

Key Terms: Diaspora and Diasporic Imagination

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Representations of migrancy, exile, and displacement have long been a well-documented aspect of some literary works. “The Wanderer,” for example, is an ancient poem in Old English that conveys the experiences of an Anglo-Saxon warrior condemned to travel “most sorrowfully over the frozen waves” after being left “bereft of [his] homeland” by a cruel twist of fate (50-51). More recently, many works of post-colonial literature have represented the experiences of the numerous cultural groups who have been scattered around the world as a result of globalization and the legacies of western imperialism. Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, for instance, centers on the transplantation of Muslim actors to Britain, and Nadine Gordimer’s *The Pickup* relates the story of man displaced from his Islamic homeland to the suburbs of Johannesburg. Music, too, has often been used to consider a disconnection from one’s home: many of Bob Marley’s well known reggae songs, for instance, have been described as “powerful catalysts for Pan-Africanism [and] and black independence” due to their focus on the state of African peoples dispersed throughout the Americas (Fischlin 22)

What is relevant about all these examples is that they collectively provide a useful introduction to the term “diaspora” and its importance to academic discussions surrounding the nature of cultural and national identity. Akin to the warrior from “The Wanderer” and Rushdie’s migratory actors, members of a diaspora effectively belong to a “traveling culture,” or a culture that has journeyed somewhere new, drawing its identity from a

combination of the past and present (Ashcroft et al. 427). More generally, one could say that diaspora refers to the “combination of migrancy and continued cultural affiliation that characterizes many racial, ethnic and national groups scattered throughout the world” largely, but not always, “due to the impact of modern imperialism” (425-26). In all, like the related term “hybridity,” diaspora is central to number of important questions surrounding the nature and stability of national and ethnic identities in an increasingly complex environment of global intercultural (and musical) encounter.

A commonly noted feature of the diasporic experience is the feeling of being caught between two worlds. As Rushdie says of emigrants like himself, “[s]ometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times that we fall between two stools” (431). On the one hand, diasporic subjects have only an “imaginary homeland” that exists in narratives and retained fragments of memory (428), and on the other hand, as immigrants, they will always be seen simultaneously as “insiders and outsiders” in their newfound homes (433). Simply put, they belong neither here nor there. In keeping with the seemingly universal quality of this feeling of alienation, the affiliations felt between members of a particular diasporic community are substantial. A sense of shared history is often pervasive, as is the common attachment to a “fantasy homeland” that is usually described in terms of ethnic homogeneity (Mishra 448). As Vijay Mishra puts it, “diaporas very often construct racist fictions of purity as a kind of...pleasure around which anti-miscegenation narratives of homelands are constructed against the reality of the homelands themselves” (449).

To explain this phenomenon, scholars typically look to the pain and difficulty associated with living in displacement. Edward Said, for instance, claims that diasporic narratives are best seen as “efforts to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement” (439). Fervent nationalism “fends off the ravages of exile” by providing an ideological tonic to a people’s perceived dispossession of their heritage (440), but it can also eventually morph into a triumphalism that, in Said’s words, “assign[s] falsehood and inferiority to outsiders” (440). Mishra reiterates this point when he writes that fantasy homelands are constructed “to compensate for [the] loss occasioned by [the] unspeakable trauma” of being exiled (449). Collectively, these points suggest that for better or worse, diasporas (in theory in least) are often created through the exclusionary affirmation and idealization of the bonds existing between those who may share nothing more than a common ancestry.

The problem with this conception of diaspora is that it neglects to account for the heterogeneity of the places from which scattered peoples originate. To say, for instance, that all members of the African diaspora are somehow essentially the same on some level due to their “African-ness” is fundamentally neglectful of the fact that there are many racial, cultural, linguistic, religious and ethnic differences that serve to differentiate such people (Ashcroft et al. 426). Moreover, the individual journeys of dispersed peoples and the contexts in which they resettle may also be highly differentiated. Two groups starting from an identical geographic location may end up occupying extremely different social positions depending on where they disperse *to* and what they end up doing once they get there. It is accordingly difficult accept the essentialist ideas of national and cultural identity that often serve to hold together as diasporic communities what would otherwise be

people only loosely associated by race or ethnicity. Avtah Brah perhaps puts it best when he says that “all diasporas are differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of a common ‘we’” (444).

The striking thing about Brah’s comment is that it also indicates just how difficult it is to dismiss the affiliations found between various diasporic communities. A “common ‘we’” is undoubtedly present, and must be accounted for (444). Yet if one recognizes the myths at work in the imaginary creation of monolithic homelands, what then does a diaspora signify? Brah’s answer would undoubtedly focus on the existence of shared narratives and cultural practices and shared power relations. He first of all speaks of the “*economic, political, and cultural specificities*” that link the different communities within a given diaspora (444, original emphasis). Somali refugees, for example, might possess nearly identical minority status and political disenfranchisement regardless of whether they have resettled in Paris or New York. They are thus situated in a partially equivalent diasporic position, and accordingly would have the grounds to establish affiliation on the basis of shared experience. The only problem with this argument is that it suggests that a particular diasporic community may be more closely affiliated to groups sharing its socioeconomic status than to groups from the diaspora’s place of origin. Somalis in Paris, by this measure, might very well have more in common with Sri Lankan refugees in the same city than with indigenous Somalis. This especially true when one considers how easily cultural hybridization occurs in a climate where intercultural contact occurs continuously. In all, the sole use of political and economic markers to identify what “diaspora” signifies is a bit problematic.

As if to recognize the limits of these markers, Brah also speaks of the “*confluence of narratives*” that arguably constitutes an “imagined community” out of a given diaspora (Brah 444, Anderson 124). He claims that there are narratives unique to a particular diaspora which are continually “lived and re-lived, produced, reproduced and transformed through individual as well as collective memory” (Brah 444). This comment is particularly helpful because it allows one to draw out a simple definition: the term “diasporic imagination” can refer to the collection of narratives, practices, and beliefs shared by diasporic subjects in relation to both their homelands and each other. Much like Benedict Anderson’s notion of the imagined community that constitutes a nation, diasporic imagination is that which creates the sense of cultural and social affiliation between individuals who might share only the common experience of displacement.

What is of further interest in Brah’s conceptualization of diasporic imagination is the centrality of collaborative processes. By his measure, diasporic narratives (and by corollary the communities they constitute) are contingent, adaptive, and dependent on social practices that are continually revised and in flux. Accordingly, it may be suggested that diasporic communities are improvisatory. In addition to the intuitive notion that improvisational practices are used by diasporic subjects to adapt and respond to the new situations and social contexts they find themselves in, there are numerous instances of scholarly work affirming idea that diasporic narratives are improvised narratives. Brah, for example, writes that “the identity of a diasporic imagined community is far from fixed or pre-given” (444), and that this identity is always “constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life [and] in the everyday stories that we tell each other individu-

ally and collectively” (444). Implicit in this wording is the idea that these stories are always works-in-progress, much like the musical arrangements associated with jazz musicians and other improvising artists. Bill Ashcroft and his co-authors are a little more explicit: they write in a piece introducing the concept of diaspora that “[a] traveling culture means a culture that changes, develops and transforms itself according to the various influences it encounters in different places” (427). Replace the words “traveling” and “culture” with “improvising” and “musician,” and one has almost a textbook definition of an aspect of what it means to be involved in creative collaboration. If improvisation is a fundamentally communal practice, then it also seems that the narrative construction of diasporic communities is also in some sense fundamentally improvisational. And the importance of musical practices to the creation of such communities should not be underestimated either: George Lipsitz, for instance, argues quite effectively that improvised musical traditions played an important role in establishing New Orleans as a center for diasporic culture in the Americas.

Lastly, lest one conclude here, it is valuable to recognize that there is always a slight tension between improvisational and predefined processes when one considers the term “diaspora.” According to Mishra and Said, diasporas are often posited on the notion that scattered cultures tend to reify “imaginary homelands” into narratives that are problematically exclusionary and occasionally racist (Rushdie 428); there is little of the collaborative ethos and contingency associated with improvisation to be found in these myths. Brah and Ashcroft et al., by contrast, present a bit of a different picture: they see diasporas as fundamentally contingent constructs that are continually creating and refash-

ioning identity in response to the changes occurring around them. In the words of Ashcroft et al, diasporas demonstrate “the extent to which identity itself must be constructed and reconstructed by individuals in their everyday life” (426). A diaspora, from this perspective, is something of an improvisation itself, built from narratives, musical practices, and movements that share elements of contingency and adaptiveness. All this is not to say that Said and Mishra are at odds with Brah and Ashcroft, but rather that their respective thoughts highlight two very different and discontinuous aspects of what diaspora signifies. Overall, regardless of the specific way in which the wanderers we associate with diaspora create their shared stories of journey, it is most important to note the unexpected way in which terms like “diaspora,” “narrative,” and “improvisation” intertwine to illuminate how cultures can be created and changed in a world in which migrancy and exile are increasingly the rule rather than the exception.

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