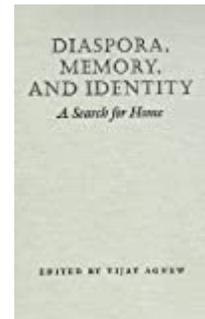




**Vijay Agnew, ed.** *Diaspora, Memory, and Identity: A Search for Home*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. x + 308 pp. \$31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8020-9374-5; \$68.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-9033-1.



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## **Autobiographical Memory, Marginality, and the Socio-psychology of Diaspora**

Vijay Agnew, a Canadian feminist historian of Indian descent, has put together an impressive interdisciplinary collection of essays that examines the production of diasporic identity amongst diverse immigrant communities in Canada. These essays are written by academics from different disciplines—humanities, English, women’s studies, sociology, history, philosophy, education—and explore the experiences of a wide range of immigrant communities in Canada, including South Asians, West Indians, Japanese, Chinese, European Jews, Eritreans, and Muslims (Iranians, Palestinians, Afghans, and Pakistanis). These diasporic subjects negotiate contradictory sites of memory and unstable notions of home/land, and operate in transnational social fields that transgress geographic, political, and cultural borders—what Nina Basch, Linda Schiller, and Cristina Blanc call “transmigration.”[1]

In her introduction, Agnew focuses on the paradoxes and the shifting identities of these diasporic subjects, whose experiences of joy and sorrow are fraught with a tension between “living here and remembering there, between memories of places of origin and entanglements

with places of residence, and between the metaphorical and the physical home” (p. 4). The location of the diasporic subject is thus represented here as a ghostly location, “where the political *unreality* of one’s present home is to be surpassed only by the ontological *unreality* of one’s place of origin” (p. 13; emphasis added). As such, the contributors to this volume examine “how memories of the past define our perspective, help us negotiate our circumstances, and develop new ways of being and becoming” (p. ix). Anh Hua’s meta-critical comment on the other contributions to this collection offers a neat summary of this project. The contributors to this volume, she states, seek to document “how cultural memory can be negotiated, claimed and reinvented,” by deploying “collective memory to document the traditions, rituals, and history of their communities and groups” (p. 204).

This approach offers an alternative to the earlier assimilationist model, providing autobiographical accounts as well as empirical studies that account for the troubled sense of belonging that immigrants have towards Canada, and pointing to the need to redefine Canadian national identity from the perspective of immigrants, for

whom this national identity is fluid, heterogeneous, and transcultural. In its emphasis on a feminist relational approach to identity, moreover, this collection presents a unique contribution to the development of theories of the gendered and classed nature of diasporic subjectivity, double consciousness, and the politics of belonging to the homeland.

What I find very impressive about this collection is also Agnew's commitment to representing the diverse genres and styles common in feminist work. Various articles are written from personal recollection, which as bell hooks states, allows for finding "again that aspect of self and experience that may no longer be an actual part of one's life but is a living memory shaping and informing the present."<sup>[2]</sup> This personalized jargon-free style is evident in Agnew's own contributions to this volume. Others combine personal reflection with poetry as well as critical analysis, a style that Agnew dubs in reference to Rishma Dunlop's contribution as "historiographic poesis—art-making in response to history" (p. 112), while other contributors opt for empirical studies and theorization to discuss the ways in which diasporic communities are invested in memory, identity, voice, and representation.

The book contains eleven essays, only one of which was previously published.<sup>[3]</sup> The book is divided into three parts, followed by an afterword by Susan Babbitt, a feminist philosopher and moral psychologist. The first part, "Diaspora and Memory," emphasizes the role memory plays in diasporic women's imaginative construction and reconstruction of their originary home/lands. These acts of imagination and reimagination serve two purposes: first, they give meaning to and hold together these women's identities which have been fragmented by spatial and temporal displacement. Second, they raise questions about memory and its politics that contest dominant narratives of the past amongst both mainstream and minority communities in Canada. This part contains three articles by Agnew, Pamela Sugiman, and Marlene Kadar. In "Language Matters," Agnew addresses the problem of language, which is often used as an excuse to justify the exclusion of immigrants and their deportation, and seeks to explode the xenophobic (mis)representation of immigrants as inarticulate and incomprehensible. In her typical personalized style, which interweaves personal stories with social observations about an ESL class attended by South Asian women, Agnew dismantles the blanket generalization that these women are lacking in their English-language proficiency. Agnew points out that because of the colonial education legacy of the

British empire as well as the class position of middle-class South Asians, most of these women are not only fluent in English but are proficient in different native idioms. Their ability to speak English fluently notwithstanding, Agnew maintains, South Asian immigrants are usually belittled for their accent and incomprehensibility, which can "make the individual feel alienated and heighten feelings of sadness, nostalgia, and create a longing for home" (p. 42).

In "Memories of Internment: Narrating Japanese-Canadian Women's Life Stories," Pamela Sugiman, a third-generation Japanese-Canadian (Sansei) herself, addresses the diverse ways in which second-generation Japanese-Canadian women (Nisei) have negotiated the shameful racial memory of internment camps. Drawing on the oral testimonies of thirty Nisei women in Canada, Sugiman explores how "memories are the product of the intermingling of past and present lives, the creation of a complex dynamic between the individual and the collective, recalling and forgetting, trauma and nostalgia" (p. 53). She demonstrates the complex ways in which the Nisei have reconstructed a Japanese-Canadian national identity for themselves by disavowing their Otherness and by insisting on their agency, dignity, and self-respect (p. 66). "While they wanted their pain to be acknowledged," she remarks, these women "also did not wish to reduce their status to that of victims" (p. 70). As such, she calls for problematizing and rethinking the nature of memories and their politics, arguing for the need to analyze memories not as a "passive repository of facts," but as an "active process by which meanings are created" (p. 72). Marlene Kadar's "Wounding Events and the Limits of Autobiography" examines alternative Holocaust genres, what she also refers to as "minimal narratives," such as deportation lists, tattoos and numbers, Roma (Gypsy) lament songs, and non-Roma recipe books, that are as a rule excluded from the traditional parameters of Holocaust Studies, but that still bear witness to the destruction of European Jewry in the Nazi camps through an emphasis on personal experience. These minimal narratives—what Christine Bold, Ric Knowles, and Belinda Leach refer to as "feminist counter-memorializing" (quoted in Hua, p. 201)—bear the mark of collective autobiographical genres, for they "intertwine the individual's life story with the larger story of the life of the community at greatest risk, thereby swelling the literary and philosophical demands of the genre, not diminishing them" (p. 100). By clearing a space for the inclusion of these minimal narratives and alternative genres in the study of the Holocaust, Kadar makes a case for reconfiguring the limits of

auto/biography (the intentional deployment of the virgule by Kadar is meant to emphasize the differences between the two genres of autobiography and biography as well as the links between them): “There is no need to fit the lament or the recipe book into the traditional genre,” she writes, “but rather there is a need to question the restrictions we have used to exclude the voices of the deeply wounded, the refugee, and the survivor” (pp. 99-100). Although this essay is not directly pertinent to the book’s concern with diaspora and the production of diasporic identity in Canada, it still provides important theoretical justifications for the inclusion in this collection of all the auto/biographical narratives, the voices and the memories of the subjugated that have been suppressed and neglected by traditional scholarship.

The second part, “History and Identity,” examines the effects of spectrality and haunting on immigrants’ remembrance of past traumatic histories and foregrounds the power of autobiographical writings in revealing the emotional consequences of their relational identities (identities formed at the intersection of contradictory, yet overlapping, identity narratives). This part also contains three essays: In “Memoirs of a Sirdar’s Daughter in Canada: Hybridity and Home Writing,” Rishma Dunlop offers a personalized reflection interweaving her own poetry, memoirs, and critical analysis on her hybrid identity as a Sikh Punjabi woman who negotiates a host of conflicting socio-historical forces that have alienated her from her homeland (*desh*). In this “historiographic poesis,” immigration evolves from a traumatic experience of being “unselved,” though not necessarily hyphenated (p. 117), and from struggles with issues of “fractured identities, discarded languages, and the will to bond oneself to a new community against the ever-present fear of failure and betrayal” (p. 116). Dunlop thus advocates post-colonial hybridity and double consciousness because it “moves the mind beyond dualism into a multiple consciousness cognizant of multilocalities” (p. 117). As such, double consciousness becomes a “privileged knowledge and perspective that is aligned with postmodernity and globalization” (pp. 11, 13-14). It remains unclear, however, how this double consciousness is consonant with postmodernity and globalization, for as Tim Brennan has shown, there is a need to examine the meaning and implication of such claims about hybridity, and cosmopolitanism, to avoid deploying them as alibis for both predatory forms of globalization and for those discourses of postmodernity that are out of touch with people’s material struggles.[4] It is not surprising, therefore, that Dunlop locates her home in a kind of modernist textuality,

wherein “artistic practice is a shelter of words, not reliant on national, political, ethnic, or other allegiances and categorizations” (p. 115).

Atsuko Matsuoka and John Sorenson’s “Ghosts and Shadows: Memory and Resilience Among the Eritrean Diaspora,” addresses the formation of new identities among diasporic Eritreans in Canada, most of whom view themselves in fact as exiles whose residence in Canada is only temporary (p. 157). Haunted by memories of violence in the homeland and their continued support for the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front in their struggle for national liberation (what Arjun Appadurai calls “long-distance nationalism”), the Eritrean diaspora had to negotiate different contradictions, emerging from the clashes between traditional patriarchal ideology, the EPLF’s egalitarian gender ideology, and racism and invisibility in Canada; these contradictions, they claim, have transformed the gender power structure and dynamics. Although women were considered “inferior beings” among the diverse ethnic groups that constitute Eritrean culture (p. 155), as Matsuoka and Sorenson show, women played an extremely important role in the construction of new identity for the Eritrean diaspora in Canada, by providing “much of the labor for political and cultural events, as well as the symbolic heart, by preparing and cooking traditional food” (p. 163).

In her second article in this collection, “A Diasporic Bounty: Cultural History and Heritage,” Agnew offers another personal essay that reflects on the global significance of India’s gems and jewels that were plundered and appropriated by the colonial powers and that are held in different museums around the world today. This essay traces the change in her attitude to this history of colonial appropriation of India’s cultural heritage from anger and resentment to acceptance and pacification. Instead of viewing these gems and jewels as symbols of loss and colonial looting and plunder, she sees them now as part of humanity’s collective heritage, because as she argues, homes and heritages do not have to “coincide with national and geographic boundaries” (p. 181). Hence, she maintains that the concept of ownership has to be bypassed altogether (p. 181) and that these artifacts must be seen as “the markers of history and the bounty of the diaspora” (p. 186). Although this essay raises very serious questions about cultural appropriation, the meaning of legitimate ownership, and the rightful place of such treasures, Agnew in her typical personalized and under-theorized style glosses over many important theoretical debates that have been raging among postcolonial scholars about these issues. Especially in the context of the

renewed zeal for imperial intervention and in the wake of the looting of the Iraqi National Museum after the American invasion of Iraq, Agnew's quick celebration of these gems as symbols of collective human heritage, rather than stolen property, betrays the life-and-death struggles of many indigenous peoples around the world who have to contend with the ecological, political, and economic ramifications of similar (neocolonial) practices of colonial appropriation by transnational corporations. Nonetheless, this essay offers another component to the feminist alternative archive that Sugiman (photographs) and Kadar (recipe books) discuss in their essays.

The third part, "Community and Home," explores the contours and contents of the new diasporic identity that differentiates immigrants, exiles, and refugees from their kin and co-nationals back home and in the diaspora. Although collective memory and cultural trauma play a significant role in the ways in which a diasporic community is imagined, what is actually remembered by these diasporic subjects depends on the relational nature of their identities, consequent upon variations of gender, ethnicity, education, race, class, religion, and sexuality. This part contains five essays: a theoretical essay, three empirical studies, and a personal essay. In her theoretical contribution to this collection, "Diaspora and Cultural Memory," Anh Hua overviews theories of the diaspora, discusses its usefulness as a concept, and explores the importance of memory to diaspora studies. Like Dunlop, Hua maintains that diasporic subjects are endowed with a "double perspective: they acknowledge an earlier existence elsewhere and have a critical relationship with the cultural politics of their present home," and like other contributors she finds "the politics of diasporic spaces" to be "contradictory and multi-accented" (p. 195). In her theorization of the diaspora, Hua correctly foregrounds the importance of understanding the historical and cultural specificity in which diasporas are grounded, and insists on analyzing diasporas as "heterogeneous and contested sites differentiated by gender, class, sexual orientation, generation differences, language access, historical experiences, and geographical locations" (p. 204). Hua makes very interesting points about women, memory, and diaspora, claiming that diasporic women's practices of remembering and documenting these memories enable marginalized women not only to resist the colonial tropes of victimization of and Otherness but also to "act as a catalyst for self-recovery and community-building" (p. 205). However, her claim that "diasporic women are less likely than diasporic men to have nostalgic memories about their homelands" (p. 195) needs further specifica-

tion as to which women exactly may wish their nations away. In other words, to speak of diasporic women in general betrays her exhortation to historicize the experiences of diasporic women across ethnic, sexual, racial, class, religions, and educational lines, as evident in this collection itself. Nonetheless, her point about feminist counter-memorialization and women's interest in critical remembrance can offer a corrective to this blanket generalization about women's memory, nation, and diaspora (p. 202).

The following three empirical studies discuss the gendered experiences of Chinese, West Indian, and Muslim immigrants in Canada. In their "Gendered Nostalgia: The Experiences of New Chinese Skilled Immigrants in Canada," Izumi Sakamoto and Yanqiu Rachel Zhou examine how skilled Chinese immigrants construct and reconstruct their idea of the homeland, and the ways in which different variables such as gender, employment status, and family relationships shape these attitudes to the homeland. In twenty-one in-depth and semi-structured interviews that were conducted in English or Mandarin Chinese, the researchers find out that "these immigrants' constructions of homeland largely depended upon how they perceived and evaluated their lives in Canada in relation to the goals they set before immigration" (p. 212). Although the researchers seem to offer evidence to Hua's claim that men are more likely yearn for home/land and to articulate their desire to return, their study offers a more complex picture of the multifaceted ways in which women express their feelings of longing and belonging to the homeland. Thus, one of their female participants bemoans her hard life in Canada and rebukes herself for her naïve faith in "going to the West since childhood" (p. 222). Ultimately, they show, the construction of homeland is a complex process that cannot be simply calculated in a zero-sum game of "which one is better" (p. 223). There is not, of course, the "flexible citizenship" that Aihwa Ong talks about among wealthy Chinese businessmen, for whom commitment to nation means nothing next to their commitment to family business and profits.[5]

Carl E. James's "I Feel Like a Trini': Narratives of a Generation-and-a-Half Canadian" is an ethnographic account of Mark, a twenty-one year old Black Caribbean Canadian athlete and university student, who is considered a part of the "1.5 generation," a strictly sociocultural and psychological term in reference to immigrants between the ages of eight and twelve who moved to Canada with or without their parents. Although he identifies himself as "definitely Trini," Mark's own narrative, James

concludes, demonstrates that "both countries have made him the person he is and expects to become" (p. 232). While Trinidad provided him with the social and cultural capital to succeed in his new country, Canada offered him the opportunity to realize his athletic and educational aspirations. Mark's narrative of identifying and belonging, hence, offers an insight into the "complex, pragmatic, sentimental, imagined, dual, and contradictory ways in which home is conceptualized and imagined" (p. 232). For James, therefore, Mark's "home" was a "fluid mixture of both Trinidad and Canada," one that is sustained by transnational social relations and structures and that is also "informed and mediated by an individual's life-stage, context, and situation" (p. 248). Although James raises important issues about racial identity, nationality, and citizenship, this essay does not consider the structural limitations that force young Black Caribbeans like Mark to choose athletics as their career path in both Canada and the United States. Absent also is any attention to the gender dynamics of a (Black) athlete's construction of masculinity and negotiation of gender roles especially, in a society that he feels alienated from as a result of institutional and individual practices of racism.

The third empirical study in this section is Haideh Moghissi's "The 'Muslim' Diaspora and Research on Gender: Promises and Perils," which examines the effects of immigration and displacement on gender relations among Canadian-Muslims of Pakistani, Iranian, Afghan, and Palestinian origins. The project, from which this essay is derived, seeks to "document significant differences in how the sexes deal with dislocation as well as differences among various Islamic communities in their gendered cultural practices" (p. 259). Using a comparative methodology involving oral interviews, questionnaires, content analysis, and census data analysis, Moghissi and her team analyze the individual experiences of their respondents in both home and host countries as well as the structural conditions and policies of the latter. They propose that the importance of gender in the immigrants' experiences of adjustment to relocation can be attributed to men's greater difficulty in acclimating themselves to the more egalitarian gender values of the new society, but their study does not offer any direct correlation between this maladjustment process and the feelings of nostalgia for the homeland that other contributors to this volume have made. This essay also interrogates and reflects upon important ethical and epistemological dimensions in the relationship between the researcher and her respondents especially, in the aftermath of 9/11 and the war on terror, which have increased the suspicion of the Muslim com-

munity towards the researchers and which have made them feel that they have been over-studied.

The last essay in this section of the book is Vijay Agnew's third contribution to this collection, "The Quest for Soul in the Diaspora." In this reflective essay, Agnew explores the ways in which Hinduism has traveled from India to the West, arguing against any claim to an authentic practice of Hinduism. In the process of traveling, Hinduism is continually transformed and the transcendental mystic spirituality associated with Hindu religious rituals and practices gets to be performed and commodified by entrepreneurial swamis and gurus for the vicarious pleasures of the participants and the observers. In tracing her reaction to the practice of Hinduism by Whites or to the Hare Krishnas in Toronto, Agnew's essay offers an interesting contrast to her reaction to the colonial appropriation of jewelry and gems evident in the aforementioned essay. While she accepted these jewels and gems as a part and parcel of human heritage, Agnew seems to be alienated from her Hindu heritage by these followers. "But to me," she states, "they were not a reminder of home or of my Hinduism, for their rituals were totally unlike any I had seen before" (p. 275). The inauthenticity, she implies, of these spectacles rendered her "emotionally distant" (p. 276). However, she concludes that religion is a fluid construction of various modalities of materialist and spiritual practices. Hence, she correctly points out, the everyday practices of religion are more complex than the stereotypical representation of Eastern spirituality and Western materialism (p. 272).

Agnew also includes an afterward to this collection by the philosopher and moral psychologist Susan E. Babbitt. In "Research Ethics: Philosophy's Role in Interdisciplinary Research," Babbitt provides a meta-philosophical reflection on some of the thorny epistemological, analytical, and methodological problems of ethical relativism that the contributors to this collection raise in their essays. Although she does not directly respond to the specific issues raised by each contributor, Babbitt only suggests that these issues ought to be addressed. Among these concerns, Babbitt identifies the following: voice and authority (who can speak for whom); the political importance of particular stories, especially those of the oppressed, and the value of generalizations, noting that "a mistaken understanding of the nature of general concepts and theories is confused with the idea that general concepts and theories are themselves mistaken" (p. 297); responsibility for the story and the voice of the oppressed in a cultural marketplace that is already uneven and unjust; and the need for flexible definitions in interdisci-

plinary studies that do not reduce phenomena to permanent essence. Babbitt thus pleads for more dialogue and bidirectional exchanges of ideas between philosophy and the social sciences.

Like immigrants who continue to be haunted by memories of the past in their new countries, this collection itself is haunted by the all-to-familiar question—what Rishma Dunlop calls the “repeated refrain” (p. 148)—that immigrants are bombarded with everywhere they go: “where do you come from?” This is the same question that Agnew used as the title for her reflective memoir, *Where I Come From*.<sup>[6]</sup> This question is meant to mark the absolute otherness of the Other and set him/her apart from mainstream society. As Shirley Goek-Lim clarifies, the ontological fact of foreign birth and knowledge of that origin provide fodder for mainstream society to “deny me entry into your society on your terms, brands me as an exotic, freezes me in a geographical mythology” (quoted in Vijay, p. 13). Moreover, as Hazelle Palmer explains, this presumption of foreignness “assumes that because you are not White you could not be Canadian” (quoted in James, p. 234). Even worse, Agnew correctly points out in one of her contributions to this volume, this question “yields only the minimum facts and does not tell us of the uneven distribution of educational opportunities in the countries of origin that make English-language education available to some and not to others” (p. 40). In their attempts to respond to this question, the contributors to this volume refuse to offer simple answers, because, as Dunlop states, immigrants do not always know where they come from. Dunlop maintains that like writers, immigrants “imagine and re-imagine history, memory, the material reality of [their] lives, testifying to the fact that boundaries of nation, culture, and gender are

slippery inventions requiring continuous interrogation” (p. 148). Agnew’s collection is a welcome addition to the increasing body of literature on the gendered and classed dimensions of immigration and its conundrums.

#### Notes

[1]. Linda Basch, Nina Schiller, and Cristina Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and the Deterritorialized Nation-State* (New York: Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1994).

[2]. bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist: Thinking Black* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1989), 158.

[3]. Pamela Sugiman’s article first appeared in the *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 29, no. 3 (2004): 359-388

[4]. Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Today* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[5]. Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

[6]. Vijay Agnew, *Where I Come From* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2003). Agnew, of course, follows the lead of other writers who examine the implications of such a question to the meaning of their lives as Canadian immigrants. See, for example, Hazelle Palmer, *But Where Do You Really Come From? Stories of Identity and Assimilation in Canada* (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1997); and Adrienne Shadd, “Where Are You Really From? Notes from an Immigrant from Buxton, Ontario,” in *Talking about Identity: Encounters in Race, Language and Identity*, ed. C. E. James and A. Shadd (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2001), 10-16.

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