

# Where is home? Diaspora and hybridity in contemporary dialogue

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## **Abstract**

Diaspora is the first step towards an encounter with the other, forcing a re-negotiation of one's cultural identity. This quest for the self, known as diasporic consciousness, is thought to be disruptive, having the power to de-essentialize national narratives. While diaspora does shake the core of individuals, this paper differentiates diasporic from hybrid consciousness as two distinct discourses of self. Maintaining a diasporic consciousness means to sustain the idea of a physical 'home' that has been forever lost. The constant desire to 'return' underscores an unconditional alliance to the homeland and its diasporic footprint. Consequently, the diasporic experience does not necessarily produce transgressive forms of cultural identification. On the contrary, those who dwell on diasporic consciousness reify national discourses abroad. The language of nationalism remains intact, and 'native' and 'other' constitute themselves through a dialectic but mutually exclusive relationship with devastating consequences for those who cannot cope with the binary. The alternative to diasporic consciousness is Bakhtinian heteroglossia, for it exposes national discourses as 'epic,' and de-territorializes 'home' to find it in language. Hybrid narratives of self connect diverse memories, images, and experiences into individual stories of identity that ultimately transform official discourses of national, gender, religious, and racial identifications.

**Key words:** diaspora, hybridity, nationalism, heteroglossia, hyphenated identities, syncretic identities, and hybrid self

"I was sort of a half-breed of colonization, understanding everyone because I belonged completely to no one" (Memmi 1991: xvi)

## **1 Diaspora**

Diaspora is the starting point of cultural and discursive hybridity. As a phenomenon that separates human beings from their homelands, diaspora is the first step towards the uncomfortable moment of cultural shock. It begets the encounter with others, forcing a re-negotiation, adjustment, and change of one's identity in the face of difference. Historically, Diaspora—in upper case—refers to the expulsion of the Jews from Israel in the sixth century B.C., when they were exiled to Babylonia. However, the term has been deployed in lower case since the 70's to describe a number of "displaced communities of people who have been dislocated from their native homeland through the movements of migration, immigration, or exile" (Brazier & Mannur 2003:1). Armenians, Africans, Palestinians, and Sikhs are some of the many groups that have been relocated, voluntarily or by force, and have adopted the term diaspora to describe their historical removal from their original

places of residence.<sup>1</sup> These movements of people across national and/or cultural domains have challenged discourses of modern nationalism, while opening theoretical debates about transnationalism, migration, and cultural hybridity. The resulting cross-cultural encounters motivated by diasporas make this phenomenon be more than just a mere physical and geographical resettlement of human beings. Diaspora also refers to the psychological experience of dislocation, which alters the consciousness of communities and individuals within and outside of the diaporic group, prompting a never-ending journey in search of self and communal identity.

Professor Tötölyan's manifesto launching the journal *Diaspora* in 1991 affirmed the larger semantic domain that the term had adopted in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tötölyan proclaimed that the study of diaspora should be concerned with the concepts of nation, homeland, and communities in and out of their native countries.

Diaspora must pursue ... indeed in all cultural productions and throughout history, the traces of struggles over and contradictions within ideas and practices of collective identity, of homeland and nation. Diaspora is concerned with the ways in which nations, real yet imagined communities (Anderson) are fabricated, brought into being, made and unmade, in culture and politics, both on land people call their own and in exile. (Tötölyan 1991:3)

My study shares Tötölyan's preoccupation with the processes of nation formation and collective identification; however, it is also invested in individual processes of identity formation and transformation in diasporic contexts. Indeed, the feminist slogan, "the personal is political," drives my underlying assumption that discursive productions of individual consciousness (trans)form collective identities, which, in turn, permeate the discourse of the nation. How is the displaced individual related to his or her homeland, to the 'host' country, to other immigrants, and to citizens of both lands? Is identity solely based on collective consciousness or is it also based on individual perceptions? What does the hyphen in between national or racial identifications (e.x. Mexican-American, Asian-American, African-American) mean and who or what gives meaning to it? Does the hyphen mean nostalgia, empowerment, or alienation? Thus, diaspora, as a "specific type of experience and thinking" is studied as an ontological term, rather than a purely historical, religious, or sociological category (Baumann 2000:324).

"Diaspora consciousness" Clifford argues, "is entirely a product of cultures and histories in collision and dialogue. Diasporic subjects are, thus, distinct versions of modern, transnational, intercultural experience" (Clifford 1994:319). Similarly, Hall defines the diasporic experience:

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<sup>1</sup> For a historical and group-based study of old and modern diasporas see, Robin Cohen (1997). For study on the African diaspora see, Paul Gilroy (1993).

not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity: by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (Hall 1990:235)

Many deployments of diaphora from the 80's and the 90's sought to de-essentialize theories of ethnicity, race, and identity politics using the term to euphorically proclaim the end of the binaries and the beginning of a new cosmopolitan subject free from prescriptive nationality and norms of citizenship. While diaspora does define individual consciousness in the face of cultural differences, my study suggests that we cannot automatically equate diasporic consciousness with hybridity in today's resurgence of cultural and racist nationalisms. I contend, instead, that diasporic consciousness can be construed as an essentialized category and should not be conflated with discursive constructions of hybridity. Contrary to studies that equate diaspora to hybridity, heterogeneity, transnationality, and interculturalism, diaspora can reinforce the binary—'native' vs. 'other'—both from an individual and a national standpoint. When diasporic consciousness dwells on an idealization of the homeland as loss and lack, 'home' represents a mythical point of origin that starkly contrasts with the 'host' country and its community<sup>2</sup>. Home, authenticity, and return—real or imaginary—become metaphors of self-exclusion for the individual in diaspora and a powerful weapon for the nation to justify the political and cultural alienation of diasporic groups within its borders.

Radhakrishnan affirms that "the diasporic location is the space of the hyphen that tries to coordinate, within an evolving relationship, the identity politics of one's place of origin with that of one's present home" (1996:xiii). Thus, diasporic consciousness is binary. It has two points of reference. The first one specifies a recurrent attachment to a geographical and natural point of origin. The other, in a second position, is the current location of residence, which seems to stand in tension with the 'real' origin, suggesting the artificiality of the latter due to movement and re-location. Diasporic subjectivities in the United States, say Mexican and American, African and American, Asian and American etc., maintain an identification with an origin that not only reinforces the rhetoric of nationalism but it also prevents the blurring of 'native' and 'other.' "Such models" of diasporic consciousness, Evans & Mannur confirm, "privilege the geographical, political, cultural, and subjective spaces of the home-nation as an authentic space of belonging, and civic participation, while devaluing and bastardizing the states of displacement or dislocation, rendering them inauthentic places of residence" (2003:6). Therefore, the recurrent identification with the place of origin is signified by the hyphen, as a form of lack, that continues connecting the original point of reference with the current country of residence in a hierarchical relationship. Both sociologist, Saint-Blancat and Robin Cohen, share this notion of diaspora as a binary rather than a hybrid condition. Saint-Blancat suggests that "quand il y a rupture avec l'origine au assimilation aux contextes d'installation on ne peut plus

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<sup>2</sup> I understand "community" as imagined, heterogeneous, and fragmented. See, Anderson (1983).

parle de diaspora" (1995:10). In turn, Cohen, speaking with a certain American idiom, suggests a similar understanding of diasporic subjects: "they do not 'creolize' or indigenize, or only do so in a limited way, thereby retaining their link with, sometimes their dependence on the 'motherland'" (1996:516).

Safran also emphasizes the diasporic obsession with the homeland as a fundamental characteristic of the displaced community. However, his interpretation adds a metaphorical aspect to the notion of 'homeland.' Home stops being a mere geographical point. The nation left behind re-appears in the diasporic consciousness as a re-construction through memory. This imagined home serves to fill the lack. Thereby, 'home' becomes an imaginary signifier that stands in direct opposition to the current site of residence—living here, but desiring there, another nation, understood as the legitimate place of one's being. Safran explains:

They retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements; they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return; they believe that they should be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland ... and they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another. (199:83-84)

For that reason, a desire to enunciate the lack of the original point of origin triggers the emergence of the hyphen in the signifiers of diaspora. Diaspora conceived this way becomes a production of identity dependant on an "act of imaginary reunification" (Hall 1990:224). Ethnicity, as a cultural and personal form of identification, appears as a reconstruction abroad of the memories of the country left behind. In turn, this reconstruction becomes collective knowledge, helping unify and homogenize the diasporic experience of people who otherwise would be considered radically different in terms of class, education, gender, origin, histories, and locality in their previous place of residence. Therefore, collective identities within a foreign nation are imagined, with 'home' as the metaphoric center that allows the creation and recreation of a cultural identity in *différance*.<sup>3</sup> The notion of 'home' as the mythical site of one's 'true' origin becomes the measuring tape of 'authenticity,' of one's 'true self' that, at last, achieves coherence, fixing and

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<sup>3</sup> Here I am using Derrida's 'différance' to suggest that ethnic collective identities or ethnicities are not only imagined, but produced through difference. Home, which is their discursive focus, differs from the notion of home in the country of residence, and it is this difference that gives them meaning and allows them to constitute themselves as 'others' within the host nation. That is, collective identities abroad differ from those at home because the spacial distance allows for a re-imagination and re-conceptualization of identity as a trace of a distanced self, which has become an other. Yet, ethnic identity is also deferred in time because, in its very and every iteration, the distance from the original identity multiplies, deferring the final closure and absolute reunification with the original. Deferral reinforces the indeterminacy and undefinability of ethnic identities within host nation states. Hence, the hyphen as signifier and mark of *différance* makes visible an invisible, impossible signified. In sum, ethnic identities are defined by both possibility and impossibility precisely because of their diasporic condition. See, Derrida (1982:1-28).

fossilizing personal identity around race and culture as if it were carried in one's blood and genes. Hall affirms that,

to have a cultural identity in this sense is to be primordially in touch with an unchanging essential core, which is timeless, binding future and present to past in an unbroken line. This umbilical cord is what we call 'tradition', the test of which is its truth to its origins, its self-presence to itself, its 'authenticity'. It is of course, a myth—with all the real power that our governing myths carry to shape our imaginaries, influence our actions, give meaning to our lives and make sense of our history. Foundational myths are, by definition, transhistorical: not only outse history, but fundamentally a-historical. (Hall 1999:4)

Diasporic consciousness, rather than being the site of hybridity, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism, is a nativist conception of identity that essentializes the individual around a narrative of uprooting and desire for return to an imagined home unchanged by time. This narrative construction retraces and connects diverse memories, images and, experiences into a coherent tale of a single, national, or ethnic origin that is even more defined and fixed than it was in the place of origin. Individual ethnic identity would only be 'authentic,' for as long as it manifests its alliance with the diasporic footprint (re)imagined from abroad. Consequently, the diasporic experience does not necessarily produce transgressive and hybrid forms of identity simply because the subjects cross national and territorial borders. On the contrary, those who dwell on diasporic consciousness reify national discourses abroad. The language of nationalism remains intact, and 'native' and 'other' constitute themselves through a dialectic but mutually exclusive relationship.

Diaspora becomes a model of identity politics that bears, according to Floya Anthias, the burden of "primordially" (1998:568). Since diasporic consciousness insists on the maintenance of the rhetoric of national belongingness, difference is celebrated from an essentialist and binary standpoint. Thus, the boundaries of diasporic identity, alike national identifications, are constructed through exclusion,

since experience will be different in different places the bonds must be those of origin rather than position/experience... Diaspora entails a notion of an essential parent—a father, whose seed is scattered... The original father(land) is a point of reference that slides into primordially. (Anthias 1998:568)

National and diasporic consciousness are both cultural narratives of belonging created around location as the "primordial" site of identification, fueling a dual competition of alliances within the diasporic subject. The mere change of location and the trespassing of national boundaries, once the homeland has been left behind, does not liberate individuals of the representational and ideological chains of the nation, as older versions of diaspora claimed. On the contrary, following Said's assessment, the diasporic subject becomes the site of "two conflicting varieties of paranoia": nationalism vs. diaspora, home vs. settlement, self vs. the group (2000:176,177). Here we encounter nationalism and its essential association with

diaspora. Nationalism and diaspora are both "grand narratives"<sup>4</sup> that depend on each other to constitute themselves as opposing normative measures of identity that ultimately essentialize and reduce multiple, heterogeneous selves in a perpetual binary schema of 'native' vs. 'other.' Diasporic consciousness, in this fashion, can never be understood as the site of hybridity or considered a serious threat to the nation-state as Robert Cohen, among others, affirms,

In short, national identities are under challenge from the de-territorialized social identities [diasporas]. In the age of globalization, the world is organized vertically by nation states and regions, but horizontally by an overlapping, permeable, multiple system of interactions. This system creates communities not of place but of interest based on shared opinions and beliefs, tastes, ethnicities... The elements of particular cultures can be drawn from a global array, but they will mix and match differently in each setting. (1996:517)

Quite the opposite, such an optimistic interpretation of diasporas, does not undermine the boundaries of the nation. On the contrary, it helps the nation signify itself under the same logic of "primordially" that governs its competing model of diasporic identity formation. Said states that "nationalism is an assertion of belonging in and to a place" (2000: 176). The nationalist claims of entitlement to the territory in which the national community resides can only work by emphasizing the loss of the national territory of those who trespassed national boundaries. The immigrant's loss of his or her homeland is an important detail to emphasize for the native community because it helps the host nation construe binary oppositions in which the national opposes the diasporic, the 'native' opposes the 'other,' 'us' opposes 'them.' By virtue of the loss of a national territory in which to reside, the national and the diasporic become opposite terms. The national community claims its right to the territory as a metaphorical locus of identity formation while excluding the diasporic for lacking it. Thus, otherness is construed in the discourse of the nation as less, lower, and lacking in its right to claim the host land as a legitimate source of identification.<sup>5</sup>

Diasporic identity is therefore not only imagined from within, but also reinforced and encouraged from without since the national community depends on the binaries to encode its borders through exclusion (Appiah 1996:30-74). In other words, while the displaced individual re-imagines home as a source of identity against the rhetoric of exclusion within the host community, the nation incorporates a certain amount of 'otherness,' and it constitutes itself against its others in a hierarchical

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<sup>4</sup> Lyotard refers to what he describes as the postmodern condition, which he characterized as increasing skepticism toward the totalizing nature of "grand narratives," typically characterized by some form of "transcendent and universal truth." See, Lyotard (1984: xxiv-xxv).

<sup>5</sup> Bhabha notes that etymologically "'territory' derives from both terra [earth] and *terrere* [to frighten] whence *territorium*, 'a' place from which people are frightened off." Those who lack a territory also lack power to share it with someone else. See Bhabha (1994:99-100).

relationship.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, diasporic consciousness becomes, to use Gopinath's words, "the bastard child of the nation—disavowed, inauthentic, illegitimate, an impoverished imitation of the originary [but, above all, of the host] culture" (1995:317). Diasporic consciousness is then a cultural process of identity formation that depends on the relations of power between the expatriate and the host nation to be constituted. In the Foucauldian sense, diasporic consciousness is "self-made," as well as "made" by the host nation through power relations that produce consent through schemes of surveillance, discipline, control and administration (Foucault 1982:787). Regulations of diasporic consciousness within the host nation serve to establish a discursive space within which a meaningful and different sense of self might be maintained against the national coherence. In this sense, the nation tolerates the limits of the ontological identity of the diasporic subject to maintain the binaries that distinguish its own self from the other—the national from the diasporic. Diasporic consciousness attains an internal 'logic of identity,' which secures stability to the self within a nation of others, but, in such stability, the diasporic settles for the bipolar *status quo*, failing to engage in the more fluid, albeit difficult, discourse of hybrid identification.

This process of diasporic identity formation, framed within asymmetrical power relations, allows the expatriate to remain in the 'new' home by clasp to 'difference' as a badge of power. However, 'difference' is dubious as a source of power within the rhetoric of exclusion employed by the nation. Diasporic difference is always marked by the double consciousness of insider vs. outsider, native vs. foreign. Hence, as Radhakrishnan affirms, "the passage into citizenship is also a passage into minoritization. [The displaced individual] is different and thus rendered a target of hyphenation in pain and alienation" (1996:174). This scheme of things is influenced by the history of European imperialism and ethnocentrism whose legacy still dictates transcultural interactions in the Americas and elsewhere. Albert Memmi pointed out in *The Colonizer and The Colonized* (1991) that the colonizer constructs, justifies, and perpetuates his economic and social privilege at the expense of the colonized. He creates a myth of himself based on 'difference.' The colonizer is a virtuous, civilized, modern man, while rendering the colonized as savage, backwards, and yet a potential candidate in due time to be assimilated through the civilizing mission. The process by which the colonizer culture imposes itself on another is through an act of representation that marks the difference and names the dialectically opposed parties. According to Derrida, this interaction produces a hierarchical system of "appellations" and classifications" that is rather violent, "one of the two terms governs the other ... or has the upper hand" (1981:41). Indeed, semantics carry material consequences for the colonized. The practice of classifying and naming human beings in the West consists of a double act of identifying signs in the human body that, in turn, 'confirm' the 'essential'

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<sup>6</sup> Here it is useful to think of Julia Kristeva's notion of the "abject" as "that of being opposed to I." Diasporic identity constitutes the border of the national identification "violently and painfully." The expatriate, like the abject, is "simply a frontier ... in which the Other keeps the subject from foundering by making it repugnant" (Kristeva 1982:1,9).

reason for the hierarchical system of individuals in the first place. To mark the difference in the 'other' becomes essential in order to maintain the rhetoric of colonization. Hence, in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, pseudoscientific movements such as social Darwinism and eugenics succeeded in attributing the 'backwardness' of the other to phenotypical markers, namely, skin color. Robert Miles calls this process in which body characteristics become signifiers and markers of difference "racialization:"

Those instances where social relations between people have been structured by the signification of human biological characteristics in such a way to define and construct differentiated social collectivities... the concept therefore refers to a process of categorization, a representational process of defining an Other (usually, but not exclusively) somatically. (1989:75)

Colonialism justified superiority over colonized groups by attributing to them certain moral, intellectual, and social defects, supposedly grounded in their 'racial' endowments, which, by virtue of being natural and bodily marked, were inevitable signs of difference. People were then classified using 'race' as the criteria to establish inherently distinct groups ordered hierarchically with only one of them claiming total and exclusive superiority.

This process of racialization as a rhetorical tool of colonization is not entirely different from 'minoritization,' the term used by Radhakrishnan to identify the modern version of the old, and yet, persistent colonial rhetoric of exclusion.<sup>7</sup> 'Race' became discredited as a biological marker of difference in the human species at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The old colonial assumption of races as biologically fixed and organized accordingly to a hierarchical determinism was ultimately challenged by anthropologists in 1998. They, who had advanced the notion of race as a marker of 'otherness' in the modern Western World in the first place, proclaimed that

human populations are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups... Physical traits vary independently of one another, knowing the frequencies of one trait does not predict the presence of frequencies of others. Any attempts to establish lines of division among biological populations [is] arbitrary and subjective.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Other scholars have coined different terms to identify the new ways of excluding racial and culturally defined groups: Gilroy and Giroux use "cultural racism," Balibar chooses "neo-racism," Stolcke, referring to the E.U. particularities, calls it "cultural fundamentalism." Everywhere else "minoritization" is referred to in denotative terms as "multiculturalism" or "cultural pluralism." See Gilroy (1990), Giroux, H. (1993), Étienne Balibar (1991), and Stolcke (1995). I choose Radhakrishnan's "minoritization" (1996), for being the most adroit at signifying the connections among "race," culture, and citizenship.

<sup>8</sup> American Anthropological Association, "Official Statement on 'Race'" <https://www.americananthro.org/ConnectWithAAA/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=2583> (1998).



From this statement, it follows that physical diversity among humans indeed exists, but there is not any biological stable trait that allows for classifications that predict innate behavior, intellectual capacity, or natural endowments. 'Race' is not a biological fact, but it is still a social construct that combined with 'culture' acts the same way today that it did during colonization. Nowadays, race, culture, and national identity converge in the process of diasporic consciousness formation to produce a similar rhetoric of exclusion and alienation under a different guise.

Minoritization has surfaced as a concept that capitalizes on the old binaries of colonizer vs. colonized, civilized vs. savage, European vs. non-European, white vs. black. It creates new categorizations that blend ideas of 'race,' nationality, and culture into binary sets: national, native, and citizen vs. diasporic, immigrant, and alien. This new rhetoric of exclusion might not directly focus on 'race,' but uses cultural heritage and nationality to label and separate groups of people. Étienne Balibar asserts:

[Minoritization] is a racism whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences, a racism which, at first sight, does not postulate the superiority of certain groups or peoples in relation to others but "only" the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the incompatibility of life-styles and traditions. (1991:21)

This logic assumes that a territory begets cultural sameness among somatically similar individuals, and that a coherent succession of these three requirements—territory, culture, and physical characteristics—is the only way to have access to full citizenship. Paradoxically, unlike the rhetoric of colonialism that dismissed origin as basis to appropriate a given land as one's own, this logic presupposes that to claim a territory as a nation state, full citizens need to share a uniform culture, language, and similar physical traits. Hence, it is by virtue of this assumption that 'minoritization' keeps cultures segregated within the nation since their territorial, racial, and cultural differences are deemed incommensurable, preserving the foundation of nativism and preventing meaningful and productive cross-cultural interactions from taking place. Multiculturalism becomes a 'parade of types' with seemingly equal power, but "this attempt at a uniform classification is not only scientifically inept but also morally deceptive," according to San Juan (1991:217). 'Race' and historical inequalities still construct a hierarchy in which the national, the authentic, the citizen is valued over the non-national, the foreign and the diasporic. In light of minoritization, cultural, racial, and national differences are acknowledged and even tolerated. Thus, some are still relegated to the margins for their conditions as 'misplaced.' Those who threaten the trinity—territory, culture, and race—of national coherence become the 'other,' 'the misplaced' and, as Stolcke affirms "a political threat to national identity and integrity on account of [their] cultural diversity and difference" (1995:8). The 'misplaced' indeed "carry their foreignness in their faces" since the national is still construed against visible, cultural, and territorial differences (Stolcke 1995:8). Stuart Hall calls this ideology "inferential racism" described as "those apparently neutralized representations of events and situations relating to race, whether 'factual' or 'fictional,' which have

racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of *unquestioned assumptions*" (Hall, 1981:36).

The practice of "minoritization," then, is based on an essentialized concept of identity marked by the very same difference that gives diasporic consciousness a sense of autonomy and coherent belongingness. Focusing on the notion of a primordial 'home' to form a unified fixed identity as a reaction against the imposition of the dominant culture means, after all, to accept the resilient ideology that organizes heterogeneity and diversity by means of cultural and racial labels that "come with normative and descriptive expectations" (Appiah 1996:92). It is only through the fulfillment of those expectations that diasporic identification is recognized as autonomous and separate: authentic. The problem with this arrangement is that it "negates identity by forcing people into a homogeneous mold" (Taylor 1994:43).<sup>9</sup> Minoritization as well as diasporic identity poses a dilemma for the cross-cultural individual. Both narratives impose a monolithic discourse of identity that recognizes the individual as member of a unified collectivity; it demands exclusivity and fixity, reducing the self to an essential core that focuses on territorial, cultural, and racial difference. Paradoxically, difference becomes fixed and functions as a marker of exclusion that draws the boundaries between 'us' and 'them.' To operate successfully, these two systems depend on a Western mode of representation that fossilizes images before the masculine gaze that creates, legitimates, and divulges them as paragon of "truth."<sup>10</sup> The individual becomes an object of representation rather than the subject. By becoming an object, the self loses its power to negotiate the boundaries of 'self' and 'other' leaving intact the binary schemas that relegate 'displaced' groups to a persisting subalternity. Alienation follows as the condition that prevents communication and identification with people across-cultures, races, and territories, forbidding the possibility of arriving 'home' after crossing the borders. Individuals are compelled to forget their complexity in favor of an incommensurable order of sameness. As Memmi asserted: "In order to witness the colonized's complete cure, his alienation must completely cease. We must await the complete disappearance of colonization—including the period of revolt" (1970:185).

Diaspora understood as a site of challenge to old binaries fails to account for hybridity as radical critique of modern paradigms. Thus, diaspora, rather than destabilizing rigid notions of identity formation, re-territorializes itself engaging into a dialectical "revolt" against the hegemonic culture. Thus, diasporic

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Taylor argues that social identities are constructed in dialogue, and they depend on a "politics of recognition" to come into existence as independent identities. This "politics of recognition" is defined as a politics that acknowledges the authentic identities of others (1994:43).

<sup>10</sup> Martin Heidegger drew attention to the emphasis on representation in the Western world. According to Heidegger, the Western man believes that everything exists through representation. Therefore, he takes upon himself the task to represent in order to produce the world according to his subjectivity. Heidegger concludes, "in such producing, man contends for the position in which he can be that particular being who gives the measure and draws up the guidelines for everything that is" (1977:115-154). For an extensive study on Western modes of representation, see Craig Owens (1982).

consciousness stands in the opposite end of the continuum towards a hybrid mode of identification. Diaspora as the physical and territorial movement of diasporic individuals does not foretell hybridity since diasporic consciousness constructs an identity around a stable territorial point of reference imagined as 'home,' causing the old binaries to reappear under a different rationalization. This nostalgic view of displacement engages in and reifies the rhetoric of nationalism and cultural ethnocentrism that prevents fluid identity formations and transformations. In fact, Foulcault reminds us that the modern nation state has become a matrix of individualization and totalization, which is a form of power that makes individuals subjected to and tied "by control and dependence to [their] identity" (1982:781, 782-783). Therefore, we cannot talk of diasporic consciousness interchangeably with postmodern notions of syncretism, creolization, *métissage*, or hybridity.

Diaspora [διασπορά] as the original Greek term indicates in its composite "dia" [δια] "through" or "across" and "speirein" [διασπειρειν] to "sow seeds" conceptualizes two organically related but intrinsically opposed terms in the modern West: to plant seeds and to set in motion.<sup>11</sup> The most sedentary meaning of the word, "to plant," is privileged over the fertile movement implied in the prefix "dia" and "sow." Land and roots become metaphors for the most desired existence: a settled one. For a hybrid consciousness to appear, the alternative—movement and migration—as a foundation of identity, must be respected and cherished over settlement and land. Hybrid identifications do not express regret of a lost origin. They strive to provide an alternative vision in which the origin is historized as in constant change. Thus, diasporic consciousness can be liberated from the state, only by promoting "new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of [this] kind of individuality which has been imposed on us" (Foulcault 1982:785). Settlement, fixity, and homogenization is a tool of the nation state to perpetuate systems of oppression. Nevertheless, hybridity should not be understood as the relatively easy experience of a Western nomadic subject, either. Echoing Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, to become hybrid entails an arduous work of dismantling the old order in order to escape simple assimilation to the dominant culture's roles (Fanon 2004). Bourgeois reconfigurations of the old system in the name of multiculturalism simply replace the colonizer with the no less pretentious appellation of "citizen of the world."

## 2 Hybridity: An alternative approach

Bakhtinian thought on subjectivity, art, and life treads the difficult path between rigid theories of essential truth, which tend to create fixed subjectivities within nation states, and the impossible indeterminacy of the postmodern individual. His criticism of these two absolutes focuses on the excessive importance that they give to signs in relation to one another. Bakhtin shifts the attention to individuals and their connection to the words they use to constitute themselves and others. Indeed,

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<sup>11</sup> The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000. [www.yourdictionary.com](http://www.yourdictionary.com).

for Bakhtin, words display a reciprocal relationship with the individual in a creative act that underscores the interplay between language and individual consciousness. Words are charged with 'ideological meaning.' That is, words reflect a social system of thought created outside the individual through experience and interaction with others. Experience becomes the actual reality, from which individual meaning is formed. Ideology, then, is not the individual property of a person, but the language that a social community shares and actively shapes. However, ideologies are always in flux, as they exist in relation to other social units and require translation and negotiation to be processed by single individuals. That is, no two individuals ever entirely coincide in their experience and/or belong to the same set of social units. Bakhtin explains:

The word is not a material thing, but rather the eternally mobile, eternally changing medium of dialogic interaction. It never gravitates towards a single consciousness or a single voice. The life of the word is contained in its transfer from one mouth to another, from one context to another context, from one social collective to another, from one generation to another generation. In this process the word does not forget its own path and cannot completely free itself from the power of these concrete contexts into which it has entered. (1963:202)

In Bakhtin's model, the word is in a constant battle to be heard among other words striving to show their particular worldview. He characterizes this environment as dialogic. Yet, while the word is understood as materially present and limited by the challenges posited by other words, it is also viewed as an image representing the character of its originator. The thoughts, ideas, and ideological tendencies of one's mind are exteriorized and discursively depicted through an image created by the language one uses. Language, then, narrates consciousness. In this sense, "the domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs. They equate with one another. Whenever a sign is present, ideology is present, too. Everything ideological possesses semiotic value ... The word is the ideological phenomenon par excellence" (Bakhtin 1973:10,13). It follows that, for Bakhtin, the word cannot be studied or understood in a vacuum. Words are intrinsically linked to the voice that speaks them. Bakhtin's model of subjectivity, then, consists of two simultaneous and intrinsic events: one, the word fights to acquire meaning and two, the word displays its speaker's image. In this way, Bakhtin reconciles the social dimension of language with the subjective by positing individuals engaged in a social struggle to constitute their own consciousness and identity through and by language. This fight "against a submission of subjectivity" is, according to Foucault, of most importance today because it is a refusal of "a scientific or administrative inquisition which determines who one is" (1982:781). The ability to create a unique discourse out of external interactions from a multiplicity of positions is understood by Bakhtin as the art of "finding-oneself-outside-of." Indeed, Bakhtin conceives individual consciousness as a "boundary" or a "self-conscious *threshold*" between the social

and the individual.<sup>12</sup> It is precisely this "extraterritorial status"<sup>13</sup> of consciousness that makes possible the creative act of authoring one "self" through "others" (Bakhtin 1973:39):

The most important acts constituting self-consciousness are determined by a relationship toward another consciousness (toward a *thou*) ... The very being of man (both external and internal) is the *deepest communion*. To be means to *communicate* ... To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary: looking inside himself, he looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another ... I cannot manage without another, I cannot become myself without another. (Bakhtin 1963: 287).

As Caryl Emerson notes, Vygotsky summarizes Bakhtin succinctly by saying that the Word is the significant humanizing event. That is, one creates a personal identity through the words one has learned, fashioning one's own voice—inner speech—through the selective appropriation of the voices of others (1983: 255). Bakhtinian thought reevaluates language as the means to create, narrate, or craft one's own life—subjectivity—through words, rather than territory.

Language offers the creativity to access a kind of truth—dialogical and multiple—that national, ethnic discourses of identity cannot provide. "The [literary] work and the world represented in it, Bakhtin says, "enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation" (1981:254). For Bakhtin, the ontological dimension of the character in a work of fiction is constructed analogously to that of the living subject. Aesthetic theory blends into a philosophical theory of subjectivity whose central idea is that language, in the form of human communication, is inherently dynamic, diasporic, migratory: hybrid. It has the ability to bridge the only gap that exists—that between the world of the other and one's own consciousness—through an aesthetic and responsive discourse endowed by the gift of creating new meanings. Thus, language, for Bakhtin is not the cause of one's alienation. Indeed, Bakhtin removes the negativity assigned to the function of language in the construction of the human being that the Lacanian model had introduced. For the latter theorist, language expresses what can never be said, a lack that signifies our entrance into the symbolic order and ultimate alienation. However, for Bakhtin, the division between the inner and the outer world is the drive that pushes the self to fulfill its 'task' of making meaning in time and space, creating a unique and personal signified for the hyphen, escaping the "law of truth" that attaches a person to a single, fixed, absolute identity imposed by the modern nation state (Foucault 1982:781). As Caryl Emerson notes, "for Bakhtin the healthy individual in life is the one who can surmount the gap, who can break down the barriers between inner and outer [world/words]" as part of the

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<sup>12</sup> Caryl Emerson and Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan both refer to the same trait in Bakhtin's thought using those two different terms respectively (1983:249). Also, Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan (1997:257).

<sup>13</sup> My emphasis here is meant to underscore the lack of a physical territorial component tied to identity formation in Bakhtin, while territory/land is absolutely necessary for nativist and diaporic identifications.

development of one's consciousness (1983:258). In such cases, language and selfhood are intimately connected as projects that constitute one another in the logosphere.<sup>14</sup>

### 3 Conclusion: A self in dialogue

This ability to 'make-meaning' of one's self and of the outer world requires a dialogic internalization of language that allows for a different, more productive interaction with monologic narratives of national belonging. It also provides access to the internal processes by which individuals in the context of cultural confrontation, 'while in diaspora,' might develop alternative, textual conditions of existence, hybrid identities, in Bakhtinian terms. Instead of 'repeating' national grand narratives, "retelling [them] in one's own words" is the other option and a more preferable one, for it constitutes a more reflective process of transmission and appropriation of discourses of nationalism and ethnic/racial identity. Moreover, 'retelling,' instead of 'repeating' narratives of national belonging, underscores the struggle against the authoritative word and the resistance to assimilating that word 'as is,' without questioning it. This struggle, in Bakhtin's words, "takes on an even deeper and more basic significance in an individual's ideological becoming." That is, when authoritative discourses as nationalistic ones are dialogized and relativized as part of an internal process of conscious ideological growth, the monologic text is transformed into what Bakhtin refers to as an "internally persuasive discourse." Its main feature is its hybrid nature, "interwoven with 'one's own word' ... half ours and half-someone else's." Thus, it stands in a constant state of tension, negotiation, and flux. "Such discourse" Bakhtin affirms, "is of decisive significance in the evolution of an individual consciousness." It starts out as the word of another, in competition with national, racial, ethnic discourses that have already been internalized. However, the process brings about the constant negotiation and individual processing of words, which "once made one's own," become part of a life-long ideological becoming that is never whole, nor monologic (1981:345). Consciousness and personal identity come about through that process (Bakhtin 1963:59). This conceptualization of identity has various implications for displaced individuals and diasporic consciousness. First, it does not let the ambiguity and indeterminacy of language 'erase' the subject. In fact, language is confronted with more language. For Bakhtin, the 'I' must be externalized both for itself and for the other. Failure to do so, means to remain in isolation, which results in the "loss of one's self."<sup>15</sup> Articulation of the inner self, in and through language, is therefore imperative in order to fight cultural and personal alienation. Yet, the dialogized narrative we create of and for our 'selves' is only possible through the recognition that aesthetics permeates our discourses of identity. As Kristeva affirms, overtly

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<sup>14</sup> The space where meaning occurs as a function of the constant struggle between centrifugal forces that seek to keep things in motion and increase difference, tending toward the extreme of life and consciousness, and centripetal forces that strive to make things cohere to stay in place, and which tend toward death and brute matter (Holquist 1983:309).

<sup>15</sup> The state, as Bakhtin adds, "of being unheard, unrecognized, unremembered" (Bakhtin 1963: 287).

acknowledging Bakhtin, what overcomes the awareness of loss and “relieve[s] psychosis” is fiction. Hybrid narratives, Kristeva concludes, bring about a “resurrection of the subject, that is, the subject’s accession to the place of the Father through the intermediary of language” (1996:115). Indeed, for Bakhtin, if we are to break free from the external word and monologic narratives of identification, the ‘I’ must function as an author and narrator of its own identity, adopting a ‘responsive’ voice that uses, abuses, changes, discards, and redistributes external words that are authored by others and meant to fix one’s understandings of self. These are struggles against the forces that tie the individual to fixed categories. The struggle against the “government of individualization” (Foucault 1982:781) calls for the “orchestration” of the outer world in one’s own unique voice that gives one’s self a dialogized identity. This is indeed what a hybrid subjectivity does: “the substantial environment, which mechanically influences the personality, ... reveal[s] potential words and tones” that are transformed into one’s own words (Holquist 1983:318). There, we find the second and third implication of Bakhtin’s theory of subjectivity: the subject, while creating a narrative of self, always finds “ever newer ways to mean.” Thereby, the individual can also constitute herself as a subject, among subjects, stepping out of the suffocating realm of national and cultural objectification:

This process—experimenting by turning persuasive discourse into speaking persons—becomes especially important in those cases where a struggle against such images has already begun, where someone is striving to liberate himself from the influence of such an image and its discourse by means of objectification, or is striving to expose the limitations of both image and discourse. The importance of struggling with another’s discourse, its influence in the history of an individual’s coming to ideological consciousness, is enormous. One’s own discourse and one’s own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other’s discourse. (Bakhtin 1981:346, 348)

In sum, a hybrid identity is created through the interaction between the outer and the inner domains. It has the life-long task of creating and recreating itself as a meaningful ‘I’ through an aesthetic discourse, much like the novelistic one, whose unity is acquired in time and space by weaving external discourses of national identity into an inner narrative of self-identification. The hybrid individual approaches the world with an aesthetic eye, giving new forms and meanings to it, being fully aware that language is indeed hollow, arbitrary, and malleable. Then, authorship, as the distinctive feature of a hybrid consciousness, underscores the narrative behind the subject it attempts to define. In other words, identity, seen in this light, can never be mistaken for Truth, or for a single and finished product. The subject understands that the sign—‘he,’ ‘she,’ ‘they’—imagines the self to be in a given time and space is not a metonymical or a distorted version of self. It is a fiction, a story, and as such cannot contain the subject in its entirety or in its complexity in any given time or place. Like a novel in a Bakhtinian sense, the narrative of one’s displaced identity is always yet-to-be-fulfilled. That is, it is oriented towards the future. Bakhtin emphasizes that “the definition given to me

lies not in the categories of temporal being, but in the categories of the *not-yet-existing*, in the categories of purpose and meaning, in the meaningful future, which is at odds with anything I have at hand in the past or present. To be myself for myself means yet becoming myself" (Bakhtin 1986:357). Thus, if 'being' means to be in the unending process and battle of becoming, the subject cannot be contained in a given instance within his/her own narrative of cultural and/or national identity. "The target," as stated in Foucault, "is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are" at all cost (1982:785). Thus, the 'I' produced in the narratives of hybridity is, as Michael Holquist notes, a self-conscious mask for a given time and place (1989:23). Moreover, this mask is not imposed by the discourses of others. The narrative of a hybrid consciousness is necessarily grounded and constrained by the time and place of the other, but its freedom comes from its aesthetic ability, its capacity to transcend in a dialogic battle against cultural nationalism and fixed narratives of race, gender, and ethnicity produced and reproduced by modern nation states.

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