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## The Turn to Diaspora

### ABSTRACT

This essay argues that diaspora must be understood as a *condition of subjectivity* and not as an object of analysis. I propose an understanding of diaspora as first and foremost a subjective condition marked by the contingencies of long histories of displacements and genealogies of dispossession. In focusing on the problem of subjectivity and subject formation, I am suggesting that diasporas are not just there. They are not simply collections of people, communities of scattered individuals bound by some shared history, race or religion. Rather, they emerge in relation to power, in the turn to and away from power. Diasporic subjects emerge in turning, turning back upon those markers of the self—homeland, memory, loss—even as they turn on or away from them.

### RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude argumente que la diaspora doit être comprise comme étant une condition subjective et non comme un objet d'analyse. Je propose une compréhension de la diaspora comme étant avant tout une condition subjective marquée par les événements imprévus de longues histoires de déplacements et de généalogies de dépossession. En ciblant le problème de la subjectivité et de la formation du sujet, je suggère que les diasporas ne sont pas simplement là. Elles ne sont pas simplement des collections de gens, des communautés d'individus dispersés et liés par une histoire, une race ou une religion commune. Plutôt, les diasporas émergent dans une relation avec le pouvoir, vers celui-ci ou loin de celui-ci. Les sujets diasporiques, qui en ressortent, se retournent pour faire face à ces marques du soi—pays d'origine, mémoire, perte—au moment même où ils se rapprochent ou s'éloignent de celles-ci.

This essay arises out of my commitment to the promise and possibilities of diaspora studies. It comes also out of my perplexity regarding the recent rise of diaspora as a term and a field of study; I have been dismayed by attacks on diaspora which describe a field of study that bears little resemblance to what I understand as diaspora studies.<sup>1</sup> I have been surprised by the plasticity thrust upon a term that not so long ago was fairly rigid in its definition and its disciplinary scope. I have found diaspora to be tremendously enabling and a resource for pushing the boundaries of criticism in fields such as postcolonial studies, Canadian literature, Asian North American literature, globalization and cultural studies. And I am troubled by the claims which divorce diaspora from histories of loss and dislocation. In thinking through the turn to diaspora in this essay, I do not seek to define diaspora as a term, nor do I wish to declare the limits of its boundaries. I do not want to claim it for anyone or anything. I do strongly believe that the turn to diaspora must be understood within the long history of the term and within specific conditions of possibility. That is, I advocate for an understanding of the term that focuses less on who or what is diasporic, than on how it is that individuals and communities become diasporic. This essay is part of my attempt to follow the trajectory of the turn to diaspora and to trace its possibilities for literary and cultural studies.

The turn has been remarkable in recent years. Searches on any number of databases and other on-line resources reveal the increasing prominence of a term that only a couple decades ago was still used largely as a proper noun describing communities of dispersed Jewish and Armenian peoples. References to various diasporas in popular media and culture abound. It has been conflated with hybridity, globalization, postcolonial and minority, to name only a few of the terms with which it seems to share critical space. In recent critical writing, diaspora has been used to describe everyone from 19th-century British imperialist and contemporary transnational elites to Japanese plantation communities in Hawaii to black communities forged out of the legacy of slavery. More remarkable still, is the relatively limited consensus about the meaning of the term and the ways in which it can be used. While there have been numerous articles, anthologies and conferences, diaspora has travelled so extensively and so easily across definitional and disciplinary boundaries that it risks losing any but the broadest and most general of meanings. Indeed, almost everyone seems to agree that diaspora, in its most basic sense, refers to a scattering of peoples who are nonetheless connected by a sense of a homeland, imaginary or otherwise. Beyond that, things get murkier. In order to prevent diaspora from becoming what Khachig Tololyan notes as a potentially “promiscuously capacious category” (Tololyan 1996: 8), various attempts have been made at a definition, to limit the scope of its reach in order to preserve its capacity as a critical term.

The continuing proliferation of the meaning of the term despite these attempts at limiting its circulation suggests not the futility of definitional exercises, but the powerful desire for diaspora in contemporary criticism. Despite verging on

capriciousness and falling wholly into a dangerous plasticity, diaspora is undeniably here to stay. The turn to diaspora in contemporary criticism is more than just a faddish adoption of a new critical language for the sake of newness. The turn to diaspora signals a demand for finding a way to speak about the complexities of connections between communities, of the unredressed griefs and disarticulated longings from which collectivities emerge. The turn to diaspora responds to what David Scott, citing Kamau Braithwaite, calls “an obscure miracle of connection” (Scott 1999: 106). Diaspora brings together communities which are not quite nation, not quite race, not quite religion, not quite homesickness, yet they still have something to do with nation, race, religion, longings for homes which may not exist. There are collectivities and communities which extend across geographical spaces and historical experiences. There are vast numbers of people who exist in one place and yet feel intimately related to another. While this current historical moment is not unique, in that there is a long history of settler colonialism and the displacement of peoples and communities in its aftermath, there is a particularity about the legacies of these displacements and longings in the present. The complexities of living in the wake of colonialism mark not the failures of the decolonization movements of the mid-20th century, but the urgency of recognizing the persistence of colonialism’s intersections with questions of immigration and citizenship.

Diaspora responds to this urgency. Diaspora offers one powerful way of thinking through the displacements engendered by colonialism. It allows a way of understanding the role of uprooting vast communities in the service of Empire as a mode of connection. Thus, African transatlantic slavery, for example, engenders movements as diverse as the Haitian Revolution of Toussaint L’Ouverture, the Civil Rights movement in the United States, and the black British cultural resistances in the United Kingdom in the 1980s. Similarly, Asian indenture produces communities as diverse as Japanese sugar cane workers on the plantations of Hawaii, Chinese guano pit diggers in South America, and South Asian labourers on the plantations of the British West Indies. These movements and communities are connected in some way. The revolts in 18th-century Haiti are connected to the struggles for civil liberties in the United States in the mid-20th-century which are in turn connected to the revolutionary interventions by black British subjects in the late 20th century. Despite important differences in culture and history, Japanese communities in Hawaii are connected to Chinese communities in South America who are in turn connected to South Asian communities in the West Indies. The problem then becomes one of finding a way to make these connections, to find the continuities within these disparate experiences and histories, without losing sight of the specificities of these various and varying communities and movements. I believe that the turn to diaspora and diaspora’s persistence in contemporary criticism is due to its promise as a mode of theorization which enables connections between the traumas of colonialism even as it marks distinctions.

Diaspora's persistence poses an urgent need for critical engagement. There have been numerous efforts to situate the (re)emergence of diaspora in terms of socio-political moments or crises (Clifford 1997; Cohen 1997; Safran 2004). While these analyses offer insights into the development of diaspora, a number of questions remain unresolved by current explorations: What is the relationship between diaspora and race? How does diaspora account for the multiplicity of displacements and dislocations? What, for instance, is the difference between an overseas Chinese community and a Chinese diasporic one? Do diasporas have to have a sense of being unhomed in order to be diasporic? Are diasporas necessarily transnational? What is the relationship between the transnational and the diasporic? Where does postcolonialism or globalization fit in the context of diaspora? It is not that current diaspora criticism does not address these questions. On the contrary, the responses to these questions tend towards definitional criteria. That is, the tendency has been to attend to the capriciousness of the term by limiting its circulation through the establishment of various sets of definitional criteria. Thus, Robin Cohen has broken diasporas down into various types and formations (Cohen 1997). Tololyan offers us a dozen criteria and a coda for identifying diasporas (Tololyan 1996). James Clifford's attempt to move out of defining diasporas by ideal types moves in something of the opposite direction when he suggests that we might understand diasporas diacritically by defining them as "caught up with and defined against (1) the norms of nation-states and (2) indigenous, and especially autochthonous, claim by 'tribal' peoples" (Clifford 1997: 250). This definitional tendency understands diasporas as objects whose major features and characteristics can be catalogued and classified. In the process of defining diaspora, diasporic communities tend to be reduced to a sampling of distinguishing features and histories of migration. Definitions that are too narrow risk excluding communities that some critics might argue are unambiguously diasporic. Definitions that are too broad risk being far too inclusive and thus evacuating the term of any real meaning. Whether the argument is for broad definitions or carefully limited ones, definitional debates reduce diasporas and diasporic communities to the status of objects.

Diaspora must be understood as a *condition of subjectivity* and not as an object of analysis. Thus, my primary aim is not to define diaspora, but to argue strenuously for an understanding of diaspora as first and foremost a subjective condition marked by the contingencies of long histories of displacements and genealogies of dispossession. Diaspora is not divorced from the histories of colonialism and imperialism, nor is it unmarked by race and the processes of racialization. It is not defined by these histories and social practices, but these histories and practices form a crucial part of the condition of diaspora's emergence. Diaspora is related to globalization, transnationalism and postcolonialism, but differentiated from these processes, not by the objective features of demographics and geography, but by the subjective conditions of demography and the longings connected to

geographical displacement. Some diasporic subjects do indeed emerge from the processes of globalization, but not all. Some diasporic subjects are indeed transnational, but not all. Diaspora emerges as a subjectivity alive to the effects of globalization and transnational migration, but also attuned to the histories of colonialism and imperialism. Diaspora is not a function of socio-historical and disciplinary phenomena, but emerges from deeply subjective processes of racial memory, of grieving for losses which cannot always be articulated and longings which hang at the edge of possibility. It is constituted in the spectrality of sorrow and the pleasures of “obscure miracles of connection.”

In focusing on the problem of subjectivity and subject formation for diaspora, I am suggesting that diasporas are not just there. They are not simply collections of people, communities of scattered individuals bound by some shared history, race or religion, or however we want to break down the definitions and classifications. Rather, they have a relation to power. They emerge in relation to power. This power is both external to the diasporic subject and internally formative. As Judith Butler understands, “power that at first appears as external, pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordination, assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject’s self-identity” (Butler 1997: 3). Crucially, Butler highlights the centrality of turning in relation to the power of subjection: “The form this power takes is relentlessly marked by a figure of turning, a turning back upon oneself or even a turn on oneself..., the turn appears to function as a tropological inauguration of the subject, a founding moment whose ontological status remains permanently uncertain” (3–4). In exploring what I have noted as the diasporic turn, I am not just talking about the turn to diaspora in academic discussions; I am also proposing that diasporic subjects emerge in turning, turning back upon those markers of the self-homeland, memory, loss—even as they turn on or away from them. In understanding power’s relation to diasporic subjectivity as both internal and external, I find Butler’s querying of that classic instance of turning in subject formation, Althusser’s policeman’s hail, to be particularly instructive. “Why,” she asks, “does this subject turn towards the voice of the law, and what is the effect of such a turn in inaugurating a social subject?” (5). She goes on to argue that

the inaugurative address of state authority presupposes not only that the inculcation of conscience already has taken place, but that conscience, understood as the psychic operation of a regulatory norm, constitutes a specifically psychic and social working of power on which interpellation depends but for which it gives no account. (5)

Thus, it is not just that power presses upon, hails and forms diasporic subjects. It is also the case that diasporic subjects emerge out of psychic relations to power which do not come from without, but are integral to that which is within the processes of subject formation. As Butler understands, “no subject comes into

being without power, but that its coming into being involves the dissimulation of power, a metaleptic reversal in which the subject produced by power becomes heralded as the subject who *founds* power” (15-16). This metaleptic reversal functions as a possible answer to the important concerns which David Kazanjian raises via Fred Moten when he notes that “accounts of subjection risk becoming ‘an obsessive recording of mastery’ if they do not also attend to the scenes in which subjection is ‘cut and augmented’” (Kazanjian and Nichanian 2003: 7). One possibility of cutting and augmenting subjection lies in the ambivalent temporality of subjectivity.

Butler’s discussion exposes the ambivalent temporality of subjectivity. It is this temporality which reveals the problematic relationship between diasporas and the conditions of their emergence. Do diasporas exist prior to the experience of scattering? When do people cease to be diasporic? As Butler understands, “The paradox of subjection implies a paradox of referentiality: namely, that we must refer to what does not yet exist” (Butler 1997: 4). This quandary illuminates the strange circularity of the many attempts at defining diaspora. They are at once already there and yet also in the process of becoming and yet again also in the process of dissolving. We cannot presume that a diasporic subject exists prior to the external forces which have produced diasporas. And yet, we cannot also talk about this subject without assuming some kind of prior relation to power. These quandaries signal the necessity of understanding the temporality of diasporic subjectivity as that which is profoundly out of joint, neither before or after a particular event or experience, haunted by the pastness of the future.

David Kazanjian’s conversation with Marc Nichanian about Armenian diasporic experience beautifully illustrates the complexity of diasporic relationships to pasts which refuse to remain in the past and futures which have already happened (Kazanjian and Nichanian 2003). Differentiating between genocide and “Catastrophe,” *Aghed*, Nichanian marks loss as a relation to the forms of memory, to the denial of mourning as a form of remembering for survivors, and thus to a loss of a particular relation to the future: Catastrophe “is a past event but it does not belong to our past. It defines the past of the future” (128). Thus, for him, diasporic loss is constituted within a relation to the future which is defined by “a past event that is still to happen” (128). For Nichanian and Kazanjian, a recognition of genocide and the search for some form of calculable reparation cannot be the basis of the formation of national Armenian identity. Rather, there must be an understanding of the memory of genocide as an archeological feature of the future. Loss is both in the past and in the potentiality of the future. This understanding of loss takes diaspora out of a relation to land and territory and into one which is bound to the problem of history and memory. In giving a proper name to Catastrophe, Nichanian neither metaphorizes a singular historical event, nor deny the specificity of history. The history of the pogroms becomes both a constitutive trauma and a proleptic memory of the future. It is this relation to

the past of the future that the language of genocide denies. Nichanian offers a way of understanding how these histories are part of the processes of becoming, of the past of the future: “*Aghed* is the name-to-be, the name that will come in the future, in a nonassignable future” (128). And in that which is to come, that which has already happened and that which defines the future, loss is constitutive of subjectivity. Nichanian’s meditations on loss in the context of the Armenian diaspora help to mark out a relationship between diasporic pasts and diasporic futures. Diasporas emerge through losses which have already happened but which also define the future. These losses come both before and after the emergence of diasporic subjectivity. In thinking about diaspora and loss, there might be temptation to understand the substance of diasporic loss as that of the loss of homeland. However, as Nichanian reveals, diasporic loss signals a relationship to history, not land or territory.

I derive my understanding of the conditions of diasporic subjectivity, conditions marked by sorrow and loss as well as by the pleasures of connection, from the specific histories of the classical Jewish and Armenian diasporas. A recognition of the subjective dimensions of diaspora requires a recuperation of the classical principles of diaspora from the histories of Jewish and Armenian communities. While many discussions of diaspora note that Jewish and Armenian diasporas are “ideal” diasporas, this observation suggests that these ideal types of diaspora are outdated and function as little more than an originary point. These gestures toward the origins of diaspora do little to acknowledge the genealogy of the term. Against the language of origins, I follow Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin in understanding diasporic consciousness as something which is marked both by genealogy and contingency (Boyarin and Boyarin 2002: 4). I situate Boyarin and Boyarin’s engagement with origins within Walter Benjamin’s refining of the term in *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*. Benjamin writes:

Origin [*Ursprung*], although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis [*Entstehung*]. The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis. That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is only apparent to dual insight. On the one hand it needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and re-establishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete. (Benjamin 2003: 45)

Thus, the question of origins is not one of genesis for an established and fixed past, but of a dialectical emergence from a history that is both restorative and incomplete. Diasporas disappear and reappear through this process of emergence.

Diasporas do not come from nowhere, nor are the conditions of diasporic subjectivity whimsical devices of differentiation. My commitment to locating conditions of diasporic subjectivity within the long histories of Jewish and Armenian diasporic experience emerges from my sense that any theorization of contemporary diaspora must acknowledge and engage with the history of the term and the ways in which this history continues to haunt the construction of contemporary diasporic community. In arguing for an engagement with the classical Jewish and Armenian diasporas, I am not suggesting an unquestioning recuperation of these historical dispersals for the present. Rather, a critical engagement with experiences of Jewish and Armenian diaspora enables an understanding of diaspora as a subjective condition bound by the catastrophic losses inflicted by power and, in the spirit of Butler's metaleptic reversal, productive of power. For example, Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin's reading of diaspora as foundationally queer and feminized in their call to rethink the role of the fable of Masada for Jewish culture illuminates one way in which diasporic subjectivity emerges as a response to power even while it generates the power of diasporic difference. Arguing that the valorization of "the account of the honourable suicide to avoid surrender at Masada was another step in Josephus' self-Romanization" (Boyarin and Boyarin 2002: 49), they contend "that the choice of 'death with (so-called) honour'—as in the Zionist appropriations of the Warsaw Ghetto revolt, harking back to the Masada ideal—represents a cultural capitulation that does not honour Jewish difference, while the choice to live however one can and continue to create as Jews is resistance" (53). Recuperating the queer and the feminine, they further argue:

The notion of dying with a weapon as more beautiful and honourable than dying without one is a surrender of Jewish difference to a "universal," masculinist consensus. Modern Jewish culture (not only Zionist) has assimilated to the macho male ethos of Western civilization. (53)

Thus, for Boyarin and Boyarin, the power of Jewish diasporic difference lies in understanding "resistance not as the accession to power and dominance, but as resistance *to* the assumption of dominance" (102). This critical engagement with Jewish diasporic difference suggests one way in which the losses inflicted by power, the murders of Jews committed by the Romans at Masada, is a violent instance both of subjection and of the power of diasporic subjectivity generated in this resistance to the "masculinist consensus" of Western civilization. I do not turn to this re-examination of Masada in order to privilege Jewish diasporic experience as exemplary, but rather to engage critically with history and memory in turning to diaspora. As Boyarin and Boyarin propose, "It is important to insist not on the *centrality* of Jewish diaspora nor on its *logical priority* within comparative diaspora studies, but on the need to refer to, and better understand, Jewish diaspora history within the contemporary diaspora rubric" (10). That is, engaging with diaspora's genealogy within Jewish and Armenian experiences is not a process of claiming

origins, but one of attending to the ways in which these histories are inextricably bound to contemporary diasporas. I turn to the classical diasporas not because they came first, but because they mark the contingencies of diasporic subjectivity.

Drawing from the models of the Jewish and Armenian diasporas, I propose that there is a vital difference between the transnational and the diasporic. While many discussions of diaspora emphasize the ways in which diasporas challenge national borders and national identities through their crossing of borders, I argue that diasporas are not constituted by transnational movement. Indeed, diasporic subjectivity does not necessarily emerge from the traversing of national boundaries. The subjective experience of what Homi Bhabha calls unhomeing, with all the resonances of an uncanny haunting and loss, depends less upon moving from one national space to another than it does the experience and memory of becoming unhomey. In his introduction to *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha explores the “unhomeliness of migrancy” proposing that “[t]o live in the unhomey world, to find its ambivalences and ambiguities enacted in the house of fiction, or its sundering and splitting performed in the work of art, is also to affirm a profound desire for social solidarity” (Bhabha 1994: 18). Bhabha’s proposal highlights the psychic dimension of diaspora which is so often overlooked in socio-historical examinations. His mapping of the loss of home to the uncanniness of feeling out place understands dislocation and dispossession as both an affect and an effect. To live in diaspora is to be haunted by histories that sit uncomfortably out of joint, ambivalently ahead of their time and yet behind it too. It is to feel a small tingle on the skin at the back of your neck and know that something is not quite right about where you are now, but to know also that you cannot leave. To be un-homed is a process. To be unhomey is a state of diasporic consciousness.

Diaspora must be differentiated from transnationalism, not only because the crossing of national borders does not necessarily define diasporic subjectivity, but also because to be diasporic is to be marked by loss. In differentiating the diasporic from the transnational, I am thus differentiating between migration and what it means to be marked by the memory of migration. I want to reserve diaspora for the underclass, for those who must move through the world in, or are haunted by, the shadowy uncertainties of dispossession. The difference between the transnational and the diasporic lies in the difference between those whose subjectivities emerge out of the security of moving through the world with the knowledge of a return and those whose subjectivities are conditioned by the knowledge of loss. Of course, there are, and always will be, exceptions and situations which contradict and challenge this differentiation. But what, you might ask, of the Iranian diasporic community in Los Angeles whose complex relations to home have been made visible through the work of thinkers such as Hamid Naficy (Naficy 1999)? Is the impossibility of their return nullified by their class positions? Or, similarly, what of the Chinese intellectuals in Rey Chow’s exploration of the lures of diaspora who have taken refuge in the West after the horrors of Tiananmen Square (Chow

1993)? Even though many of these intellectuals may move through the world within the security of their university postings, surely the threat of persecution that they face upon return annuls their status among the transnational elite? These questions raise the issue of class and mobility. It is not that wealth and multiple passports render one transnational rather than diasporic. My commitment to this differentiation between the transnational and the diasporic is not a rule but a condition of possibility. I understand that there will never be straight and clear definitions of diaspora, nor do I want them. In this essay, I am not interested in cookie cutter definitional exercises. I do not want to get into the game of declaring one community to be diasporic and another one not. It is a concern for the conditions of diasporic subjectivity that motivates my enquiry. It is within these conditions that I seek the limits of diaspora and in particular its differentiation from the transnational. In this sense, it matters less to me whether one community might be classified as diasporic and not another than how diaspora as a rubric might help scholars to understand the conditions of dislocation.

Another condition marked by “ideal” diasporas lies in the foundational role of traumatic dislocation. In Jewish and Armenian diasporic experience, Jewish and Armenian peoples have been forcibly scattered. While there are numerous accounts of these histories, what matters for my argument is not the specific events of the scattering itself, but its effect as a subjective experience. I recognize the dangers of a perpetual return to a narrative of wounding and victimization. In particular, I recognize the possibility of clinging to these narratives as a mode of retrenchment, as a claim to singularity, and as a justification for conservative insularities. But these are the dangers of a fossilized approach to history which does not take into account the ways in which the past lives in the present. An emphasis on subjectivity makes possible a mode of engaging with these histories not as immutable expressions of victimization and wounding, but as crucially productive of subjectivities which straddle the divide between past and present. One of the major challenges to thinking about the formation of diasporic subjectivity lies in understanding the legacies of displacement and dislocation as crucially mutable features of the present. What form does the memory of the Middle Passage take in contemporary diasporic subjectivity? How do we understand the experiences of incarceration in the barracks and the barracoons as part of memory in the present? One of the wagers of this essay, a wager that is shared by many postcolonial and diaspora critics, is that these histories are not merely narratives of a faraway past disconnected from contemporary subjectivities and memories. The question then becomes one of thinking through how it is that these histories are also histories of the present. How do historical experiences of incarceration and bondage in the service of empire emerge in the formation of contemporary identities? What are the forms of transmission? Who carries these histories into the present? What

transformations in these histories occur in the process of transmission and how are these histories transformative?

These questions can be addressed by thinking through the conditions and formation of diasporic subjectivity. Diasporic subjectivity calls attention to the conditions of its formation. Contrary to studies of diasporas as objects of analysis where race or religion might be considered a defining feature, I have been arguing that no one is born diasporic. Rather, one *becomes* diasporic through a complex process of memory and emergence. Thus, to be black, for example, does not, automatically translate into a state of being within the black diaspora. Blackness is not inherently diasporic. Black diaspora subjectivity emerges in what it means to be black and live through the displacements of slavery and to carry into the future the memory of the losses compelled by the legacy of slavery, to be torn by the ambivalences of mourning losses that are both your own and yet not quite your own. Black diasporic subjectivity emerges in relation to other diasporic communities and through the depths of histories that will not rest because they have had no peace.

Diasporic subjectivity requires both a lateral engagement across multiple diasporic communities and identities and vertically through long histories of dislocation. In lateral terms, diasporas do not emerge in isolation, but are defined through difference. In contemporary debates, diasporas tend to be discussed in their singularities. Thus, there are extended discussions of *the* black diaspora, or *the* Chinese diaspora, or *the* Indian diaspora. When critics take up explorations of more than one diasporic community, these multiple diasporas tend to be discussed as examples of various types of diasporas. There is relatively little discussion of diasporas as they emerge *in relation* to one another. And yet, we know from Stuart Hall that diasporic identities emerge *through* difference and not as singular and self-evident manifestations of diasporic experience (Hall 1990). The tendency toward thinking through diasporas in isolation results in a definitional morass. Rather than discussions of how one diasporic community emerges subjectively in relation to another, we are left with objective declarations of diasporas as representative types and debates about true versus false diasporas. What is needed is a finer understanding of diasporas constituted through difference. This means not only adequately understanding how diasporas are internally complicated and divided in this complexity, but also how diaspora as a term and critical force has emerged in relation to other emergent fields and disciplines. As Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin so evocatively note, “if a lost Jerusalem imagined through a lost Córdoba imagined through a lost Suriname is diaspora to the third power, so is a stolen Africa sung as a lost Zion in Jamaican rhythms on the sidewalks of the Eastern Parkway” (Boyarin and Boyarin 2002: ix). These losses are not only shared across geographies and communities, but are also constitutive of each other. For a lost Zion sung in Jamaican rhythms can only be imagined within the knowledge of a lost Jerusalem *and* a stolen Africa. These are not parallel losses, but losses which inform each other, losses whose songs of remembrance call forth one loss

even as they commemorate another. They share continuities even as they persist in their differences.

Within this commitment to this understanding of diasporas as constituted in difference, the final part of this essay engages in a preliminary exploration of two distinct diasporic communities in their specificity and in relation to each other. One way of understanding the condition of diasporic subjectivity lies in thinking through how the memory of oppression lives on in the present through the processes of racialization. These processes do not emerge in isolation but through difference. In examining black and Asian diasporas, I hope to investigate the relations between them and to contest the current mode of discussing these diasporas in their singularities.

Even as differences “within” and/or constituting diasporas need to be investigated more critically, so too do seemingly distinct diasporas need to be compared. I turn to a consideration of the legacies of black slavery and Asian indenture in order to illustrate the necessity of thinking through these two distinct histories and to locate their overlaps and connections. While black slavery is generally understood as being foundational to the formation of black diasporic communities, Asian indenture occupies a very different position in Asian diaspora studies. When indenture is discussed at all, it tends to be referred to as an event in the past curiously divorced from the formation of contemporary Asian diasporic identities. Indeed, part of the work of my explorations of Asian diaspora is that of injecting back into the discussion the role of indenture as a formative event for contemporary Asian diaspora. Contrary to understanding of indenture as an event in the past, I suggest that Asian indenture is not only formative of the present, but also a crucial clue to the deep and vibrant relations between black and Asian diasporas.

I understand the urgency of examining Afro-Asian diaspora connections within the context of making connections between old and new diasporas. In two separate articles which put forward strikingly similar terms, Vijay Mishra and Gayatri Spivak both suggest that diasporas can be understood as falling under two broad categories, what they termed the old and the new: old diasporas are connected with histories of indenture and slavery, whereas the new can be understood as products of transnational cosmopolitanism (Mishra 1996; Spivak 1996). Where the former experience displacement because of various forms of oppression, the latter are exemplary subjects of the hyper-mobile global order. In Chinese diaspora criticism, these categories have come under a number of different names but broadly mean the same thing. For example, in Ma and Cartier (2003) Carolyn Cartier puts forward the idea of first and second wave diasporas and Laurence Ma suggests that there are cultural and clandestine diasporas; more broadly, Asian American discussions distinguish between pre- and post-1965 immigrants. These distinctions are important because they foreground the issue of class. It is generally understood that modern Chinese migrants are different than their

indentured predecessors. Again and again, we are told that these new migrants have more capital, cultural or otherwise, than those who first sojourned across the oceans in search of work and possibilities of improving their lives.

While these distinctions foreground class, they do not question the historically progressivist narrative which divides Chinese diasporic subjects into neat, temporally sequential categories. These distinctions between old and new make sense of Fujian refugees by implying that they are somehow more backward, less modern, than their multiple-passport transnational capitalist counterparts. It allows that same transnational capitalist to declare themselves to be different from the supposed queue jumpers, invoking a Chineseness that is somehow dissociated from the those who arrive clinging to the sides of boats without the safety or security of money or citizenship. Perhaps the Chinese will one day, like the Irish, become white. But this bleaching of Chineseness is clearly an unsatisfactory solution for anyone interested in social justice and progressive politics. Distinctions such as Ma's between cultural and clandestine diasporas are useful in that they highlight, as Akash Kapur puts it, "the men and women who arrive in Europe [and arguably other parts of the first world] not safely buckled into their seats, but clinging frozen to the undercarriage of aeroplanes and trains, or suffocating in the backs of lorries and vans" (Kapur 2002: 10). However, these distinctions also risk excluding the diasporic underclass from our understanding of the culture of diaspora—after all, if there is a cultural diaspora and a clandestine diaspora, does this mean that the clandestine diaspora is not cultural? These categories do not hold when they are taken up as exclusive entities.

Old and new diasporas are crucially constitutive of each other. Asian diaspora criticism needs to take seriously the history of indenture, not as a feature of a past long since buried, but as a palpable component of contemporary Chineseness. Part of that work lies in understanding the category of "coolie" in relation to that of "slave." Through his exploration of the rebellions and resistances of slaves and coolies in the Caribbean in *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting*, Prashad beautifully notes the connections between black and Asian communities in the Caribbean and rightly observes that it is the legacy of colonialism and imperialism which maintains the boundaries between these racialized communities (Prashad 2002). Writing of Hosay in Guyana, a festival similar to Carnival in which Asians, Africans and Amerindians crossed the colour line, Prashad traces the polycultural potential of the festival and its tragic demise in the face of a racialized retrenchment instigated by the colonial authorities. The festival had once been a rare opportunity for workers to freely transit between plantations and across the colony. This intermingling culminated in protest in 1884 that left twelve people dead and more than one hundred injured. Despite having their petitions for a Hosay rejected that year, the workers had gone ahead with the festival. Officials locked the gates in an attempt to forestall the festival, but the workers broke them down and were met with gunfire. "Faced with the combined rage of the Africans, East Indians,

Chinese and others, the colonial state moved fast to reduce contacts between them” (81). In a frightening echo of contemporary cultural nationalism, the colonial state reasoned that “coolies and ex-slaves had ‘forgotten’ their ‘original’ cultures” and actively promoted the development of religious and cultural boundaries. The example of Hosay in 1884 Guyana not only reminds us of the dangers of cultural and religious retrenchment, but also of ignoring the possibilities of understanding indenture as crucially formative of contemporary Asian diasporic subjectivity.

Suppressing or denying the ways in which the experience of indenture shapes and is productive of Asianness in contemporary culture risks losing a sense of connection between black and Asian communities. Without indenture, the connection between these communities is lost. Without indenture, discussions of Asian diasporic culture become unmoored from these intertwined histories of dislocation. I understand that it is not easy to talk about Asian indenture. Unlike slavery, its definition as a historical event, as a legal category and as an experience of subjection is not obvious. The legacy of slavery has produced specific forms of black diasporic subjectivity. I am acutely aware of the important differences between slavery and indenture—not the least of which is, as Evelyn Hu-Dehart notes in her work on the Chinese in Cuba, the difference between being identified as chattel property in the exercise of the law and that of being a subject of the law (Hu-Dehart 1993). There are crucial differences between indenture and slavery, and many questions as to what Asian indenture actually constitutes. Clearly, the experiences of the labourer on the railways of western Canada are different than those of the guano pit worker in Peru, whose experience is not the same as those of the miner in South Africa whose conditions of work are not the same as those on the sugar plantations of the Caribbean. The proliferation of definitions surrounding what it means to be indentured, its very slipperiness as a category and a history, need not mean that we do not talk about it at all or that we cannot think through the relations between them.

It is precisely Asian indenture’s lack of fixity that reveals Asian diasporic subjectivity as produced within and through the contradictions of voluntary migration for racialized diasporic subjects. Diaspora studies has wrestled with the question of voluntary and involuntary migration. As William Safran observes, “neither poverty nor oppression is necessarily perpetuated in diaspora ... oppression is not a *sine qua non* of the diaspora condition” (Safran 2004: 15). While it is generally acknowledged that there is a difference between voluntary and involuntary migration, there is little sense of how we might theorize the relation between them. In accordance with Tololyan, I also believe that diaspora as a term must be reserved for particular communities, that its liberal application to any and all mobile groups only works to diminish the power of the term. Paying attention to indenture, both in history and in its continuing presence as a reality for many migrant subjects, rules out any easy distinction between voluntary and involuntary migration. As the debates over “illegal” immigrants reveal, even the

most conservative and racist interpretations of their status as “authentic” refugees demands an assessment of what voluntary migration actually entails. After all, when someone is desperate enough to leave their home by travelling for months in a locked shipping container with little food or water, sweltering in filth and fear, the voluntariness of this migration is, at best, relative.

Clearly, indenture, even in its multiplicity, is not responsible for all Asian migration. And yet, we have to learn from black diaspora studies in order to understand how indenture produces constitutive effects. Not all black people were affected by slavery. But the production of blackness through the experience and legacy of slavery remains crucial to understanding contemporary Black diasporas. I suggest that the same kind of attention needs to be afforded to the experience of indenture for Asian diasporas. The old diasporas of indenture and bondage cannot be separated from the new diasporas of the transnational elite. For the old diasporas continue to exist in the newness of our globalizing world, and the new diasporas have never been new. They are constitutive of each other and we risk shoring up a colonialism that never ended when we lose sight of these constitutive effects of indenture on Asian diasporic subjectivity.

Losing sight of indenture also means losing sight of Afro-Asian connections which continue to reverberate across contemporary culture. Even as memories of the injustices of the past live on in movements such as the call for slave reparations and head tax redress, the divide between black and Asian communities seems to widen. As part of her *Notorious C.H.O.* performance, the Korean-American comedienne Margaret Cho screened a cartoon short entitled *Grocery Store* which opens with the following dialogue narrated by Margaret Cho and Bruce Daniels as cartoon versions of themselves:

Cho: Korean people and black people don't get along. This has got to end.

Daniels: Yeah, we're sick and tired of it.

Cho: When we hate each other...

Daniels: ...we're taking valuable time away from...

Cho: ...hating white people.

Daniels: And we don't want to do that, do we? (Cho 2002)

In the still-undulating wake of the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles, the dialogue has a particular resonance with U.S. race relations. Its cheeky call for coalition revisits one of the central scenes of the riots, the Korean-American grocery store. The animated short examines the encounter between an African-American man and a Korean-American woman grocery store owner. When the black man walks into the store, the woman immediately suspects him of wanting to cause trouble. He flips his middle finger at her in the security mirror. She demands that he leave the store. When he reaches into his jacket pocket, she immediately reaches under the counter for a rifle. This action results in a miniature arms race across the counter. He whips out a machine gun. She counters with cannon. He responds

with a bomb. She takes out a Molotov cocktail. He takes out a skunk. They end up in group therapy. The scene is both humorous in its hyperbolic approach to inter-racial violence, and tragically accurate in its understanding of the tensions, resentments and suspicions which fuel this violence.

I am struck by *Grocery Store* not only for the biting and dark humour of its depiction of contemporary Afro-Asian race relations, but also for the way in which the scene of grocery store violence resonates with so many other scenes of violence, often in grocery stores, between black and Asian peoples across geographies and through histories. The Korean-American grocer's experience echoes that of the Chinese grocer in Jamaica as depicted in Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda* (1999), or the Tuli family in Trinidad in V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1969). The positioning of Asian diasporic communities as merchants by critics such as Robin Cohen who suggests that the Chinese diaspora is best understood as a "merchant diaspora" has obscured not only the connection between indenture and slavery (Cohen 1997), but also the connection between the Asian indentured labourer and the Asian merchant. I understand that it is risky to collapse particular experiences, to suggest that there might be a connection between a Korean-American grocer in late-20th-century Los Angeles and a Chinese-Jamaican grocer in 19th-century Jamaica. But this is a risk I want to take. I want to risk connection over disconnection, relation over division.

The positioning of Asians as ideal, passive, more suitable to the demands of capital, is not new. Nor is the fomenting of violence between blacks and Asians. Nor is the Asian business as the target of resentment and the site of violence. While Korean-Americans may not be directly associated with the histories of Asian indenture that we have been contemplating, the racialization of Asians in America continues to be marked by these histories. While I understand the necessity of keeping in mind the specificities of Asian diasporic experiences, I am also mindful of the ways in which Asian diasporic communities persist through the legacies of Asian coolie subjection. It matters that Korean is not Chinese, but it also matters that Korean cannot be separated from processes of racialization rooted in the subjection of Asian diasporic peoples. One way of attacking racism's tendency to generalization has been to insist on specificity. But we must also think through the connections between racialized subjects in order to make visible the relation between the positioning of Asians across histories and geographies.

Margaret Cho's *Grocery Store* does not give us easy resolutions. It will take more than everybody kung fu fighting to carry us through and out of diasporic dissolution. Even as *Grocery Store* expresses ambivalence toward the uses of therapy, closing as it does with the Korean-American woman's look of sad ambivalence when she admits that she doesn't really know how it makes her feel when the black man refers to her through racist epithets, it also calls for sustained dialogue across black and Asian communities. Not only is this dialogue essential so that we can stop, as

Margaret Cho and Bruce Daniels sassily note, “taking valuable time away from hating white people,” it also points to the ways in which diasporas are constituted through difference. Asian diasporas do not exist in isolation. They emerge in and through their interactions with other diasporic communities. Diasporic communities carry forward the damage of dispersion and dislocation.

## Conclusion

In my explorations of diasporic memory and affect as well as my examinations of the relation between black and Asian diasporas, I hope to illuminate the relationship between diaspora and cultural studies. Not only do many key diaspora critics claim significant affinities with cultural studies, including Ien Ang, Rey Chow, Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, but diaspora studies shares with cultural studies a methodological commitment to the everyday and a sense of the need to rethink history as what Mieke Bal terms “cultural memory in the present” (Bal 1999). As Bal notes, cultural studies, through the practice of cultural analysis,

entertains an ambivalent relation to history as it is or has been traditionally practiced in our faculties. Far from being indifferent to history, cultural analysis problematizes history’s silent assumptions in order to come to an understanding of the past that is different. This understanding is not based on an attempt to isolate and enshrine the past in an objectivist “reconstruction,” nor on an effort to project it on an evolutionist line not altogether left behind in current historical practice. Nor is it committed to a deceptive synchronism. Instead, cultural analysis seeks to understand the past as part of the present, as what I have around us, and without which no culture would be able to exist. (3)

Diaspora shares with the work of cultural analysis this commitment to a history which is all around us and yet is also suppressed by the imperatives of progressivism and synchronism. I understand that this commitment to other histories is not unique to the discipline of cultural studies and embrace the connections to postcolonial projects such as Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2000) call to provincialize Europe and Homi Bhabha’s (1994) understanding of the time lag; to minority and ethnic studies projects such as Robin Kelley’s work on everyday forms of resistance in African American communities and David Eng, David Kazanjian and Anne Anlin Cheng’s work on racial melancholia (Eng and Kazanjian 2003; Cheng 2001; Kelley 1994); to the projects for reconsidering the legal constitution of race by Patricia Williams (1992) in critical race studies. Clearly, the archeological work of cultural memory in the present does not belong to diaspora alone, nor is it disciplinarily solely within the provenance of cultural studies. In the connections between these various projects and disciplines, I celebrate their dedication to understanding the possibilities of memory in everyday objects and gestures.

Even as I argue for the specificity of diaspora studies, I do not want to lose sight of these crucial connections between diaspora and other related disciplines such as postcolonial, ethnic, minority, critical race and cultural studies. As the specificity of one diasporic formation is not compromised by understanding its relation to another, emphasizing the relation of diaspora studies to other fields of enquiry renders it no less unique. In fact, I see this relation as one of the tremendous strengths of diaspora studies. As Edouard Glissant so eloquently notes, it is in the poetics of relation that I might find the undercurrents which connect the unmarked underwater graves of unforgotten bodies to the remarkable persistence of Black diaspora culture (Glissant 1997). It is also in the space of relation that I track the currents of disciplinary turns and seek to understand the persistence and possibilities of diaspora culture. Despite Vijay Mishra's provocative and instructive suggestion that all postcolonial texts have drawn their source texts from diasporic archives (Mishra 1996: 426, n. 23), diaspora studies is neither an originary disciplinary formation, nor is it divorced from other disciplines, nor yet is it entirely of them. It is, rather, a confluence of multiple disciplinary movements as well as a singular contribution which emphasizes the relation between these movements.

The turn to diaspora illuminates the urgency of and the desire for an engagement with the legacies of colonial displacement which attends to the emergence of subjectivities bound by the disparate geographies of home and away, the past and the present. Diaspora touches upon and is marked by the colonial and the postcolonial, race and redress, culture and history. For if cultural memory in the present is the work of the future in the name of losses not yet redressed and sadnesses not yet recognized, it is also the work of embracing the unrelenting homesickness of the unhomely denizens of diaspora. To turn to diaspora is to turn to the power of relation and the enabling possibilities of difference. To turn to diaspora is to turn away from the seemingly inexorable march of history and towards the secret of memories embedded within the intimacies of the everyday. To turn to diaspora is to turn to restless specters of sorrow bound by that which is lost and to obscure miracles of connection marked by that which is found. Let us turn then to diaspora.

### Note

1. The most compelling recent criticism of diaspora studies that I have encountered emerges from a recent paper by Lee Maracle. Maracle argued that diaspora shares many features with colonialism and that its valorization of migration and mobility works against the claims of indigenous cultures. While this criticism of diaspora's focus on mobility and movement at the expense of rootedness is not new, I believe that Maracle's point is an important one in that it calls attention to the intersection of diaspora and the work of indigenous studies (Maracle 2005). Maracle's critiques highlight the desperate need for a finer understanding of diaspora which differentiates it from the transnational and situates it inextricably within long histories of dislocation including that of the dislocation of First Nations peoples of Canada.

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