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Spaces of Dispersal

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Two entanglements, to use James Clifford's term, complicate any discussion of diaspora. First, there is the entanglement of the historical formation of concepts with the experiences they describe. This is a subject that Clifford addresses at length, and as he so cogently demonstrates, this entanglement plays out differently in Jewish and African diasporas. Second, there is the problem of "practicing a form of discourse that [we] intend rather to analyze" (Handler 1988: 18). Handler destabilizes the authority of nationalism by examining the interpenetration of nationalist ideology and social scientific theory. It is in the interest of his dismantling of nationalism to clearly avoid practicing the discourse he intends to analyze.

The opposite approach informs Clifford's exposition of diaspora as an historical and theoretical formation. Here the critique is mounted affirmatively by transvaluing diaspora, which for most of its history has been taken as a mark of failure. The terms of that failure are linked to the normative ideal of national sovereignty in one form or another. The inclination with respect to diaspora transvalued is to practice the form of discourse that is the object of analysis.

Diasporic discourse in this context is strong on displacement, detachment, uprooting, and dispersion—on disarticulation. It is appealing precisely because it so easily lends itself to a strategic disaggregation of territory, people, race, language, culture, religion, history, and sovereignty. Rearticulation—how the local is produced and what forms it takes in the space of dispersal—is trickier because of the risk of closure, essentialism, or premature pluralism. Were we to take this project of disaggregation all the way, we would dismantle the very structure of our academic institutions, built as they are around departments of national languages and literatures and supported in many cases by foreign governments—Italy, France, Germany, Greece—through national "houses." What the rearticulation might look like is another matter.

If Handler dresses nationalism down, Gilroy, Mercer, and the Boyarins transvalue diaspora from a negative state of displacement to a positive condition of multiple location, temporality, and identification—while not forgetting the

often violent conditions that produced it. Though neither project is disinterested, disinterest seems better suited to Handler's critique of the entrenched discourse of nationalism, while engagement marks Clifford's setting forth of a transvalued notion of diaspora. That said, can (or should) the discursive field of diaspora that Clifford maps out so insightfully remain exempt from the problem of practicing the discourse that is being analyzed? Is this the prerogative of a position not yet widely accepted? Is it the privilege of a worthy desire to imagine and bring about "nonexclusive practices of community, politics, and cultural difference" (p. 302)? Is it the duty of those who will speak about or on behalf of those with less, rather than more, power?

Clifford's nuanced reading of diaspora across black and Jewish experiences and formulations brings into focus how fundamentally pathological are the notions of *minority*, *ghetto*, *stranger*, *marginal man*, and *rootless cosmopolitan*, and the deficiencies of *homelessness*, *placelessness*, and *statelessness* as we know them from the classical social-science literature—and how worn out the assumptions of acculturation and assimilation. Such notions have dominated the study of Jewish, African, and other diasporas. While I appreciate Clifford's concern that we not "run the risk of making Jewish experience again the normative model," we might note the extent to which the Jew has served as the oncomouse of social theory.

Diaspora, ghetto, stranger, and marginal man, as concepts in the social sciences, have been generalized from a reading of the Jewish predicament. Early studies of Jews were guided by the question "Are Jews a religion, race, or nation?" and its corollary "Should and can they be integrated into the larger society in which they live?" These concerns have determined what can and cannot be said about Jews, the primary concern of my own work. In the process, Jews have become the paradigmatic case for such key concepts as diaspora, whether by self-definition or within theories of diaspora more generally, and also a primary site for modeling social pathology.¹ This is not a site of privilege.²

The terms *diaspora* and *ghetto* form a linked pair. What is not blamed on one is attributed to (and often entailed by) the other—stranger and marginal man flow from them. As models of the Jewish experience (and not just as historical conditions), diaspora and ghetto precede Zionism and were in many ways a constitutive feature of the Jewish Enlightenment's preoccupation with Jewish emancipation and integration. The tension between the coterritoriality of diaspora and the isolation of ghetto produces a series of paradoxes on the theme of difference.

First, the very condition of dispersal and continuous contact is read by Theodor H. Gaster (1950:981) and Melville Herskovits (1927), to name but two, as a situation where some peoples create a "common" or "distinctive" or "homogenous" culture, while others borrow from them. This bankrupt language of influence and imitation, which is endemic to a largely philological preoccupation with cultural genealogy, is central to legitimizing discourses of nationalism that speak in terms of purity and precedence. Where difference is positively val-

ued on the powerful side of the distinction that it marks, stigma becomes the ground of transvaluation, though not always.

For example, Herskovits—and for that matter, Boas—did not view Jewish and African American diasporas as producing similar results. Both of them denied the existence of Jewish particularism (because of diaspora) while valorizing African American difference (in spite of diaspora). This moment in American anthropology is worth inspecting for the light it sheds on the historical context in which entanglements of diasporic and disciplinary histories occur—in this case, the period of mass immigration and the Harlem Renaissance, although the period may be characterized in other ways as well.

Second, the condition of social isolation, epitomized by the much used and abused term *ghetto*, was offered by Louis Wirth, among others, as an explanation for difference. If detached conceptually from race, such differences would disappear when the social isolation that produced them was removed. How one answered the Jewish question—which revolved around the issue of difference, its nature, and durability—determined the prospects of not only Jewish emancipation and social integration, but also Jewish national aspirations. For German Jews like Boas, particularism was fine as the basis for what anthropologists studied in the field, but not as the foundation for their lives at home (Boas 1938). In a perfect world, difference would disappear. Indeed, Boas fought in the period before World War II for the freedom neither to identify oneself nor to be identified by others as anything in particular. For Boas, the answer to anti-Semitism was invisibility, and where invisibility was impossible, then an affirmation of difference. This accounts in part for why Boas and Herskovits approached Jews and African Americans so differently, even as they imagined them in terms of each other.³ Herskovits could write *The Myth of the Negro Past* but could not imagine a comparable “myth of the Jewish past,” or rather, the task was to demonstrate that there *was* a Negro past and to question claims made for the Jewish past.⁴

Third, there is the assumption of singular attachment as normative. As late as the 1960s, sociologists such as Milton Gordon still held to the view that:

[t]he individual who engages in frequent and sustained primary contacts across ethnic group lines, particularly racial and religious, runs the risk of becoming what, in standard sociological parlance, has been called “the marginal man.” The marginal man is the person who stands on the borders or margins of two cultural worlds but is fully a member of neither. He may be the offspring of a racially mixed or interfaith marriage, or he may have ventured away from the security of the cultural group of his ancestors because of the individual personality and experience factors which predisposed him to seek wider contacts and entry into social worlds which appeared more alluring. . . . Frustrated and not fully accepted . . . ambivalent . . . and beset by conflicting cultural standards, he develops, according to the classic conception, personality traits of insecurity, moodiness, hypersensitivity, excessive self-consciousness, and nervous strain. . . . While . . . at least one acute observer of the contemporary American scene has pointed to the possible desirable personality traits of marginality, such as greater insight, self-understanding, and creativity, the sociological *position* may certainly be

discerned. . . . It is the position occupied by the social deviant from standard ethnic behavior. . . . [Gordon 1964:56–57, emphasis in original]

In a word, a psychosocial portrait of “the Jew,” the prototypical marginal man and model for the sociological concept. Here, too, Clifford maps the transvaluation of multiple identifications and locations and the fruitful hybridity of such situations.

The provocation of Clifford’s magisterial discussion of diaspora is to re-think dispersion and proximity in an era of hypermobility, to take up the challenge of “identifying the range of phenomena we are prepared to call *diasporic*” (p. 304). As people, goods, and information move faster and further than ever, what does diaspora mean? This hypermobility not only divides and disperses people and activities that once occupied a contiguous space—and not only or necessarily by means of violence—but also collapses spaces of dispersal by abbreviating the time it takes to get from here to there.

In this spirit, I want to consider the uncoupling of displacement, dispersion, and diaspora. I appreciate Clifford’s commitment to keeping alive the historical specificity of diasporas and the often (but not necessarily) oppressive nature of their inception. The trauma of departure, which seems to be a defining feature of diaspora in the work that Clifford discusses, implies however that without oppression to propel people to leave a place and to disperse there would be no diaspora.⁵ This suggests several possibilities that have yet to come into sharp theoretical focus: first, staying put, which having been assumed as normative for so long, no longer seems to require explanation; second, spatial effects that are produced without displacement—for example, through missionizing efforts and mass media; and third, movement that does not necessarily (but can) produce dispersion, a topic that Clifford (1992), anticipating the concerns of the current paper, has taken up elsewhere in his discussion of traveling cultures. Can these possibilities offer as rich a site as diaspora proper for theorizing disarticulation, displacement, and reconfiguration in spaces of dispersal?

To think of diaspora as a dispersal marked by displacement still assumes the primacy of an earlier placement—of physical proximity and contiguity—even as the local conditions of diaspora (copresence and coterritoriality) are richly theorized. Increasingly, however, as distance becomes a function of time, the instantaneity of telecommunication produces a vivid sense of hereness and interactivity the feeling of presence. The result is an extreme case of physical distance and social proximity under the conditions of disembodied presence and immateriality of place. New spaces of dispersal are produced—traversed and compressed—by technologies of connection and telepresence. Physical locations can be experienced as *accidents of proximity*, while common interest, rather than common location, can become the basis of social life in a medium where location is defined not by geographical coordinates but by the topic of conversation (Rheingold 1992).⁶

Increasingly, there is a convergence of diasporas as we understand them from Clifford’s account and the spaces of dispersal defined and mediated by

communication technologies. It is at this convergence that we might rethink *di-aspóra*. Not only has Clifford mapped the conceptual terrain for such a task, but also he has provided a seismograph of the sensibilities running through the diaspora debates. Capturing a distinctive moment in current thinking about displacement and dispersal, Clifford has provided the coordinates from which to proceed.

Notes

1. There is a peculiar recursiveness as Jews in Poland are seen by sociologists such as Aleksander Hertz (1988[1961]) and Celia S. Heller (1977) as a caste, mediated more by theorizations of African Americans than of the Indian caste system. Caste in this work is an intensification of what ghetto stands for—separateness and a fixed position in the social hierarchy, determined by birth—and goes beyond an urban neighborhood to include the entire Jewish population of the country. Similarly, while India is the source of the notion of pariah, Jews are the site where Max Weber (1967) theorizes it as a more general sociological concept.

2. The “wandering Jew,” whom Clifford mentions, is incidentally the protagonist of Christian legend. He wanders as a punishment for helping to condemn Christ, who cursed him to everlasting restlessness. After the crucifixion, the wandering Jew left Jerusalem, and since then people have reported seeing him in various places (Hasan-Rokem and Dundes 1986).

3. See, for example, Boas’s letter to Felix Adler, proposing an “African Museum” (Boas 1906), which by propagating accurate knowledge of the American Negro and displaying “the best products of African civilization,” would “counteract the prejudices which hinder the advancement of the negro race.” In his commencement address at Atlanta University in 1906, Boas took as his topic “The Outlook for the American Negro.” His themes included, first, a proud African past as a source of strength, and second, the lesson to be learned from the Jews of Europe—namely, how cultural differences can disappear when social barriers are removed, even if it takes longer for antipathy to fade (Boas 1974).

4. Herskovits offers a fascinating commentary on this problem. Written while he was student at Hebrew Union College, “When Is a Jew a Jew?” argues that “Jew” is an empty sign—a signifier without a signified: “A Jew is a person who calls himself a Jew, or who is called Jewish by others” (Herskovits 1927:117). Such identification is, in his view, a reaction to “discriminatory reactions on the part of the various peoples with whom the Jews live” and is not based on any discernable differences: “I fail to see anything particularly unique in the Jew as Jew” (Herskovits 1927:116, 117). Taking himself as a case in point—he calls himself a Jew but is not “what might be termed a person any more Jewish than any other American born and reared in a typical Middle Western milieu” (1927:109)—Herskovits sees a similar reaction among Negroes and wonders if Gypsies have not also responded in this way to “attitudes of their fellow-men as different, or inferior, or something to be disdained” (1927:115).

5. *Diaspora* and *exile* are intertwined in the terms *galut* (Hebrew) and *goles* (Yiddish), though the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, taken as a normative (Zionist) text (it was published in Israel in 1972), sharply distinguishes *diaspora* and *exile*: it refers diaspora to voluntary dispersion and exile to forced dispersion, which by definition ends with the formation of the state of Israel—once there is a homeland, those who remain outside it do so voluntarily. Conversely, “only the loss of a political-ethnic center and the feeling

of uprootedness turns Diaspora (Dispersion) into galut (Exile)." In this context, *galut*, strictly speaking, refers to exile, not diaspora. There is an acknowledgment that "the feeling of exile does not always accompany the condition of exile" (s.v. *galut*).

6. Rheingold (1992) is quoting a 1968 statement by J. C. R. Licklider and Robert Taylor, research directors for the Department of Defense who helped create ARPAnet, one of the first electronic networks.

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