

Diaspora(s): Movements and Cultures

Edited by Nicholas Hewitt and Dick Geary



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Diaspora(s): Movements and Cultures,
edited by Nicholas Hewitt and Dick Geary

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Introduction

Nicholas Hewitt and Dick Geary

This collection of essays is largely based upon an international conference and constitutes a collective attempt to explore aspects of diaspora in a broad international and historical context. As such, it is the beginning of a collective project undertaken by universities within the Universitas 21 network, which will continue to explore and develop the subject in a number of subsequent volumes devoted to generic subjects such as diasporic culture, cultural representation of diaspora and cultural transfer, as well as explorations of geographical areas not covered by this volume and detailed case-studies. The essays range chronologically from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first, and geographically from Africa and Brazil to Europe (London, Portugal, France and the Mediterranean), Asia (Japan, China and Indochina) and the Pacific (Australia and New Caledonia).

The essays themselves raise a number of important themes. On one level, diaspora appears, inevitably, in the form of travel, migration and immigration. Andrew Cobbing discusses the discovery of the modern world by Japanese travellers in the nineteenth century, after centuries of isolation, whilst Jennifer Harrison explores nineteenth-century migration from Europe to Queensland. At the same time, travel and migration were not always by any means voluntary, and were often dictated by political persecution, economic necessity and, at its most extreme, enforced migration in the form of slavery, as Dick Geary explores in the example of African slaves in Brazil. This, in its turn, raises important questions of identity, as discussed, for example, by Marie-Paule Ha in her study of Chinese, Indochinese and French in Indochina, and often powerful feelings of exile, as, for example, in the case of the Yugoslav dissidents in Britain after the Second World War analysed by Dejan Djokic. Nor, as Paul Gladston demonstrates in the case of contemporary urban growth in China, do travel and migration necessarily involve vast distances of displacement: the destruction of familiar and traditional urban areas and relocation to modern housing developments can provoke the same sense of *anomie* as international migration. Finally, the building-block of any study of diaspora is the diasporic community itself, and contributors have emphasised the importance of these communities, from the North Africans living in contemporary France discussed by Karima Laachir, to the Japanese community in New Caledonia in Raylene Ramsay's chapter, South American and Sri Lankan youth culture in Australia, analysed by John Napier, the elderly Chinese migrants in Australia discussed by Nora Yim, Eastern European immigrants in Portugal explored by Graça Almeida Rodrigues and the Sylheti community of London's East End in Ashafque Hossain's chapter. At the same time, as Nicholas Hewitt demonstrates in his chapter on Marseille, the geographical locus of diaspora is an often-neglected aspect of the phenomenon, in which ports and transit centres play a vital role.

These themes, in their turn, raise some important issues, not least of

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which is the crucial one of definition. John Milfull is correct to point out that, technically, diaspora can only strictly be applied to the Jewish dispersal following the Bar Kochba revolt, with its subsequent and attendant connotations of exile, exclusion and persecution. Yet John Napier is also right to insist on the transformation of this historical fact into a more generalised metaphor, with the condition that, central to the notion of any diaspora, there must be a notion of an original "homeland", however distant in time and geography, and however vestigial, which binds the diasporic community together and gives it part of its identity. It is this aspect of diaspora, however, which is at the core of its problematic nature. On the one hand that identity becomes less distinguishable from that of the "host" community, sometimes voluntarily and sometimes not. This is witnessed in the development of "syncretic" cultural forms (as in the case of Africans in Brazil, discussed by Dick Geary) and raises in its turn the question of "hybridity". In her essay on the nineteenth-century Australian landscape, Lynne Gladston refers to the importation of European botanical species which evolve into hybrids through their contact with indigenous flora, a metaphor developed by Raylene Ramsay in her essay on immigrant communities in New Caledonia. Conversely, the role of culture in diasporic communities also aims to maintain that community's identity through cultural connections with the original "homeland", whether real or imagined.

The diasporic experience, therefore, may be seen to extend from the "separate", at one end, whether enforced or adopted, via "hybridity" to total integration and assimilation. At the same time, some of the diasporic communities analysed here see no problem with maintaining a dual, triple or even quadruple identity, as, for example, in the case of the East End Sylhetis, who see themselves as British, Sylheti, Bengali and Muslim. Crucial in this process, however, is the attitude of the "host" community, which, as in the case of France, still denies a "French" identity to its long-term North African population. In other words, a potentially hostile "host" community will often resist assimilation and seek to maintain a level of separateness or even hybridity, a task facilitated, ironically, by emphasis on the "problematic" nature of the diasporic community, be it in terms of discrimination or adaptability.

In fact, quite apart from the political pitfalls involved in drawing attention to the difficulties experienced by diasporic communities, there is a broader, though connected, issue concerning the nature of the experience itself. This volume begins with John Milfull's emphasis on diaspora as being essentially derived historically, then metaphorically, from Jewish history. Yet, we end the volume with the essay by Terry Winant and a warning not to see the process as one of a single-track journey to disaster, that diaspora does not necessarily have to be equated with the Holocaust and that the "portability of roots" is inherently positive.

The chapters in this volume may well show some of the darker aspects associated with diaspora, but they are also careful to emphasise its positive role in continuing social and cultural development.