The Nation-State and Its Others:  
In Lieu of a Preface

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“What is my nation?” asks the Scots officer Macmorris, speaking a 
foreign tongue, of his Welsh colleague Fluellen, who also serves in Henry 
The Fifth’s polyglot “English” army in Shakespeare’s Henry V (III.i.121). 
The question focuses the spectrum of issues this journal will address as it 
considers the Nation and its Others. We find the query useful, as Shakes-
peare did when he set out in 1599 to instruct his audience about its fiction 
of “England” in 1415. He wrote from within a barely secure new nation 
about a time when English kings still viewed Normandy, Anjou, Aquitaine, 
and the inhabitants thereof as their land and their people, though not yet 
their nation-state).

Writing Ulysses between 1914 and 1921, James Joyce has a Dublin citizen 
of 1904 ask the ambiguously Jewish Leopold Bloom: “What is your na-
tion[?]” Bloom answers by indirectness, defining “a nation [as] the same 
people living in the same place” (Joyce 331; emphasis added). This fails to 
satisfy the questioner, a nationalist who bristles at the rule of the British 
Empire and envisions liberation through a coming struggle in which a 
“greater Ireland” that includes the Irish diaspora will participate: “We’ll 
put force against force. . . . We have our greater Ireland beyond the sea. 
They were driven out of house and home in the black [1847]. . . . Ay, they 
drove out the peasants in hordes. Twenty thousand of them died in the 
coffinships. But those that came to the land of the free remember the land 
of bondage” (Joyce 329–30). To the citizen, Irish emigrants in America are 
part of the Irish nation, and so Bloom’s answer has unacceptable implica-
tions. Throughout Ulysses, written as the Irish fought Britain and each 
other to make the Irish Free State between 1916 and 1921, Joyce uses the 
story of Odysseus’s homeward journey to question the meanings of “home” 
and “nation,” and of keeping faith with a national culture while living 
elsewhere, in individual or communal exile. Ulysses examines the idea of 
longed-for but exigent home that the nation-state would become.1

The conviction underpinning this manifesto disguised as a “Preface” is 
that Diaspora must pursue, in texts literary and visual, canonical and 
vernacular, 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 fabu-
lated, brought into being, made and unmade, in culture and politics, both on 
land people call their own and in exile. Above all, this journal will focus on 
such processes as they shape and are shaped by the infranational and 
transnational Others of the nation-state.

Shakespeare’s and Joyce’s queries about nationhood bracket the cen-
turies in which European nations forged themselves and their state apparatuses, even as they acquired colonies and empires. These projects were intertwined; both employed military, technological, political, and commercial strategies that extracted an extraordinary human toll, violently expelling some conquered populations while confining others to fractions of their land: the reservation "nations" of Native Americans and the ethnonational republics of the Soviet Union are among some of the products of such actions. Elsewhere, the most monstrous and sustained efforts of the western empires uprooted, killed, or transported millions into slavery, creating the African diasporas. Combinations of economic coercion and incentive encouraged the formation of overseas communities such as those of the Japanese, Indians, and Chinese, which, like the African-descended collectivities, now increasingly represent themselves to themselves and to others as diasporas (Pan).²

Some of the entities this history has shaped remain purely infranational: they endure within a particular state and resist the cohesion imposed by it (e.g., the Navajo, the Inuit, the Québécois, the Georgians of the USSR). Others are both infra- and transnational, living disadvantaged lives within reduced territory while reaching out to kindred people elsewhere (e.g., Moldavians, Armenians, Crimean Tatars, Palestinians, Iroquois, Magyars in Romania). Today, the processes of uprooting and dispersion continue, but already by 1916, the Irish subjects of Britain and the subdued Arabs of the Ottoman Empire had launched uprisings that heralded the possibility of remaking old collectivities into new nations, while challenging the claims of existing states. What has emerged in the past two decades, under the impact of new transnational, global forces, is the view that nation-states may not always be the most effective or legitimate units of collective organization.

Of course, multicultural colonial empires—Hellenic and Roman, Persian and Ottoman—have existed since antiquity, and some of the phenomena characteristic of our transnational moment are as old as history: individual exile like Ovid’s, collective dispersion like that of the Jews by the waters of Babylon. This journal will address that history. But the past five centuries have been a time of fragmentation, heterogeneity, and unparalleled mass dispersion; additionally, the past five decades have been a time of cultural and political regrouping, of renewed confidence for ethnonations existing across the boundaries of established nation-states. In fact, migrations have led to a proliferation of diasporas and to a redefinition of their importance and roles. Crucially, these dispersions, while not altogether new in form, acquired a different meaning by the nineteenth century, in the context of the triumphant nation-state, which as a polity claims special political and emotional legitimacy, representing a homogeneous people, speaking one language, in a united territory, under the rule of one law, and, until recently, constituting one market.

In naming this publication Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies, we give equal emphasis to both sides of the colon. We use “diaspora” provisionally to indicate our belief that the term that once described Jewish, Greek, and Armenian dispersion now shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community. This is
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the vocabulary of transnationalism, and any of its terms can usefully be considered under more than one of its rubrics. For example, Cubans outside Cuba are in certain ways a diaspora that stretches from Madrid to Miami and beyond, the result of both coerced and voluntary departure. The US media refer to them as an exile community, particularly when underscoring the ambitions of some leaders to overthrow Castro. And "Cuban" is of course an ethnic designation. Thus, Cubans are a transnational collectivity, broken apart by, and woven together across, the borders of their own and other nation-states, maintaining cultural and political institutions; the study of their specificity, their interpenetration and articulation with others is part of our enterprise.

To affirm that diasporas are the exemplary communities of the transnational moment is not to write the premature obituary of the nation-state, which remains a privileged form of polity. Conflicts like the Gulf War revive and reaffirm the nation-state’s legitimacy even as new forms of economic and political interaction, communication, and migration combine to erode its sharply defined borders, increasingly turning even the mightiest and most ocean-buffered polities, like the United States, into “penetrated” (Brown) and “plural” societies (Smith). Yet, as these incursions multiply and many nation-states confront the extent to which their boundaries are porous and their ostensible homogeneity a multicultural heterogeneity, other collectivities strive for nationhood through struggles conducted in both homeland and diaspora (e.g., Eritreans, Kurds, Palestinians, Sikhs, Tibetans, Armenians).

In such a context, transnational communities are sometimes the paradigmatic Other of the nation-state and at other times its ally, lobby, or even, as in the case of Israel, its precursor (Sheflor). Diasporas are sometimes the source of ideological, financial, and political support for national movements that aim at a renewal of the homeland (Sun Yat Sen, Yasser Arafat). In the cases of the now only nominally “Soviet” republics of Armenia and Lithuania, diasporan organizations operate across the boundaries of the multiethnic empire and bring to their kindred ethnonations new ideas, new money, even new languages. Elsewhere, it becomes impossible to comprehend the new shape of certain polities—Los Angeles, the European Community—without taking into account the effects of massive movements of Hispanic, North African, or Turkish migrations of “guest-workers”; similar claims apply to states as diverse as South Africa and Germany, Nigeria and Sweden. In these and other places, transnational forces are intervening in ways whose consequences are not yet clear.

Diaspora is concerned as well with all of the other forces and phenomena that constitute the transnational moment. These include massive and instantaneous movements of capital; the introduction of previously “alien” cultures through the practice of “media imperialism”; issues of the double allegiance of populations and the plural affiliations of transnational corporations. All these developments point to the need to interrogate the national context in which certain assumptions about collective identity once prevailed; they also raise questions about the global context.

Of the making and unmaking of nations and exile communities there is no end in sight. The recent Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was born of a tangle of motives, some less problematic than others, many comprehensible only
from the transnational perspective. One was the impulse to enlarge the Iraqi "nation" of Kurds and Arabs; another was to make a united Iraq and Kuwait that would serve as a prototype of the Arab nation. The invader wanted to destroy the emerging territorial state of Kuwait, which was not quite a nation in August of 1990, though doubtless it will become one in the war's aftermath. The flood of refugees the invasion triggered (Indians and Pakistanis, Egyptians and Palestinians, Sri Lankans and Filipinos) reminds us that 60% of the population of Kuwait was not Kuwaiti, that in fact "before [Kuwait was] a nation, [it was] a business" (Kramer). In fact, many nations began as businesses, a fact concealed by mythologies of national origin but disclosed by the movements and histories of diasporas. It is not accidental that USA, like IBM, is an acronym for an establishment (as in Est. 1766) that was founded fairly abruptly, not in the intimate coevolution of a people and nation over centuries, like France and the French, say. The United States began, in part, as a set of commercial enterprises, as did British Canada: tracts for real-estate development and fur-trapping, units of the transatlantic economy. International commerce initiated the development of many nations; in some ways, it is now supplanting them, which is why "sovereignty," like "nation," is one of the concepts this journal will interrogate.

Diasporas are emblems of transnationalism because they embody the question of borders, which is at the heart of any adequate definition of the Others of the nation-state. The latter always imagines and represents itself as a land, a territory, a place that functions as the site of homogeneity, equilibrium, integration; this is the domestic tranquility that hegemony-seeking national elites always desire and sometimes achieve. In such a territory, differences are assimilated, destroyed, or assigned to ghettoes, to enclaves demarcated by boundaries so sharp that they enable the nation to acknowledge the apparently singular and clearly fenced-off differences within itself, while simultaneously reaffirming the privileged homogeneity of the rest, as well as the difference between itself and what lies over its frontiers.

In the past, diasporan communities confined in this way have remained self-protectively silent about their own view of themselves; their self-representations and assignments of meaning to their collective existence have been carefully policed. Stated too loudly and clearly, these representations would inevitably blur difference, even while pointing to an endemic doubleness, or multiplicity, of identities and loyalties, taboo topics both within and outside the diaspora community. Such silence long seemed necessary to the maintenance of the nation-state, whose frontiers were ideally absolute limits, crossed only in heavily regulated economic, cultural, and demographic interactions. This vision of a homogeneous nation is now being replaced by a vision of the world as a "space" continually reshaped by forces—cultural, political, technological, demographic, and above all economic—whose varying intersections in real estate constitute every "place" as a heterogeneous and disequilibrated site of production, appropriation, and consumption, of negotiated identity and affect.

Admittedly, this is an abstract description. On the one hand, it points to what we celebrate as the reinvigorated diversity of a plural society woven out of diasporas and ethnicities. But even the nation-states most receptive
to this pluralism—Canada, the United States, Australia, as well as the somewhat more reluctant members of the European Community—must increasingly acknowledge the way in which few of the old “general” interests continue successfully to claim nationwide legitimacy and consent, except in the guise of hypocritical fictions of hegemony. Meanwhile, new and forcefully asserted concerns and claims, like those of transnational communities, perhaps anachronistically continue to be regarded as “special” interests. This changed state of affairs affects nearly every area of cultural, political, and scholarly endeavor; it is welcomed by some and detested by others. At any rate, the chain of analogies that once joined the image of the safely enveloped individual body (the site of unique personal identity) to the homogeneous territorial community (the site of national identity) is no longer plausible. The image of the ideal world as a League of (sovereign and united) Nations is under pressure, beset by what is seen as the threat or promise of what Roger Rouse calls, in his article in this issue, “an alternative cartography of social space.” Such a cartography does not wager on the end of nationalism; in fact, it assumes that, precisely because the proliferation of infranational and transnational alternatives to the nation-state has led to a realignment of collective emotional investments, nationalism and other forms of loyalty will compete for a long time. Diaspora is a forum for debates about those concrete and theoretical remappings of global “order” that take both the nation-state and its transnational Others into account.

Notes

1. Conversations with James Fairhall and Enda Duffy helped me to formulate my thoughts about Ulysses.

2. Most overseas Chinese do not yet think of their communities as diasporan, but this is beginning to change, as Pan’s title suggests. Until the late 1960s, most African-Americans did not use the term either. It was first applied by a handful of intellectuals to the group for which they sought to speak; the term has now gained currency, both in the community and among scholars writing about it. In at least two communities, the Jewish and the Armenian, in North America and elsewhere, the vocabulary of “diaspora” and “galut” (sparuk and gaghat in Armenian) is traditional and widespread, as it is in certain Greek communities.

3. I am deviating slightly from Brown’s use of the term. He writes solely of Middle Eastern states and societies as “a penetrated subsystem of international relations” (4).

Works Cited


Sheffer, Gabriel, ed. Modern Diasporas in International Politics. New York: St. Martin’s, 1986.