IPEK DEMIR

DIASPORA AS TRANSLATION AND DECOLONISATION
Diaspora as translation and decolonisation
Globalisation is widely viewed as a current condition of the world, but there is little engagement with how this changes the way we understand it. The Theory for a Global Age series addresses the impact of globalisation on the social sciences and humanities. Each title focuses on a particular theoretical issue or topic of empirical controversy and debate, addressing theory in a more global and interconnected manner. With contributions from scholars across the globe, the series explores different perspectives to examine globalisation from a global viewpoint. True to its global character, the Theory for a Global Age series is available for online access worldwide via Creative Commons licensing, aiming to stimulate wide debate within academia and beyond.

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Diaspora as translation and decolonisation

Ipek Demir
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The Theory for a Global Age series, of which this important new book is a part, is a space to rethink concepts and categories central to everyday understandings. This is done by taking seriously the experiences and knowledge of those who are rarely seen as agents in such processes. It is also done by re-examining dominant understandings through frameworks and contexts not previously considered. Diaspora as translation and decolonisation by Ipek Demir provides a brilliant new account of diaspora in just these terms. She examines the contributions made by the Kurdish diaspora, for example, as well as shifting our focus from the usual concerns of those who study diasporas – ‘static’ topics such as homeland, identity and questions of belonging – to examine how diasporic communities themselves ‘translate, intervene and decolonise’ the contexts within and across which they move.

Diasporas are often conceptualised through the politics of nation-states. They are seen to come into being as a consequence of struggles within nations and are represented as coming to reside in what are regarded as the nations of others. In this way, they are presented as having a sense of ‘home’ elsewhere than where they are. Demir sharply contests such associations. In contrast, she locates diasporas also in the historical relationships consequent to the expansion and dismantling of imperial formations. Drawing on, and extending, Sivanandan’s resonant formulation that ‘we are here because you were there’, she examines both the ‘we’ and the ‘they’ in terms of each being diasporic. In the process, she expands our understanding of the term and its associated processes.

Diaspora as translation and decolonisation offers a distinctive and innovative account of the dynamics of diaspora, of the ways in which, for example, they have been involved in processes of decolonisation, albeit rarely recognised as such. Alongside this
move, she also points to diaspora as central to modes of translation and intercultural dialogue. She demonstrates the ways in which diasporas unsettle standard conceptions of home and identity, among other understandings, through their social and political interventions across a range of locations. In the process, Demir superbly highlights the difference that new understandings of diaspora can make to the way we think about the global and its ongoing re-figurations.

Gurminder K. Bhambra
University of Sussex
A couple of years ago, when I started writing this book, the word ‘decolonisation’ had not yet become mainstream. It was largely ignored by wider academia and in public debates, despite the fields of decolonial studies and postcolonial studies having made serious interventions questioning Eurocentric assumptions of academia for decades, and despite important social movements such as Black Lives Matter and Decolonise the University having taken off in mid-2010. As an academic who took these interventions seriously, for me the centrality of decolonisation, and the links between diaspora, translation and decolonisation, were clear from the start. I wanted to write a book that captured the transformative and far-reaching role of diaspora, one that sought to expand diasporic imaginary spatially and temporally and show how much could be gained if we weaved translation and decolonisation into understandings of diaspora. The writing of the final sections of the book coincided with the violent killing of George Floyd in 2020 and the rekindling of the Black Lives Matter movement, which during the summer of 2020 turned into a transnational and global phenomenon. We now observe that decolonisation is widely used in popular and academic discourse, both by critics and proponents. The insights of the fields of decolonial studies and postcolonial studies, of race and ethnicity, are receiving increasing and well-deserved attention by wider academia. Many institutions have also begun to reckon with race, including universities of the Global North as they move to decolonise teaching and research. However, the pushback is evident, as shown by the stepping up of culture wars in 2020 and the recent publication of the much-discredited report of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. The backlash to diaspora, to its decolonisation efforts, is certainly not over.
Preface and acknowledgements

I am thankful to all those who have contributed intellectually to this book through our conversations, their writings, thoughtful exchanges, feedback and considerations. I would especially like to express my thanks to Professor Gurminder K. Bhambra, my series editor, for her excellent feedback, intellectual rigour and extremely generous support, to Professor John Holmwood, who has been providing intellectual stimulation and depth since he became my PhD supervisor at the University of Sussex, to Professor Martin Kusch, for many conversations about language, translation and incommensurability during my postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Cambridge, to Professor Barbara Misztal at the University of Leicester, whose intellectual breadth and depth always inspired me, to Professor John Holmwood, Professor Barbara Misztal, Dr Pierre Monforte and Dr Ebru Soytemel for their constructive comments on various chapters, and of course to all my colleagues at the University of Leeds and the Centre for Ethnicity and Racism Studies (CERS) for stimulating discussions and productive exchanges over the last two years. I am very grateful to Professor Robin Cohen for his thoughtful and insightful feedback, suggestions and encouragement. I would like to thank my publishers, Manchester University Press, especially Thomas Dark and Alun Richards for their ongoing support and professionalism, and also for their patience when I was unwell. I would also like to thank Susan Jarvis for her very helpful and meticulous editing.

I am grateful to my family in Turkey who instilled in me a strong sense of justice, which underpins all my work, and to Andy for his unending support and generosity. The work for this book was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Fellowship Programme and subsequent research. I would like to thank my research participants for their generosity and support.

The book is for those who care about diaspora and who seek recognition of how diasporas have conceptually and practically expanded ideas about equality and freedom and dignity. It is a book for those who wish to not only develop a decolonial perspective to diaspora, but also seek to recognise how diasporas are primary agents of decolonisation of the Global North.
Introduction

This book draws our attention to the concept of diaspora and investigates it both theoretically and empirically. It analyses how diasporas can translate, decolonise and pierce exclusive nationalisms. As such, it provides a discussion of what a theory of diaspora for our global age should prioritise, revealing its transformative and far-reaching potential. My thinking through of diaspora is unashamedly concerned with diaspora as an analyst category rather than being an examination of how actors deploy it strategically and discursively to gain political advantage. If diaspora is to have an analytical purchase, it should be employed when illuminating a particular and specific angle of migration or migrancy. It should valorise and inquire into a particular aspect of migration. The aspect I defend in this book is how diasporas do translation and decolonisation.

Since the first decade of the twenty-first century, we have seen nativist movements and anti-immigration sentiments becoming more mainstream and alarmingly moving to centre-stage. There has been a major shift, especially in the Global North, including from certain sections of the left (Bloomfield, 2020; Mondon and Winter, 2019; Shilliam, 2020). Nativists are reacting not only to economic globalisation, but also to racial, cultural and religious diversity, equality and multiculturalism at home. The reactions are related: they are both to do with feelings of loss of sovereignty and control. These two types of loss of sovereignty and control – one globally and one at home – are also brought together through ‘diaspora’. Diaspora is deeply interlinked with sovereignty, belonging and transnationalism, and also ideologies and sentiments of ‘imperialistic abroad and xenophobic at home’ (Venuti, 1995: 23).

Many nativist movements and anti-immigration sentiments, current and past, show a longing for the good old times when the Global North set the rules of the international order, held the upper hand in world trade and was able to migrate and settle in others’
lands, often through the use of brutal force. Longing is clear and visible in the slogans of many of the movements in the Global North: ‘Make the Netherlands Great Again’ (Wilders’s slogan); ‘Austria First’ (the campaign message of Hofer’s Freedom Party); ‘Putting the “Great” Back into Great Britain’ (the UKIP Manifesto slogan); ‘Make America Great Again’ (Trump’s 2020 slogan); and ‘Take Back Control’ (the Leave campaign during Brexit). A sense of insecurity and anxiety about declining privileges and a feeling of victimhood, paradoxically combined with a sense of superiority and exceptionalism (Melville, 2020) underwrite the recent nativist movements, but also those that preceded them. However, it would be a mistake to narrowly conceive such current, past and also future nativisms and movements in the Global North as being limited to the crisis on new migrations – notwithstanding their importance. Such sentiments are in fact often closely linked to resentments towards settled diasporas of colour in the Global North. Anxieties about loss of control and sovereignty are deeply intertwined with existing diasporas of colour in the Global North and the decolonisations and translations they bring – the central themes of this book.

Empires have governed various populations, myriad ethnic, religious and cultural groups. Through plantations, indenture, colonisation, expansion, settlements, slavery and other forms of domination and movements of peoples, empires have been instigators of diasporas. Many of today’s diasporas were made in and by recent empires, including the collapse of them and/or the nationalist projects that followed them – the Ottoman Empire (e.g. Kurdish and Armenian diasporas); the Austro-Hungarian Empire (e.g. Slavic and Jewish diasporas); the British Empire (e.g. Afro-Caribbean and South-Asian diasporas); and the French Empire (e.g. Arab diaspora). Many of today’s diasporas are thus an outcome of historic relationships arising out of subordination and colonisation, of expansion and retraction of empires. Much recent diaspora literature and the ever-expanding case studies of diaspora, however, examine diaspora within the confines of nation-states. Diaspora is understood as emerging out of ‘ethno-political’ struggles within nation-states, and often told from a perspective of push factors. This has happened despite many diaspora theorists, for example, Avtar Brah, Robin Cohen, Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall and others having discussed diaspora within the context of empire. This has had
Introduction

consequences for diaspora research, as it has brought limitations to understandings of diaspora. The links between empire and diaspora are too often ignored, and the transnational dimensions of diaspora research are curtailed. As such, the temporal and spatial boundaries and imaginations of diaspora research are capped.

Diaspora research has often ended up being too tightly hemmed into the history, sources and understandings of the nation-state. Yet today’s diasporas are products of empires as much as of nation-states. Much of the literature on the case studies of diaspora and diaspora theorising at times ends up producing methodologically nationalist discourses and examinations. They often focus on case studies, as identified by Faist (2010: 25), without necessarily informing how the case study can expand or challenge the way we have conceptualised diaspora. Ironically, this occurs despite the close affinity diaspora has with the literature on transnationalism. As the links between empire and diaspora are ignored, the consequences of expansions and retractions are erased. Nation-state centric approaches to diaspora multiply. Diaspora should instead be understood as inscribed and entangled in a series of historical and political processes associated with empire and expansion – including, of course, nationalist and ethno-political responses to these. Ethno-political struggles and diasporisation – that is, their spilling over into other places – are a postcolonial phenomenon. Even if we take an example like the Kurds, which typically is constructed within nation-centric discourses, it is not possible to understand Kurds and the Kurdish diaspora without an awareness of the role of the Ottoman, French and British empires, and their reorganisation of the borders and consolidation of populations and religious and ethnic allegiances in the Middle East. Nor can a perspective that ignores empire place Kurdish diaspora and its activities within a Global South perspective, or identify and unpack Kurdish indigenous and decolonial discourses arising in diaspora – approaches I have been able to utilise. Instead region-centric, nation-state and security-dominated perspectives continue to dominate the field. Such a turn to empire is also needed to uncover the imperialist origins of the field of Kurdish studies, which were forged by imperialist projects – amongst others, the ‘Russian, British and French consuls and intelligence officers’ (Bruinessen, 2013: 1).
Diaspora as translation and decolonisation

Confining discussions of diaspora to the politics of ‘their’ nation-state also places boundaries on diaspora’s citizenship in the new home, leaving a question mark over the extent to which they can belong. It continues to reproduce the assumption that the real home of diasporas remains elsewhere – that is, their nation-state – with the consequence that their citizenship in the new home is regarded as contingent and revokable, even when there are centuries of linkages and lineages that were created through empire, as expressed in the well-known phrase ‘we are here because you were there’. We can think of how those from the Windrush generation in Britain were regarded as ‘immigrants’ despite the fact that they were coming to the ‘mother country’. Or that the French army in World War II was two-thirds or more African, yet not only was their significant role in the liberation of France and the defeat of Nazism denied, but they were also refused French army pensions. Leaving the relationship between empire and diaspora unacknowledged and unexplored can mean that even those diasporas that have extremely close historical and cultural links with the metropole can continue to be construed as an ‘other’ and their presence questioned. They can even be turned from ‘citizens into migrants’ through citizenship legislation (Karatani, 2003), as we saw in the case of Windrush.

Additionally, an understanding that breaks the link between empire and diaspora overlooks how diasporas can become agents of decolonisation. For it is not only that diasporas have their roots in recent empires: they increasingly throw up multicultural problems for the metropole as they seek to undo unequal and hierarchical relationships entrenched in empire, a central focus of this book. Diaspora is therefore the nemesis of collective amnesia, questioning the spatial and temporal limitations imposed on it. Asymmetric colonial systems come to be challenged and reconfigured through the decolonisations carried out by diasporas. Through a conceptualisation of diaspora as translation and decolonisation, this book resists the confinement and reduction of diaspora theorisation to the nation-state. It spatially and temporally seeks to expand diasporic imaginary and shows much can be gained if we weave translation and decolonisation into understandings of diaspora.

The literature on diasporas spans various disciplines and fields. Diaspora is a concept that has been housed, examined and applied in
many disciplines – politics, international relations, literature, sociology, geography, language, history, media and others. Moreover, some diaspora research is interdisciplinary. It is therefore a challenging task to group and engage with it with precision. It is well known that the concept itself has ‘diasporised’ (Brubaker, 2005). In this book, I develop a critical engagement with two dominant forms of diaspora theorising. One is what I call the ‘ideal type’ approach led by Cohen, Safran and others devoted to identifying the key characteristics of diaspora (e.g. Cohen, 1996; Safran, 1991). The second is what I call the ‘hybridity’ approach (e.g. Bhabha, 1994; Brah, 1996; Clifford, 1994; Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1990). Both approaches have indeed helped to clarify our understandings of diaspora. The clarity, rigour and insights of Cohen’s elaborations have been extremely important, and Hall, Gilroy and Brah have opened up other new and innovative ways of thinking about diaspora. The second group’s focus on fluidity, subjectivity and hybridity attempted to undo and readjust the first group’s definitional focus, which was accused of being too locked into the gardening tropes of roots, origin and soil. Despite the important links it developed between empire and diaspora, the latter approach to diaspora is not fully satisfactory either: if all cultures are basically hybrid, fluid and shaped by subjectivity, little can be gained from identifying that diasporas are too. Moreover, the focus of these two approaches – one on ‘being’ and the other on ‘becoming’ – has at times too narrowly confined diaspora theorising to ontological concerns.

Rather than seeing diaspora as an everlasting feature of a group, or as centred around a subjective fluid experience, I focus on the interventions diasporas make, namely how diasporas do translation and decolonisation in their new home and the home left behind. I thus seek to change the terms of discussion on diaspora. Such a conceptualisation affords heterogeneity and temporality to our applications of diaspora, instead of all members and actions of a group being stamped with ‘diaspora’, and for eternity. Such a temporal and heterogeneous calibration of the concept of diaspora and its employment questions the essentialism and primordialism often associated with the notion of diaspora. Yet it seeks to refrain from confining it to subjectivity, often associated with the hybridity approach. I aim to develop an understanding of diaspora that
reveals its capacity as a critical concept, claiming its transformative and far-reaching potential.

A focus on the dynamics of diaspora as translation and diaspora as decolonisation, I argue, can expand thinking and understanding of diaspora within the current dynamics of our globalised world. Translation is not just a useful metaphor for understanding the movement and struggles of diasporas; more importantly, translation studies has much insight, from which we can learn, apply and extend our understandings in diaspora studies. I discuss ‘diaspora as translation’ (Chapter 2) together with ‘diaspora as decolonisation’ (Chapter 3). I propose a new and productive way of conceptualising diaspora, drawing from the insights of translation studies to inform understandings of authenticity, untranslatability and incommensurability. Diasporas are the archetypal translators, as they put new identities, languages and world-views in circulation. They can also erase, domesticate and rewrite. Anthropologists have also paid attention to translation when unpacking hierarchies arising from European expansion and colonisation. My focus on translation turns the tables on this. I pay attention to how, this time, we can examine the flows of peoples and cultures going to the Global North, but more importantly, how they ‘speak back’ to the metropole and dislodge coloniality. This is because, in my conceptualisation, diasporas emerge as central agents for decolonisation of the Global North, but also of Northern regimes elsewhere too – although the former is the focus of this book. I thus see diaspora as a source of liberation of progress. Yet decolonisation and foreignisation – that is, strategies aimed at pushing the boundaries of the target rather than simply assimilating into it – are difficult.

In Chapter 2, therefore, I examine the lure of translation for diaspora, unpacking ‘diaspora as rewriting and transformation’, ‘diaspora as erasure and exclusion’ and ‘diaspora as a tension between foreignisation and domestication’.

Ricoeur (2006) sees linguistic hospitality as a model for other forms of hospitality. Diasporas translate their identity struggles and battles to the host. Such translations can take place in the form of foreignisation or domestication; they can be partial and at times opaque. They can smooth over differences, leave out sections and at other times help to achieve ‘unlearning’. But, as I explore in the book, through foreignisation strategies, diasporas
have been, and continue to remain, agents of decolonisation. Such a focus on diasporas and their translation of identity is tied inextricably to their battles in the new homes, transnationally but also back in the home left behind. It can thus help to expand diaspora research, which has tended to focus on methodologically nationalist understandings, examining single-case studies without much situating the case study in wider social, political and global debates of our times, or history or empire, or informing how the case study can expand or challenge how we have conceptualised diaspora so far through offering new heuristic and conceptual tools. Hence it is not that case studies of a particular diasporic group are used often, but how they are used that has become the problem. It is time we turn attention to how diasporas have intervened in and shaped the culture and debates globally.

It should be clear by now that in this book I am not focusing on textual translation of diasporas, nor am I examining literary works to do with diasporas. I am taking people, identity and power rather than text as my primary source for uncovering diasporic translations. The aim of the book is to provoke a new thinking of diaspora that is political, and engaged with the contemporary global order by using the insights of translation studies and research on migrancy, race and culture. Diasporas can unsettle and trouble North-centric visions and Northern epistemologies. This is why, in Chapter 3, I argue that we need to shift our focus to an exploration of how diasporas decolonise the Global North.

Diasporas bring various disruptions and destabilisations to the Global North. I see the provincialising and decolonising carried out by postcolonial diasporas as a form of ‘talking back’ to the metropole, and discuss them in detail in Chapter 3. I start with a discussion of how vertical fallacies were created by Victorian anthropologists in their translations of ‘others’. The chapter argues that diasporas should not simply be seen as mediators but as agents who speak back and challenge the world-views in the Global North, aiding foreignisation and decolonisation of the new home. They also speak back and challenge world-views in the home left behind, aiding decolonisation of the homeland at a distance. I conceptualise how diasporas undo colonisation through two central processes – ‘radical remembering’ and ‘radical inclusion’ – which I posit against ‘social inclusion’ through a focus on the United Kingdom example.