‘What is home?’ Exploring the complexity of homeland and identity within diaspora

Abstract: Since the 1980s, the field of diaspora studies has seen a clash between attempts to delineate the term ‘diaspora’ and counter-currents in which scholars have challenged the prevalent definitions of diaspora that emerged. This paper builds on social constructionist critiques of diaspora to challenge notions of homeland and homeland orientation in prevalent definitions of diaspora. Through analysing the experiences of second- and third-generation Maghrebi immigrants in France and Iranian political exiles, this paper intends to discard absolute, fixed and territorialised notions of home, and instead allow for complexity, plurality and dynamism. It will argue that complex negotiations of self and home are at the heart of the diasporic experience, rather than orientation towards a fixed homeland, and conclude that in diaspora home can become multiple, split, displaced and sometimes become a purely conceptual space rather than a physical, territorialised space.

Key words: Diaspora; Identity; Belonging; Home; Unhomeliness

“What is home? On the one hand, ‘home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination... On the other hand, home is also a lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day...all this, as mediated by the historically specific of everyday social relations” (Avtar Brah 1996: 193)

Since the 1980s, the field of diaspora studies has seen a clash between attempts to delineate the term and place limits on its expanding use and counter-currents in which scholars, described as social constructionists, have challenged the prevalent assumptions about and definitions of diaspora that emerged (Cohen 2008: 1). The purpose of this essay is to build on social constructionist critiques of diaspora, with a particular focus on challenging the emphasis on homeland orientation in definitions of diaspora. This will lead towards an understanding of diaspora that rejects absolute, fixed and simplistic notions of home, and that allows complexity, where home can be a physical reality, lived in or yearned for, an imagined myth or a historical reality that can no longer exist; where home can evoke feelings of familiarity and nostalgia as well as alienation, and where home can be a combination of these: plural rather than singular. I will begin by exploring the evolution of the term diaspora, examining both the trajectory of its usage through time and the definitions and typologies that have emerged. Following this, I will discuss a number of examples that undermine notions of
absolute, fixed and territorialised homeland. These will include the experiences of second-
and third-generation Maghrebi immigrants in France and the attitudes of Iranian immigrants
and political exiles towards Iran. I will argue that these individuals are members of diasporas
and that their complex understandings of self and negotiation of identity and home are
evidence of their diasporic consciousness.

The evolution of the term ‘diaspora’

The term ‘diaspora’, initially used to describe the dispersal of the Jewish people from
Israel, is derived from the Greek words *dia*, ‘through’ and *speirein*, ‘to scatter’ and can thus
be understood most simply as the physical dispersion of a people from a common point of
origin (Zohdi 2016: 496; Brah 1996: 180; Cohen 2007: 2). From the 1960s, the term became
used to describe the dispersion of the Africans, Armenians and Greeks, known as the
‘classical diasporas’ (Cohen 2008: 1). These diasporas are seen as the examples which most
correspond with the experience of the prototypical Jewish diaspora, due to their history of
forced dispersal (Brubaker 2005: 2; Cohen 2007: 7). However, by the 1980s, the term had
come to be used to describe a large variety of migration experiences, including ‘political
refugees, alien residents, guest workers, immigrants, expellees, ethnic and racial minorities’
as well as to refer to trans-border linguistic communities and global religious communities
(Cohen 2008: 1; Shuval 2000: 41; Brubaker 2005: 3). It was this “amazing inflation” of the
term, which according to one scholar, “was being applied to most of the world’s people” that
caused frustration amongst scholars and led to prolonged debate (Dufoix quoted in Zohdi
2016: 496; Singh 2013: 2). In order to counter the dispersion in the meaning of the term, and
realising that ‘if everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so’, a number of
definitions and typologies were developed in order to restore the term’s academic rigour
(Brubaker 2005: 3; Tsagarousianou 2004: 52).

The most prominent scholars in this activity appear to have been William Safran, Rogers
Brubaker and Robin Cohen. Safran’s definition of diaspora, which appeared in 1991, is one
of the earliest and most influential attempts to delineate the concept, and contains a key focus
on homeland orientation, downplaying other aspects of the diaspora experience
(Tsagarousianou 2004: 55). His six-part model of diaspora can be summarised as a
community which: (i) is dispersed from a homeland, (ii) maintains common memory or myth
about the homeland, (iii) maintains boundaries with the host-land society due to fear of
exclusion, (iv) intends to return should conditions prove favourable, (v) continues to support
the homeland, and (vi) continues to relate to and define itself by the homeland (1991: 83-4). This is likely one of the most systematic and restrictive of the prevalent definitions of diaspora, and the fact that four of the six aspects mentioned describe a particular attitude towards ‘the homeland’ shows Safran’s belief in the ‘vital importance of homeland in defining one of the essential characteristics of diaspora’ (Cohen 2007: 2). Similarly, Brubaker’s three-part definition also includes homeland orientation as a constitutive feature of diaspora, yet is more open in that it also acknowledges the possibility of ‘imagined homeland’ (2005: 5). Meanwhile, Cohen’s exploration of diaspora allows for some further expansion of meaning; Cohen explicitly mentions ‘groups that scatter voluntarily’ in his definition, and has written extensively on a typology of diaspora which includes ‘labour’, ‘trade’, ‘imperial’ and ‘cultural’ diasporas alongside the classical ‘victim’ or ‘catastrophic’ diasporas (Brubaker 2005: 2). While still emphasising ‘strong links to the past’, Cohen’s work has also explored a decoupling of the concepts of diaspora and homeland, with his article on solid, ductile and liquid homes showing a progressive view of home, which acknowledges ambiguity and change in the notion of home for some diasporas (2008: 9-10).

**Challenging understandings of diaspora**

**Moving past ‘the past’ and notions of territoriality**

The approaches explored above, with their emphasis on return, homeland orientation and links to the past, can all be described as ‘nostalgia-premised’ or ‘backward-looking’ definitions of diaspora (Tsagarousianou 2004: 57, 59). Furthermore, there appears to be a territorial emphasis, particularly in Safran’s definition which consistently refers to ‘homeland’ rather than ‘home’. The usage of a singular form and definite article when referring to ‘the homeland’ in Safran’s work also reveals an understanding of home that is itself singular, fixed, absolute, and determinable. Such a definition cannot encompass the possibility of multiple homes, or the possibility of change and displacement of ‘home’ itself, and the ambiguity of home in the case of multiple displacements. Furthermore, his model describes a wholly positive attitude towards homeland, which appears simplistic in that it obscures the alienation that often exists simultaneously alongside nostalgia for homeland, creating more nuanced attitudes towards return, or rendering return impossible or unfavourable. In response to these return-orientated, backward-looking, territorialised and absolute notions of home, a large body of literature has emerged from theorists such as Stuart Hall, Roza Tsagarousianou, Homi K. Bhabha, Avtar Brah, Faiza Hirji and Paul Gilroy, who
seek to highlight the flaws in these definitions. They stress that: (i) diasporic peoples are thinking in new ways about ‘home’ and ‘the past’ and tend to focus on recreating or ‘making one’s home’ and ensuring quality of life in the present and future, (ii) a desire to return home is not at the heart of diasporic identity and may not be favourable or even possible, (iii) a specific, singular homeland is not always easily determinable - it may be historically ambiguous, relate to numerous geographical points on a trajectory, or be ‘deterritorialised’ or displaced, (iv) the diaspora process leads to multiple, split and hybrid understandings of home or a feeling of being ‘unhomed’, and finally (v) current definitions of diaspora neglect the possibility of transformation of diasporic experience and sentiment for later generations of the diaspora (Singh 2013: 4; Tsagarousianou 2004: 56, 58-59; Brubaker 2005: 6; Hall 1990: 235; Zohdi 2016: 495-6; Hirji 2009; Brah 1996).

To some extent, these challenges have been acknowledged and partially accommodated following the turn of the century, in what Cohen calls ‘the consolidation phase’ (2008: 2). Cohen’s article, ‘Solid, ductile and liquid: changing notions of homeland and home in diaspora studies’ provides evidence of how the field of diaspora studies has allowed re-questioning of homeland within diaspora and widely embraced a more sophisticated understanding of homeland that acknowledges the historical and empirical support for diasporas whose homeland has been displaced (producing a ‘ductile’ home), or completely deterritorialised (producing a ‘liquid’ home) (2007; 2008: 12). To illustrate the former, Cohen gives the examples of the Hindu Sindhi diaspora, who lost access to the region of Sindh when it became part of Pakistan through partition in 1947 (2007: 8). Those living in the region were displaced and the majority of them moved to Bombay, where they recreated their culture, making the city their ‘cultural heart’ and managing to politically integrate themselves and achieve remarkable prosperity, whilst those who had already dispersed for the purpose of trade learnt to look towards a new land as their home (Cohen 2007: 8-9). Cohen illustrates his discussion of liquid homes through the Caribbean diaspora, ‘an exemplary case of deterritorialised diaspora’ (2007: 11). Acknowledging the multiple displacements of the Afro-Caribbean population, virtually all of whom came from elsewhere, often as African slaves from West Africa prior to arriving in the Caribbean, and the way ‘ideas, people and popular culture crisscrossed between Africa, the Americas and Europe’, Cohen supports the concept put forward by Paul Gilroy of ‘the Black Atlantic’ (2007: 11). This situates the ‘home’ of the Caribbean diaspora as an in-between space, ‘between the fixed geographies of

This shows a much more progressive approach to homeland than seen in previous definitions, yet also raises further questions about home. If the Sindhi diaspora was able to recreate home and refer to what was previously a hostland as a homeland, whilst still holding a notion of another distant homeland as a basis for their community, and with some members of the diaspora still wistfully looking towards the lost region of Sindh, then this raises the possibility of multiple homes and implies a blurred boundary between hostland and homeland (Cohen 2007: 8). Furthermore, Cohen still emphasises a territorial, physical aspect to home based on points of origin and physical trajectories, even within his understanding of ‘deterritorialised diaspora’, when the Sindhi and Caribbean examples surely reveal that diaspora can manifest itself in an attachment to people, culture and traditions more than physical locations. This attachment to people can be seen in the verse quoted by Cohen from the Sindhi poet, Prabhu Wafa, ‘Wherever you find Sindhis, call it your Sind’, as well as in his understanding that the real links in the Caribbean diaspora ‘were not with Africa, but with other dispersed people of African origin’ (2007: 9, 12). This is particularly important because it means that diaspora does not necessarily imply an attachment or orientation towards any land, but around an ability to create links between people and to ‘recreate a culture in diverse locations’ (Clifford 1994: 306).

By discarding this territorial fixation in defining diaspora, it becomes possible to include the experiences of other dispersed populations that have permanently settled in their ‘hostland’, such as South Asian and Chinese populations in Europe, the United States, Singapore, Malaysia, and Southeast Africa or the Maghrebi populations of France and Spain. Whilst these communities may have no desire to return to their original or ancestral homelands they can arguably still be seen as both performing and inhabiting diaspora, often continuing to live their links to the homeland ‘within the imagination’ (Ghosh 1989: 76). Lingchei Letty Chen has argued against an ‘expiration date’ on the term diaspora for these settled populations, arguing that the memory of an ancestral homeland continues to play a central part in these communities’ lives (2015: 52). This happens both through the narration of memory by earlier generations, creating a sense of ‘prosthetic memory’ for later generations who may have no experience of the ancestral lands yet still find their identities shaped by this memory, as well as through the experience of memory, incomplete or fractured as it may be, through participating in ‘time-honoured rituals and customs’ and the
use of ancestral languages (Chen 2015: 59). Such practices often render the communities distinct from their surrounding society affecting both their self-perception and external categorisation by surrounding society. This shows that the memory of the diasporic process continues to profoundly impact on their lives. Furthermore, later generations of these diasporas may not view their adopted society as a ‘hostland’ at all, and develop an understanding of home that is plural, encompassing both their ancestral and adopted lands.

**Acknowledging the experiences of second- and third-generation immigrants**

Following on from Chen’s argument, there is good reason to further explore the experiences of settled diasporic populations, particularly of second- and third-generation youth, who I would argue ought to be regarded as inhabiting diaspora. Having no experience of migration and perhaps having never visited an ancestral homeland, they may not consider themselves immigrants of any generation, and are likely to have very different attitudes towards that land to their parents (Hirji 2009: 1, 6). However, their experiences, self-perception and external categorisation by society continues to be influenced by their diasporic history. An example of this would be the Maghrebi diaspora in France, which interestingly, is mentioned by Safran in his landmark work on defining diaspora (1991: 85-86). As studies have shown, many young individuals of the Maghrebi population in France often do not share the nostalgic retrospective attitude of their parents to the homeland and thus would not be accommodated by Safran’s restrictive definition of diaspora (Nash 2012: 34). Despite their more ambivalent attitude towards the ancestral homeland, they do not necessarily settle in easily into their host society, contrary to the assumptions of previous studies in diaspora, which assumed that such youth integrate into their host society more easily than their parents due to their relationship with their origins and the fewer struggles they face in mastering the host society language and acquiring cultural capital (Hirji 2009: 4).

To illustrate this uncomfortable relationship with the host society, one could look at the participation of Maghrebi immigrants, alongside other immigrant populations, in ‘car-burning riots’ in France (Hirji 2009: 4; see Hussey 2014). These events reflect the complex perceptions of identity among French-Maghrebi youth, where some individuals’ alienation and exclusion from their host society may lead to a stronger attachment to the ancestral homeland as Faiza Hirji has documented, or where some individuals may feel they do not belong in either society, experiencing what Salman Rushdie has called ‘double unbelonging’ (Hijri 2009: 5; Rushdie 2012: 141). Conversely, other aspects of the French-Maghrebi
community’s life, such as language use, could be seen to reflect more positive relationships with both the hostland and homeland, where French-Maghrebi youth perceive themselves as having hybrid identities influenced by both the home and host lands (Nash 2012: 46). This supports Hirji’s argument that such youth often ‘have complex understandings of self’, feeling a sense of difference from their peers and an uncertainty in terms of belonging, therefore causing them to struggle to integrate and perceive the host society as home (2009: 4-5).

Consequently the reactions of second- and third-generation immigrants towards their diasporic history are multifaceted, manifesting themselves in feelings of being ‘unhomed’, to borrow Homi K Bhabha’s term, of having multiple homes or of negotiating which home is the ‘real home’ (Zohdi 2016: 498). These negotiations of identity and nuanced relationships with homeland and hostland must be understood as second- and third-generation youth displaying ‘diasporic consciousness’ as ‘inhabitants of diaspora’ (Hirji 2009: 1,4). Furthermore, the fact that French-Maghrebi youth continue to be categorised as others by society and the media, based on their ancestral homeland, often facing a great deal of negative rhetoric and discrimination, illustrates Hirji’s point that ‘even if they have no physical experience of migration, even if they have not visited some kind of homeland, most describe an existence where they are constantly reminded that they are seen as migrants, foreigners, sometimes even interlopers’ (Nash 2012: 46; Hirji 2009: 5).

Interestingly, this is similar to Cohen’s explanation of how the African diaspora continues to remain diasporic even as its members have come to be settled in various ‘hostlands’ around the world, as in many societies their skin colour ‘remains a marker’ and makes it ‘impossible for any people of African descent to avoid racial stigmatization’ (2007: 11). Unfortunately, Cohen’s work fails to apply this understanding of how being marked as ‘other’ or ‘foreign’ continues to have a profound impact on later generations of settled migrant populations, and the questioning and negotiation of identity that ensures, to other diasporas, therefore failing to capture the experiences of these youth. However, as Hirji argues, the experiences of identity negotiation and complex notions of home found amongst ‘provide us with rich material for understanding the ways that different diasporas transform and interact with host cultures, creating something new and meaningful’ (2009: 8). Furthermore, some of the examples mentioned here make the broadening of the definition of diaspora more urgent; manifestations of disharmonious relations between individuals with a history of diaspora and their hostland could be analysed using a ‘diaspora’ lens if second- and
third-generation immigrants were accommodated by the definition. This analysis could then move past semantic debate and examine the factors that affect the settling in and notions of belonging within diaspora, such as the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of society, demonising narratives, and feelings of community or uprootedness.

**Home as a site of alienation and nostalgia**

The final aspect that I wish to tackle is the wholly positive outlook towards homeland found in Safran’s criteria. As Safran has already noted, members of diaspora often have reasons to view return unfavourably, due to practical, economic and political reasons. He gives the example of the following ‘old Jewish joke from Eastern Europe’ to highlight this (1991: 91):

> The husband asks his wife: “What will happen to the million zloty I invested in the business if the Messiah comes, and we have to leave everything behind?” And the wife answers: "With God's help, the Messiah will not come so soon.”

His acknowledgement here of practical and economic reasons that sometimes make returning to a homeland unfavourable or impossible shows a more nuanced understanding of homeland orientation that is not evident in his six-part model. Like the Jews of Eastern Europe prior to the possibility of mass resettlement in Israel, there are many diasporas who cannot go home or do not have a homeland to return to, either because the conditions are unwelcoming or because the various political, economic, ideological and social changes have caused the land to be “transformed beyond recognition” (Safran 1991: 91; Tsaragousianou 2004: 56). This has certainly been the experience of the Hindu Sindhi, African and Caribbean diasporas that have been studied here.

However, it is important to note that even when a homeland exists and return has become a practical possibility, diasporic individuals may still struggle to perceive that home without some sense of alienation. As Esmaeil Zohid argues, understanding the concepts of ‘home’ and ‘unhomed’ are central to a strong understanding of diaspora (2016: 495-6). The term ‘unhomed’ or ‘unhomely’ is one developed by Homi K. Bhabha who borrows the term from Sigmund Freud, to describe something which is ‘both strange and familiar at the same time’ and which can be seen as characterising the diasporic experience of ‘traumatic ambivalences of a personal psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence’ (2016: 496-7). To feel unhomed is “to feel not at home even in one’s home because you are
not at home in yourself; that is, your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee” (Lois Tyson quoted in Zohdi 2016: 498). This concept of being ‘unhomed’ is certainly applicable to most diasporas’ experience of displacement and life in a new land, yet also applies, in some cases, to diasporic peoples’ view of a homeland. This has already been shown to some extent with the example of French-Maghrebi youth’s experiences of double unbelonging.

Zohdi explores the concept of ‘unhomeliness’ through Iranian literature, in which the characters feel a ‘sense of doubleness between the past and the present’, creating alienation from both homeland and hostland, loneliness and an inability to belong in either land, yet this notion can also be explored with reference to the experiences of Iranian immigrants and political exiles, and their complex attitudes towards returning to Iran (2016: 503). A study on the attitudes toward returning to Iran among Iranian refugees in Sweden has shown that political exiles in particular have a complex relationship with the idea of returning: whilst showing deep nostalgia for Iranian culture and attempting to recreate it in Sweden through food, radio programmes and other cultural products and expressing a desire to return and ‘pay back their debts’ to those they ‘abandoned’ on leaving, they also worry that returning would mean ‘recognizing the legitimacy of the Islamic regime in Iran’ (Graham & Khosravi 1997: 118-9, 129). They fear the alienation and harsh welcome they might face should they choose to return, as well as being labelled traitors, spies or collaborators by fellow Iranian exiles in their hostland (1997: 118-9). Their unwillingness to return despite their nostalgia and family ties, even now that return has been made possible for many by the Iranian government, can be seen as stemming from a feeling of unhomeliness, where their political and ideological alienation make Iran simultaneously ‘home’ and ‘not home’ (1997:118-9). This conflicted attitude towards homeland intensifies in the case of Armenians and Baha’is from Iran whose history of persecution in Iran and different cultural or religious practices create further tensions in their understanding of Iran as home. Similarly, the Iranian example is comparable to the process dezionisation of Jews whose disillusion with the actions and policies of the Israeli state prevents them from returning (see Cohen 2007: 7). Consequently, it becomes clear that the notion of home becomes split in diaspora, as both a site of alienation and nostalgia, and that members of diaspora often face a difficult, and sometimes traumatic, task of reconciling their complex feelings towards multiple lands, ideologies and cultures. Definitions of diaspora should therefore allow for a more nuanced relationship with home rather than an entirely positive one.
Conclusion

In conclusion, it appears that the complex negotiation of home and identity, such that we have seen in the cases of French-Maghrebi youth and Iranian political exiles, is at the centre of diasporic existence, rather than notions of fixed home, nostalgia and a desire to return. It is clear that the physical dispersal within diaspora also leads to a dispersal in the notion of home: once assumed to be singular, fixed and absolute, home becomes “multiple, pluri-local… avoiding ideas of fixity, boundedness, and nostalgic exclusivity traditionally implied by the word home” (Walters quoted in Zohdi 2016: 496). The arguments made here intend to lead towards an understanding of diaspora that rejects fixed, absolute and simplistic notions of home, and adopts a much more nuanced understanding, where home is multiple and split, can encompass a lived-in physical reality, a spiritual or ancestral home, a mythical place that may no longer exist, an adopted home where economic security can be ensured, where one can live free of political and religious persecution, that one feels comfortable in, included in and unashamed of. Ultimately, this gives new meaning to the phrase ‘there’s no place like home’. For many diasporic peoples who have experienced multiple homes, any absolute notion of home can only be a conceptual space, a utopian dream that cannot exist in reality – there is no one homeland in physical existence that is able to satisfy all these needs and desires.

Bibliography


• Cohen, R., 2007. Solid, ductile and liquid: changing notions of homeland and home. *Diaspora studies*


• Hirji, F. 2009 The Next Generation: Diaspora, Youth and Identity Construction *Diasporas, Migration and Identities*


