter and assemble content according to their personal interests. This functionality is made possible by the flattening effect of digital remediation noted by Ernst (2013: 84). As every artefact is transposed into digital code, the same items can be incorporated into different configurations, depending on how the user wants to approach the material, as set out in the 'How to Use the Website' page (<https://www.houshamadyan.org/introduction.html>). The user can either select a place on a map and view the material held by the website on that location in relation to specific themes (e.g. economy, religion, local characteristics, education, sports), or they can choose to investigate one of these themes in the entire region, which will lead them back to the pages dealing with that theme as it manifested itself in one of the local communities that have been documented.

## **Analysing diasporic memory practice**

The earlier outline of the formal characteristics of these websites has already indicated some of their potential significance for the diasporic communities they both engage and serve. However, we argue here that it is not possible to gain a full sense of that significance through a 'textual' analysis of the sites alone (Hutchby, 2001: 445–447). While we can already observe some potential 'affordances' of both the Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum and Houshamadyan, a fuller sense of the role they play (or seek to play) in the diasporic communities in question can only be gained by an investigation of how these sites both enable and constrain particular kinds of memory practice (Bareither, 2021), while also recognizing that they are at the same time shaped by such practice (Hutchby, 2001: 444). In exploring the relationship between these websites and the practices associated with them in their respective diasporic communities, we will respond both to the 'practice turn' in the humanities and social sciences (Cetina et al., 2001) and to the call, already expressed by Jeffrey Olick and Joyce Robbins in their article from 1998, for social memory studies to define itself as the investigation of 'distinct sets of mnemonic practices in various social sites', rather than

seeking to analyse ‘collective memory as a thing’. Here, Olick and Robbins (1998: 112) urge researchers to recognize memory as a ‘process’ rather than a ‘possession’, focusing on the historical understanding of ‘mnemonic practices’ as key to this ‘process’.

In the analysis that follows, we draw in particular on Andreas Reckwitz’s (2004, 2010) attempt to synthesize the insights of a range of thinkers of ‘practice’ into a coherent and multi-faceted theoretical and methodological approach. Reckwitz (2016) helpfully proposes that any site of practice, however defined, is the location of ‘complexes of practices’, in other words, of combinations of things that are done. These practices are enmeshed with discursive formations, material artefacts, forms of implicit and explicit knowledge, and forms of subjectivity. These elements simultaneously make certain practices possible at a given moment and are maintained and potentially modified by those practices. It is the purpose of a praxiological analysis to help us explore the relationship between these elements at particular sites of practice. Reckwitz takes on board the spatial and affective turns in the humanities and social sciences by insisting that the unfolding of such complexes of practice happens in specific spaces with their own qualities and that practice always has an affective dimension.

This approach is especially useful for our case studies, in that the diasporic communities in question are engaged in practices that combine the elements outlined by Reckwitz. These practices draw upon and reformulate (historical, autobiographical) discourses about the homeland and the diaspora’s traumatic experiences, engage with archival artefacts, collaborate in the dissemination of knowledge, and make claims to subjective and collective identities. For those engaged in diasporic memory practices, their ‘homeland orientation’ and their negotiation with their own situatedness in their new home necessarily emphasizes the spatial dimension to practice highlighted by Reckwitz. Needless to say, given the fundamental experience of trauma and loss that defines these communities, the affective aspect of their practice is of particular significance.

In order to explore the practices associated with our chosen websites, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with key individuals in each of the civil society organizations responsible for setting them up and maintaining them. We conducted four interviews with members of the Kresy-Siberia organization, who were based in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. We also conducted five interviews with individuals involved in setting up and running the Houshamadyan site, who were based in Germany, Turkey, the United States and Belgium. Although the interviews focused on individuals closely involved in the development of the sites, and not on individuals who are only users or visitors to them, it should be noted that all of the interviewees considered themselves members of the diaspora interested in documenting their own family history. Furthermore, the interviewees were able to provide useful information on the organizations’ interactions with users and of users among themselves.

## **Diasporic memory practice and the Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum**

What became clear from the interviews conducted with key participants in the Kresy-Siberia organization in the winter of 2020–2021 is that the real significance of the virtual museum is its function as an occasion for a wide range of memory practices that go on ‘behind the scenes’, but which are nevertheless facilitated by the Virtual Museum and other forms of online interaction. A primary motivation for becoming involved in the Kresy-Siberia organization is an interest in one’s own family history, which interviewees often described as being silenced within the family itself or incomplete because of the dispersal of family members across the globe during the Second World War, some of whose fates remained unknown. Individuals wanting to know more about their families often approach the organization through its Facebook presence (which is a moderated group with membership by permission only) and are then encouraged to share any information they have by contributing it digitally to the museum.



The participants who have become more closely involved in the running of the website, the Facebook page and the organization more broadly in most cases came into contact with Kresy-Siberia when they were searching for information for their own family history, but have since become involved in facilitating the recovery of such history for others who approach the organization. A routinized system of response to and referral of queries has been developed, with members of the wider organization acting as experts for others who seek information about a particular community in the pre-Second World War Kresy or the fate of individuals following the Soviet invasion. Core members of the Kresy-Siberia team also direct enquirers to key literature and archival sources. This assistance is offered, however, on the explicit understanding that individuals researching their family histories will also contribute to information-gathering, for example, by digitizing and uploading photographs and documents from family archives to the museum's Hall of Images section.

This ongoing memory practice contributes both to the development of the Virtual Museum and sustains a digitally networked diasporic community. This community has a dual function: it both acts to restore broken social bonds and connections to the homeland and allows access for participants to a global network in which new forms of connection are made possible. Finding out what happened to family members, but also to other people who may have been living in the same place or nearby, allows descendants of the exiled to reconstruct an often silenced history and make sense of their family's experience in a wider historical context, while also finding a new sense of belonging in the diasporic community. This experience is described by one interviewee as follows:

And then I think what happens with everyone or with many, many people is you join the group or the museum really just to find out information about a family member, that what so many people don't realize, is that, I mean, I actually had this image all my life that my Dad somehow was sent to Russia and [ . . . ] it didn't occur to me that there was a million other people like him, it was just Dad was sent to Russia, and I think lots of people had that idea, so you come to this group and you think what you're looking for, and you partly are looking for information about what happened to your family, but actually what you find is a different type of family. You actually find people that have exactly the same experience as you, have the same sense of loss and the missing piece of the puzzle as you. I mean [another member's] dad grew up about 20 miles away from where my Dad grew up, rural Poland, which is now Ukraine. You know, they all went through Russia, they all went through Persia, they all went through the armed forces and it's just, it was such a light bulb moment for me, and I think for lots of people it's the same [ . . . ] (Interview P2)

The lack of knowledge about life in the Kresy and the sufferings that exiled parents experienced before settling in their new homes was referred to by more than one interviewee in terms of a 'sense of loss', and our interviewees also spoke of the struggles of other members of the group to come to terms with sometimes difficult relationships with a traumatized parental generation.

Notably, however, this reconstructive enterprise, in which the history of the Kresy is brought alive for the descendants of the exiled who participate in the project, does not appear to lead to a widespread idealization of the lost homeland or a desire for return, although participants in the Kresy-Siberia association do often visit Poland and their ancestors' former homes now outside the Polish state. Rather, the collective work on the museum project facilitates the creation of a digitally networked diaspora, which offers an alternative kind of belonging, 'a different type of family', as the interviewee cited directly above notes. These two kinds of community (the retrospectively imagined historical community of the Kresy and the sense of community created by the association) also overlap and reinforce each other. As another interviewee told us, the online dialogues with others searching for their family history have led to offline friendships, which in turn have led to the discovery of historical connections between ancestors:

The thing is, I went to go visit them, like these people, and they're like family now. With these friends [. . .], you know, they're absolutely amazing, you know, you look at their records and look at the pictures and, same thing, more familiar faces. (Interview P1)

In this way, memory of the historical homeland and the network of encounters created by the association intersect in multiple ways, combining online and offline interactions, sharing of historical documents and images, sharing of expertise, mutual emotional support, and the development of close friendships that are described in familial terms.

Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that each individual's engagement with the association plays distinct and various roles in their life. In the case of one New Zealand interviewee, for example, engagement in the Kresy-Siberia association and its museum project is part of a wider engagement with the local Polish community, which also includes emigrants from different periods who were not affected by the 1940-1941 deportations (Interview P3). In other cases, individuals may have little connection to local Polish communities in their everyday lives (Interview P1), and in one case, a key volunteer for Kresy-Siberia told us that he had no Polish ancestors, but had been close to a Polish family as a young man and had subsequently begun to learn Polish and take an interest in Polish history (Interview P4). In this latter case, we can see how digital networking makes identifications possible that extend beyond the established notion of diaspora as kin.

There are, however, clearly limits to the kinds of engagement with the history of the Kresy that the association encourages. It opposes revanchism in relation to the lost homeland and emphasizes that the Kresy was a multicultural space. The 'About us' statement on the Kresy-Siberia emphasizes this point:

It is important to note, and central to the Kresy-Siberia philosophy, that the group has always been multi-ethnic and multi-religious. Poland prior to World War II was a multicultural mix and our group has chosen to reflect this value.

In its public communications, largely through its Twitter presence, Kresy-Siberia actively encourages the acknowledgement of other historical experiences in the region and seeks reconciliation with other ethnic groups, whose historical suffering is also recognized (Interview P4). In the early stages of the organization's development, this 'cosmopolitan' (Bull and Hansen, 2016: 391-393) approach to memory drew criticism from some older members of the community who withdrew from participation. The Facebook group is carefully monitored to challenge or remove statements that are not in line with the ethos of the association as a whole (Interview P1).

To return to Reckwitz's account of practice, as outlined earlier, we can see how the Kresy-Siberia organization and its Virtual Museum project constitute a site that integrates a range of memory practices. These practices allow participants to develop a shared sense of diasporic identity that is experienced by our interviewees in familial terms, repairing both the relationship to the lost homeland (which is recreated virtually by the community) and to the parental generation, whose historical experiences can be more fully understood. In this way, the website as the focus of a 'complex of practices' allows participants to address what Harry Harootunian has described as a heritage of 'the unspoken', in which the silence of a traumatized parental generation about life before exile leads to a sense of disconnection to the homeland itself, and also to a sense that the next generation is 'denied even the memory of belonging to a kin group of departed relatives' (Harootunian, 2019: 65).

Through engagement with the Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum and its associated activities, this sense of lost connection is repaired not only through discovery of family history, but also by gaining a new 'family' through the organization itself. In this sense, engagement in Kresy-Siberia has an important affective dimension, addressing feelings of loss, while also helping participants to

manage their relationship to lost and new homelands, highlighting the spatial dimension of practice in Reckwitz's account. As Reckwitz also suggests, these practices produce and are produced by shared forms of knowledge, with the sharing of historical information and expertise being key to practices that sustain the association's network.

## **Diasporic memory practice and Houshamadyan**

While still a not-for-profit civil society organization, Houshamadyan directly engages a core team of 10–12 people, who run the site and carry out the research for its content. Although everyone involved in the project has personal connections to the subject matter, they are paid for their time. Most work on a part-time or irregular basis, apart from the founder, who works full time. The core team works based on demand, depending on available funding and their capacity alongside their other projects: many of our interviewees work for other organizations or freelance alongside their commitment to Houshamadyan (e.g. in design work, artistic work, translation), and many work with the diaspora in other contexts. This team is based internationally and collaborates as a digital network: in one case, an interviewee reported working with some colleagues on the site for a number of years without meeting them in person, and that such meetings were sometimes a matter of chance (Interview A1). The website is supported by individual donations from a small group of families, who do this in memory of their ancestors. The association also seeks funding for individual projects and works in partnership with a number of academic institutions and foundations, the most prominent being the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

The original impetus for the creation of the site came from its founder, a trained historian, who sought to draw primarily on a corpus of 300 handwritten 'Houshamadyan' or 'memory books', which were produced by survivors of the genocide between the 1920s and 1980s in order to preserve the history of their families and communities (Avagyan, 2013). The website sought to make these sources more easily available to the field of Ottoman Studies, thus writing the Armenian presence back into that history, and also 'to be the means by which their Ottoman memory may be returned to the Armenians' (<https://www.houshamadyan.org/introduction/why-houshamadyan.html>). The initial plan for the website therefore did not stress interactivity between users and the association, but was rather understood by the team as a resource that was being made available to relevant communities.

The launch of the website, however, changed the thinking of the team, when users began submitting material from their own family archives for inclusion (Interview A2). This shifted the largely geographical focus of the website, which had sought to document historical locations, towards an engagement with family histories, which are now remediated in an 'Open Digital Archive'. The stated approach to writing family history here is 'microhistorical', that is to say that it emphasizes the everyday culture of ordinary people, who were 'not merely puppets in the hands of great underlying forces of history, but [ . . . ] are regarded as active individuals, conscious actors' (Magnússon and Szijártó, 2013: 5). The association has also recognized the potential to augment its collections of documents and images on specific locations by publishing calls to its social media followers to contribute suitable materials.

The interviews we conducted with individuals involved in creating the website revealed two aspects that set them (and the project) apart from the example of Kresy-Siberia. First, their involvement in creating and maintaining the website is more strongly embedded within a continuum of specialized or professional practice that extends beyond the Houshamadyan site. For example, one of the team we interviewed is a fine artist working in installations, whose artistic production frequently addresses themes of memory, while another interviewee, based in the United States, is involved in delivering genealogical workshops to those with Armenian ancestors and also writes for US-Armenian diaspora websites. Second, the participants' motivations were more strongly

outward-directed than in the case of Kresy-Siberia, in the sense that they more explicitly foregrounded a need to serve others. Although the individuals we spoke to knew a good deal about their own family history, the process of researching their heritage was not the path that led them to the organization, and they did not speak of their interactions with others in the Houshamadyan team or with users of the website in terms of a reciprocal enrichment of their understanding of that history. Rather, participants tended to express a sense of mission to return the heritage of the Armenian presence in Turkey to those who have been denied access to it. This could include the diaspora, of which one participant spoke in terms of her ‘responsibility’ to her ‘community’ (Interview A3), but was also seen as important for Muslim citizens of Turkey. One interviewee expressed the feeling that there was a strong demand for the knowledge provided by the website in Turkey (‘they’re thirsting for it’, Interview A5), whereas another commented that the work of Houshamadyan played a part in stimulating that demand, stating that it is ‘[o]ur responsibility to tell them, yes there were Armenians’ (Interview A1). This commitment had a significant affective dimension, experienced by some in terms of a personal mission.

Despite the fact that the website covers a wider geographical area than present-day Turkey, what links all of our Houshamadyan interviewees is their concern with Turkey as a locus of Armenian memory and memory activism. This represents a marked shift of focus from the point-of-view of the diaspora in particular, which has been characterized since the foundation of the Armenian Republic in 1918 by its intense political engagement and identification with the post-genocide Armenian state (Chernobrov and Wilmers, 2020; Panossian, 1998). In this respect, Houshamadyan is part of a broader process, in which Turkey has been rediscovered as ‘the ancestral homeland for the Armenian diaspora and a real kin-state’ (Punsmann, 2019). We can locate this development roughly in the period between the 90th anniversary and the centenary of the genocide (2005–2015), with an intensification of debates around Armenian heritage in Turkey following the assassination of Hrant Dink in 2007 (Turkmen-Derrişoğlu, 2013), who was editor of the Turkish-language Armenian newspaper *Agos*. This decade was marked not only by a greater willingness to acknowledge the genocide among many Muslim citizens of Turkey, but also, for some, by a rediscovery of their own Armenian heritage.

The genocide by no means removed all Armenian people from Turkey: the Armenian population in Istanbul, which was more visible to the outside world, remained largely intact (Ekmekçioğlu, 2016), while the genocide in Anatolia saw a significant number of Armenian children adopted (sometimes forcibly) into Turkish and Kurdish families, conversions to Islam by Armenians as a means of survival, and the marriage of Armenian women to Turkish and Kurdish men. In the 2010s, Muslim citizens of Turkey became emboldened to reclaim their Armenian heritage, with some even converting to Christianity and learning Armenian (Marchand and Guillaume, 2015). A number of book publications also drew new attention to the fate of survivors who had been assimilated into Muslim families and lost their Armenian identity (Altınay and Cetin, 2014; for example, Cetin, 2008). More recently, the decision by the Turkish state to make Ottoman censuses (including genealogical data) available online in 2018 has made it easier for Muslim citizens of Turkey to trace ancestors (Genc, 2018). This trend has also been encouraged further by the availability of mass-market DNA testing, which has allowed Muslim citizens of Turkey to reconnect with relatives in the Armenian diaspora.

Within this broader context of memory activism and public debate in Turkey and the Armenian diaspora, we can see that Houshamadyan, although clearly a valuable resource for its users, is far from alone in terms of its concerns or even its approaches. For example, the Hrant Dink Foundation, an Istanbul-based civil society organization addressing Turkey’s multicultural heritage, has conducted extensive historical work on a number of towns and cities that were formerly home to large Armenian populations and has also developed an interactive map, not unlike Houshamadyan’s (<https://turkiyekulturvarliklari.hrantdink.org/>), which allows users to explore

Armenian, Greek, Syriac and Jewish cultural heritage in Anatolia. National and local civil society organizations have also made direct interventions to restore the Armenian community's material and immaterial heritage, often with financial and logistical support from diasporic Armenian organizations. Examples include the restoration of the Armenian fountains in the village of Habap, organized by the Hrant Dink Foundation in 2010, the restoration of the Armenian church in Diyarbakir in 2011, or the Van project (2011–2013), in which a French-Armenian non-governmental organization (NGO) sought to revive Armenian folk music traditions in South-Eastern Turkey (REPAIR, 2016).

These multiple forms of memory practice, from the publication of memoirs and the rediscovery of family trees, to religious conversion, and reclaiming of built heritage and immaterial cultural practices, all share an impulse to create an 'alternative local memory' (Altinay and Cetin, 2014: xx) in those towns and villages whose Armenian people and heritage were violently removed. This impulse is directed to two distinct publics: Muslim citizens of Turkey, who are encouraged either to rediscover and identify with any Armenian heritage they may have, or who learn to recognize the previous erasure of the Armenian presence in their locality; and members of the diaspora, who, when returning to Turkey, are able to connect with their heritage as part of a lived present and potentially also with a re-vitalized Armenian community within Turkey. This more general trend in the Turkish context is reflected in comments by our interviewees, who, for example, spoke of Turkey as 'the most important country for the Armenians, for recognising their past sorrows' (Interview A1) and emphasized the importance of the website's content being available in Turkish precisely in order to address the needs of Muslim citizens of Turkey rediscovering their Armenian heritage (Interview A5). Furthermore, the need to be able to return to Turkey and reconnect with an ancestral homeland whose contemporary inhabitants feel an affiliation to Armenian heritage was particularly strongly expressed by our US interviewee, who described his journeys to Turkey in the following terms:

But whenever I am in those lands, in that land, with those people, our people, and our lands . . . uhm . . . I feel like I am at home. That's a powerful feeling, let me tell you, a powerful overwhelming feeling, it really is. (Interview A5)

We would argue then that the Houshamadyan website situates itself within a broader complex of practices that have multiple locations, both online and offline. Such online sources facilitate a reengagement with Armenian heritage by Muslim citizens of Turkey, and they also facilitate the diaspora's reengagement with Turkey as a kin-state. It is notable that, although some of our interviewees regularly travel to Armenia and expressed their love for the country, there was also an evident ambivalence in relation to its culture and the openness of citizens of the Armenian Republic to engaging with the diaspora and their perspectives. Some of our interviewees, for example, noted communication problems relating to the Western and Eastern Armenian dialects. In one case, an interviewee who had attempted to do cultural work in the Armenian Republic questioned the willingness of its citizens to engage with voices from the diaspora:

there was this dynamics of 'the diaspora are kind of stupid' . . . People that don't understand what's going on in Armenia. [ . . . ] And then also these [thinking] 'give money, but don't say anything because we need money, but we don't need your input or your ideas or your what you think this country is'. So I left. (A4)

By contrast, interviewees noted the strong interest in the website among users based in Turkey and accessing its content in Turkish. Indeed, the project invests considerable resources in the translation of content for this audience. The website's founder also acknowledged that users based in Turkey had become a key audience (Interview A2).



Because Houshamadyan is part of a broader movement to re-engage with Armenian heritage in Turkey itself, it serves a fundamentally different purpose from that evident in the case of the Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum and its associated activities. Kresy-Siberia functions as a (web)site around which a complex of restorative practices can take place for members of a diaspora who seek an alternative sense of community that compensates for the loss of a homeland that is now perceived to be non-recoverable. For Kresy-Siberia, the culture of the Kresy can be commemorated and experienced as a communal point of identification in the online space, but our interviewees do not express the belief that this culture could be re-established in Ukraine, Belarus or Lithuania, for example, despite the presence of ethnic Polish minorities in those countries. Even though members of Kresy-Siberia have undertaken visits to the former Kresy in search of family histories, they still tended to view the Polish state in its current form (which does not include the territory of the Kresy) as a genuine kin-state, in which they can stake a legitimate claim (Shain and Barth, 2003: 450). While a virtual claim on the Kresy is supported by their digitally networked interactions, it is a claim on the memory of the historical region and its Polish culture only. In the case of Houshamadyan, by contrast, the claim on the historical homeland is maintained, or rather revived, through the memory practices the website helps to sustain, thus rendering less vital the need for a virtual community created by the networked diaspora.

## **Conclusion**

We began this discussion by asking what role online projects such as the Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum and Houshamadyan can play for diasporic communities. We asserted that the affordances of such websites could only be understood in relation to the practices that they made possible for those individuals who engaged with them. Our analysis has shown that the particular choices of the civil society groups who run these sites make a significant difference not only in terms of the opportunities for interactivity that they build into their online projects, but also in terms of the activities that they are able to facilitate around the development of the project. Specifically, in the case of Kresy-Siberia, the organization has placed significant emphasis on the mutual exchange of information and the dialogue between members in search of family histories, and the website reflects this ethos. Houshamadyan, by comparison, while facilitating a certain level of participation through donation of digitized documents and photographs, acts more like an interactive archive that the individual can use as a resource for rediscovering their family or community history, not as a gateway to further interactions with other users. This latter aspect is particularly supported in the Kresy-Siberia case by the associated Facebook group.

Nevertheless, the different approaches to the design of these online projects also points to the different needs of the specific diasporic communities in question and their different historical backgrounds. While the desire for a digitally networked community based on ‘affiliative postmemory’ is clearly expressed by our interviews from Kresy-Siberia, Houshamadyan serves the needs of Muslim citizens of Turkey, Turkish-Armenians and diaspora Armenians who are concerned with the re-establishment of an Armenian cultural presence in Turkey itself. As we have noted, in this respect, Houshamadyan is part of a wider social movement that has gained traction in Turkey since around 2005. In addition, the websites and the activists associated with them in both cases express complex relationships to place, in which digital networking can both facilitate a compensatory identification with a ‘virtual’ homeland, on one hand, or stimulate engagement with that homeland offline, on the other hand. Such complexity reinforces the findings of scholars discussed earlier who assert that the Internet is far from being a ‘placeless’ medium, but also indicates that we cannot understand how websites like these facilitate relationships to place without examining the practices associated with them.


This leads to two lessons that can be taken forward in the study of the relationship between diasporas and the ‘the quintessential diasporic medium’ of the Internet (Bernal, 2006: 175). First, if we are to understand the role that websites like those studied here play for diasporic communities, we need to move beyond readings of the affordances that can be posited by researchers through analysis at the ‘textual’ level of the sites themselves in order to understand the practices associated with them. These practices (for example, social events or organized trips to places of significance for the community) often take place far away from computer screens and are vital to continued memory work. Second, these websites should not be seen simply as making possible or constraining certain practices, but rather as themselves the expression of the diasporic memory practices of historically specific groups with their own particular needs and characteristics, that is to say as both producing and as the product of such practices, often in conjunction with a network of other activities.

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