

## AVTAH BRAH

### THINKING THROUGH THE CONCEPT OF DIASPORA

From *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

**F**IRST, A NOTE ABOUT THE TERM 'DIASPORA'. The word derives from the Greek – *dia*, 'through', and *speirein*, 'to scatter'. According to *Webster's Dictionary* in the United States, diaspora refers to a 'dispersion from'. Hence the word embodies a notion of a centre, a locus, a 'home' from where the dispersion occurs. It invokes images of multiple journeys. The dictionary also highlights the word's association with the dispersion of the Jews after the Babylonian exile. Here, then, is an evocation of a diaspora with a particular resonance within European cartographies of displacement; one that occupies a particular space in the European psyche, and is emblematically situated within Western iconography as the diaspora *par excellence*. Yet, to speak of late twentieth-century diasporas is to take such ancient diasporas as a point of departure rather than necessarily as 'models', or as what Safran (1991) describes as the 'ideal type'. The dictionary juxtaposition of what the concept signifies in general as against one of its particular referents, highlights the need to subject the concept to scrutiny, to consider the ramifications of what it connotes or denotes, and to consider its analytical value.

At the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of a journey. Yet not every journey can be understood as diaspora. Diasporas are clearly not the same as casual travel. Nor do they normatively refer to temporary sojourns. Paradoxically, diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down, about putting roots 'elsewhere'. These journeys must be historicised if the concept of diaspora is to serve as a useful heuristic device. The question is not simply about who travels but *when, how and under what circumstances?* What socio-economic, political and cultural conditions mark the trajectories of these journeys? What regimes of power inscribe the formation of a specific diaspora? In other words, it is necessary to analyse what makes one diasporic formation similar to or different from another: whether, for instance, the diaspora in question was constituted through conquest and colonisation as has been the case with several European diasporas. Or it might have resulted from the capture or removal of a group through slavery or systems of indentured labour, as, for example in the formation respectively of African and Asian diasporas in the Caribbean. Alternatively, people may have had to desert their home as a result of expulsion and persecution, as has been the fate of a number of Jewish groups at various points in history. Or they may have been forced to flee in the wake of political strife, as has been the experience of many contemporary groups of refugees such as the Sri Lankans, Somalis and Bosnian Muslims. Perhaps the dispersion occurred as a result of conflict and war, resulting in the creation of a nation state on the territory previously occupied by another,

as has been the experience of Palestinians since the formation of Israel. On the other hand, a population movement could have been induced as part of global flows of labour, the trajectory of many, for example African-Caribbeans, Asians, Cypriots or Irish people in Britain.

If the circumstances of leaving are important, so, too, are those of arrival and settling down. How and in what ways do these journeys conclude, and intersect in specific places, specific spaces, and specific historical conjunctures? How and in what ways is a group inserted within the social relations of class, gender, racism, sexuality or other axes of differentiation in the country to which it migrates? The manner in which a group comes to be 'situated' in and through a wide variety of discourses, economic processes, state policies and institutional practices is critical to its future. This 'situatedness' is central to how different groups come to be relationally positioned in a given context. I emphasise the question of relational positioning for it enables us to begin to deconstruct the regimes of power which operate to differentiate one group from another; to represent them as similar or different: to include or exclude them from constructions of the 'nation' and the body politic; and which inscribe them as juridical, political, and psychic subjects. It is axiomatic that each empirical diaspora must be analysed in its historical specificity. But the issue is not one that is simply about the need for historicising or addressing the specificity of a particular diasporic experience, important though this is.

Rather, the *concept* of diaspora concerns the historically variable forms of *relationality* within and between diasporic formations. It is about relations of power that similarise and differentiate between and across changing diasporic constellations. In other words, the concept of diaspora centres on the *configurations of power which differentiate diasporas internally as well as situate them in relation to one another*.

Diasporas, in the sense of distinctive historical experiences, are often composite formations made up of many journeys to different parts of the globe, each with its own history, its own particularities. Each such diaspora is an interweaving of multiple travelling; a text of many distinctive and, perhaps, even disparate narratives. This is true, among others, of the African, Chinese, Irish, Jewish, Palestinian and South Asian diasporas. For example, South Asians in Britain have a different, albeit related, history to South Asians in Africa, the Caribbean, Fiji, South East Asia, or the USA. Given these differences, can we speak of a 'South Asian diaspora' other than as a mode of description of a particular cluster of migrations? The answer depends crucially upon how the relationship between these various components of the cluster is conceptualised.

I would suggest that it is the *economic, political and cultural specificities linking these components that the concept of diaspora signifies*. This means that these multiple journeys may configure into one journey via a *confluence of narratives* as it is lived and re-lived, produced, reproduced and transformed through individual as well as collective memory and re-memory. It is within this confluence of narrativity that 'diasporic community' is differently imagined under different historical circumstances. By this I mean that the identity of the diasporic imagined community is far from fixed or pre-given. It is constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively.

All diasporic journeys are composite in another sense too. They are embarked upon, lived and re-lived through multiple modalities: modalities, for example, of gender, 'race', class, religion, language and generation. As such, all diasporas are differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of a common 'we'. It is important, therefore, to be attentive to the nature and type of processes in and through which the collective 'we' is constituted. Who is empowered and who is disempowered in a specific construction of the 'we'? How are social divisions negotiated in the construction of the 'we'?

What is the relational question. It is given omnipresence circumscribed on bipolar opposition. The centrality of this division in a given problem remains, readily be assumed the workings of him mark the terrain of what are actually represented as immutable be an object of de-

It is especially the surfacing of 'cleansing' make it as trans-historical nature. On the contrary investigation in terms than taken as always productively as an negating the condition power to mobilise

The point is that or more may be accounted may be primarily about of course, a binarisation isolation from other ficity of each is fractured, then, is not simply but whether or not in what ways they in sexualities; how they Binaries, thus, are why, in a given context coherence and stability female. In other words

We may elaborate The question then is different forms of or religion, for instance colour, physiognomy tuted. An important virtue of these racial Muslims differentiatedly, how are black within its racialised

What is the relationship of this 'we' to its 'others'? Who are these others? This is a critical question. It is generally assumed that there is a single dominant Other whose overarching omnipresence circumscribes constructions of the 'we'. Hence, there tends to be an emphasis on bipolar oppositions: black/white; Jew/Gentile, Arab/Jew; English/Irish; Hindu/Muslim. The centrality of a particular binary opposition as the basis of political cleavage and social division in a given situation may make it necessary, even imperative, to foreground it. The problem remains, however, as to how such binaries should be analysed. Binaries can all too readily be assumed to represent ahistorical, universal constructs. This may help to conceal the workings of historically specific socioeconomic, political and cultural circumstances that mark the terrain on which a given binary comes to assume its particular significance. That is, what are actually the effects of institutions, discourses and practices may come to be represented as immutable, trans-historical divisions. As a consequence, a binary that should properly be an object of deconstruction may gain acceptance as an unproblematic given.

It is especially necessary to guard against such tendencies at the present moment when the surfacing of old and new racisms, violent religious conflicts and the horrors of 'ethnic cleansing' make it all too easy to slide into an acceptance of contextually variable phenomena as trans-historical universalisms that are then presumed to be an inevitable part of human nature. On the contrary, the binary is a socially constructed category whose trajectory warrants investigation in terms of how it was constituted, regulated, embodied and contested, rather than taken as always already present. A bipolar construction might be addressed fruitfully and productively as an object of analysis and a tool of deconstruction; that is, as a means of investigating the conditions of its formation, its implication in the inscription of hierarchies, and its power to mobilise collectivities.

The point is that there are multiple others embedded within and across binaries, albeit one or more may be accorded priority within a given discursive formation. For instance, a discourse may be primarily about gender and, as such, it may centre upon gender-based binaries (although, of course, a binarised construction is not always inevitable). But this discourse will not exist in isolation from others, such as those signifying class, 'race', religion or generation. The specificity of each is framed in and through fields of representation of the other. What is at stake, then, is not simply a question of some generalised notion of, say, masculinity and femininity, but whether or not these representations of masculinity and femininity are racialised; how and in what ways they inflect class; whether they reference lesbian, gay, heterosexual or some other sexualities; how they feature age and generation; how and if they invoke religious authority. Binaries, thus, are intrinsically differentiated and unstable. What matters most is how and why, in a given context, a specific binary – e.g. black/white – takes shape, acquires a seeming coherence and stability, and configures with other constructions, such as Jew/Gentile or male/female. In other words, *how these signifiers slide into one another in the articulation of power.*

We may elaborate the above point with reference to racialised discourses and practices. The question then reformulates itself in terms of the relationship at a specific moment between different forms of racism. Attention is shifted to the forms in which class, gender, sexuality or religion, for instance, might figure within these racisms, and to the specific signifier(s) – colour, physiognomy, religion, culture, etc. – around which these differing racisms are constituted. An important aspect of the problematic will be the relational positioning of groups by virtue of these racisms. How, for instance, are African, Caribbean, South Asian and white Muslims differentially constructed within anti-Muslim racism in present-day Britain? Similarly, how are blacks, Chicanos, Chinese, Japanese, or South Koreans in the USA differentiated within its racialised formations? Will

of these differential racialisations on the lives of these groups? What are the implications of these effects in terms of how members of one racialised group might relate to those of another? Do these effects produce conditions that foster sympathetic identification and solidarity across groups or do they create divisions? Of central concern in addressing such questions are the power dynamics which usher racialised social relations and inscribe racialised modes of subjectivity and identity. My argument . . . is that these racisms are not simply parallel racisms but are intersecting modalities of *differential racialisations marking positionality across articulating fields of power*.

VIJAY M

THE DI,  
TheorizinFrom 'The Dias  
*Practice* 10(3)In  
of  
an  
in  
tin  
ba  
un

**I**N THE LAR to situate a diaspora of around r  
diaspora of around r  
In the lead essay in  
devotes a mere twe  
acteristics of this d  
movement out of t  
Indian diaspora pres  
largely because the  
the colonies. The e  
tions and Indian ind  
Fiji and South Afric  
Malaya to work on  
diasporic movement  
the older diasporas  
advanced capital to  
settler colonies. Sin  
want to refer to tl  
Furthermore, I wou  
sivism because they  
writer of the old Inc