OVERVIEW

- Main defining characteristics of Diaspora.
- The privileged relation between “Diaspora” and “minority.”
- Different (inclusive / exclusive) conceptualizations/theorizings of Diaspora.
DIASPORA

- Etymologically, the term Diaspora has a Greek origin.
- Its meaning: “to sow over” was used to refer to Greek colonial populations outside Greece.
- In the past, the concept was mostly used by scholars who researched dispersed African, Jewish, and Armenian populations.
- Since the beginning of the 1990s, the concept has been at the center of debates and research in a variety of fields of inquiry, which are engaged in the study of movements of people and goods, transnationalism, and processes of globalization.
DIASPORA?

- This explosion of work on “Diaspora” makes it eventually difficult to identify how and why the term is being deployed in critical scholarship.
- “Diaspora” is often used, erroneously, to simplistically evoke all movements, however privileged, and all dislocations, even symbolic ones.
EXCLUSIONARY DEFINITIONS OR THEORIZING OF DIASPORA.

- This explosion of work on “Diaspora” brought some scholars to react by proposing specific, and rather exclusive, definitions.
- The often cited article by William Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return” (1991), presents what is probably the most notorious of these reactionary and exclusionary definitions or theorizing of Diaspora.
“Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return”

- This article by Safran was published in the first issue of a new—in 1991—journal (Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies) dedicated to the study and discussion of research on Diasporas. The journal’s foundation in the early 1990s denotes the blossoming of interests for the concept that characterized that decade.
DEFINITION OF DIASPORA?

- There is no such thing as a clear-cut and definitive definition of Diaspora.
- Diaspora has always been theorized in relation to the realities of one, or of a small group of, community(ies) at a time.
- This situation only allowed for discussion of certain specific aspects of Diasporas’ “characteristics” at one given time.
SAFRAN’S LIST OF DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF DIASPORA

- Taking Walker Connor’s basic definition of Diaspora: “that segment of a people living outside the homeland” (1988: 6) as a departure point, Safran (in the above mentioned article) proposed a list of such defining characteristics.
- He extended Connor’s definition by including in its scope the expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following six characteristics:
1) DISPERSION

- Members of a diasporic community, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original “center” to two or more “peripheral,” or foreign regions.
Members of a diasporic community are defined by their retention of a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements.
3) RELATIVE ALIENATION FROM HOST SOCIETY

- Members of a diasporic community believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it.
4) IDEALIZING HOMELAND

- Members of a diasporic community regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate.
5) COMMITMENT TO MAINTENANCE OR RESTORATION OF THE ORIGINAL HOMELAND

- Members of a diasporic community believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity.
Members of a diasporic community continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. (1991: 83-84)
In the social sciences, the concept of “minority” is applied to communities who are deprived of, or have limited access to, social and political power in their societies of residence.

This use of “minority” precludes the application of “Diaspora” to groups who concentrate (a lot of) social and political power.
JEWISH DIASPORA AS AN IDEAL?

- Safran, a Jewish scholar, grounds his list of shared characteristics on the “experiences” of the Jewish diaspora.

- For him, Jewish experience provides the “ideal type” of Diaspora.

- Other Diasporic communities only approach this ideal of diasporic experience, but never really attain it (See Safran1991:84).
CRITIQUES OF SAFRAN

- Many Diaspora studies scholars criticized Safran’s list for its exclusionary tendency, and for its exclusively Zionist understanding of the Jewish diaspora.

- Robin Cohen (a Jewish scholar of South African origin, who is now based in Ireland), for example, dedicated the first chapter of his book, Global Diasporas: An Introduction (1997), to such a critique.
In the introduction to his book *Global Diasporas*, Cohen discusses and critiques classical notions of Diaspora.

He underlines the diversity of origin of the Jewish diaspora (see also Boyarin and Boyarin 2003), and emphasizes the necessity for Diaspora studies scholars to transcend the Jewish tradition (1997:1-30).
Cohen is much more inclusive than Safran, in the way he uses “Diaspora” to label certain communities.

Referring directly to Safran, he enumerates what he sees as three additional features of Diaspora that Safran did not include in his listing of characteristic features:
1) GROUPS THAT SCATTER FOR AGGRESSIVE OR VOLUNTARIST REASONS.

- “We may wish to include in the category ‘Diaspora,’” groups that scatter for aggressive or voluntarist reasons. [The latter could be] justified by reference to the case of the Ancient Greeks (who after all, coined the word) and to the duality, voluntary and compelled, of the Jews’ own migration patterns. It also conforms to Cohen’s use of the term to describe trading and commercial networks, to those seeking work abroad and to imperial or colonial settlers.” (1997:23-24)
1) GROUPS THAT SCATTER FOR AGGRESSIVE OR VOLUNTARIST REASONS (pt. II)

- That is how Cohen comes up with the categories “labour diasporas” and “imperial diasporas.”

- Because the category “imperial diasporas” is in direct contradiction with Safran’s understanding that Diasporas must be “minority communities” in their country of residence, it has been highly problematic.
2) TIME

- Time has to pass before we can know that any community that has migrated “is really a Diaspora.”

- “A strong tie to the past or a block to assimilation in the present and future must exist in order to permit a diasporic consciousness to emerge or be retained.” (Cohen 1997: 24)
3) COMMON IDENTITY WITH CO-ETHNIC MEMBERS IN OTHER COUNTRIES

- Cohen argues that the fact that “members of a Diaspora characteristically sense not only a collective identity in a place of settlement, nor again only a relationship with an imagined, putative or real homeland, but also a common identity with co-ethnic members in other countries. (…) 

- [However] a bond of loyalty to the country of refuge/settlement competes with ethnic solidarity of members of diasporic community.
COHEN’S LIST OF COMMON FEATURES OF A DIASPORA:

- Similarly to Safran, Cohen also came up with a list of characteristic features.

- Despite being somewhat similar to Safran’s, Cohen’s list is much more inclusive.

- It has nine main points (Cohen 1997:26):
A diasporic community is defined by a dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions.
2) EXPANSION

- Alternatively, the dislocation of diasporic community can be a result of expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade, or to further colonial ambitions.
3) COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND MYTH ABOUT THE HOMELAND

- A diasporic community is also established around a collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history and achievements.
Diasporic community is conditioned upon an idealization of the putative ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, and/or even to its creation.
5) RETURN TO HOMELAND

- Among diasporic communities, the notion of a return movement typically gains unquestioned collective approbation.
Another characteristic of diasporic existence is a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history, and the belief in a common fate.
7) TROUBLED RELATIONSHIP WITH HOST SOCIETIES

- Diasporic communities are often burdened by a troubled relationship with host societies, suggesting at least a lack of acceptance, or the possibility that another calamity might befall the group.
8) SOLIDARITY WITH CO-ETHNIC MEMBERS IN OTHER COUNTRIES

- Members of diasporic communities develop a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members living not only in their home country, but also in other countries of settlement.
9) **POSITIVE VALUE OF DIASPORIC EXISTENCE**

- The possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism.

(Here, he mostly has the Jewish diaspora as an example)
COHEN’S CATEGORIES OF DIASPORA (see Cohen 1997):

- Victim diasporas (ex: Armenians, and African slaves in the US and other regions),
- Labor diasporas (ex: Indian population in the West Indies),
- Imperial diasporas (ex: British in their colonies),
- Trade diasporas (ex: Chinese in Europe),
- Cultural diasporas (ex: Caribbean mix)
In the field of Diaspora studies, many scholars have focused their research on the relations that diasporic communities have maintained with their homelands.

They try to address the ways in which diasporic communities manage to construct (imagine) their respective homelands.
AFRICA AS HOMELAND

- There is, for example, abundant literature on African diasporic imaginations of Africa as homeland / Motherland, particularly on communities of the African diaspora who are the descendants of slaves or maroons (see Price 1983, Routon 2005).
- Most of these works focus specifically on U.S. born African Americans (Lemelle and Kelley 1994; on “Afrocentric” imaginations of Africa, see Howe 1998, Rahier 2001; on the imagination of Africa in the U.S., see Hernandez 1999).
- Others deal with constructions of the homeland by West Indian migrants in the U.S. (Hintzen 2001, 2004), or focus on the relationship of Haitian diasporans to Haïti (Laguerre 2005), of Jamaican diasporans to Jamaica (Thomas 2006); etc.
Scholars who wrote about other diasporic communities have also focused on homeland construction (see Assayag 2003, Radhakrishman 2003, and Lowe 2003.)
HOMELAND vs. HOST COUNTRY AS A LOCATION FOR IMAGINING HOME

- Some Diaspora studies scholars (particularly in African diaspora studies) have emphasized and focused their research exclusively on the survival of homeland traditions in the lives of the diasporans (see Herskovits 1990 [1958]).
- Other scholars, also in African Diaspora studies, have on the contrary insisted that the locations (places) in which diasporic communities live are fundamental for the understanding of diasporic constructions of the homeland and self-identity (see Gilroy 1993, Hintzen 2002, Rahier 1999: xiii-xxvi).
IMPERIAL DIASPORA?

- Most scholars in African Diaspora studies completely disagree with Cohen’s category of “imperial diasporas.”
- Indeed, in their work, the notion of not being fully integrated into definitions of citizenship in their country of residence or birth is a fundamental condition for Diasporas to exist (see Hintzen 2002).
- For them, it makes no sense to theorize Diaspora in such a way as to call Diaspora a group of colonial settlers. These colonial settlers, because they concentrated social, political, and military powers, were not a minority community wherever they were, on the very contrary; and this is so despite their limited number in relation to the colonized populations.
Contemporary theorizings of Diaspora challenge the notions of a fixed point of origin, unilineal trajectories of movement, and singular historical moments of forced dispersal that create diasporic communities.
PAUL GILROY AND AFRICAN DIASPORA THEORIZINGS

- The work of Paul Gilroy challenges the rigidity of some of these conceptions. He de-centers Africa and the unilineal trajectory of Black people from the continent.

- He describes the Atlantic as a site of constant, *multi-directional* criss-crossing by networks of Black people for a whole variety of reasons. (See Gilroy 1993).

- However, he has been criticized because he still privileges Atlantic geographies and the transatlantic slave trade as the defining moment for Black movement.
NEW DIASPORAS

- Some scholars also talk of “new Diasporas” (see Van Hear 1998, Koser 2003).

- In the case of Koser, what he calls “new African diasporas” are of recent, non-slavery based, post-colonial formation (in Europe, the U.S., and elsewhere).
Other scholars have insisted on another aspect of Diasporas: common identity with co-ethnic (co-“racial”) members in other countries (see Edwards 2003), and insist on diasporic transnational circulation of cultures and politics (see Gilroy 1993).
Others have discussed Diaspora in relation to gender constructs and sexuality (see Chow 2003, Ifekwunigwe 2003, Manalansan 2003).
CONCLUSION

- Despite Safran’s wishes (the “imperial diaspora”), “Diaspora” has usually been theorized and associated in relation to communities of people in situations of socio-economic and political domination, who are regarded as non-citizens in the places where they live (despite their eventual holding of formal citizenship through “naturalization”), and who continue to think of themselves as “naturally” linked to their place or country of origin.

- Safran’s and Cohen’s lists of characteristics are good—although not perfect—tools to begin thinking about “Diasporas.” These lists must be complemented by intensive readings on what has been written by different scholars on a variety of diasporic communities. (See list of recommended readings)