

Diasporas

IN THE LAST DECADE the term diaspora has become ubiquitous in the humanities and social sciences. Derived from the Greek verb to scatter (*speirein*) over/through (*dia*), the word was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament and referred classically to the dispersal of the Jews. The expression was adopted subsequently by other groups experiencing dispossession, alienation and exile. In the early twentieth century the term was applied to the Armenian flight from the Ottoman Empire and from the mid-1960s it became common for scholars to describe the coerced passage of African peoples as a diaspora. In each of these cases, 'Diaspora signified a collective trauma, a banishment, where one dreamed of home but lived in exile.'¹ However, in the last quarter of the twentieth century this definition was overtaken by a proliferation of new usages and understandings, so that today the word diaspora seems often to serve merely as a synonym for a dispersal of people; a community living outside its ancestral homeland; ethnic minorities; and even the act of migration itself.

Confronted with its indeterminate present-day usage, several scholars have attempted to define (or redefine) the specific characteristics of diaspora. In one well-known formulation, William Safran proposed that the key elements of diaspora were the dispersal of an expatriate community to at least two 'peripheral destinations'; its maintenance of 'memory, vision, or myth' about the homeland; an enduring sense of alienation in the new society; a desire for a return to the homeland at some time in the future; and an ongoing commitment to and relationship with the homeland.² However, as James Clifford rightly observed, attempts such as Safran's to establish an 'ideal type' are flawed if for no other reason than their static conception of the group being observed: 'at different times in their history, societies may wax and wane in diasporism, depending on changing possibilities — obstacles, openings, antagonisms, and connections — in their host countries and transnationally.'³

In 1997 Robin Cohen proposed an alternative approach, creating a typology of 'adjectival diasporas' — victim diasporas, trade diasporas, labour diasporas, imperial diasporas and cultural diasporas. Though more inclusive than Safran's, Cohen's scheme inhibits the possibility that one national or ethnic group may inhabit more than one category of diaspora, or that the diasporic impulse of a group may alter over time.⁴ It also assumes, with Safran, a high degree of constancy in the historical experience of the diasporic groups in different post-migratory settings.

This rise of academic interest in the concept of diaspora stems principally from the astonishing global movement of peoples in the last half of the twentieth century. In particular, the collapse of the former European empires and the emergence of new nations in the aftermath of World War Two initiated unprecedented waves of westward migration. Whereas in the decade 1951–60 immigrants from developing nations constituted 12% of total US immigration,

by 1981–90 those countries accounted for 88% of new arrivals. Canada and Australia experienced comparable transformations in their immigration intakes during the same period. Simultaneously, European nations that had been major sources for the vast nineteenth-century emigration to the New World became hosts to a sizeable influx of newcomers from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and, more recently, Eastern Europe. Everywhere this reversal of previous migratory patterns transformed cityscapes and forced (often reluctant) reconsideration of existing notions of citizenship.⁵

New notions of diaspora gained traction during these post-war years as sizeable immigrant communities from former colonial territories were established in the West. In Great Britain, scholars including Stuart Hall drew a salient distinction between an older ‘backward-looking’ conception of diaspora, characterized by notions of exile and a longing for return to a distant homeland, and the emergence of new identities in a postcolonial world: ‘diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference’.⁶ This more fluid formulation of diaspora and diasporic identity seemed critical to understanding the dynamic processes of community establishment (and disestablishment) that were occurring within recipient nations. As Gargi Bhattacharyya and his collaborators wrote recently, ‘the traditional meaning of diaspora . . . has been expanded to refer to a mix or fusion of cultures which expresses new ethnic identities and which cut across as well as articulate with such social factors as class, region, age, gender and sexuality’.⁷

However, if in the late twentieth century diaspora inferred dynamism and malleability in the formation of new identities, it was also subject to what might be interpreted as contradictory impulses. Superior opportunities for fast, affordable travel and new telecommunications and information technologies served to bridge time and distance between the homeland and the multiple sites of new settlement. The intensification of contacts and exchange between diasporic communities produced a heightened sense of connectedness, but could also serve to generate and dispense homogeneity. Indeed, according to some theorists the result of these recent transformations has been to blur the distinction between the homeland and scattering that lay at the heart of traditional understandings of diaspora, and produce instead a sort of ‘travelling culture’ that involves ‘dwelling in a nation-state in a physical sense, but travelling in an astral or spiritual sense that falls outside the nation-state’s space/time zone’.⁸

For many of its advocates and practitioners, the concept of diaspora has particular appeal precisely because of its capacity to resist easy incorporation into national stories. Confronted by demands for new inclusive histories and burdened by increased scepticism towards older unifying narratives of the nation, scholars in a range of Western societies in the late twentieth century articulated new demands for the transgression of national boundaries and the internationalization of their discipline.⁹ The study of diasporas offers one avenue to open up national histories and effectively challenge the hold of the nation. As Clifford pointed out, ‘the nation-state, as common territory and time, is traversed and, to varying degrees, subverted by diasporic attachments’.¹⁰ These impulses have been evident in recent New Zealand historical writing, most notably in

Peter Gibbons' call for a decentring of 'New Zealand' as a subject.¹¹ Conceived widely to include peoples, artefacts, cultural processes and information, diaspora provides a significant conduit towards the world system framework Gibbons describes.

The four essays in this issue showcase approaches to the study of diaspora in New Zealand and the Pacific in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Rosalind McClean explores recent discussions about diaspora and its applicability to British settlement overseas. Highlighting the tensions and ambiguities that surround the concept, she argues that diasporic approaches offer a fruitful approach to recover individual stories of migration from New Zealand's past that have become lost or merged in collective narratives.

Heather McNamara's principal concern is the transmission of information within the Irish diaspora in the period from the late nineteenth century to the time of the Irish Civil War. In an innovative article possessing significant international implications, McNamara uses the *New Zealand Tablet* to unravel the complex networks of newspaper exchange, editorial correspondence and personal communication that kept New Zealand's Irish population linked to Ireland and their compatriots settled in North America and Australia. At a time when four in every ten men and women born in Ireland lived outside it, the Dunedin-based *Tablet* fulfilled a critical role in generating and maintaining diasporic consciousness. As McNamara shows, the newspaper acquired worldwide recognition for its representation of the experience of New Zealand's Irish-Catholics, while its connections with Ireland and the Irish diaspora proved critical in animating the identity of the Irish and their descendants 'Half the World From Home'.

Damon Salesa examines the mobility of Samoans in the second half of the nineteenth century and suggests ways in which the internal and external pathways people followed were transformed. He argues that Samoans and other Pacific islanders were 'travel-happy' in the period up to World War One, their mobility and dispersal composing what he terms a 'Brown Pacific'. Importantly, Salesa examines the interplay between this mobility and state formation, acknowledging that though diasporas may subvert national borders their circuits are also wired within the contexts of nation and nation building.

In contrast to Salesa and McNamara, who focus on the nineteenth century, Geoffrey Moore's article examines the late twentieth-century experience of Vietnamese New Zealanders. Vietnamese in New Zealand who departed from their homeland after the collapse of the southern regime in 1975 were initially prohibited from return, while communities in exile in the West often harboured intense antagonism towards the Communist regime. However from the late 1980s, as the Vietnamese government softened its opposition to returnees, and émigré communities' political opposition waned, the prospect of return home increased. Drawing upon extensive interviews with Vietnamese in Auckland, Moore probes the meaning of these return journeys and argues that connections between individuals in Vietnam and New Zealand are now sustained as much by difference as by a sense of sameness.

While the frequent and inexact use of the word diaspora will no doubt continue to excite discussion over the meaning and usefulness of the concept,

it is difficult to imagine that those debates will result in much common ground being reached. Neither, given its currency across so wide a range of disciplines, can the concept of diaspora simply be ignored. The four essays that follow reflect differences in understanding and approach to the study of diasporas, but together are richly suggestive of avenues that might be pursued in future scholarship. The study of New Zealand's links with Australia; its Pacific and trans-Pacific engagements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the experiences of New Zealanders and New Zealand communities resident outside their homeland; and the connections of New Zealand's immigrant groups with home and compatriots in other destinations are but some of the projects that will, I hope, be stimulated by this issue.

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NOTES

- 1 See Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, London, 1997, pp.ix, 1–29; Kevin Kenny, 'Diaspora and Comparison: The Global Irish as a Case Study', *Journal of American History*, 90, 1 (2003), pp.140–3.
- 2 James Clifford, 'Diasporas', *Cultural Anthropology*, 9, 3 (1994), p.303.
- 3 *ibid.*, p.306; William Safran, 'Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return', *Diaspora*, 1, 1 (1991), pp.83–99; Cohen, pp.22–3; Donald Akenson, 'The Historiography of English-Speaking Canada and the Concept of Diaspora: A Sceptical Appreciation', *Canadian Historical Review*, 76, 3 (1995), pp.377–409.
- 4 Cohen, pp.25–9, 177–80.
- 5 W.M. Spellman, *The Global Community: Migration and the Making of the Modern World*, Stroud, Glos., 2002, pp.152–3.
- 6 Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in Jonathan Rutherford, ed., *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, London, 1990, p.235.
- 7 Gargi Bhattacharyya, John Gabriel and Stephen Small, eds, *Race and Power: Global Racism in the Twenty-First Century*, London, 2002, p.140.
- 8 Cohen, pp.129–37.
- 9 Khachig Tölölyan, 'Rethinking *Diaspora(s)*: Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment', *Diaspora*, 5, 1 (1996), pp.3–36; Kenny, pp.134–5.
- 10 Clifford, p.307.
- 11 Peter Gibbons, 'The Far Side of the Search for Identity: Reconsidering New Zealand History', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 37, 1 (2003), p.39.

