DIASPORA, MEMORY, AND IDENTITY

A Search for Home

EDITED BY VIJAY AGNEW

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For Nicole Agnew,
loving daughter and best friend

Acknowledgments

After many years of doing research and writing on my own, I decided it was time to leave my solitary habits behind and become more engaged with the work of the university. As director of the Centre for Feminist Research at York, I have had the pleasure of getting to know many academics who were previously unknown to me, and have enjoyed playing host to feminist scholars from different parts of the world who have come to visit the university. In meeting others I have grown intellectually and have learned new skills of communicating with people. *Diaspora, Memory, and Identity* has come out of this phase of my life. The executive of the Centre for Feminist Research wanted to initiate a project that would draw diverse women together, and consequently decided to host a conference on memory and identity. The work of planning and organizing the conference was ably done by the centre's administrator, Annis Karpenko, who has since left us for other opportunities. I thank her for communicating with participants and responding promptly to their concerns.

The conference introduced me to the research of friends and colleagues and suggested new directions for my writings. Editing this volume made it necessary for me to read and reread the papers of the contributors as we worked through the different stages of the publishing process. I gained new insights at each reading and understood patterns and commonalities between the varied experiences of diasporic people of different ethnic and racial identities. Many of the contributors to this volume discuss how memories of the past define our perspectives, help us negotiate our circumstances, and develop new ways of being and becoming. I have greatly enjoyed working and learning from the research of these contributors, and I now think of them as friends. I

thank them for their patience with my many queries concerning their essays, and for their prompt and helpful responses. In particular I would like to thank Marlene Kadar and Haideh Moghissi for their engagement with the work of the Centre for Feminist Research, and for their encouragement of my research and writing.

I would like to thank senior administrators at York for their generous support of the work of the centre. I had to raise funds for hosting the conference, and when I passed the hat around it came back with enough to enable me to invite scholars from overseas to come and present their essays. I would also like to acknowledge the support of the Social Science and Humanities Research Council for a three-year grant that enabled me to write the chapters included in this volume.

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I draw courage and sustenance for research and writing from the unfailing love and support of my husband, Tom. Mothers nurture and care for their young, and as Nicole, my daughter, makes her way in worlds that are distant and different from mine, I watch from afar and pray for her well-being. My conversations with her, and with her friends, give me a glimpse into the hearts and minds of young women. As I see these young women plan confidently for their personal and professional lives, I think that the struggles of feminists of my generation were not just a passing phase but have left their indelible print on history. Knowing that gives me enormous satisfaction. I am a mother, full of stories about 'home.' Nicole indulges me by listening patiently, and I thank and love her for it.

Contents

DIASPORA, MEMORY, AND IDENTITY: A SEARCH FOR HOME

Introduction

VIJAY AGNEW

Memories establish a connection between our individual past and our collective past (our origins, heritage, and history). The past is always with us, and it defines our present; it resonates in our voices, hovers over our silences, and explains how we came to be ourselves and to inhabit what we call 'our homes.' Thus, 'what we call the past is merely a function and production of a continuous present and its discourses' (Hirsch and Smith 2002, 9). Those who have left their places of birth to make homes in other parts of the world are familiar with the question 'Where do you come from?' and respond in innumerable, well-rehearsed ways. The past and the present are social constructs that are contested by those with different identities, experiences, genealogies, and histories. This relationship between the past and present is complex and dynamic, with meanings and interpretations that shift with time, place, and social context. In contemporary society, the mobility of people and ideas have been further accelerated, challenging those of us who are interested in the study of diasporas to reflect upon our mental, social, and physical boundaries and perhaps shift and dislocate them. It is as important for us 'to cross metaphorical lines as it is to cross actual ones: not to be contained or defined by anybody else's idea of where a line should be drawn' (Rushdie 2002, 373).

The word *diaspora* was originally used to describe the forced dispersal and displacement of the Jewish, Armenian, and Greek peoples. In his seminal article on this subject, Clifford defines the main characteristics of a diaspora as incorporating a 'history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, and alienation in the host (bad host?) country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship' (1994, 305).

Anh Hua, in this volume, discusses the history and theories associated with the term diaspora to argue that the term is useful to study 'the social world resulting from displacement, flight, exile, and forced migration,' enabling us to 'reconfigure the relationship between citizens, nation states, and national narratology.'

Anthias (1998) outlines six criteria that define a diaspora, such as dispersal and scattering, collective trauma, cultural flowering, a troubled relationship with the majority, a sense of community transcending national frontiers, and promoting a return movement. There is no ideal diaspora, nor do all of these elements have to be present to define it, and there is no hierarchy among them that emerges by the absence or presence of one or more of these elements. Importance, however, lies in the shared history of displacement, suffering, adaptation, and resistance.

The term diaspora has been expanded to incorporate situations that are not associated with forced dispersals or a desire to return. For example, the South Asian diaspora is not characterized by its orientation to roots nor its desire for a permanent return to the homeland. Rather, as Rishma Dunlop and I document in this volume, it is defined by its ability to recreate a culture in diverse locations. Diasporas can thus denote a transnational sense of self and community and create an understanding of ethnicity and ethnic bonds that transcends the borders and boundaries of nation states. Yet, the individual living in the diaspora experiences a dynamic tension every day between living 'here' and remembering 'there,' between memories of places of origin and entanglements with places of residence, and between the metaphorical and the physical home.

At the present time, the word diaspora is used in a number of different ways that have more to do with the scholars' disciplines than with any substantive concerns about the term. In this volume, the contributors, who come from diverse academic disciplines – humanities, English, women's studies, sociology, history, social work, contemporary art and theory, and education – use the term in a multiplicity of ways that evoke its original definition as well as its subsequent broader use. The authors are interested in documenting 'how heightened social, economic, and political interconnectedness across national borders and cultures enables individuals to sustain multiple identities and loyalties, create new cultural products using elements from a variety of settings, and exercise multiple political and civic memberships' (Levitt and Waters 2002, 6).

Discourses on diaspora use the term in three distinct but related

ways: as a social form, as a type of social consciousness, and as a mode of cultural production (Vertovec 1997). As a social form, the term refers to individuals who live in different parts of the world but identify collectively with one another, with the countries or region from which they or their ancestors originated, and with the society in which they currently reside. Atsuko Matsuoka, John Sorenson, Izumi Sakamoto, and Yanqiu Zhou use the term in this way in this volume. Scholars who define a diaspora by its social consciousness refer to individuals who live in a variety of societies and cultures and who emphasize their sense of belonging or exclusion, their states of mind, and their sense of identity.

In this volume, Pamela Sugiman and Marlene Kadar use the term to show how traumatic and wounding experiences construct identity and shape feelings of community in various social and political contexts. Diaspora, as a mode of production, refers to the reproduction of cultural phenomena through creolization and hybridization. Dunlop, Haideh Moghissi, and I discuss these phenomena in this volume. These categories are not separate and distinct, however; rather, they overlap and intersect with one another.

Migrants use their intellectual, social, and political resources to construct identities that transcend physical and social boundaries, and they are rarely, particularly today, mere victims who are acted upon by the larger society. Ong refers to the experience of ethnic Chinese, of the investor and business class, to argue that their sense of themselves and their community is derived from a variety of locations throughout the world where they live or have lived. The Chinese, who are mobile and move frequently between countries, exercise 'flexible citizenship.' They may experience the oppressiveness of race and gender, but they also intervene in a planned and deliberate manner to contradict conventional racist stereotypes. Instead, they generate new and different images of themselves and their group that correspond more closely to their evolving self-image and self-definition (Ong 1999). Identity thus transcends national boundaries and becomes deterritorialized. Nevertheless, the critical self-defining issue for the migrants may be, in the words of Hawley (1997), 'Who [they] ... expect to be, who they are allowed to be, and who do they choose to be' (183).

Until recently, discussions of diasporas were critiqued for failing to pay adequate attention to the differences of class and for their neglect in studying the gendered experiences of diasporic populations (Anthias 1998; Clifford 1994). All chapters in this volume discuss the gendered and class nature of the diasporic experience. Moghissi analyses whether

attachment to the culture and traditions of the homeland that reinforce patriarchy and subordinate women is a response by migrants to the racism and sexism that they experience from the larger society in which they live. The discussions of Sakamoto, Zhou, Matsuoka, and Sorenson in this volume analyse gender in comparative and relational terms to show that being in the diaspora can lead to a positive renegotiation of gender relations. Eritrean and Chinese women who live away from their homelands are compelled to modify conventional gender roles to meet the political and social demands of their new countries. These changes generate new modes of interactions that challenge subordination. Sugiman and I analyse class biases about how different groups of individuals are perceived and treated in the diaspora.

Memory, writes Hua in this volume, is important in studying the diaspora, for it is closely tied to historical and political struggles and in recent time 'has become an object that is gendered, appropriated, politicized, nationalized, medicalized, and aestheticized.' A point of entry into my own history is a portrait of my mother enclosed in a plain wooden frame. This image always hung on a white wall that was devoid of any other decoration, in my father's austere room in our home in Bombay. By the time I was a toddler, my parents and extended family had become refugees as a result of the British partition of India. They fled from Quetta, a Muslim-dominated region in the northwest of India that had been their home for generations and is today part of Pakistan, hoping to escape religious violence and find safety and security with their co-religionists in India. A year later my mother died, and my siblings and I became 'motherless.'

The hurried nature of my parents' departure from Quetta, now part of Pakistan, meant that they carried little with them that was not necessary for physical survival. No albums or pictures of the past survived, other than the portrait of my mother and a photograph of my paternal grandfather. All record of my parents' youth, their celebrations of weddings and births, and joyful gatherings with friends and relations were lost and obliterated. My mother, like many of the women of her class and generation, kept no diaries and journals that recorded her everyday life or her departure from Quetta and arrival as a refugee in India. My only access to her times and her inner self are through the memories of others – my father, siblings, and extended family.

Histories and public archives memorialized, until recently, the lives of the noteworthy and powerful while neglecting, except in broad strokes, the everyday lives and experiences of the majority of the popu-

lation. Feminists use 'alternate archives' such as visual images, music, ritual and performance, material and popular culture, and oral history to record lived reality, particularly of the disenfranchised, marginalized, and excluded populations (Hirsch and Smith 2002, 10). Memories play a role in the individual's struggle to construct a social and personal identity in a world in which subjectivity is both fragmented and fractured (Giles 2002, 21). Memories that are documented in narratives, life writings, and autobiographies represent individuals and groups with a specificity and particularity that eschew homogeneity and generalizations. Memories recorded in journals, diaries, and life writings are acts of representation, performance, and interpretation (Hirsch and Smith 2002, 5.) If memory is an act of representation and performance, then we can ask what its relationship is to 'fact' and whether memories are 'real' and 'authentic' interpretations of self, home, and history.

In this volume, Kadar examines memoirs and autobiographies in order to determine how survivors of the Holocaust recall memories and how they encode their personal and collective experience of the traumatic events. Women internees who were forced to identify themselves as numbers were traumatized by the imposition of an anonymity that erased their selves. Kadar examines recipes written during the women's internment to illustrate how food texts allowed inmates to recall the flavour of home, fulfil the longing for food, and satisfy the psychological need for familiarity and comfort.

Like Kadar, I question the significance of origins and posit the dismantling of borders and boundaries that enclose identities and heritages. I approach this topic by invoking the symbols of gems and jewels in museums in Britain, North America, and the Middle East. Gems and jewels encode the cultural and political heritage of diasporic populations and satisfy their nostalgia and longing to know and be in touch with their ancestral history. Such symbols of their cultural past enhance the self-esteem and pride of communities that have been eroded by experiences of racism.

Feminists' 'alternate archives' give us access to the everyday lives of women. These archives supplement academic methodologies such as oral histories, interviews, and ethnographic studies. Together, these methods and various forms of evidence shatter anonymity and create a better understanding of what internments, migrations, escapes from danger and violence, and refugee status really mean. The contributors to this volume use various methodologies to document the diasporic experiences of the Eritrean, Iranian, South Asian, Chinese, Trinidadian,

and Japanese peoples. Memories of exclusion shadow their lives and thwart their feelings of being at home in the diaspora.

As a child, I cared little for my grandmother's and aunts' comments that pointed out the striking similarity between my mother's facial features and my own. I did not dwell upon the connection (other than that of biology) between the woman who gazed sombrely and sternly out of the photograph, and me. I did not think about my mother as a woman or ponder her life and circumstances because they seemed to have no bearing on me at the time. Yet the details of the portrait are indelibly etched in my mind: she is wearing a sari with a small print on it, the folds of the garment neatly drawn together over one shoulder where a gold pin holds it in place. Her hair is pulled back, emphasizing her stern and unsmiling expression. Now, as a feminist historian who lives in Canada, I interpret the picture somewhat differently: I attribute the unsmiling and stern expression on my mother's face to the fact that she is in a studio and is being portrayed through the lens of a male photographer. He sees a mother and a housewife and portrays her in that sombre and somewhat dull mode.

My maternal grandmother's memories of my mother recall a cheerful, confident woman who always had a smile hovering around her lips and was a loving daughter and a dutiful mother. My brother, who was my mother's favourite child, strongly disputes my resemblance to my mother. He asserts authoritatively that he has vivid memories of her, and that these are more reliable guides to who she was. According to him, I do not have her sweet temperament and lack the cooking and sewing talents for which she was well known. My father tells me stories of my mother that highlight her graciousness, diligence, and modesty because these are the qualities he wishes me to emulate. My maternal aunts remember my mother as a feisty and courageous woman who encouraged them to transgress the boundaries of custom and convention. The memories of others generate images for me that give me access to my past and history, but I do not try to distil the essence of my mother through them or try to discern who speaks the truth about her.

Memory is an act of remembering that can create new understandings of both the past and the present. Memories are an active process by which meaning is created; they are not mere depositories of fact (Giles 2002, 22). Gayle Greene argues that women writers turn to the past as a means of effecting change in the present, not for reasons of nostalgia, which she defines as a form of escape from an unsatisfactory present into an idealized past. She distinguishes between *nostal-*

gia, which she sees as static, and *remembering*, which is a more radical and transformative activity:

> Whereas 'nostalgia' is the desire to return home, 'to remember' is 'to bring to mind' or 'think of again,' 'to be mindful of,' 'to recollect.' Both 'remembering' and 're-collecting,' suggest a connecting, assembling, a bringing together of things in relation to one another ...
>
> Memory may look back in order to move forward and transform disabling fictions to enabling fictions, altering our relation to the present and future. (Cited in McDermott, 2002, 391)

But McDermott (2002) argues that it is impossible to maintain this distinction and indeed it may be unnecessary to do so because nostalgia is a necessary ingredient of memory work. 'When we long for the past, we long for what might have been as well as what was; it is only by incorporating such longing into our narratives that we can suspend the past and ultimately change its meanings in the present' (405–406). Sugiman in this volume reviews the discussion on nostalgia and its relation to memory and history. In her research she found that 'the nostalgic memories expressed by many Nisei women have helped to shape a "secure identity" and to build a "positive image of the self" in both the past and the present.' Memories are constantly made and remade as people try to make sense of the past.

My father, who had more or less retired by the time I was a teenager, often read in his room while sitting in an armchair that directly faced the portrait. As a teenager, I would stamp into his room, stand beneath the portrait of my mother, thus facing him directly, and defiantly assert myself over some trivial grievance I had unearthed. (My physical location was not deliberate or chosen but a mere consequence of the layout of the room.) Perhaps my demeanour or voice evoked memories in my father that made him say quietly to himself, 'She is so much like her mother,' or 'She is not at all like her mother.' When he gazed at her and me, while he was listening to my complaints about his rules, did my mother's silent presence in the room have a role in his negotiations with me? Did he speak for both of them or only for himself? Did the values and norms of our linguistic community in Quetta mediate our interactions and relationship? As a young adult, I resisted the embrace of my father's enveloping memories, asserting instead my desire to define who I was in the present and what I would become in the future.