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# 'Ever more "Diaspora": Advances and Alarums'

**Donald Harman Akenson**

## I

Seemingly, discussing 'diaspora' in New Zealand should either be unnecessary or such an easy sell that a conference on the topic could only be an assemblage of the obvious. If the term diaspora is used in its denotative sense as derived from classic Greek, it means dispersion or, slightly more poetically, the dispersion of seeds – things that grow, prosper and multiply. Here we are – and so what? New Zealand, taken as a whole, has been the destination site of two extraordinary diasporas: one the heroic, virtually Arthurian, quest of segments of the Polynesian peoples, the other the later globe-bisecting migration of European peoples, most notably those stemming from the British Archipelago from the mid-nineteenth century. There have been, of course, immense and fascinating, sometimes frightening, interactions between these two major diaspora groups, also some fairly yeasty intra-group developments, as well as complex alliances and frictions with later arrivals.

When in the mid-1990s 'diaspora' became one of the *terms-du-jour* it did not register sharply with scholars of New Zealand society, nor should it have. Most of the early work was by sociologists, refugee advocates, and filio-pietistic promoters of ethno-national groups that have had little presence and less purchase in this culture. Nevertheless, as the term 'diaspora' migrated into standard historical work, historians of New Zealand were introduced to the term in some of the most sensible of the deployments and assessments of the concept. I refer particularly to the work of Enda Delaney, Donald MacRaild and Kevin Kenny.[1] A reasonable summary of the situation from

[1] Kevin Kenny, 'Diaspora and comparison: the global Irish as a case study', *Journal of American History,* 90 (June 2003), 134–62. See especially the observations of Enda Delaney and Donald M. MacRaild in 'Symposium: Perspectives on the Irish Diaspora', *Irish Economic and Social History,* 33 (2006), 35–358. These two scholars also edited and contributed to a special issue of *Immigrants and Minorities*, 23, 2–3 (July–Nov. 2005). For background, see my own *The Irish Diaspora. A Primer* (Belfast, 1993) and also *Small Differences. Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants, 1815–1922. An International Perspective* (Montreal and Kingston, 1988).

the viewpoint of New Zealand's historiography might be as follows: firstly, diaspora could conceivably be useful as a tool in helping to understand the historical base of this particular society; secondly it almost certainly would help place New Zealand's history into a larger international literature, from which there might be wider lessons; thirdly, conversely, the world might notice that the history of this society has some salient things to say to 'the Big Boys'. Nothing revolutionary here, nothing hard to cope with.

Except, be warned: *Here Be Landmines*. Hence, as a sensitizer to possible problems, let us look briefly at a very non-Kiwi source. There is a very testy article on diaspora to be found in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. This is not an otiose exercise, because I think it is widely recognized that until the past generation, diaspora has been a concept that, if not quite a proprietary Jewish brand, was one in which the Jewish community worldwide was the dominant shareholder. The *Encyclopaedia Judaica,* first published in 1972 with the support of Israel's government, is a massive enterprise. (It reaches twenty-two volumes in its second edition of 2007.) The effort combines front-line scholarship with the semi-official line on certain sensitive matters. One of these is the Jewish Diaspora. In a breathtakingly apodictic ruling, the editors preface the article on diaspora with two paragraphs of proper-think:

The word Diaspora, from the Greek … ('dispersion'), is used in the present context for the voluntary dispersion of the Jewish people as distinct from their forced dispersion, which is treated under Galut [Exile]. As such it confines itself to Jewish settlement outside Eretz Israel during the period of Jewish independence or compact settlement in their own land.[2]

Under this secular *halachah*, the historical boundaries of the Jewish Diaspora are three-fold. First, the settlement in Egypt referred to by the prophet Jeremiah (see Jeremiah, chapter 44) in the late First Temple period (c. 600 BCE). How large this population was, and how long its predecessors

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Three general essays offer thoughtful broad perspectives in their assessment of the problems and opportunities involved in employing diaspora as a concept: Kim D. Butler, 'Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse', *Diaspora,* 10 (Fall 2001), 189 – 219; Osten Wahlbeck, 'The Concept of Diaspora as an analytical tool in the study of refugee communities', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies,*. 28 (April 2002), 221 – 38; and Rogers Brubaker, 'The "diaspora" diaspora', *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* 28, 1(2005), 1 – 19.

[2] *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1st ed. (Jerusalem, 1972); 2nd ed. (Detroit Jerusalem, 2007). Article on 'Diaspora' by Menahem Stern, with editor's prologue. The extremely contested relationship between Israelis and members of the Jewish diaspora is shrewdly surveyed in Gabriel Sheffer,'Is the Jewish Diaspora unique? Reflections on the Diaspora's Current Situation', *Israel Studies*, 2, 1 (2005), 1 – 35.

had been in Egypt is unknown. Secondly, and at the other end of the time-line, the Jewish Diaspora is accepted as existing *after* 1948, when the state of Israel was created. Thirdly, in the long medial period between the world of Jeremiah and 1948 (!), matters are contested. The Jewish Diaspora begins in a fuzzily defined period that runs from the beginning of the Second Temple era (say, 450 BCE) to either the Destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, or to the end of the Palestinian patriarchate (roughly 430 CE). During this medial period, Diaspora Jews spread all over the Roman-Hellenic world, with large numbers in Egypt, Syria, Rome, and what is present-day Iraq.

The pivotal point for present purposes, however, concerns the post-1948 period. We are here listening to an authoritative judgment directed at the Jewish population outside of Israel, and especially at that of the United States of America. At least in the English-speaking world, by the 1960s it had become common as part of Jewish identity to apply the term diaspora not just to persons living outside of Israel post-1948, but also to long sweeps of earlier Jewish history. Such employment of the concept asserts an historical continuity between present-day dispersed Jews and all those dispersed in the past. The state of Israel will have none of that. Members of the present-day Jewish Diaspora (a 'voluntary dispersion' remember) are not to think themselves equal to those who suffered forced Exile–Galut–before 1948. Those who formed modern Israel had suffered Exile and their suffering was nobler and their redemptive heroism greater than those who remain outside Eretz Israel. One here catches a faint whiff of the old *Soviet Encyclopaedia* which pretty much set the world right on every big issue and most small ones as well. The implied delation of the non-Israeli Jews for conceiving of themselves as a noble and historically contiguous diaspora is not for a full-blown thought-crime, but it is for a thought-misdemeanor.[3]

[3] Three textual points are here revealing. (1) The fiat that prefaces the 'Diaspora' article in the 1972 edition is marked as being by the editors. The much longer scholarly article is by Menahem Stern, Professor of Jewish History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and one can only speculate why he would permit the editorial dicta to sit over his name. (2) The fact that the introductory *halachah* was not by Professor Stern is erased from the second edition of 2007. The entire article is ascribed to him. (3) Everything else in the two editions is the same: which is to say that the necessity of having a semi-official rebuke to the Jewish Diaspora still was operative. Incidentally, the blurred character of the time-line when diaspora is an approved descriptor–essentially it is here used as a residual category to refer to eras in which galut was not operative–is underlined by the definition of 'galut' in the same encyclopedia. The article by Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson, Israeli supreme court justice, bows before the semi-state definition that 'the residence of a great number of

## II

Clearly, if the ethno-religious group that is usually recognized as the entity to which diaspora was most often applied has to police the usage of the idea, then manifestly it is a contested concept. How did we come to be engaged with it today?

The short answer is that the idea of the diaspora of the Jews (and, also in some authors, of the early Christians) was found in the writings of certain ancient classical and patristic writers: Philo of Alexandria on the Jews, for example, and Eusebius, third–and fourth-century bishop of Caesarea, on the Christians. With what is vaguely referred to as the 'humanistic revolution', scores of ancient writers were rediscovered, and among them was Eusebius, the first historian of the Christian church whose works survived virtually intact. Eusebius was especially popular.[4]

Then, in the nineteenth century, 'diaspora' evolved into a naturalized English word when English biblical scholars became enamoured of the German higher criticism of the nineteenth century, wherein diaspora was an accepted concept that had a general scholarly usage.[5] The formal acceptance of diaspora as a standard term in educated English is found in the article by the great Julius Wellhausen in the 'Israel' entry in the 1881 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.[6] Thus, it required no special explanation when 'diaspora' was employed in an article on Philo of Alexandria in the 1885 edition of the standard English reference work.[7]

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members of a nation, even the majority, outside their homeland is not definable as galut so long as the homeland remains in that nation's possession'. He defines the galut as lasting from the Destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE to the founding of the modern Jewish state.

[4] The early English Books has six separate sixteenth- and seventeenth-century editions of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* available, this is in addition to ancient language versions. Philo was well enough known to be a stage figure in a 1645 fable, *Sad Condition of a Distracted Kingdom*.

[5] *The Oxford English Dictionary of the Christian Church* credits William Robertson Smith's *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church* (Edinburgh, 1881) with making 'higher criticism' a current term among the educated class. Smith's volume, however, merely ratified an admiration for the German biblical critics that ecclesiastical adepts had harboured since the late eighteenth century.

[6] This, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989 edn) entry on 'Diaspora'. The Wellhausen article was translated from German as he did not write fluent English. His high prestige in English scholarly circles at the time was largely the product of the publication of the second volume of *Die Geschichte Israels* in 1878.

[7] Per *OED* (1989). The famous eleventh edition (1911) of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*

Confirmation that by the late 1880s, well-educated persons were expected to know how to employ diaspora as a useful concept is found in a very smooth, very worldly essay in the most widely read of High Victorian intellectual periodicals, *The Edinburgh Review*. There, in January 1889, in an extended review of a recently published commentary by Anglican scholars on the 'Apocrypha' (usually called the 'Deutero-Canon' by Roman Catholics), 'diaspora' was used to explain why Jewish religious culture expanded and spilled outside of the limits of the canonical scriptures. Physical diaspora enlarged Jewish mental horizons, it was argued, and the cultural richness that ran from the stories in the books of Tobit and of Judith, to the Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach, to the heroics in the various Maccabean volumes, was the product of ancient Jewish culture being rubbed against 'Oriental' societies. 'The growth in this direction is not only demonstrable, it is rendered *a priori* natural and reasonable by the very existence and large area of the Diaspora.'[8] Significantly, in this review essay no distinction was made between the Babylonian Exile (Galut) and other Jewish scatterings in antiquity. They all are said to have had the same culturally enriching effect.

Thus, unlike so many old words drawn from the early Common Era, diaspora was not undergoing linguistic entropy. Quite the opposite: from the High Victorian era onwards, it became a more and more familiar term within the field of biblical studies, and this at a time when knowledge of that field was an essential part of the education of any gentleman, agnostics and atheists included. Then, in the cultural equivalent of welder's blowback, many (not all) of the Christian-based interpretations and usages of the concept of diaspora returned to influence Jewish studies. The precondition for this retro-invasion was the complex cultural phenomenon usually called the Jewish Enlightenment. The iconic figure in this process was Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86), an heroic polymath who, as Paul Johnson has mischievously observed, 'laid no claim to a specific Jewish stake in the Enlightenment; he simply wanted to enjoy it'.[9] Mendelsson and his colleagues brought Jewish culture into the German mainstream (he produced in German an up-to-date

reprinted this article from the 1885 edition. It nicely confirms the cultural migration path of 'diaspora' into educated English. The article is the joint product of Professor Emir Schurer, one of Germany's leading scholars of the Early Common Era, and the Reverend Professor Charles Bigg, Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History, Oxford University.

[8] 'The Apocrypha,' *Edinburgh Review*, 169, 345 (January 1889), 75. The anonymous article, 58–95, is a review of Henry Wace's two volume edition.

[9] Paul Johnston, A History of the Jews (New York, 1987), 300.

translation of the Pentateuch) introducing aspects of European high culture into the cultural ghetto of middle class German Jewry, all the while fighting against the anti-Semitism of the time.

The form of 'liberal Judaism' (the term is descriptive and does not refer to the Jewish denomination of that name) that Mendelsson and his successors developed had little impact on the shtetl Rabbinism of the Pale of Settlement, but its cumulative effect from the later eighteenth century onwards meant that in the cultural hubs of Europe educated and still-observant Jews participated in front-edge cultural developments. To take the course of events into the twentieth century, as the academic field of religious studies increasingly broke away from Christian apologetics, Jewish scholars were intimately involved: at first in 'Old Testament' studies, but soon afterwards in scholarship on the New Testament and in interpretations of the kaleidoscope of religious material produced in the late Second Temple era.

Inevitably, the word diaspora – reintroduced into Jewish scholarly vocabulary after an absence of a millennium-and-a-half – found its way into the political and social conversation of the laity. So, within the Jewish community, fierce debates about the nature of diaspora flamed, and in many ways these muddied the waters even more than had Christian usage (which often talked about a Christian diaspora): was there a real difference between Exile [Galut] and the Jewish Diaspora? (most persons in the Jewish Diaspora would have said no.); was the Jewish Diaspora ever 'a Good Thing'? (liberal American Jews tended to say yes); was the Jewish Diaspora the only possible diaspora, or could the concept be shared with other religious or ethnic or national groups? And, if the concept was to be shared with other groups, was there a requirement that a certain degree of victimization was necessary before admission to the club was granted?

The truth is that by the later decades of the twentieth century, Jewish commentators on diaspora were as muddy in its employment, and as indeterminate in its definition, as when the term was used by non-Jews.[10] Like so many words that become more and more fashionable, mushiness in meaning was a prerequisite for popularity.

[10] For an excellent *longue durée* essay, see Denise Eileen McCoskey, 'Diaspora in the Reading of Jewish History, Identity, and Difference', *Diaspora*, 12 (Winter 2003), 387–418.

## III

Why, then, would any student of human behaviour employ the term diaspora, save for the dubious pleasure of riding the same crowded wave as a lot of other sharp-elbowed people? Granted, a term that is argued about has some sensible attraction. At least the dialectics might spark off a conversation that metamorphoses into rigour, empathy, narrative, good things like that. Yet, there must be suspicion that when, in the later twentieth century, diaspora was grabbed at by so many scholars, in a wide range of disciplines, their choice was not a positive embracing of diaspora as an indication of their being dead-sick of the old and lifeless alternatives.

Take the field of Irish studies. By the early 1990s some scholars had begun to believe that emigration, as the concept was then used in Irish historiography, was mined out. It was almost impossible to talk about emigration in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries without immediately invoking the ochone-ochone threnody of alleged Irish exile. (In the vocabulary of our present discussion, when about the question of Irish diaspora was raised, most responses were couched in the vocabulary of Galut.) Equally important, although not invalid as a descriptive reference, in the Irish historical literature emigration as a higher-level concept had become almost useless, being used both to denominate a set of events (a set of effects in other words) and also the cause of those events. 'Emigration' had become a going-nowhere omnibus construct.

There were two other problems. One of these was that emigration in the then existing historical literature of Irish emigration was, with some honourable exceptions, overwhelmingly defined on a sectarian level, and this at a time when the Troubles were still in train. (Crudely, no Prods need apply; or if admitted to the narrative of Irish emigration, they were segregated.) And, secondly, the concept of Irish emigration was limited by the chaffing spancel of the cultural imperialism of the United States. Overwhelmingly, the story of 'Irish emigration' had been centred on a voyage by ship, usually with Liverpool on one side and New York, Boston, or Philadelphia on the American side, a journey as predetermined as a train ride. In fact, Irish people of all sorts–Catholics and Protestants, well-off, poor–migrated all over the world. Indeed, in most years of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries more Irish emigrants went to destinations in the homeland or the empire of the old-enemy than to the United States. The histories written under the American imperium had kept this multiplicity of migration outcomes as far off-stage as

possible. So, 'diaspora' seemed like the intellectual equivalent of a 'Get Out of Jail Free' card.

That noted, it would be unfair and inaccurate to suggest that the push to employ 'diaspora' in Irish studies in the 1990s was solely a negative reaction to the flaccidity of the then prevailing ways of talking about the richly complex pattern of worldwide Irish migration.. There were also independent positive reasons to consider diaspora, namely a transition of usage of the term from theological monographs to secular historical and policy studies. For the secular academy of the English-speaking world, one of several foundation-moments was John A. Armstrong's 'Mobilized and Proletarian Diasporas'.[11] This nimble essay, which well repays reading today, is part of a causal chain that flows right into the present cascade of diaspora-studies. Armstrong's work was referenced several times by the authors who contributed to Gabriel Scheffer's *Modern Diasporas in International Perspective,* published in 1986.[12] In turn, Scheffer's collection was one of the several threads that was woven together by Kachig Tololyan when he founded the journal *Diaspora* in 1991.

A related, and ultimately contributory, chain of secular scholarship introduced diaspora from the viewpoint of what was then called Black Studies, a field that had much more force within the academy than did the fragmented sub-specialties that initially were drawn into diaspora studies. The first book to use the term 'African diaspora' in its title was published in 1976. The editors of that volume, Martin Kilson and Robert Rotberg, noted:

The application of the Greek word for dispersion, *diaspora*, to this process of Jewish migration from their homeland into all parts of the world not only created a term which could be applied to any other substantial and significant groups of migrants, but also provided a concept which could be used to interpret the experiences (often very bitter experiences) of other peoples who had been driven out of their native countries by forces similar to those which had dispersed the Jews: in particular, slavery and imperialism.[13]

This idea, that there were parallels between the Jews and Black Africans had been suggested as early as 1802, Kilson and Rotberg noted, by the English author William Movor, in a volume entitled *The History of the Dispersion of the Jews, of Modern Egypt, and of the other African Nations*, and it had been taken up

[11] John A. Armstrong's 'Mobilized and Proletarian Diasporas'. in *The American Political Science Review,* 70 (June 1976), 393–408.

[12] Gabriel Scheffer (ed.), *Modern Diasporas in International Perspective* (New York, 1986), passim.

[13] Martin L. Kilson and Robert I. Rotberg (eds), *The African Diaspora: Interpretive Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), 2.

several times during the nineteenth century by writers on Africa.[14] It was only during the 1960s, however, that the word 'diaspora' began to enter the working vocabulary of Africanists and of historians of Black history worldwide. At the International Congress of African Historians, held at University College, Dar-as-Salaam, in 1965, Joseph E. Harris and George Shepperson each delivered papers in various aspects of the African diaspora. Shepperson's 'The African Abroad or the African Diaspora' was especially important, attempting simultaneously to indicate the breadth of the topic and to impose a significant limitation. The breadth came from an estimate Shepperson cited for the year 1946: that in the western hemisphere alone there were 41 million people of African descent. The limitation was this: 'it must be emphasized that not all migration from Africa comes within the bounds of the concept of the African diaspora which is the study of a series of reactions to coercion, to the imposition of the economic and political rule of alien peoples in Africa, to slavery and imperialism.'[15]

That limitation introduced a major problem into the study of the African diaspora and, proleptically, into all diaspora studies: should this involve only the study of those persons, and their descendants, who were forcibly moved from their African homeland? Research undertaken in the 1970s and early 1980s emphasized the duality of the concept to the African diaspora and, though it focused overwhelmingly on forced migration and the results, it left open the theoretical possibility of non-forced voluntary migration being of some consequence.[16] The irony at this point is that just at the time Israeli's authorities were trying to define the Jewish Diaspora as being entirely voluntary, most Africanists were using the term to denominate *in*voluntary dispersion.

In global African studies, things changed sharply in the late 1980s, with the introduction of a strong feminist perspective[17]and increasing recognition of the magnitude of pre-slavery mobility of the African population and the degree of voluntary migration since slave times. As was noted in the introduction to an influential collection: 'A balanced appreciation of the [African] Diaspora must note that many Africans were dispersed globally by choice, through adventure, long before Columbus went to the New World and inaugurated

[14] Ibid.

[15] George Shepperson, 'The African Abroad, or the African Diaspora', in T.O. Ranger (ed.), *Emerging Themes of African History: Proceedings* (Nairobi, 1968), 153.

[16] Graham W. Irwin (ed.), *Africans Abroad: A Documentary History of the Black Diaspora in Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean during the Age of Slavery* (New York, 1977).

[17] Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Sharon Harley and Andrea Rushing (eds), *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora* (Washington, 1987).

the trade in human cargo.'[18] An immense amount of voluntary migration by Africans and persons of African descent had occurred since the ending of most forms of slavery. As Roy Bryce-Laporte forcibly argued: 'With regard to Blacks, the term "diaspora" too often operates against the background of a yet pervasive but incorrect present-day orientation which presents them as a dominated, confined and immobile people in closed, segregated conditions. But, in fact, an important and understudied aspect of the Black Experience is the historical and ongoing mobility of its people, which indeed carries us back to the very genesis.' [19]

If the concept of diaspora could be applied to the dispersal, both voluntary and involuntary, of the African peoples, it could also be employed to white groups, at least those whose cultural history included an epochal tragedy comparable to slavery. Thus, the Armenian Genocide of 1915 becomes a fulcrum upon which the idea of an Armenian diaspora pivots. The exact extent of the displacement and slaughter of the Armenians during the last days of the Ottoman Empire is a matter of some controversy, but in the two decades before the First World War perhaps 200,000 Armenians were killed and, beginning in the spring of 1915, as many as a million were later killed, deported, or scattered. The United States and Canada became the chief new homelands, but Armenians and their descendants are found all over the Middle East and Europe, as well as sub-Saharan Africa. The Armenians have maintained a strong cultural identity. As one generation has folded into another and yet another, the single motif that more than any other elicits loyalty is the genocide of 1915.[20] Scholars who belonged to the Armenian community formed a third leading strand in the evolution of diaspora studies. Not accidentally, *Diaspora* was founded with the aid of Armenian philanthropy.

## IV

That diaspora had become one of the most fashionable concepts within the scholarly academy by the 1990s was confirmed by the 1995 meeting in

[18] Aubrey W. Bonnett and G. Llewellyn Watson, 'Introduction', in *Emerging Perspectives on the Black Diaspora* (Lanham, MD, 1989), 3.

[19] Roy S. Bryce-Laporte, quoted ibid., xiii.

[20] Lorne Shirinian, *The Republic of Armenia and the rethinking of the Northern American Diaspora in Literature* (Lewiston, NY, 1992.

Montreal of the International Committee of Historical Sciences. There, the world's leading historians were asked to focus their attention upon three major topics. These were advanced as being the most important issues for historians of the world to address at the dawn of the twenty-first century: Peoples and State-Forms; Gender; and Peoples in Diaspora.[21] In an echo of affirmation, in 1999 the American Historical Association embraced 'Diasporas and Migrations in History' as its primary theme. Springtime for diaspora, apparently. The only difficulty was that suddenly almost every ethnic group, tribe, and religious community was being described as a diaspora. Certainly any construct that covered in a single breath the overseas Chinese and the underground Cornish, the Coptic Church and the Hutterites, the descendants of African slaves and the princely clan of the Rothschilds, had very porous borders indeed.

To reduce the danger of 'diaspora' becoming the intellectual equivalent of an oil spill in a marine nature preserve, heroic efforts were made to develop definitions and taxonomies. For example, in the first volume of *Diaspora,* William Safran bravely put forward a set of criteria which were admirable for their clarity. Members of any specific diaspora community, he suggested, would share most, if not necessarily all, of the following characteristics:

(1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original 'centre' to two or more 'peripheral', or foreign, regions;

(2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland in terms of its physical location, history, and achievements;

(3) they believe that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it;

(4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return – when conditions are appropriate;

(5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and

(6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that ancestral homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness

[21] In order to focus the International Committee's deliberations on the central topics, the *Canadian Historical Review* commissioned a special issue that included one plenary piece on each of the three main topics. Some of the matters I discussed at that time inform the present examination of diaspora. See 'The Historiography of English-Speaking Canada and the Concept of Diaspora: A Sceptical Appreciation', *Canadian Historical Review,* 76 (September 1995), 377–409.

and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such an ongoing relationship.[22]

Constructive as this attempt was, it raises some obvious problems. The use of the passive voice in Safran's first point ('they or their ancestors, have been dispersed') seems to exclude the cases, such as the Chinese, wherein the dispersal was volitional and active. The third point, which postulates some form of perpetual alienation from new homelands, places *a priori* restrictions on the historical process by precluding the possibility that a diaspora community may evolve from a feeling of alienation towards one of affiliation with the host society. The fourth and fifth points, concerning diaspora communities having an ideal homeland to which they wish to return, excludes the African diaspora, most of whose members have not the slightest inclination to return to their ancestral continent.

In an attempt to expand William Safran's work into an operational mode of distinguishing a diaspora from a non-diaspora (whatever that may be), Robin Cohen, developed nine metering criteria. They are enumerated in his *Global Diasporas. An Introduction* (1997). Here, in abridged form, are the indicators of a diaspora:

(l) Persons are dispersed, 'often traumatically' from the homeland to two or more foreign regions;

(2) *Alternately* [emphasis mine], persons leave their homeland in search of work, trade or colonial ambitions;

(3) *A* [note the singular] collective memory of the homeland exists among those who leave;

(4) *An* [again, note the singular] idealization of the homeland develops, as well as *a* [singular] commitment to the maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity of that homeland, 'even to its creation';

(5) A return-to-the-homeland movement gains 'collective approbation';

(6) A strong ethnic group consciousness and sense of shared history is sustained over a long time;

(7) A troubled relationship with host societies occurs;

(8) A sense of solidarity either continues or develops between 'co-ethnic' members of the diaspora group in several countries;

(9) There is a possibility of a 'distinctive, creative, enriching life in those countries that have a tolerance for pluralism'.[23]

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[22] William Safran, 'Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myth of Homeland and Return', *Diaspora,* 1 (Spring 1991), 83–4.

[23] Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas. An Introduction.* (London, 1997), 26. A critical but quite

This is a sincere effort, but it is so valueless that a wandering cynic might wonder if it were actually intended as a parody. Firstly, the schema makes several palpably false historical assertions, not least that diasporas of necessity are triggered by traumatic events, apparently of seismic magnitude, and also that a return-to-the-homeland movement has been historically normative among diaspora groups. (Again, the African slave case illustrates the point.) Secondly, some of the criteria for diaspora status are completely non-operational, such as items 1 and 2, when placed side-by-side. Cohen's schema in essence proposes that people leave either involuntarily or voluntarily. Indeed, what other possibilities are there? Thirdly, his employment of the singular, rather than the plural, as normative in defining diasporas ('an idealization of the homeland'; 'a strong group consciousness'; 'a sense of solidarity') flies in the face of the evidence that most diaspora groups have several rival views of their own history, group consciousness, and political-moral commitments, and these certainly are not standard-issue for individual global groups around the globe. Fourthly, Cohen's final point about creative pluralism in new homelands as a possibility is a piety that is unassailable, but its being a statement of future possibility makes it useless for adjudging a set of historical conditions – and each diaspora is an historical set of events.

## V

As will be apparent, I am somewhat ambiguous about how historians should feel about the concept of diaspora. It is a very prickly cactus, one not easily embraced. And you can infer that I feel a touch guilty about having written several books that either directly or indirectly propelled forward the idea of the Irish diaspora, and did so without including a warning label on the first page of each. Should we simply forget the idea of diaspora, dismissing it as undefinable and thus unemployable except as a term of atmospherics, a bit of St. Elmo's fire glowing romantically in dark and exotic foreign forests? Perhaps. But 'dispersal' is not such a bad synonym for 'diaspora', and in that sense diaspora can be employed because it really is nothing new and certainly not understudied. 'Diaspora' as a term may force us to look afresh at things we already have studied intensively in the academy, at least since the mid-twentieth century: concepts of ethnicity; definitions of population

generous discussion of Cohen's book is William Safran, 'Comparing Diasporas : A Review Essay', *Diaspora*, 8 (Winter 1999), 255–92.

movements; reckonings of in- and out-migration; assessments of social mobility; multiple cultural identities; popular culture; religious affiliations and ideological constructs. There is nothing new here, but these are all matters that need to be dealt with in a much broader context than previously.[24]

However, if diaspora is to fulfill its promise as a vivifying modality, we must change its voice, and not just in a single, simple way. First, the dominant habit of using the passive voice when talking about diasporas must be dropped. Almost all histories of diasporas describe them as happening *to* people. Individuals in these stories become flotsam on some poorly defined and simplistically explained historical tide. This robs the participants in a diaspora of their greatest human characteristic, their human agency. My own observation of diaspora participants is that they are active, vital, often heroic, and the habit of using the passive voice turns these individuals into characterless rag dolls. Secondly, the whingeing tone has to cease. If diaspora studies follow the present trajectory, it will be self-discredited within two decades, having degenerated into a competition of complaint held against a wailing wall located beyond earshot of anyone who cares. Thirdly, the implicit self-righteousness that sits in the back of the throat of so many diaspora scholars, making them sound like the hot-potato voice of a Harvard-educated eighteenth-century Unitarian divine, has to cease. The refusal to face the fact that diaspora minorities must often be seen as victimizers as well as victims has led to a good deal of moral side-stepping. In fact, diaspora groups often have displaced, oppressed, or in the not-so-distant past, enslaved, indigenous populations. They continue to do so to the present day. Fourthly, excessive

[24] Although I obviously favour a descriptive rather than a prescriptive interpretation of 'diaspora', if it makes the reader uncomfortable to contemplate employing 'diaspora' without framing his or her own normative definition, then here is the task. (1) One must decide to what degree 'diaspora' is a metaphorical term. Of course almost all words are in some sense metaphors, but when should 'diaspora' be used purely as a taxonomic device and when, if ever, should it be applied to group phenomena, the way one does ask of a literary metaphor? (2) Can diaspora as a concept ever be considered without implying a reference to the Jewish Diaspora—and even if possible, is that desirable? And if one developed a definition of diaspora not based on the bedrock of the Jewish experience where would the Jewish Diaspora be fitted? (3) Must diaspora always imply victimization? (4) Is diaspora applicable only to minority groups or to majority groups as well? (5) Should one confine diaspora to physical dispersal, or are there forms of cultural dispersion that would qualify? (6) And are you really defining diasporas as real-world entities or only as ideal types in the Weberian sense? These and several other questions will require answers and if the normative approach is to be effective, then it must be agreed upon (or forced upon) practitioners of diaspora studies.

presentism in our conversation on diaspora is intellectually lobotomizing. Yes, we must care ardently about present-day problems, but we will handle them slightly better if we understand that most cases of the diaspora have already run their full course, or nearly so. Hence, we would do well to stack side-by-side the several dozen cases there are of almost-completed diasporas. (I say almost-completed because the residual effects of any diaspora, like the rock dropped into the ocean, is never done, merely less easily documented.) The historical menu of actual events well may be of more practical value in determining the range of policy possibilities than all the think-tank vapourizing of the privileged. Fifthly, and finally, if we are at all serious about diasporas as a real-world set of variant causes and divergent effects, then we must clear our throats, try not to stammer, and talk aloud about the Big Ugly Fact. This is that the largest and most consequential diasporas in the last 500 years have comprised what used to be called–with baleful accuracy–the Expansion of Europe. The multiple diaspora that stemmed from European soil changed utterly the social geography of the human species. These diasporas were of people both victimized by 'imperialism' (let us resurrect that word) and who were themselves, in their new homelands, imperializers, whether intentionally or accidentally.

Diaspora as a concept has been with us a very long time. It should not be thrown away casually. But if we are to employ it, it is essential to find ways that are intellectually robust, fecund, and collectively understandable. Otherwise, stop using the concept. Completely.

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