

Welcome to the Diasporama

A Cure for the Millennium Blues?

Phil Cohen

Of all the ideas that have been bandied about in the quest to give some coherence to what might be assembled beneath the Millennium dome at Greenwich, there is one that has been conspicuous by its absence. Diaspora is one of the buzz words of the post modern age; it has the virtue of sounding exotic while rolling sibilantly off the English tongue; it whispers the promise of hidden depths of meaning yet assimilates them to the shape of a wave breaking gently on native shores. More pragmatically, for the hard pressed poet, or copy writer, it offers a desirable feminine ending, and much verse-utility. Dialectics, aspiration, semaphore, with para-rhymes like these who needs new ideas? The word seems to send all the right signals about the relationship of where we have come from to where we are at, and where we might just be going.

Yet the popularity of the term has as much to do with politics as with prosody. Diaspora proposes itself as a master trope of migration and settlement, linking the experiences of the Jewish, Black, Asian and Irish in Britain and around the world. It effortlessly connects local communities with global cities. It might have been purpose built for a multimedia spectacle designed to celebrate the past, present and future of multicultural Britain. What the panorama was to the Great Exhibition of 1851 in providing a mechanism for framing the Imperial gaze, the diasporama could be to the Millennium Experience, restoring some sense of connectedness to the fragmentary, dispersed perspectives that characterise our current post colonial squint at the world we no longer rule. That at least is the promise, or if you prefer, the hype, entailed in the idea.

So why has diaspora remained anathema to the Millennium dome heads? There is a straight forward answer: Old 'one nation' Labourism demands an assimilationist reading of British History; New Labourism requires a triumphalist version of the place of Britain in the wider world. For the purposes of celebrating 'where we live, who we are, and what we do' diaspora admits too many loose ends, has too many diverse beginnings, is too unstable and self critical a concept to construct a coherent story line that is both accessible to the general public and makes everyone feel good about belonging to 'New Britain'. In the general process of dumbing down that has accompanied the creation of cultural flagship projects to mark the Millennium, diaspora is just too damn difficult a notion to work with.

It is, of course, that very complexity which has made the notion so attractive to sections of the liberal intelligentsia, especially, of course, amongst its 'pomo' wing. But what is it about the term and the history of its deployment that has made it so good to think with, or write about for so many people? The answer to that question, as we will see, is far from simple.

Are We That Name?

If you do a keyword search in the British Library Catalogue, you get a list of 216 books with 'diaspora' in the title, or subtitle, all of them published since 1975. This large output is a relatively recent phenomenon. The vast majority of the books (72%) have been published since 1990. A survey of academic journals also indicates an exponential rate of growth of articles on this topic over the past few years.

As regards the topics subsumed under this rubric the following list of the first ten entries shown up by the search gives a good idea of the range:

The Children of the Diaspora and other stories of exile Mbulelo Mazemane 1996

The Black Handbook: the people, history and politics of Africa and the African Diaspora E.L. Bute 1997

Rossiiskai diaspora-Kazakhstan, Lavia,etc AA Lazkova 1996

Pseudo-Hecateus, On the Jews legitimising the Jewish Diaspora Bezalel Bar-Kochva 1996

Vanishing Diaspora – the Jews in Europe since 1945 Bernard Wasserstein 1996

Land, Centre and Diaspora – Jewish construct in late Antiquity Isiah M Gafni 1997

Charles H Wesley and the Diaspora – the intellectual tradition of a Black Historian James Conyers (ed) 1997

The Book of Acts in its Diaspora Setting (no author) 1996

Images of African and Caribbean Women-migration, displacement, diaspora Stephanie Newell (ed) 1996

Ovena – A directory of the Armenian diaspora: personalities and organisations 1980

Black and Jewish history or culture are overwhelmingly dominant as the point of reference for diaspora studies. The term African or black diaspora is cited as title or subtitle in 37% of items, whilst Jews feature in 35%. If you look at the output over time (i.e. from 1975 to the present) it is also clear that the literature on the African or black diaspora is increasing at a much faster rate than anything else and that the Jewish literature is declining relative to it. The term Black or African diaspora is hardly found before 1975, and until the mid 1980's Jewish entries predominate. Only in the last ten years has the situation begun to reverse. To extrapolate from the current trend, it can be confidently predicted that by the turn of the century the African/Black Diaspora will dominate the bookshelves. The remaining third of the output is divided unevenly amongst some 24 different nations or ethnicities. Amongst these, the Armenians make a strong showing throughout the period, while the Indian subcontinent and South Asia has emerged more recently as an important site of diasporic studies. Latin America is distinctly under represented as site of diasporic community, although there are some references to the Afro-Brazilian case.

Amongst the also rans we find featured Chinese, Korean, Sikh, Sri-Lankan, Tamil, Haitian, Arab, Muslim, Ukrainian, Lithuanian Finnish, Chilean, Sicilian and Andalusian diasporas. There is even a British diaspora, the term being used in one study to refer to emigrants to the white colonies of Rhodesia, Canada and Australasia. There is however no record of a Welsh or Scottish diaspora. The Irish diaspora, despite the geo-demographic scope of Ireland's 'fifth province' is very weakly represented in the literature with only three entries, although we may expect this to change, along with the current terms of affiliation of the national project.

There were some other notable absences. Although the word is of ancient Greek origin there were only three references to a Hellenic diaspora. The quite extensive literature on the Vietnamese-Chinese boat people makes no mention of the term, either as a title or as an organising concept. I can find no reference to a Japanese, Filipino, Iranian or Tibetan Diaspora; the term is rarely used in studies of forced dispersal of people within the continents of Africa or Asia, although in a few cases it is used to describe trajectories of population movement between these continents.

In some instances histories of dispersal are rendered invisible because they are subsumed under more global instances. The movement of Nigerians, Ghanaians, Ethiopians, Somalis, Jamaicans or Grenadians disappear under the rubric of the Black or African diaspora. Similarly the distinctive migration and settlement histories of Sephardic and Askenaze Jews tend to be grouped together as if they were two aspects of the same old Jewish story. Islam performs much the same umbrella service for Moroccans and Algerians. The use of the term under these circumstances serves as an agglomeration factor – it increases the perceived volume and extension of the migrations involved at the expense of their historical individuality.

This survey is not, needless to say, complete. In many cases, the lack of reference may be due to the dearth of literature held by the British Library in the relevant language. There is very little work in German, French or the Scandinavian languages held here, and correspondingly little mention of Turkish, Moroccan or Algerian diasporas. Despite this in-built cultural bias, it is interesting to note that the British Library holds a much higher proportion (28%) of foreign titles in this category area than in many other cognate fields. But there are, in any case, significant national differences – and double standards – in the distribution of the term. Jews in France are routinely accorded diasporic status. Beurs never. German researchers may use it to apply to ethnic German in Russia, but they do not extend it to cover the Turks.

It may be objected that the notion of diaspora may be much more widely deployed in the literature than this simple collation of titles suggests. However a brief perusal of a sample of the texts suggests that this is not the case. Where the term is used as a central organising concept of the work, then it almost invariably features in the title or subtitle. I found only three cases (out of 63) where this did not occur and these were all Irish, for reasons I will come back to. It is in the nature of a 'buzzword' that it is used to both flag up the book to its potential readership as well as organise the argument in the text.

A separate analysis of subtitles does not significantly alter the picture, though it does help us map the articulations of the term more fully. According to western literary convention (and it is worth stressing that almost all these books were published in the West) subtitles may be regarded as qualifying or giving more substantive content to the title. Apart from the obvious indicators of ethnicity the most frequent substantive terms associated with diaspora were migration, exile, identity, memory, and religion in descending order of popularity.

The diaspora industry is not, of course, confined to the old print technology. I typed the word into one search engine on the internet and got 9,915 entries. The internet itself has been hailed as both a model and a means of implementing Diasporic communication - in so far as it makes it very easy for geographically scattered populations to maintain links around the globe and hence to still feel part of a single, albeit virtual community. Yet a rough sampling showed that the content and distribution of the home pages followed much the same pattern as the printed literature; if anything the internet has further strengthened the representation of the black diaspora, much of it with a strong Afro-centric bias. At the very least we can say that global information technology does not seem to have significantly widened usage of the term to include groups who are not otherwise disposed to pull upon its various meanings.

Losing the Plot?

It is clear from this brief survey that the term is used to refer to a very wide range of historical and contemporary phenomena; nowadays it is applied indiscriminately to refugees fleeing from political or religious persecution, to white colonists and black colonised, to economic migrants, and to peripatetic or exiled intelligentsias. While at one level it has become a portmanteau word, that may mean almost all things to all people, it is also used strategically and in a highly selective manner to apply to some groups and not others; some languages and cultures do not use the word because of its particular connotations; other appropriate it for the same reason. It functions as an increasingly important topic and resource for identity work amongst a small but growing number of new as well as old ethnicities.

In comparing the different usages of the term in a representative sample of texts a number of distinctive patterns emerge. Particular kinds of diasporic study often imply specific definitions. For example sociological studies of local communities for example of Kurds in East London, Sikhs in Syracuse, or Tamils in Toronto, tend to stress specific trajectories of migration and settlement and focus on questions of social integration and/or identity. Then there is a genre of 'diaspora directories' or handbooks that are concerned with political networking, developing cultural resources, and maintaining links between refugee organisations and groups in the 'mother country'. Autobiographical, literary, historical and other cultural works that promote diaspora as a strategic metaphor or master narrative, tend to stress the generic or genealogical usages of the term. Diaspora is used here to describe a quasi-universal human desire for home building in the midst of alienation or else a specific articulation of roots and routes. Finally and inevitably there are many hybrid texts, for example books that provide practical information about how to trace cultural ancestry alongside exemplary autobiographical accounts produced by people who have adopted these methods as a strategy of identity work.

As the usage of the term has spread, so its boundaries of definition have become ever more blurred and confused. In most of the literature little attempt is made to specify theoretically the limits and conditions of its applicability. Nevertheless there is an implicit rule of thumb at work. The basic assumption seems be that diaspora refers to following instances:

- a) A large scale physical dispersal of supposedly homogeneous populations (viz. the Armenians, the Sikhs) from a single originating point in time and space due to some catastrophic event.
- b) Simultaneous or successive re-settlement over long distances at multiple and heterogeneous foreign locations in which populations make themselves a (temporary or permanent) home from home.
- c) A strong sense of being displaced from ethnic/national territories and a desire to return or to claim entitlements to them.

In every case the first two of these conditions were met. I have not come across a single case where the term is applied to small groups uprooted for short periods, and resettled over short distances in a single place. It is worth noting that historically, and in some current usages, the reference back to territorial notions of the nation is not a necessary condition of diasporic status. The fetishism of this dimension is characteristically 'modern'.

I've already suggested that there are populations who meet these criteria but do not claim it. Campaigners for Romani Rights do not make use of the term for the simple reason that the travelling stories which carry their myths of origin are not predicated on this kind of representation.

At the same time the term can be applied speciously to groups who, on the above criteria, do not really merit it. For example to talk about 'white flight' (i.e. migration from the inner city to the suburbs in order to get away from blacks) as a 'diaspora' is to underwrite an entirely racist definition of the situation – namely that the advent of a black presence is a catastrophic event that has driven large numbers of whites from their homes and scattered them to the four corners of the country. This does not remotely correspond to the patterns of either migration or motivation in this case.

Definitions based upon agreed facts of physical geography or demographic history may furnish contingent terms of reference for the diaspora story, and in that sense provide its lowest common denominator; but such facts do not in themselves furnish the distinctive structure of meaning that qualifies their recounting as a diasporic tale. That deeper grammar derives from the conjunction of a special kind of cultural geography and political history. It is here that the third 'national' criterion becomes decisive.

In the sample texts I looked at, the highest common factor of 'diasporicity' lay in a strategy of employment which unfolded the story of a people or nation in the form of a teleology of the oppressed; the staple ingredients of the story line were persistent persecution, repeated uprooting, and an unquenchable desire for homecoming in freedom. This was a history of victimology, of long duration, linked to an extensive geography of exodus and return. The act of diasporic story telling (and writing) was often explicitly rendered as a form of collective memory work; the aim was to retrace and connect the broken narrative threads linking dispersed destinies back to a single defining national or ethnic site of origin.

Diasporicity, in other words, is a narrative construction placed upon events, a particular way of mapping territories of meaning, traversed by the experience of migration and settlement, through a strategy of remembrance entailed in long term principles of hope. As the cultural prestige and political salience of the term has increased, so more and more groups have laid claim to 'the diasporic condition' by re-describing their experience in these terms.

This is a language game with two quite distinct (and even conflicting) ideological payoffs. Firstly it permits nationalism to act at a distance; it is a homing device that enables expatriate communities to exert considerable influence over events in their 'mother countries' even and especially if they never set foot in them. For example Jews who are 'in or of the diaspora', have laid claim to an important stake in Israeli politics irrespective of whether they live in New York, Manchester, Rome, Addis Ababa, Delhi or Calgary. Palestinians living in those same cities may have similar investments in the PLO.

In principle diasporicity constitutes a non place realm of community that overrides or cuts across local allegiances. Many have argued that it holds in suspension the inevitable differentiation of settler experience over time in favour of a common 'transcendental' affiliation. In practice however this only seems to occur where communities of faith (either religious or political) are actively involved in the prosecution of cultural nationalisms. Here the invented traditions of Diaspora take on their full weight, as the story of an epic journey from eternity to here and back again.

This is not the only discursive formation at work in diasporicity. It has been suggested that thanks to new information technologies and the process of space/time compression, a quite novel, transnational and post modern version of the tale has begun to emerge. The diasporic experience, it is claimed, throws up more open, hybrid and multicultural forms of identity in a way that enables Jews and Arabs, Irish Catholics and Protestants, Blacks and Asians to make common cause against the racism of the dominant society, while still recognising and even celebrating each other's differences. One of the most enthusiastic advocates of this position has argued that diasporas constitute the 'exemplary communities of the transnational moment'.

For some tastes, it sounds a bit too good to be true, too neat a coincidence between the ethnoscaping of international migration and the post modern turn. And certainly in some hands diaspora has ceased to be a metaphoric statement about certain recurrent patterns of migration and settlement and become inflated into a full blown metaphysics of the 'transgressive subject' replacing the 'international proletariat' as a site for the projection of revolutionary hopes. To understand how and why homeless and displaced people should be made to carry this additional burden of utopic representation we need to delve a bit more deeply into the provenance of the word itself.

What's in a Word?

Diaspora is originally a classical Greek word with a double meaning: to scatter, and to sow. It refers to one of the most ancient and still surviving forms of soil cultivation where the two instances are fused in a single organic process: seeds are scattered on the ground, they take root, a crop grows, it is harvested and in turn provides the seeds for future planting. This simple sequence provides a natural symbol of human reproduction; it offers an image of organic continuity that is especially salient for societies that have given up nomadic forms of agriculture for a more settled existence, yet are also subject to unpredictable bouts of famine or dearth. At the same time the sequence furnishes a telling mimetic representation of how stories transmit cultural knowledge and values from one generation the next. The initial moment of scattering followed by a period of rooting and concentrated growth, culminating in reaping of what has been sown – this is a narrative grid that applies across the nature/culture divide and resonates with multiple meanings.

This highlights a central feature of the whole construction; whether we are talking about soil cultivation, human biology, or cultural transmission, the fusion of scatter/sow into a single organic image makes it possible to equate dispersal with dissemination. An action or event that could spell potential disaster, dearth, death, or at the very least discontinuity, is thus reclaimed for benign purposes of human fertility and socio-cultural reproduction. And yet as the term is developed into a core narrative in the cultures of Western Antiquity a further element is introduced – a moment of more or less violent disruption that punctures the continuum of cyclical time and marks a decisive break or turning point in history. This is where the diasporic story properly begins, where it is present at its own making.

In the founding myths of Sparta and Rome, those two great city states that went on to build imperial civilisations, the term diasporagamos refers to a critical moment of the nation and empire building project. In the case of Sparta, Cadmus's army is destroyed by a serpent; he takes revenge by crushing its head with a rock, whereupon Athena advises him to sow the serpent's teeth in the ground. Wherever a tooth has been planted a new soldier springs up and this armed band promptly go forth to found Sparta.

In the case of Rome, the decisive question is which of the twins, Romulus or Remus is to prevail as the founder/ruler of the city. The omens decide that it is to be Romulus (more jackals settle on his side of the bridge) and then Remus is ritualistically killed, his body torn apart by the crowd in a moment of orgiastic frenzy, each member of the murderous mob carrying away within him a piece of his body, so that all share equally in the fratricidal act. According to the logic of the myth, it is this dispersal of collective blood guilt that concentrates the power of the people and lays the seeds of Rome's greatness. The equation between dispersal and dissemination here directly constructs a sense of political consanguinity, a principle of co-inherence in the same body politic based on a shared quasi racial fraternity.

Nowadays the classical provenance of the word is largely forgotten, and so is its implication in the disavowal of collective violence attendant on the foundation of nations and empires. In its modern usage diaspora is supposed to figure the experience of underdogs, not oppressors; yet, as we will see, there is still buried in the diasporic plot the trace of this constitutive link between victims and executioners.

The switch in associations coincided with the triumph of the Judaic over the Hellenic version of the story. In Hebrew there is no equivalent to the Greek word. Instead there are two words for diaspora: galut meaning a state of more or less voluntary exile attendant on settlement outside the homeland and golah meaning the more or less violent expulsion from the homeland as a result of persecution or punishment.

The Jewish sense of diaspora has arisen out of a systematic conflation of these two terms. Galut is interpreted, especially (but not only) by Zionists, to mean a state of alienation or self punishment arising out of the experience of golah; and golah is rendered into a form of redemptive exodus. Under this rubric, the scenes of exodus that mark Jewish history, from the flight into Egypt to the fall of the Second Temple, from medieval banishments to modern pogroms are read both forwards and backwards as part of a recurrent pattern. Here we find crystallised the main elements of the diasporic story as a modern liberation struggle bound up with the claim to national self determination. A chosen people are evicted from their birthright; their ensuing state of alienation is overcome by laying claim to principles of hope bound up with the homeland; after a heroic struggle, these hopes are realised in a final redemptive moment of homecoming.

In a perverse way the rise of anti-Semitism confirmed the power of the narrative, and gave it added impetus. In the figure of Ahasuerus the Wandering Jew, victim of God's curse and condemned to perpetual exile as punishment for the aboriginal crime of Christ murder, anti-Semitic discourses found both their chief protagonist and their rationale. The persecution that continually drove Jewish communities out of whatever settlements they had made for themselves in medieval and early modern Europe, thus functioned as a self fulfilling prophecy. Whether as sign of redemption or guilt, diaspora became a performative statement about Jewishness culminating in the Shoah.

The Hellenic model with its natural symbolisms of cyclical time thus gives way to a model in which principles of chronic repetition are inscribed in a historical teleology, linking origins and destiny through an unfolding drama of human action. The game of historical consequences and the politics of "long memory" can begin.

Many of the key themes of the Jewish diaspora are of course contained in the Old Testament; it was in that form that they were disseminated throughout the Christian West. It was as a bible story that diaspora became a privileged discourse through which colonial subjects could talk back at their English masters, appropriating not just their language and religion, but one of the master narratives through which the Judaeo-Christian world justified its civilising mission. Bondage and Exile in Babylon, the crossing of the Red sea, the quest for the promised land of Freedom, the advent of Zion, these motifs provided an ideal template for narratives of Black slavery, the middle passage and the return to the African homeland. Suitably recast in setting and register, popularised through the medium of gospel music, inflected with the idioms of Black nationalism, the Jewish diaspora has in the last twenty years become effectively Africanised.

The term has done more than any other to yoke together the Black and Jewish experience, even and especially in America, where the links between the two communities are so fraught with conflict. It is by invoking their sense of diasporic commitment that American Jews argue their support for Israeli settlements on the West Bank; it is in the name of the same language game that Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam proclaim their solidarity with attempts to drive the Jews into the sea.

Despite this local contradiction, much of the recent popularity of the term seems to derive from its role as metaphoric bridge between so many disparate stories of uprooting and oppression. Yet if the Black and Jewish diasporas continue to serve as a referential model for displaced national intelligentsias around the globe, it could be argued this has less to do with any substantive sense of shared predicament, than with the prestige the term enjoys within the western philosophical tradition.

Through its very association with marginality and displacement the term has been central to the metaphysics of alienation and dual consciousness that has dominated European thinking since the Enlightenment. The notion of symbolic violence, of a rupture in identity, leading to a divided or nomadic subject, may have been claimed by the post modernists as their own invention, but its origins can be traced to much earlier arguments about the consequences of large numbers of people becoming uprooted from stable communities based on common custom and sentiment with the advent of industrial capitalism. The key assumption in much of this literature is that everything solid and valuable about ethnic or national identity is melting into the thin air of modernity. Local affiliations of kith and kin bounded by the dramatic unities of time and place are seen to be dissolving into to much more rootless or dispersed patterns of identification.

This notion to some extent united the victims and executioners of the colonial enterprise. Those, like Enoch Powell, who mourned the loss of Empire saw in it the dissolution of everything that had made Britain Great, and called for a symbolic 'ingathering of the English' so that they might finally be at home and alone with themselves. But those who travelled to Britain from the ex colonies in the belief that they were 'coming home' had to face a more complex sense of displacement. Their immediate sense of separation from places of birth and formative experience resonated with a deeper sense of historical loss, an alienation from cultural roots, that was reinforced by a host society in which that diasporic story was either disparaged, ignored or used as hostage to fortune. When both the immediate and long term past becomes a foreigncountry, the longing to be re-united with a real or imaginary homeland becomes correspondingly intense.

The postmodernists have tried to make their own cultural capital out of this sense of uprootedness and they have done it in two ways. They have sought to detach diasporicity from essentialised definitions of identity and belonging; and they have tried to make the equation between dispersal and dissemination central to their account of how the world has changed. But how far does their poetics of dis/location really succeed in going beyond (or in the trade jargon, de-centring or deconstructing) the 'old' Judaeo-Christian framework? Or have they merely gone back to elements of the Hellenic model to put a new spin on old coin?

Writing Diasporas

Most of the writers for whom diaspora has been good to think with have focused on the issue of cultural hybridity and liminality. Exile here is no longer a sign of bondage or self alienation, but of freedom from constraint. The migrant is considered an orphan from the storms of modernity, but one whose salvation lies in boldly proclaiming that fact. The sense of displacement experienced by immigrants is thus associated with the position of the dissident intellectual and is actively recruited as a metaphor for the post-modern condition.

The work of Juan Goytisolo is symptomatic of this tendency. In his autobiography, *Forbidden Territory* he describes himself as that rare species of writer *'not claimed by anybody, alien and opposed to all groupings and ideologies, defined as a Castilian in Catalonia, a French speaker in Spain, a Spaniard in France, a Latin in North America, an infidel in Morocco, and a Moor everywhere as a result of my wanderings.'*

He wavers between cultures and languages, in a perpetual state of adolescent indecision, but his choices are made in a forum where the clash of cultures implies ideas of crossbreeding, bastardy, contingency. For Goytisolo, if the condition of exile and marginality is originally imposed, it is to be welcomed as providing a sense of distance which makes possible a critique of the dominant society, opening up a *'vast domain of latent aspirations, silent questions, unfinished truths.'*

Juan the Landless is a kind of Joycean mapping of a post-modern geography of exile, linking the histories of migrants and displaced peasants, sexual and ethnic minorities, tramps and revolutionaries, into a single network of travelling signs, which continually play against each other. But Goytisolo is also concerned to unite them in a single imagined community of revolt against Authority, as in the following poem. *(next page)*

*He who sows the wind shall reap the whirlwind
uttered a thousand times by circumspect and
cautious throats,
the warnings will not reach fugitives of your kind
whom the centrifugal forbidden passion has driven
to these stony and barren places
you will counter their spirit of authority and
hierarchy based upon prohibitions and laws with
the egalitarian and generic subversion of the
aroused naked body
the traps of your reason will fail to catch us
morality
religion
society,
patriotism
family
are mere threatening sounds whose ringing
reverberations
will leave us indifferent
do not count on us
we believe in a world without borders
wandering Jews
heirs of Juan the Landless
we shall encamp there where instinct leads us
the Mohammedan Brotherhood affracts us and
within it we shall find refuge
give up your monotonous refrain
the familiar age old threat of shameful
Disasters
and calamities
after us the deluge
Let us sow whirlwinds!*

Here two sides of the diasporic story are brought together, albeit in a new and perverse relation. The violence of the nation founding moment – the diasporagamos – is no longer repressed but returns in the figure of the whirlwind, an anti-foundationalist avenging angel bringing about the final dissolution of the nation state and/or western-civilisation –as-we-know-it. Goytisolo's vision of the Diaspora is not about observing the proprieties of tolerance in a multi-cultural society! His *Migrant* is a literary conceit, based upon a notion of liminality as a creative space where new and more hybrid cultural forms can be produced. But the author's marginality, like his nomadism is actually of a rather traditional and privileged kind, expressing the predicament of the cosmopolitan intellectual, rather than the plight of economic migrants or political refugees. From such a vantage point it is all too easy to forget that the real marginal and dispossessed are immobilised in low paid jobs, incarcerated in hostels and detention centres, continually stopped and searched by police, and many are sick or homeless. What people in this situation want is security, protection, basic human rights, housing, work, the very antithesis of Goytisolo's programme.

Paradoxically the more enthusiastically Goytisolo praises the joys of liminality and eternal exile, the more he is driven to seek asylum in some kind of permanent orphanage. It seems unlikely that this gay anarchist who spends his time insulting religion, morality and family life would find much of a welcome amongst Islamist sects like the Mohammedan Brotherhood! But if you are out to sow whirlwinds, perhaps it is a case of any port in a storm.

Goytisolo in his very extremism shows the limits of the diasporic concept. Using it as a kind of cultural go-between to forge a putative link between Europe's internal and external others does not in fact alter the profound Eurocentrism of the underlying construct. That does not of course invalidate its use in particular cases, but any attempt to generalise its application beyond the trajectories it can reasonably describe must be suspect. The current inflation of the term, the attempt to use it as an over arching concept or model to map every kind of traffic in populations, cultures or ideas leads at best to confusion, at worse to the annexing of experience to quite alien paradigms. Comparative typologies that talk about 'economic diasporas', local or global 'diasporas' 'political diasporas' etc. are little more than pseudo-scientific alibis for this hegemonising project.

Equally the attempt to force complex and diverse histories and geographies into the same chronic mould, as in some Afro-centric version of diaspora, leads theoretically to an extreme version of cultural diffusionism that ignores or makes nonsense of the demographic facts. As for the attempt to legitimate the term by incorporating it within the project of post modernism, however well intentioned the aim, the effect has been to perpetuate the post colonial cover story, often in its most debilitating form.

In much recent writing, the homes from home offered by political ideologies, or religions, popular cultures or new ethnicities have come to seem more like orphanages, prisons or mad houses than sites of potential liberation. Yet in and against these closures another, more open and resourceful sense of diasporic space has emerged; refusing the quest for redemption, or the ethnocentric consolations of roots, poised on the knife edge of the unknown, it offers a precarious asylum which only absence makes endure, but which may make the pain of separation and loss slightly more representable and hence endurable.

The Irish, and Irish Studies, for reasons that should be all too apparent to readers of 'New Ethnicities', have been in the vanguard of those who wish to increase the cultural traffic that takes place within this kind of space. Fintan O'Toole is one of the most eloquent voices in the argument for a new 'poetics of dis/location made by all' which will put the notion of diaspora off its head and back on its feet. He draws our attention to the fact that Ireland has recently got to orbit the earth in the shape of an obscure asteroid newly discovered and named thus by the Minor Planet Centre in the USA. He has this to say about it:

Minor Planet Ireland is far away and virtually invisible to the naked eye and almost nothing is known about its composition. It bears, in other words, a similar relation to terrestrial Ireland as the emergent Ireland of imaginative connections does to the physical Ireland in the Atlantic. Spinning in the dark, held in place by the pull of invisible gravity, it is still solid, full of possibilities and, perhaps habitable Ireland has long had its satellites, its exiled communities orbiting the motherland. But it is not so long since people thought that all the planets went around the Earth and had to suffer the psychic shock of finding that it was the other way round. These days it gets harder to shake off the thought, absurd but insistent, that Minor Planet Ireland, the distant place called after the familiar one, is not the imagined asteroid, but the real, green island that used to be at the edge of Europe.

This 'Copernican revolution' in diasporicity brings us back to the Millennium Experience. For the reasons I have outlined the crisis of representation associated with this 'national project' may be dramatised by the design concept of a diasporama, but its underlying problematics of 'an island home' are unlikely to be resolved by it. Indeed to inject a form of 'multiculturalism' under these terms would amount to little more than a rhetorical reworking of the assimilation game that underwrites the island race story.

It may be more to the point to consider what powers of improvisation would be unleashed by symbolically relocating the site at Greenwich outside the scope of the imperial chronotope altogether so that other calendars and other maps might inform the unfolding of events both inside the building and out. Within such a framework it might then be possible to envisage a dome of discovery for the minor planet England, orbiting in company with other minor planets (Scotland, Wales and Ireland) around somewhat denser constellations of meaning whose names and locations in the firmament are still, however, awaiting clarification. In order to help build that dome of discovery the Centre is planning to collaborate with a number of other organisations to host a national conference. Its aim will precisely be to map the changing constellations of Britishness in the post Atlantic and post European age. But that, as they say, is another story.

Further Reading

Brah, Avtar *Cartographies of the Diaspora*

Brathwaite, Edward *Rites of Passage*

Cohen, Phil *Home Rules*

Cohen, Robin *Global Diaspora*

Finkelkraut, Alain *The Imaginary Jew*

Gilman, Sander *The Jews in Germany*

Girard, Rene *The Scapegoat*

Goytisoló, Juan Juan *The Landless*

Kristeva, Julia *Strangers to Ourselves*

O'Toole, Fintan *The Lie of the Land*