

Jews and Others in Brooklyn and its Diaspora: Constructing an Unlikely Homeland in a Diasporic World

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In recent years, the concept of “diaspora” has been adapted by scholars in so many disciplines—and deployed by activists in so many communities—that the term itself has become somewhat diasporic. In a poetically appropriate fashion, “diaspora” has spread out from what some consider its conceptual and/or historical homeland in Jewish studies, and settled in African-American, South Asian, and many other ethnic and area studies; in migration studies, of course; but also in political science, anthropology, literary theory, cultural studies, and many other fields. As in most every diaspora, these far-flung communities claim to share a common origin, orientation or destiny—We must all be scholars of “diaspora,” or why else would we gather at a conference of that name?—yet they seem to spend most of their time questioning and debating the significance of these common bonds. What exactly do we in the “diaspora” diaspora mean by this ostensibly shared term? Can this fugitive concept sit still long enough for us to build an academic field—or even a two-day conference—around it?

It turns out, as you’re most likely well aware, that scholars in the various provinces of diaspora studies use the term “diaspora” in substantially different ways. Some of these conceptual differences derive from the sociohistorical differences between the diverse communities we study. As James Clifford has noted, our theories of diaspora are “always embedded in particular maps and histories” (1994:302), so it should surprise no one that scholars of, say, Jews in fifteenth century Spain and Cubans in today’s Miami may have different things in mind when they call each of these communities “diasporas.” Other conceptual differences seem to derive from the theoretical and methodological gaps between scholars who approach the shared concept of diaspora with intellectual tools—and habits, and biases—formed in their own disciplinary fields.

Again, it should surprise no one that a statistical analysis of migration patterns, an ethnographic study of community life, and a symbolic reading of literature or film may offer us rather different insights into the “diasporas” at hand. The developing field of diaspora studies is hardly unique in these empirical, theoretical and methodological divides—indeed, they are found in nearly every interdisciplinary field of scholarly research.¹

But in addition to these standard-issue spats and schisms, scholars of diaspora are divided, at times, by a number of debates specific to the field—debates that unfold, I would argue, from fundamental tensions within the concept of “diaspora” itself. One such debate, which I will examine in this essay, concerns the ties and tensions between *diasporas* and *homelands*. I’ll chart this debate—these ties, these tensions—in two different ways: first through a survey of recent research in the field, and then through a discussion of my own research on the homelands that Jews and others have struggled to build in Brooklyn.

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The concept of “diaspora” is premised on a fundamentally ambivalent relationship between homelands and diasporas, “the nation-state and its others” (Tölölyan 1991). On the one hand, diasporas are (by all accounts) communities scattered, in one way or another, from the places thought to be their “true” or “original” homes. But on the other hand, diasporas are (by nearly all accounts) communities that maintain significant connections, of one sort or another, to these lost homes. “Diaspora” thus marks a set of perpetually unresolved tensions—between origin and dispersion, roots and routes, identity and difference, memory and loss—tensions that are more-or-less essential to the definition of the term.² Far from being “contradictions” to

¹ Khachig Tölölyan has pointed out that the current debates around “diaspora studies” are similar, in many ways, to debates around “cultural studies” in the 1980s and 1990s (personal communication). They may also be similar to debates surrounding the formation of the academic disciplines themselves in the 1880s and 1890s

² I’m hardly the first to recognize these tensions. Khachig Tölölyan discusses them in the inaugural issue of the journal *Diaspora* (Tölölyan 1991). Stuart Hall traces them through two different views of “cultural identity” (Hall 1990). Paul Gilroy wrestles with them on nearly every page of *The Black Atlantic* (Gilroy 1993). And Avtar Brah argues, much as I do here, that “the concept of diaspora places the discourse of ‘home’ and ‘dispersion’ in creative tension” (Brah 1996:192-193).

resolve, or “flaws” to iron out, these constitutive tensions animate research and theory in diaspora studies. There can be no theory of “diaspora,” I would argue, that does not touch, in one way or another, on *both* homeland and diaspora, origin and dispersion.

Yet at the same time, there are divisions within the field based on the relative priority different scholars grant to the poles of these tensions. Which is *more* significant in a theoretical definition of “diaspora”—roots or routes, origin or dispersion? Or to put the matter empirically, which is *more* influential in shaping diasporic community life—one’s ongoing ties to the homeland, or the sheer fact that one has left it? Scholars of diaspora have answered these questions in different ways, and their answers have shaped their perspectives on the field.

Our common-sense, colloquial understanding of “diaspora” tends to grant conceptual priority to origins rather than dispersion—an emphasis that may be seen in the terms we use to refer to different diasporas. We tend to distinguish, for example, between “Haitian,” “South Asian” and “Chinese” diasporas, even if their members live cheek-by-jowl in Brooklyn, Paris or Havana. The “Jewish” diaspora might seem an exception to this rule, yet it too is typically defined in terms of Jewish connections to an ancient homeland, rather than present day Jewish geographies.³

Despite their profound engagement with processes of dispersion, scholars of diaspora have also tended to privilege diasporic origins. In an influential essay in the inaugural issue of the journal *Diaspora*, William Safran, for example, proposes a restrictive definition of “diaspora” that firmly centers the concept—and the communities to which it refers—around homelands that seem to gain in symbolic significance what they’ve lost in physical proximity. Of the six main points in Safran’s definition, five concern relationships between diasporic

³ A simple thought experiment shows the priority of origin over dispersion in most definitions of “diaspora”: How, we may ask, would our understanding of the term change if we took the diverse migrants currently living in any one place as a basic unit of research and analysis in scholarship on diaspora, rather than focusing solely on migrants living in diverse places who trace their roots to any one homeland? Could we fruitfully use the concept of “diaspora” to trace connections between a single community and its residents’ many homelands? And if not, what does this limitation say about the constitution of the term—and the field?

communities and their homelands—relationships that must, according to Safran, “importantly [define]” the “ethnocommunal consciousness” of such communities (Safran 1991:84). The one point that refers to relationships between diasporic communities and their adapted homes requires, simply, that they feel “alienated and insulated” from them (ibid:83). Although Safran’s definition has been adapted, at least in part, by many subsequent scholars (eg. Cohen 1997:21-29), it has also been subjected to searching critique—most notably by James Clifford (1994:304-307). Yet even as Clifford and others have broadened the scope of “diaspora,” the conceptual priority of the homeland has largely been preserved by a widespread tendency to equate diasporic consciousness with feelings of displacement. As Jacqueline Brown notes, with a dose of dry humor, people in diaspora tend to be, “completely defined [in scholarly literature] by their longings for home; they are people positively pining for a past rooted in some other place” (Brown 1998:293).

Of course a great many people in diaspora are, in fact, “positively pining” for lost homelands. And diasporic communities often do define their collective identities and political agencies through ongoing connections to these homelands. I am not, by any means, questioning these empirical social facts, or the significance of research on their complex social histories. Moreover, it seems entirely reasonable, up to a point, to reserve the concept of “diaspora”—as opposed to “immigration,” “transnationalism,” “tourism” and other terms—to refer specifically to these facts and their histories. Yet at the same time, I think it is theoretically and politically dangerous to link the concept of “diaspora” too closely to that of the “homeland”—to assume that diasporas must, by definition, be closely linked to homelands. The danger lies, I believe, in oversimplifying the complex relationships between diasporas and nation-states.

For the “homelands” of our “diasporas” tend to be autonomous states—or at least potential states, seeking such autonomy (like Khalistan and Kurdistan, or Israel before 1948). This is certainly the case for Safran, who casts doubt on the idea of an “African diaspora” because, in his view, African-American and Afro-Caribbean imaginations of home “can no longer be precisely focused” (Safran 1991:90). And, somewhat similarly, for Yossi Shain, whose analysis

of the role of diaspora communities in shaping U.S. foreign policy is explicitly limited to “political diasporas” based on “common national origin[s]” (Shain 1995:814).⁴ In this nation-centered view of “diaspora,” diasporas are little more than geographic extensions of states. They are products of what Nina Glick Schiller and Georges Fouron (2001) have called “long-distance nationalism,” and they function, in large part, to further—or sometimes change—the interests of their countries of origin.⁵ Their dispersion, it seems, may make national belonging a bit more complicated, but it scarcely disturbs the centrality of the nation-state as an organizing principle of contemporary politics and collective identities.

Of course the nation-state does, in fact, remain central to contemporary politics and identities (a fact that is all too clear in the fall of 2002, as the United States gears up for another war with Iraq). Yet scholars of diaspora—and scholars of socioeconomic and cultural globalization more generally—have focused a great deal of attention on transnational ties that promise, or threaten, to erode laboriously constructed national boundaries. Khachig Tölölyan, for example, has called diasporas “the exemplary communities of the transnational moment,” while simultaneously refusing to “write the premature obituary of the nation-state” (Tölölyan 1991:5). He points out that, “transnational communities are sometimes the paradigmatic Other of the nation-state and at other times its ally, lobby, or . . . precursor” (ibid), an ambivalent formulation that mirrors what I described above as the fundamentally ambivalent relationship between homelands and diasporas. Diasporas and their scholars may thus articulate critical perspectives on the nation-state system that has come to dominate global politics, by working within the conceptual (if not geographical) boundaries of the nation-state at times, while exploring its limits at others. But when scholars imagine diasporas simply as extensions of nations or homelands, they run the risk

⁴ Shain does, in fact, address the politics of the African diaspora, but he limits his analysis to the roles African-Americans played in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa (Shain 1995:834-839). Again, the “homeland” is equated with the nation-state.

⁵ Glick Schiller and Fouron actually distinguish their concept of “long-distance nationalism” from that of “diaspora,” arguing that the latter term should be reserved for “[d]ispersed populations that share an ideology of common descent . . . but make no claim to nation-state building” (2001:22). I would argue, however, that many scholars of “diaspora” are quite close to Glick Schiller and Fouron in their analyses of the nation-state.

of neutralizing this productive tension—and thus losing sight of the critical edge, and political promise, that has animated recent scholarship on diaspora.

This critical edge may be seen a bit more clearly in the work of other scholars who have cut “diaspora” loose, to varying degrees, from the moorings of the homeland, and the politics of the nation-state. Paul Gilroy, for example, has developed a multi-centric view of the African diaspora in such important works as *The Black Atlantic* (1993). Gilroy expresses his frustration with “the unthinking assumption that cultures always flow into patterns congruent with the borders of essentially homogeneous nation states” (ibid:5), yet he reserves some of his harshest words for Afrocentric efforts to root the routes of Africans in the “New World” too firmly in an essentialist view of African “tradition” (see esp. 187-196). In place of this homeland-centered understanding of diaspora, Gilroy offers a view of “diaspor[ic] multiplicity [as] a chaotic, living, disorganic formulation . . . a tradition in ceaseless motion” (ibid:122). This is an “African” diaspora that does not privilege origin over dispersion, a diaspora built around de-centered cultural exchange—in which, for example, Nelson Mandela quotes Marvin Gaye to a Black audience in Detroit, and “the purist idea of a one-way flow of African culture from east to west [is] instantly revealed to be absurd” (ibid:96). Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin develop a similar understanding of the Jewish diaspora—and a scathing critique of the nation-state ideal—in their seminal essay “Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity” (1993), and recent volume *Powers of Diaspora* (2002). Though the Boyarins insist on the significance of genealogical and mnemonic ties between diasporas and their homelands—and thus set the concept of diaspora against that of Enlightenment individualism—they nevertheless resist any simple equation between the identities or interests of diasporas and homelands. Indeed, they describe the creation of the state of Israel as a betrayal, rather than a culmination, of the history and culture of the Jewish diaspora (see esp. 1993:711-723). More broadly, they argue that the concept of diaspora, “calls into question the idea that a people must have a land in order to be a people” (ibid:718), and explicitly “propose Diaspora as a theoretical and historical model to replace national self-determination” (ibid:711). For Gilroy, the Boyarins, and many other scholars, the concept of diaspora

can in no way be reduced to that of the homeland or the nation-state. Indeed, it marks a refutation—not an extension—of the homeland as traditionally conceived.

Although this de-centering of diaspora maintains the vitally important critical distance between diasporas and nation-states, it too threatens to neutralize what I've described as the productive tension between diasporas and homelands. In this case, I would argue (at the risk of contradicting myself, or perhaps in an effort to do so), we risk losing sight of the constitutive ambivalence of "diaspora" if we pay insufficient attention—or grant insufficient respect—to the imaginations of "home" and "homeland" that help to define many diasporic identities. Gilroy's critiques of Afrocentrism and the Boyarins' critiques of Zionism may be theoretically, politically and ethically sound—indeed, I firmly believe they are—but they should not lead us to overlook or oversimplify the social realities of such homeland-centered diaspora politics. As Khachig Tölölyan has argued, we risk distorting the social facts of diasporic lives if the concept of diaspora is limited to "an occasion for the celebration of multiplicity and mobility—and a figure of our discontent with . . . a world apparently still dominated by nation-states" (Tölölyan 1996:28). Perhaps contra Tölölyan (or perhaps not), I do not think sophisticated theorists like Gilroy and the Boyarins have actually done so.⁶ But I worry, nevertheless, that their decoupling of diaspora and homeland creates the potential for such distortions.

How, then, might scholars of diaspora steer a course between the *reduction* of diasporas to homelands I've critiqued in Safran and Shain and the *decoupling* of diasporas from homelands that gives me pause in Gilroy and the Boyarins? How might we preserve—or provoke—the tensions between between homeland and diaspora, origin and dispersion, memory and loss, that have animated the development of diaspora studies? Recent research in the field suggests a number of interesting strategies for just such a middle course. Avtar Brah, for example, has tried to reframe these diasporic tensions through analyses of the "homing desire" inherent in most, if

⁶ Indeed, Gilroy and the Boyarins have offered some of the most subtle—and in a sense, sympathetic—critiques of Afrocentrism and Zionism in recent scholarly literature. And the Boyarins' most recent work is explicitly devoted to unpacking the diverse axes of power—liberatory, repressive and everything in between—that run through Jewish and other diasporic communities.

not all, diasporas. She argues that, “the concept of diaspora offers a critique of discourses of fixed origins, while taking account of a homing desire which is not the same thing as desire for a ‘homeland’” (Brah 1996:180). And Jacqueline Brown has suggested, more broadly, that instead of “tak[ing] an initial moment of dispersion . . . to be the starting point of analysis,” scholars of diaspora might “examin[e] how historically-positioned subjects identify both the relevant events in transnational community formation and the geographies implicated in that process” (Brown 1998:293)—events, communities and geographies that may or may not be centered around something like a “homeland.”

Building on these insights, let me propose two avenues for research on the relationships between diasporas and homelands. First, and perhaps above all, I would suggest that scholars of diaspora must pay more careful attention to the ongoing *construction* of homelands by diaspora communities—to the discursive and political strategies with which, for example, the Zionist movement built the state of Israel (for an analysis somewhat like that which I am advocating see Cohen 1997:105-126). Second, and perhaps more controversially, I would suggest that scholars of diaspora must be careful not to limit the analysis of such constructed homelands to the “usual suspects” like nation-states, would-be states, and ethnic territories. Rather, we must examine how diasporas construct homelands in unlikely places—in spaces ranging from the “old neighborhood” to the “Old World,” and in ways that might confound the logics of territorial sovereignty and ethnic purity.

I believe these are productive avenues for new research, because they do not treat the homeland as the necessary center of diasporic life, or equate the homeland with the nation-state, yet they continue to take the concept—and politics—of the homeland quite seriously. They thus preserve the tension between origin and dispersion, and do justice to the fundamental ambivalence of the concept of “diaspora.”

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In the remainder of this paper, I would like to illustrate the construction of “unlikely homelands” through brief discussions of my own research with Hasidic Jews and other diasporic

communities in and around Brooklyn, New York. I'll touch on two quite different, but closely related, research projects—my dissertation research with Blacks and Jews in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights, and my plans for future research on memory and nostalgia in the Brooklyn diaspora.

Crown Heights is a Brooklyn neighborhood at the crossroads of both Black and Jewish diasporas—a neighborhood known for a history of intermittent conflict between Afro-Caribbean immigrants, African-Americans, and Hasidic Jews. I conducted ethnographic research on racial and religious identities in Crown Heights from 1996 to 1998, and I was struck by the transnational or diasporic dimensions of these identities. But to say that Crown Heights residents form diasporic identities and communities is not necessarily to say that they are “positively pining for a past rooted in some other place” (Brown 1998:293). Indeed, I was particularly struck by the extent to which the Lubavitch Hasidim—ultra-orthodox Jews who first settled in Crown Heights in the 1940s, as Holocaust refugees—have built a homeland of sorts in their multi-racial Brooklyn neighborhood, complete with the tropes and trapping of a nation-state. Though most Lubavitchers fervently await the messianic ingathering of the Jews in their ancient homeland, and many hold ultra-nationalist views of Israeli politics, they nevertheless imagine a Jewish world centered around their community in Brooklyn. I have examined this “reterritorialization” of the Jewish diaspora in detail elsewhere (Goldschmidt 2000a), but I'll summarize my analysis here. I argued that Crown Heights may usefully be described as the Lubavitch community's “homeland” for the following three reasons.

First, because most Lubavitchers imagine Crown Heights as a clearly bounded, purely Jewish space—not a simple task in a neighborhood with hotly contested boundaries, and a population that's approximately 65% Afro-Caribbean, 15% African-American, 8 to 10% Jewish, and 10 to 12% others. A number of authors have argued that the conflation of territory with identity lies at the heart of the nation-state ideal—as Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin put it: “Race and space together form a deadly discourse” (1993:714). But Lubavitchers in Crown Heights attempt to bring “[r]ace and space together” in the figure of a “Jewish neighborhood”—like a nation-state in

miniature, claiming territorial integrity. Lubavitchers imagine Crown Heights as a “Jewish neighborhood” by looking back to the mid-twentieth century, prior to the White flight of the 60s and 70s, when the neighborhood was predominantly Jewish (though scarcely Hasidic); and perhaps above all, by limiting their definition of today’s “Crown Heights” to a small area where their community is prominent (though hardly a majority). According to the semi-official boundaries of the neighborhood, the broad boulevard of Eastern Parkway runs right through the center of Crown Heights; but for many Hasidim, Eastern Parkway forms the boundary between “Jewish” Crown Heights and “Black” Bed-Stuy. Some Lubavitchers even draw upon the rhetoric of the nation-state and call Eastern Parkway “the Green Line”—comparing it to the militarized border that divides the state of Israel from the occupied territory of the West Bank.

Second, because the Lubavitch community has worked over the years to coopt, and wield, the signs and services of the state. There is, of course, no razor wire marking the “Green Line” on Eastern Parkway, but the homeland Lubavitchers have built in Crown Heights is hardly innocent of state power. Indeed, the accusation that Hasidim receive “preferential treatment” from the police and other state agencies has been a point of contention between Blacks and Jews in Crown Heights since the early 1970s. Many Black Crown Heights residents saw evidence of this pattern of privilege in the car accident that sparked the well known “Crown Heights riots” of August 1991.⁷ The violence began when a car the motorcade of the Lubavitcher Rebbe—the spiritual leader of the Lubavitch community—struck two Black children, whose families had come from Guyana, killing one instantly. The motorcade was escorted, as usual, by a police patrol car, a fact that led to widespread criticism of the Hasidic community’s relationship with police. But Lubavitchers defended their Rebbe’s police escort by placing their “local” community in a “global” context. The Rebbe, they argued, may not be compared to New York’s other ethnic and religious leaders. Rather, he must be treated as an international figure—a leader

⁷ Unfortunately, I can’t offer an adequate account of the violence of 1991 in this brief essay. The factual details of these events are extremely complex, and often hotly contested. For more information and multiple perspectives see: Goldschmidt 2000b:52-92; Smith 1993; Rieder 1995.

of world Jewry, comparable to a head of state, like a president or a pope.

And finally, because the Lubavitch community has, in fact, built a sprawling transnational network of communities and institutions, with Crown Heights at its core—a global diaspora, in many senses, centered around the homeland in Brooklyn. Since the 1950s, many hundreds of Lubavitch families have moved to far-flung communities as “emissaries” of their Rebbe, establishing synagogues and institutions to promote orthodox Judaism. There are now over 100,000 Lubavitchers (and many more non-Hasidic Jews affiliated with Lubavitch) living in at least forty-three of the United States and forty-six other countries. And this centrifugal movement rebounds to Crown Heights, as Hasidim from around the world visit the neighborhood for a few days, or months, or years at a time. Many thousands come, for example, to visit the Rebbe’s grave on the anniversary of his death. And students often come from Israel to Brooklyn—from the “diaspora” to the “homeland”—to study in the Rebbe’s yeshivas.

An ethnographic analysis of the Lubavitch community of Crown Heights—of Crown Heights as Lubavitchers see it—thus reveals *both* a refugee community living at a charged intersection of the Black and Jewish diasporas, awaiting messianic redemption, *and* a community settled in a homeland of sorts, marked by clearly defined borders, headed by a world leader, at the center of its own diaspora. This is, in short, a community shaped by—and thriving on—the tensions between homeland and diaspora, origin and dispersion.

But the Lubavitch community forms just a single strand in the tangled web of diasporas running in and around Brooklyn. I’ve often wondered, over the past few years, as I’ve reflected on my work in Crown Heights: What about the secular Jews who left the neighborhood during the White flight of the 1960s and 70s? How do they—and all the other “White ethnics” who left similar Brooklyn neighborhoods—feel about the contested spaces they left behind, where Lubavitchers and others have built new homes and homelands? How does Brooklyn figure in the cultural imaginations of those who left? Might we describe these far-flung migrants—living in the suburbs and the Sun Belt, in Miami and Los Angeles, in retirement communities throughout the United States—as a “Brooklyn diaspora”? I think so.

In the coming years, I intend to conduct research on memory and nostalgia in the Brooklyn diaspora—exploring the links between memory, migration, and racial identity. I plan to do archival research on life in Brooklyn in the mid-twentieth century; to examine scholarly, popular and literary representations of this period; and perhaps above all, to conduct multi-sited ethnographic research with members of the numerous Brooklyn clubs, Brooklyn high-school alumni associations, and Brooklyn Dodgers fan-clubs now meeting throughout the United States. But these ambitious projects are yet to come. For the moment, I can offer no more than an impressionistic sense of the Brooklyn diaspora. We might begin our tour on-line (where so many diasporas seem to gather these days) by taking a look at “The Brooklyn Board,” a web site that announces itself as a home (or a homepage) for, in its words, “displaced, misplaced, and nostalgic ex-Brooklynites” (www.brooklynboard.com).⁸

Voices ring out from around the country, in dozens of texts posted each day on the message board: “Does anyone remember the cozy bar on Pitkin Avenue?” (posted 11/1/02), “Do you remember Mr. Lapato’s candy store on Warwick and Belmont?” (10/17/02), “Anyone from Brooklyn living in Spring Hill, Fl.??” (9/29/02), “Is there anyone living in Tuscon or Phoenix, AZ from East New York?” (10/3/02), “Does anyone know what happened to Jackie Curilly?” (10/6/02). Responses often follow: there seem to be at least a half-dozen people from East New York living in Arizona, but no luck so far finding Jackie Curilly. Debates sometimes rage: over whose corner-store made the best pizza or egg-creams, over Dodgers statistics and lore, and over the present day realities of a borough many feel has fallen on hard times. One ex-Brooklynite posed a seemingly simple question: “Am dreaming of moving back to Brooklyn. What would be the nicest neighborhood to live in today?” (8/26/02), and the answers divided this virtual community. One poster responded:

⁸ We could just as easily begin our tour with lavishly illustrated texts like *When Brooklyn was the World, 1920-1957* (Wilensky 1986), and *Brooklyn: A State of Mind* (Robbins [ed.] 2001). Or in theater and film, with the works of Neil Simon, Woody Allen and many others. Or at a number of other sites in popular culture—Brooklynites and ex-Brooklynites seem to be quite a prolific bunch.

I wouldn't live in Brooklyn today if you moved my house there. It's dirty, expensive, crowded, the people have the worst attitudes (obviously due to the pressure of living there) and as far as multi-cultural goes, you can have the "flavor" of Brooklyn the way it is today and send it to sea. Let's not even talk about the infrastructure. They have been "rebuilding" the Manhattan bridge for the past 20 years. Weather? Freeze in the winter, heat and humidity in the summer. Taxes? Unreal. The best thing I ever did was drive out of there. (8/30/02)

But another took offense at these and other negative comments:

I have read some of these posts . . . honestly I couldn't stomach reading much more. To those that left years ago, Brooklyn isn't the same . . . are you? People change and so do the places where they live. If you don't like what happened to the neighborhoods that you beloved, consider that your departure did not help the situation. Instead of trying to bail the water, you left the ship. Well, if you take care to look back . . . it didn't sink. [. . .] I love Brooklyn, and always will. Not only for what it was, but for what it is and for what it will become. I envy the children growing up there now with their whole lives ahead of them to grow up in one of the greatest places in the world! (8/30/02, my ellipsis in brackets, others original)

More often, however, these conflicting perspectives coexist, uneasily, in the voice a single ex-Brooklynite. This ambivalence is perhaps clearest in the fairly frequent tales of nostalgic visits back home. For example, one poster writes:

Last week I toured my old Brooklyn neighborhoods after 45 years. . . . The Church Ave. and Flatbush Ave. areas looked like a different world. All the high fashion stores, nightspots and shoppers gone. On to Utica Ave. and Flatbush - Marine Park streets. My houses were still standing and actually in good shape. The biggest disappointment was the Coney Island and Brighton Beach areas. My house gone and Nathans and surrounding streets nasty. How could they ever let Coney Island decay like that? . . . Seeing Brooklyn minus the trolleys but still the very noisy El trains and very depressed once thriving communities was bitter-sweet to say the least. (10/27/02)

Again, we can see the fundamental ambivalence of life in diaspora—the "bittersweet" bonds between diasporas and their homelands.

The ambivalent nostalgia of these Brooklyn Board posts marks the ambivalent legacy of White flight—the racialized, and racializing, wave of intranational migration that reshaped the

culture and politics of Brooklyn, and the United States, in the 1960s and 70s. Crown Heights, for example, was approximately 70% White (and predominantly Jewish) in 1960, but 70% Black (and predominantly Afro-Caribbean) by 1970. From 1960 to 1977, four million Whites moved out of America's cities; the White suburban population grew by some twenty-two million, while the Black urban population grew by some six million (Lipsitz 1998:7). In the words of George Clinton, the "chocolate city" and its "vanilla suburbs" were born. But the White migration didn't stop there. As these ex-urban White folks aged, many moved to planned communities in warmer climates. Between 1975 and 1980, for example, some 200,000 New Yorkers moved to Broward, Dade, Monroe and Palm Beach counties in Florida (Cutler 1988). A thoroughly unscientific poll of Brooklyn Board posters conducted in 1997 found many ex-Brooklynites still living in New York and New Jersey, but even more living in Florida, California, Maryland and Texas (the data, such as it is, may be found at: brooklynboard.com/survey/survey3r.htm).

Strikingly, however, the same poll found that almost 25% of ex-Brooklynites like their current homes "less" or "much less" than Brooklyn (ibid). Even those who are happy to bask in the Florida or Texas sun nevertheless seem drawn—at least in their imaginations—back to the streets of Brooklyn. Consider Ray Halper, for example, vice-president of a Brooklyn club with over 600 members in a retirement community outside of Fort Lauderdale:

The main feature of his sunny, two-bedroom, 1,500-square-foot apartment, which overlooks a lake in the rear, is a large wall dedicated to memories of his Flatbush childhood. He has hung framed pictures of streetcars, old Brooklyn Dodgers pennants, and pieces of Coney Island memorabilia. (Duffy 1998:55)

This nostalgic fascination with the "old neighborhood"—which Halper shares with many ex-Brooklynites, though by no means all—seems, to me at least, to indicate a profound ambivalence about the process of White flight. Halper and others in the Brooklyn diaspora seem to have formed, in William Safran's terms, an "ethnocommunal consciousness" that is "importantly defined" by memories of a lost homeland (Safran 1991:84). Some even seem to be "alienated and insulated" (ibid:83) from their adapted homes. As Mildred Beacher says of her fellow Brooklyn

club members in another retirement community: “These people don’t belong here in Florida. They belong in Brooklyn” (Duffy 1998:59).

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But do they belong in the scholarly literatures on “diaspora”? When I refer to the Lubavitch community of Crown Heights and the virtual community of Brooklyn Board posters as a “homeland” and a “diaspora,” am I using these terms in a rigorous sense, or merely speaking in loose—if perhaps evocative—metaphors? These homelands and diasporas are defined by informal boundaries of race, class and religion, rather than national borders and geopolitical forces. Does it make sense, then, to describe them in the same terms used to describe Jews and Arabs exiled from Israel and Palestine, Haitians and Mexicans fleeing poverty in the United States, or Indians and Pakistanis negotiating their differences in England?

I’ve suggested that it does. Indeed, I would argue that this seemingly unorthodox use of the terms “homeland” and “diaspora” helps us preserve the fundamental tensions between origin and dispersion, roots and routes, memory and loss—tensions that lie at the heart of the field of diaspora studies. If this field is to thrive in the future—and thrive in all of its diversity, without being reduced to any one of its factions—it must chart the construction of unlikely homelands, like those built in Brooklyn.

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