

Serial Accommodations

Diasporic Women's Writing

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Where once “Where are you coming from?” implied the beginning of inclusion in a community, now the same question is shadowed by another question (“What do we do with them now?”).

—V. Mishra 5

An underlying question animating this special issue is whether or not the term “diaspora writing” retains any useful heuristic properties in relation to literary criticism. Complicated further by a focus on gender, the essays all question whether or not an emphasis on the kind of affiliations and mediations attached to notions of diaspora enable new interpretations of writers in relation to their various embeddings (including national ones). Does the application of “diasporic,” for example, instantly characterize a writer as transgressing national canonical taxonomies? Does it elevate a writer’s cultural stock by acquiring a transnational or transcultural dimension, thus, local but also global?

Not all the writers engage specifically with the shoals and eddies of diaspora criticism. Some, like Jennifer Delisle, do indeed carefully situate their own work within a genealogy of diaspora criticism ranging from William Safran, to Khachig Tölölyan, to the insights of local exponents such as Lily Cho and David Chariandy. While it isn’t really possible to pin down definitive critical elements, one might view diaspora criticism as bringing together the many disparate elements critics have associated with the field (and these do overlap with other fields such as, for example, postcolonial studies) and to use them strategically to open up and interrogate the criteria that help construct national literary histories, something Faye Hammill also explores in relation to Martha Ostenso’s work.

What we can confidently assert is that the condition of anomaly and ambiguity is at the heart of the diaspora experience and is examined in its complex permutations by many cultural texts. According to Stuart Hall, “the diaspora experience . . . is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity: by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*” (401-02). But the universal applicability of this term raises complex questions and calls for a new understanding of what it means to be diasporic in specific places and periods in the world. For instance, is it helpful to speak of diaspora as an already formed body (community or individual) that enters into a relationship with an existing nation-state? As a politically contested term, diaspora is often used in a normative sense to mean dispersal and dislocation, but how does diaspora differ from adjacent terms such as transnational, global, multicultural, and immigrant, and how do these terms enter literary discussions? How do processes of racialization and gendering complicate these issues further? To what extent (and for how long) are writers burdened with conveying diasporic histories or representing diasporic communities? While diaspora often evokes a homeland, how do women writers assert, negotiate, and contest multiple, political ideas of home across time, history, and geography? In what ways do women writers accommodate serial diasporas, often in multiple languages?

Diasporic subjects are often used to represent the dilemma of not being able or permitted to acquire the substance and consequence that are attached to many models of citizenship arising out of the bounded and “pure” characteristics associated with entities such as nation-states. Instead they signal the instabilities of hybridity, métissage, creolization, and “contamination.” While nations may designate such qualities to be troubling ones, diasporan subjects themselves often find this condition to be enabling, one that lifts them above the turmoil associated with myths of nationalism to what one might term a hyper-rationalist realm. And certainly within postcolonial theory W.E.B. DuBois’ notion of “double consciousness” and Edward Said’s of “contrapuntal consciousness” have (at their best) facilitated gimlet-eyed analyses of the spectrum of emotions generated by colonialism or nationalism or, for that matter, religious fundamentalisms. In other words, their dual or multiple perspectives are at odds with bounded and discrete models of thinking and dwelling. Knowing that there is more than one language or more than one prescription for social interaction means that one can more easily be critical of all those entities that speak in universal terms in relation to civilizations

or nations or even family. But much depends on the degree to which one's baggage includes a secure cultural capital when one migrates—dependent on one's class, one's age, etc. Otherwise the diasporic state is too often fraught with those apparently inescapable abjective dimensions catalogued by critics such as Rey Chow (2002). In these formulations the abjective state is always minoritarian, liminal, and restricted to eternal plaintiveness.

The genealogy of diaspora studies has been assembled over the last decade, galvanized by the appearance of the journal *Diaspora* (1991) edited by Khachig Tölölyan. Many date some of the first pronouncements to William Safran who argued (1991 and still argues, 2004) for the defining models of the Jewish, Armenian, and Greek diasporas and maintains that diaspora studies' heuristic value depends on excluding groups he describes as simply minority or those that travel. Such earlier models reinforced a kind of binary between what has been termed homeland and hostland. Robin Cohen attempted to move beyond this binary by constructing taxonomies focused on victim, labor, trade, and colonial diasporas as providing a more complex and realistic structure for identifying diasporic groups and mobilities. But Cohen has been critiqued for surreptitiously reintroducing the reified mechanisms associated with ethnic affiliations (S. Mishra 43-49). More recent models evoke the serial diasporas (movements across borders and within them) of groups and individuals: James Clifford, Vijay Mishra, Sudesh Mishra, R. Radhakrishnan. Questions raised have included whether or not diaspora studies now include all forms of transnational mobility or whether they should be reserved for "rooted" and local groups or individuals, particularly those held together by an identifiable historical trauma. Embedded within these analyses is the question of how temporal concerns (histories) interact with spatial considerations and indeed, whether or not oppression and trauma need to be the defining elements. Avtar Brah, for example, is more concerned with the "homing desire" that animates diasporic consciousness and that she distinguishes from a desire for a specific homeland:

I argue that the concept of diaspora offers a critique of discourses of fixed origins, while taking account of a homing desire which is not the same thing as desire for a "homeland." This distinction is important, not least because not all diasporas sustain an ideology of "return." In examining the subtext of "home" which the concept of diaspora embodies, I analyse the problematic of the "indigene" subject position and its precarious relationship to "nativist" discourses. (180)

As the quotation from Brah indicates, concepts of "home" are at the heart of debates on diaspora and one must question whether there is indeed

always an imperative to return to some putative, nostalgically invested motherland or whether such feelings may indeed be generated by the sense of un-homeliness accompanying even a prolonged residence in the new country? In my own research these neat models fall apart when one is grappling with the affective economies of generational transmission where even third-generation artists and writers are still being designated “migrant” or “ethnic” (Gunew 2004). In some ways this work was easier to do in settler colonies because among those marginalized and rendered homologous with “foreigners” were indigenous groups, thus exposing (as Brah suggests) the contradictions and fault lines within such foundational models. Indigenous groups base their claims on an autochthonous relationship to place—they have always been there and their political strategies are based on designating all other groups as immigrants, settlers, and colonizers.

The term “serial accommodations” of my title¹ attempts to signal the contradictions that lead away from oppositional models. It is certainly not meant to reinforce the binaries of home and away or to naturalize belonging and un-belonging, as though those designated diasporic were somehow being automatically constructed as aspiring to cultural citizenship. More accurately it is a way of suggesting that some writers who are situated or qualified through hyphens and other devices do not choose these devices and that these often reflect the insecurities of those who are generating such terms of engagement.

Diaspora as a generalized image is connected with seeding and dissemination, but I would like to focus on more centrifugal questions: what holds people together in an imagined diaspora? There is also the reminder that diaspora is imagined as much by the nation as those internal to it and in this version spawns those anxieties that quickly turn diasporic individuals and groups into targets. The nation (or other entity) is provoked by whatever glue binds diasporic groups together. Vijay Mishra discusses this “jealousy” concerning the manifestation of other allegiances in terms of a Hegelian and Žižekian “Nation Thing” (14-15), whereas Ghassan Hage (36-43) compares it to the imaginary unconditional love a mother has for her child: both models are fantasy structures, of course. What that formulation also implies is the centrality of gender and whether women and men are perceived to carry differing responsibilities in maintaining cultural links. Women are often constructed as the bearers of tradition, more vehemently so when in transition (Kandiyoti, Yuval-Davis). In very abstract terms there are forces of internal differences here as well, whether these be political or generational, for example, the allegiances and values of those who fled fascism or state

communism (perhaps not so different after all, in retrospect). Psychoanalysis and its structures of mourning and melancholia offer further frameworks of meaning,² as does the burgeoning field of affect theory.³ Certainly psychoanalytically inspired studies suggest that the children of diasporic peoples often inherit disabling guilt and longings from their parents (Rashkin; Cheng). Suffice to say that the diasporic subject exists in a permanent state of misrecognition in the mirror of the social, but simultaneously functions as an enduring symbol for the nation-state because this misrecognition is, in a sense, inevitable. It is another way of formulating the instability that exists at the core of national cultures or any cultures aspiring to homogeneity. Homi Bhabha's well-known concept of mimicry is another version of the ways in which this logic functions. In other words the impulse towards assimilation embodied in mimicry is precisely the mechanism that undoes the claims of (in this instance) colonial authority. In that case, should we not distinguish amongst the functions the diasporic subject performs for the nation, for the putative home culture, and for the so-called diaspora itself? And how does all this influence the ways in which we read texts, for example, do we reinforce the binaries, the reifications, where texts stand in for diasporic subjects who are designated to be at a tangent to a unified culture? Indeed, they can be seen to testify by their supposedly diasporic nature (disparate groups and individuals struggling to get in) to the very existence of a unified culture?

The consequences are both symbolic and material in ways that remind us of Althusser and his concept of ideology: people's imagined relations to their real conditions (38-39). Indeed, the Althusserian idea of interpellation, or hailing, is useful for analyzing these relations.⁴ While it is always slightly dangerous to treat groups as though they were individuals, how the hostland interpellates visitors or guests, for example, the immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers who seek to enter nation-states, is often evaluated as a measure of a culture's self-confidence and even civilization. One needs to point out as well that the ideology of the imagined nation carries material consequences in terms of whose work gets funded and published and who gets taught as part of a national culture. Folded into these concerns are questions concerning who are designated expatriate members of the "home" culture, functioning as a kind of "outreach" for it—a further marker of underlying ideological assumptions (Ghosh).

Adjacent to the slightly problematic notion of Althusserian "hailing into being"⁵ is the Lacanian mechanism of the mirror-stage in which the subject comes into being at the same time as becoming split. While the

misrecognition inherent in the Lacanian mirror-stage is described as occurring at an unconscious level it also leads to speculations concerning the degrees of consciousness involved, particularly when Lacanian emphasis on the unconscious being structured like a language summons up notions of a particular language. A suggestion I would like to make is that interpellation involving a misrecognition (we are not hailed in ways to which we wish to assent) brings into consciousness a self-consciousness or reflexivity. Caught in the baleful and paralyzing glare of the stereotype (social misrecognition) the subject-in-process summons into being a reflexivity that undermines such structures by a number of different tactics. If marginalization (arguing for difference) is invariably constructed as permitting the subject to be subjugated through taking up the position of ethnic abjection, there doesn't appear to be any room left for agency. However, some have argued ethnic abjection can also be a tool for agency (Nava; Nyers).⁶ My emphasis here is to say that the stereotypes of ethnic abjection emanating from the host culture call into being an active set of tactics to undermine and construct alternatives to this abject field.

Vijay Mishra's statement quoted as epigraph emphasizes the sobering context for diaspora studies. Numerous studies, including recent ones organized around multiculturalism and New Labour in the UK (Fortier), have shown that these double questions are never resolved. Those designated "diasporic" or "multicultural" can never display their allegiances to the nation-state sufficiently, adequately, or often enough to resolve the grounds of their differences. And for those diasporic subjects themselves, the wisps of interpellations perceived as emanating from home cultures, or simply other ways of existing, hail into being a "what if" subject. At worst they reinforce archaisms and fundamentalisms and at best help to deterritorialize origins and identities towards bringing into play the kinds of nomadic subjectivities celebrated, for example, in the work of feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti:

Comparing diasporas raises ethical questions about the methods of laying alongside each other different forms of traumatic dispersal. Faced with a proliferation of such discourses and social practices of nomadism, how can we tell the proactive from the regressive ones? The counter-method starts from the politics of locations . . . This politics of locations is best served by a non-unitary vision of the subject that stresses nomadic complexity and open-endedness . . . far from resulting in moral relativism, non-unitary subject positions engender alternative systems of values and specific forms of accountability. (92-93)

Exploring such new and flexible subjectivities is part of the excitement of diaspora studies and the papers in this issue give numerous examples.

Faye Hammill's essay on Martha Ostenso clearly reveals that diasporic writers do not necessarily fit easily into national boundaries. As someone who moved between Canada and the US as well as her native Scandinavia, Ostenso remains an ambiguous figure who demands reassessment within Canadian and other literary histories. Ostenso raises further questions in relation to the ways in which she genders and racializes her characters, according to Hammill, and challenges as well notions of genre in the sense that her work is often dismissed as too popular and formulaic. Ostenso's work also leads to questions concerning the nature and construction of nationalistic "whiteness" in Canadian fiction. Drawing on Daniel Coleman's work Hammill links Ostenso to the development of models of "white civility" in the nationalist project.

Jennifer Bowering Delisle uses the memoirs of Helen Buss/Margaret Clarke to construct a notion of a Newfoundland diaspora as a way of challenging the assumption that diaspora writings are always situated in relation to national canons. Basing her claim on the repeated characteristics within diaspora criticism that diasporic groups cohere around trauma and "coercive displacement," Bowering finds these elements in Buss/Clarke and suggests that her text articulates recurrent Newfoundland expressions of feeling discriminated against and even colonized by the rest of Canada. These regional frustrations have, in Delisle's opinion, as much of a claim on diaspora studies as other contenders. Delisle concludes her analysis by endorsing Ien Ang's concept of "postmodern ethnicity" which contends that all identities are provisional and partial and deflect an automatic coupling to ancestry or place. More controversially, she also suggests that considerations of a Newfoundland diaspora may help disaggregate the category of "whiteness."

Marie Lo's essay also takes up concerns with "whiteness" through examining the mechanisms adhering to the "model minority" comparison which is usually invoked in conjunction with Asian American and Asian Canadian subjects. Lo analyzes Joy Kogawa's *Itsuka* and SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* to make the case for needing to link anti-racism struggles to Indigenous decolonization battles. Through the delineation of family relations she traces in both texts, she cautions Asian Canadian writers against reproducing the traditional colonial tropes of a "Native-white binary" identified by Canadianists such as Terry Goldie and Margery Fee. Such a move would also help differentiate Asian Canadian critical concerns so that they are not collapsed into Asian American ones.

Maria Ng's memoirs of being born in Macau and raised in Hong Kong paradoxically credits her colonial education by American nuns as helping to liberate her from the somewhat stifling constraints of Confucian familial values for a female Chinese subject. She also attributes to her Western education the ability to see people and situations more objectively but confesses this facility to be disconcertingly at odds with the demands of memoir writing for the display of an emotional life. Ng also reminds readers, contrary to prevailing opinions, class could sometimes trump race and that material resources could effectively shield one from colonial racism. She concludes with a model of "serial non-belonging" that she feels to be a more generative model for contemporary mobile subjects than attempting to identify with one's roots.

Shani Mootoo's subversive odysseys through the fractured subject positions of Irish-Trinidadian-Canadian-Queer artist also revels in a transnationalism "bred in the marrow." While she battles the demands made on her by her Brahmin grandmother to be a good Indian girl, impositions which prevented her from immersing herself in the calypso delights of black Trinidadian traditions, she ruefully acknowledges her own seduction by Bollywood movies in terms of succumbing to their evocation of the models of masculinity that eventually structure her own "female masculinity."

Finally, in her discussion of Dionne Brand's novel *What We All Long For*, Emily Johansen posits the city rather than the nation as diasporic space. Her analysis is based on new debates in psychogeography arising out of the work of Saskia Sassen on global cities as well as Walter Benjamin's theories of the flâneur. Johansen distinguishes sharply between generations and locates hope for changing racialized power relations in the second rather than the first generation. Tracing Nancy Fraser's notion of a "subaltern counterpublic" she analyzes Brand's characters in terms of axes of resistance that aspire to a condition of cosmopolitan citizenship.

NOTES

- 1 The title was used for a seminar convened by the Centre for Women's and Gender Studies in March 2007. My thanks to Terri Tomsky, Kim Snowden, and Medha Samarasinghe for helping to organize this event. Thanks as well to Kim and Terri for helping expose the complications of the topic in their contributions to Notes and Opinions in this issue.
- 2 Vijay Mishra explores diaspora in these terms (Mishra 7-10).
- 3 Affect theory could be described as an attempt to analyze and theorize the complex field of emotions and the ways in which they shuttle between private and public realms, between

biology and abstract philosophical categories. See, for example, Ahmed, Brennan, Clough, Massumi.

- 4 The “hailing” of a subject is undertaken by an authoritative figure supported by institutional power, for example, a policeman or someone carrying out an official task such as a judge, a doctor, or a teacher (Althusser 48ff.).
- 5 Many critics have noted the existential contradiction in Althusser’s concept in the sense that he argues that this first hailing establishes the subject, in other words, something must already be in place to respond to this hailing and where does this something come from? It might make more sense to imagine the subject as a subject-in-process, to use Julia Kristeva’s term (103-05).
- 6 This is a case I argued in relation to critiquing Rey Chow’s influential notion of ethnic abjection (Gunew 2006).

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