



ANTHROPOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Podcast Transcript

Diasporas I: A scattering

ZAINABU JALLO: Leaving one's homeland often brings a shared memory of a place left behind. People may feel that they don't fully belong in their new environment. This feeling often comes with a deep longing to return. Alongside this longing, there's usually an effort to keep the image of the homeland alive – and to stay connected to it, both personally and within a community.

People who have left their country may, because of these feelings, begin to see themselves as part of a diaspora. The word comes from the Greek diaspeirō, meaning “to scatter.”

But do these memories and emotions actually define what it means to be diasporic? Beyond physical relocation – whether voluntary or forced – are there other things that shape the experience of diaspora?

It seems that diasporic individuals and communities are often highly aware of their displacement. They struggle with questions of identity and belonging. And they frequently find it difficult to fully integrate into the culture of the host country.

The concept of diaspora has been explored by scholars like George Shepperson (1966), William Safran (1991), and George Cohen (1997). All of them point to the close link between being displaced and feeling a strong desire to return home.

Today, as people continue to move across borders for many reasons, our understanding of diaspora is shifting. It now includes many forms of mobility and many different motivations for leaving.

Historically, the word diaspora carried strong political and historical meaning. Political theorist William Safran pointed out that what was once treated with suspicion has now become a topic of great interest. But trying to fit all diasporas into one definition does not work. It ignores the specific histories and situations of different groups.

If we agree that mobility is key to the idea of diaspora, we still need to ask: what about cases where no movement happens? Many descendants of displaced communities continue to identify as diasporic – even if they've never moved. Some researchers link this to transgenerational epigenetic memory – meaning that experiences of displacement are passed down and still shape identity.



In his 1997 essay "A Question of Place: Revisions, Reassessments, Diaspora", curator Okwui Enwezor offers a powerful definition of diaspora. He writes:

SPEAKER VOICE: "the quintessential journey into becoming; a process marked by incessant regroupings, recreations, and reiteration. Together these stressed actions strive to open up new spaces of discursive and performative postcolonial consciousness."

ZAINABU JALLO: He goes on:

SPEAKER VOICE: "Diaspora, I would suggest, simultaneously refers to a process, a condition, a space and a discourse: the continuous processes by which a diaspora is made, unmade and remade, the changing conditions in which it lives and expresses itself, the places where it is moulded and imagined, and the contentious ways in which it is studied and discussed. It entails a culture and a consciousness, sometimes diffuse and sometimes concentrated, of a 'here' separate from a 'there', a 'here' that is often characterized by a regime of marginalization and a 'there' that is invoked as a rhetoric of self-affirmation, of belonging to 'here' differently."

ZAINABU JALLO: In the first part of our reflection on diaspora, you've heard how the idea can be understood in many ways. Which of these perspectives felt most relevant to you — and which left you wanting to know more?