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RITES OF RETURN

Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory

edited by
Marianne Hirsch
and Nancy K. Miller

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For our students

Introduction

MARIANNE HIRSCH AND NANCY K. MILLER

“To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul,” philosopher Simone Weil declared in the chapter “Uprootedness” of her famous 1949 essay, *The Need for Roots*. Emerging from the European aftermath of World War II, Weil’s belief has not ceased to resonate in popular consciousness as well as in theoretical reflections on displacement and dispossession that have come to characterize our modernity. But, Weil also argued, “Every human being needs multiple roots.”¹

In the United States, Alex Haley’s *Roots* gave a name and shape to the longing for a verifiable identification of personal and cultural beginnings. The tremendous success of Haley’s 1976 Pulitzer Prize–winning book and television miniseries attested to the fact that that identification needed more than research into the group genealogy of displaced peoples: it required the hook of a personal journey to an ancestral homeland. *Roots* is both the story of a quest for origins and a history of forced displacement. As a quest narrative, it exposes its research methods: travel to the village of Juffure in Gambia where Haley believed his slave ancestor Kunta Kinte was born, the collection of oral accounts of the capture and enslavement of his forebear, and the consultation of the manifest of *The Lord Ligonier*, the slave ship on which Kunta Kinte was thought to have crossed the seas

to the United States. Using this evidence to construct a history of Kunta Kinte's representative life story, Haley set the stage for the performance of roots seeking and the climactic moments of recovery that have become common features of American collective self-fashioning.² For example, the 2006 public television series *African American Lives* and its sequels, hosted by Henry Louis Gates Jr., updated and supplemented Haley's roots-seeking quest with the use of DNA technologies, as well as user-friendly Internet guidance to help interested viewers research their familial past, construct their family tree, and locate their cultural origins in Africa. Although the DNA tests remained inconclusive for most of Gates's celebrity guests, and mostly dispelled their imagined origins (Gates himself is found to be 50 percent European), the trajectory of *African American Lives* culminates in the "return" journey of well-known actor Chris Tucker to an authentic-looking village in Angola—not the village where his ancestors probably originated, the program assures us, but one "like it." There, dancing around the ancestral baobab tree, villagers welcome Tucker as he cheerfully exclaims that "I'm happy to be back."

The vast appeal of *African American Lives* and its spinoffs to U.S. audiences, along with the success of Web sites like www.africanancestry.com and www.jewishgen.org, attest both to the seduction of the quest for a direct link to deep roots and family bloodlines, and to what appears to be a widespread longing that crosses the boundaries of ethnicity, gender, and social class.³ But Saidiya Hartman challenges these longings in *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*: "Neither blood nor belonging accounted for my presence in Ghana . . . only the path of strangers impelled toward the sea. . . . I wasn't seeking the ancestral village but the barracoon."⁴ Unlike Haley or Gates, Hartman is impelled not by a desire to recover a lost homeland but to witness, record, and repair a history of injury through which lives are undone and humans are transformed into commodities. And yet, even as she resolutely embraces the identity of the "stranger" rather than the returnee, Hartman searches for her own beginnings, for how the spaces and traces of enslavement "had created and marked me."⁵

Mutual imbrication rather than clear opposition between a desire for roots and an embrace of diasporic existence is symptomatic of our post-millennial moment. In his classic 1984 essay "Reflections on Exile," Edward Said observed that our age "with its modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers—is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration." But, de-

spite his recognition of the pain and sadness of exile, Said, in the mid-1980s, warned against the equally powerful implications of the quest for rootedness—defensive nationalism, territorialism, cultural chauvinism, so many variants of “triumphant ideology.”⁶ Said gave voice here to the dominant postmodern discourses of hybridity, frequently heard across U.S. campuses throughout the 1980s and 1990s: the embrace of marginality, the border, and diasporic existence as a corrective to both the essentialist identity politics of the 1970s and insidious nationalist orthodoxies.

In his landmark essays on the meanings of diaspora, James Clifford added the now familiar homonym *routes* to *roots* so as to emphasize the ways in which every form of rootedness and dwelling already presupposes travel, cultural exchange—routes. Opposed to colonialism and war, moreover, diaspora came to appear, in Clifford’s terms, as a “positive transnationalism,” a fruitful paradigm capable of disrupting identity-based conflicts.⁷ In the language of diaspora, originary homelands are not simply there to be recovered: already multiply interconnected with other places, they are further transformed by the ravages of time, transfigured through the lenses of loss and nostalgia, constructed in the process of the search. “Root-seekers,” Alondra Nelson argues, “also become root-makers.”

The very definition of diaspora depends on attachments to a former home and, typically, on a fantasy of return. At the same time, diaspora’s classic writings tend to defer that fantasy in favor of a practice of “dwelling (differently)” in a global network of interchange and circulation.⁸ Far from waning, however, in the twenty-first century, the desire for return to origins and to sites of communal suffering has progressively intensified. The cumulative effects of multiplying disasters at the end of the twentieth century and the refugee crises many of them unleashed have contributed to these desires—as do anxieties about belonging and concerns about the violence and inequities faced by refugees and illegal immigrants here in the United States, as well as in Europe and other parts of the globe. The ability to travel after the end of the cold war and the fall of the iron curtain, however, in combination with specialized Web-based technologies, have rekindled desires for reconnection with lost personal and familial pasts.

As academic feminist critics in the United States, we lived through and participated in critical and sometimes bitter conversations about the conflicting claims of identity animating the phenomenon of return. It is from this vantage point that we ask: What links the ostensibly postmod-

ern individual to the community from which she has been severed by accidents of history? How, in particular, does a feminist subject negotiate the intensities and contradictory impulses of diasporic return?

Rites of Return stages a dialogue between feminist and diaspora studies, offering a multifaceted paradigm of community that acknowledges longings to belong and to return while remaining critical of a politics of identity and nation.

Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" inspired generations of postwar, second-wave feminist scholars to understand gender identity as an existential construction rather than an inherited essence.⁹ Recast in new language for the 1990s by Judith Butler, the idea of cultural self-construction emerged as a performative process and a reinterpretation of sexual codes and gender norms. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, the elaboration of new identities secured by the evidence of science and genetics has posed an intriguing challenge to constructionist models.

An attention to roots and identity-based origins does not necessarily mean an appeal to a biological essentialism, shored up and masked by innovative technology. Like most cultural theorists working during the years of poststructuralist and postcolonial debate, we are suspicious of origins and, as feminists, we are committed to challenging idealizations of home. We have embraced the commitment to contingent, ambiguous definitions of self. But, as our own essays here reveal, each of us, along with many other American Jews of our generation, has also devoted the last several years to the recovery of our own family stories and the search for lost Jewish worlds in Eastern Europe. Throughout this past decade, we have been actively engaged in the emerging fields of memory and trauma studies and particularly have come to appreciate the confluences and the commitments these theoretical projects share with feminism. Indeed, the notion of *postmemory* elaborated by Marianne Hirsch emerges from feminist insights into the mediated structuring of identity and the intersection of private and public forces in its formation. Thus the legacies of the past, transmitted powerfully from parent to child within the family, are always already inflected by broader public and generational stories, images, artifacts, and understandings that together shape identity and identification. While the idea of postmemory can account for the lure of second-generation "return," it also underscores the radical distance that separates the past from the present and the risks of projection, appropriation, and

overidentification occasioned by second- and third-generation desires and needs.

In an analogous formation, Nancy K. Miller's term the *transpersonal* builds on the feminist understanding that the personal is necessarily political, which is to say shared with others. The transpersonal emphasizes the links that connect an individual not only backward in time vertically through earlier generations but also in a horizontal, present tense of affinities.¹⁰ The transpersonal is a zone of relation that is social, affective, material, and inevitably public.

Taken together, the essays in *Rites of Return* bring to diaspora studies an articulation of the complex interaction between the affects of belonging and the politics of entitlement in a diasporic world, rethinking and retheorizing the complex interactions between loss and reclamation, mourning and repair, departure and return. The readings of diaspora and rites of return offered by this volume propose alternatives to the celebration of rootlessness and diasporism by making space for the persistent power of nostalgia, and the magnetism of the idea of belonging, even while casting a critical eye on the obsession with roots. This dual vision can combine the desire for "home," and for the concreteness and materiality of place and connection, with a concomitant, ethical commitment to carefully contextualized and differentiated practices of witness, restoration of rights, and acts of repair.

Three special issues of feminist journals were recently devoted to thinking diaspora and gender together in the context of transnational feminism. In their introduction to "The Global and the Intimate," geographer Geraldine Pratt and literary critic Victoria Rosner argue for the productive consonance of two paradigms: "The global and the intimate," they write, "may seem an unexpected combination, yet our pairing draws on a central strand of feminist practice, one that challenges gender-based oppositions by upending hierarchies of space and scale."¹¹ Emerging from African diaspora studies and an interdisciplinary project on "Gendering Diaspora," the 2008 issue of *Feminist Review*, edited by Tina Campt and Deborah Thomas, also focuses on such experiential specificities, applying the lens of feminist critical analysis, if not always a primary focus on women and gender, to the study of diaspora.¹² Both "The Global and the Intimate" and "Gendering Diaspora" situate themselves against the backdrop of the differential effects of globalization on diverse populations, the new hegemo-

nies and power structures that are formed within diasporic communities, and gendered and raced conceptions of the relationships between routes and roots in the self-conceptions of displaced peoples.

In her introduction to the 2009 special “Diaspora” issue of the new journal *Contemporary Women’s Writing*, Susan Stanford Friedman aims to show “how gender—particularly the experience of women—is the flash-point of complexity exploding at every step reductionistic readings of the ‘new migration.’” Women’s narratives, Friedman writes, “suggest that the displacement of diaspora begins *before* the journey from home to elsewhere, begins indeed within the home and homeland and travels with the women as they face the difficulties of negotiating between new ways and old ways of living.”¹³ Several of the essays in *Rites of Return*, like the essays in these special issues, account for the differential diasporic experiences of women and for women’s gendered oppression at home as well as abroad.

As early as the 1990s, queer theorists challenged the notion of diaspora by pointing out its masculinist, patriarchal, and heteronormative assumptions. At the same time, as Jarrod Hayes shows in this volume, an ever growing body of scholarship in queer diaspora studies has found the concept of diaspora surprisingly generative for theoretical elaborations of postcolonial thought that focus on the multiplicity of roots and the lateral, extrafamilial connections queering structures of kinship.¹⁴

Sharing the feminist and queer methodology of this recent work, *Rites of Return* shifts the focus from *diaspora* to *return*, to the practices that take place between routes and roots. Throughout, we emphasize the links between private experience and national and global crises as well as the role of generational histories and genealogies in acts of memory as well as fantasies of return. This accent on the personal, the familial, the affective, and the intimate has long been constitutive in feminist theory, trauma theory, and psychoanalysis. Here we bring these same pressures to bear on the paradigms of place and displacement that shape the field of diasporic studies.

It has been instructive to return to the genealogy of feminist thought that underpins our current reevaluation of diasporic canons. In its desire to mark the places of connection between intimate values and a wider world of conflict, this volume in fact returns to a force that has animated feminist theory since at least the mid-1980s. In her 1984 “Notes Toward a Politics of Location,” for instance, Adrienne Rich revisits her earlier conviction that seeing the politics in women’s individual personal experience

is key to a collective political vision. And she worries about looking back to a lost female utopia for inspiration: “I’ve been thinking a lot about the obsession with origins,” Rich admits. “It seems a way of stopping time in its tracks.” As she ponders the history of racism, she reflects: “Don’t we have to start here, where we are, forty years after the Holocaust, in the churn of Middle East violence, in the midst of decisive ferment in South Africa—not in some debate over origins and precedents, but in the recognition of simultaneous oppressions?”¹⁵

To some extent the desire for return always arises from a need to redress an injustice, one often inflicted upon an entire group of people caused by displacement or dispossession, the loss of home and of family autonomy, the conditions of expulsion, colonization, and migration. When we examine the detail, the case studies of individual and collective return, attentive to hierarchies of gender and sexuality and the power dynamics of contested histories, we find that hidden within what appears to be a universal narrative of rights are uneven and gendered smaller stories, forgotten and submerged plots of the kind that feminist theory has taught us to bring to light.

Rites of Return is organized around four overlapping nodes that map a present moment in which return has become a generative practice and paradigm. Part 1, “Tangled Roots and New Genealogies,” explores at once the social effects of digital and biological technologies that have produced new possibilities in genealogical research and identity constructions and recent literary and artistic contestations of biological and essentialist conceptions of identity and genealogy. The essays in part 1 illuminate Simone Weil’s belief that every “human being needs to have multiple roots.”¹⁶

Part 2, “Genres of Return,” analyzes different aesthetic modes and genres—memoir, photography, music—as well as different forms of cultural engagement, like travel and activism, that have been mobilized by and expressed through a variety of acts of return. The first-person voice of these and many of the other essays in the volume underscores the emotional stakes of familial and national legacies, the cost of return, and the necessary interrelatedness of memorial projects occurring in dramatically different cultural contexts.

But *rites* of return always invoke the question of *rights*, and part 3, “Rights of Return,” explicitly examines the fundamental tensions between acts and claims. Whatever the location or political history, the effects of these complexities emerge with equal force in the analyses of novels and

memoirs, legal and humanitarian documents, and impassioned testimonial essays that appear in this third section.

The volume ends with part 4, “Sites of Return and the New Tourism of Witness,” which focuses on the transformation of sites and the kinds of travel that have arisen in response to the civic needs generated by catastrophic events across the globe. At their best, the museums, memorials, and “modes of memory tourism” discussed in these essays combine the powerful affects of return with a critical and political form of witness.

How can such radically different sites of return be thought together, in one volume, without blurring the distinctions between the historical, political, and personal circumstances of African Americans, Jews, Aboriginal and indigenous peoples, South Asians, and Palestinians? In placing their stories alongside each other, we are putting forward a *connective* rather than *comparative* approach that places the claims, responses, and strategies of redress emerging from different contexts in conversation with each other. The performance of return crosses cultural divides and reveals both commonalities and differences among diverse groups with divergent histories. Such *connective* work in memory studies is meant as a corrective to the nationalist and identity-based tendencies at work in some of the memorial projects described in the volume.¹⁷

The essays in *Rites of Return* focus on small, ordinary stories, on objects and images, on local and familiar sites of longing and belonging. But they always reveal the political dimensions of the private and familial as well: the family becomes not only the site of memorial transmission and continuity across generations but also a trope of loss, longing, and the desire for home. From a feminist and queer perspective, however, the family often becomes the site of critique—sometimes of rejection and abjection. Thus, in “Queer Roots for the Diaspora,” Jarrod Hayes suggests that “the family tree that typically structures return narratives” tends to be heterosexual and that “whereas a return to roots attempts to remedy the alienation resulting from a historical uprooting, an assertion of roots can just as easily justify oppression by excluding those considered not to share them.” The African and Caribbean writers on which his argument focuses instead propose “alternative, multiple roots that ground an identity based on not only sexual diversity, but also diversity in general.”

Similarly, Sonali Thakkar’s “Foreign Correspondence” shows the difficult yet seemingly inevitable return of a young Ghanaian woman from 1970s Western Europe to postindependence Africa, as narrated in Ama

Ata Aidoo's prose poem *Our Sister Killjoy*. Family offers the protagonist only the limiting role of "Sissie," but the queer kiss by a German woman cannot provide an alternative form of affiliation. Ultimately, "Sissie must return home, not just because her loyalties demand it, but also because she feels herself unwelcome and unwanted elsewhere." If injury can spur the original departure, for today's foreign immigrants and refugees, injury can spur the need to return, often leaving would-be returnees amid impossible alternatives.

This dilemma, and the powerful forces of family and the maternal, emerge most clearly in a distinctly contemporary roots-seeking phenomenon, a practice, as Margaret Homans shows, that is common to a cohort of transnational adoptees: young women who decide to undertake a journey to their country of origin—in this case Korea—in order to come to terms with their severance from ordinary homeland and maternal attachment. What they long for from their biological mothers is perhaps the fantasy of every daughter, biological or adopted: to be embraced, accepted, seen, and understood, even beyond language. By definition, however, fantasies are rarely satisfied in reality, and it is not surprising that the young women are often disappointed and reinjured by their return to what they think of as their lost home. For many, what Homans terms "scopic sexism" and the prevalent racism of the U.S. communities in which the girls grow up are sadly matched by the patriarchal beliefs of the Korean family with which they reconnect.

Nevertheless, the encounter with the realities of reunion has productive effects on the level of writing. In their memoirs the adopted daughters convert their suffering into a document through which their stories are preserved as history, and the "ambiguous maternal legacies" become "strong assertions of creative futures." As home becomes a textual effect of the journey and a figure of writing, the memoirists reverse the traditional sequence between roots and routes, thus complicating or, in Jarrod Hayes's terms, queering, the conception of origin itself.

In the literature of return, a painful past can sometimes be reframed through writing. When suffering is translated into fictional narrative and art, it becomes a way to counter the history of violence through an aesthetics of reattachment. This is Rosanne Kennedy's argument in her study of Aboriginal responses to the disruption of biological family and exile from homeland in Australia. What this would mean, for any disinherited group, might be thought of as an adaptation of what Adrienne Rich called, several decades ago, "writing as re-vision," a gesture with powerful

implications. For women, Rich famously declared, re-vision is “more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.”¹⁸ In much the same way, Kennedy shows, indigenous writers and artists refuse the silence surrounding the violence done to bloodlines and generational descent through work that seeks to “represent and commemorate the trauma of dispossession and bring that experience into visibility.” When artist Judy Watson resorts to the “perverse archives” of the colonizers and resignifies the documents that record the injuries inflicted on Australian Aboriginal peoples by subjecting them to “blood marks,” she creates a new way of reading the past that brings oppressions into a forum that can begin to acknowledge injustice and lay the groundwork for redress.

The emotional effects of diasporic dislocation and relocation also have led many of us in the twenty-first century to recapture, in writing, family memories and stories, in order to rescue lost legacies, to restore connections suspended by time, place, and politics. This is especially true of descendants of groups that have been subjected to extermination or expulsion. Memoir, a literary genre reinvigorated and reinvented in the 1990s, has become an increasingly productive form for exploring the meaning of family, generational identity, and ethnicity, as well as one for researching a past marked by historical calamity—the losses caused by the vicissitudes of violence, war, and genocide. The success of the memoirs of return by three writers we have placed in conversation, Saidiya Hartman, Eva Hoffman, and Daniel Mendelsohn, attests to the power of the personal voice and of the family as vehicle in the transpersonal writing of historical return.

The return to family through acts of memory is a journey in place and time. In the most common form of the genre, the returning son or daughter seeks connection to a parent or more distant ancestor and thereby to a culture and a physical site that has been transformed by the effects of distance and the ravages of political violence. They wish to see, touch, and hear that familial house, that street corner, the sounds of the language that the child often does not speak or perhaps never did. Never straightforward, the return to the generational family is always dependent on translation, approximation, and acts of imagination.

In his meditation on his family’s complicated roots, Jay Prosser attempts to connect to his mother’s past, writing *her* memoir *for her*, by re-connecting her memory to that of her father—his grandfather—through the pathways of music. Prosser returns to the family’s diasporic history through physical journeys, his and his mother’s, but most effectively and

poignantly by replaying a cassette, recorded in the 1970s, of the voice of his grandfather, “a Baghdadi Jew living in Singapore . . . born in Bombay.” Thanks to the tape, the grandson can hear and repossess the complex linguistic legacy that held his family together over the distances of dispersion. “Singing is what I remember about my grandfather,” Prosser writes, “not his stories, for which I was neither old nor geographically close enough.” In this autobiographical return through music, it becomes possible to override the spaces of geographical separation and to restore some of the lost dimensions of a scattered family with sharing and collaboration. Again, a postmemorial aesthetic of reattachment creates a new way of bringing historically inflected meaning to intergenerational transmission.

In Prosser’s multicultural musical archive, the emotional, bodily longing to recapture lost time is unmistakable. And it is his belief in the power of music to cross borders that connects the affect of familial return to a future politics, one not stymied by bitter histories of exclusion and repression. This hopeful vision, embodied in the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra cofounded by Edward Said and David Barenboim, is moving in its optimism, but optimism in the Middle East is always lined with a pessimism lived on the ground, in struggle.

This entwined awareness of history, injustice, and responsibility is embedded in Amira Hass’s “Between Two Returns: A Meditation from Palestine.” Writing autobiographically, Hass both acknowledges the sense in which she is “split at the root,” not biologically, in her case, but historically: both as the daughter of Holocaust survivors, born in Jerusalem, and as a journalist deeply committed to Palestinian rights of return.¹⁹ Hass protests the ideology underwriting the Israeli Law of Return that concretizes “the alleged blood links supposedly shared by Jews all over the world and tie them all to the soil of the Holy Land.” She constructs her meditation in part from the complicated details of the diasporic journeys of her parents, citing the example of her mother who, by her own practice of dwelling, voted “for the right of Jews to live in the Diaspora of their choice, not necessarily the Diaspora of their birth.” But she ends on a note that emerges from the language of a poem by Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, hoping for another iteration of a long-deferred return: “Perhaps, because it is trans-temporal, the Palestinians’ return will possibly materialize one day, and their exile will have become one of choice, not of coercion.”

In these and other feminist accounts of return, the memory strands of inheritance are intimately intertwined—the domestic and the political, the

familial and the global. If Prosser's Baghdadi grandfather handed down the emotion of warmth and attachment of his diasporic legacy through song, Lila Abu-Lughod's Palestinian inheritance was passed on through her father's stories. "My father was a talker and a storyteller," Abu-Lughod begins her meditation on her father's return to Palestine. "Because of this, there was no time when we, his children, did not know we were Palestinian." For a Palestinian to say return to Palestine is also to come to grips with the expulsion that preceded it. But what does it mean for the American-born daughter of a Palestinian-born father to invoke the trauma of this past history? As in many autobiographical accounts of return to a geography one has inherited through familial memory as a "wounded identification," the writer must grapple with two levels of return: her entrance into a world by way of another's story and her own political views of that world's history from another location and its politics. Those two levels of return are necessarily related to each other, but never identical, particularly after the parent's death: "I had heard my father's stories all my life, but it is different to walk, orphaned, through a hot dusty checkpoint dragging your suitcases because they won't allow any Palestinian vehicles to cross." The trauma of the daughter's return remains doubly layered: a daughter's loss of her father, a daughter, who is also a writer, for whom the father's past continues to be a brutal present.

The doubleness of inherited trauma as it is expressed in the act of return haunts memoirs, as does, in fact, the double frame of return itself. For the generation of descendants for whom the world of the parents and grandparents is not a world they shared in the same fold of time, going back to the city of origin, however, is a way of coming to grips with the mythic dimensions of a place they would have to apprehend on new terms. The experience of return to an earlier generation's lived places is mediated by story, song, image, and history. But now it is also powerfully mediated by the parallel reality of the digital. In fact, it could be argued, as Hirsch and Spitzer do, that it is the very immateriality of the virtual landscape that compels the return to the actual, the three-dimensionality of the vanished or, at least, irrevocably transformed place itself.

Some return journeys, like Daniel Mendelsohn's in *The Lost* and Eva Hoffman's in *After Such Knowledge*, may begin with individual and familial loss, but when family history is intimately bound up with momentous historical events, individual stories become communal and generational and family histories become representative. New technologies have fostered such a sense of community, the formation of groups based on pre-

sumed shared desires and needs. In the case of the Czernowitz reunion group described by Hirsch and Spitzer, the trip itself emerged from a need for making community on the basis of a common history. The group had shared knowledge and memories with each other on the Web site. But is it possible to become a group in the present on the basis of overlapping but distant histories, intersecting memories, familiar stories, and the seduction of a place known for its seductiveness, without erasing differences and disagreements? Hirsch and Spitzer reveal the pitfalls of Web-based intimacy and group affiliation that always lurks in the fascination with genealogy and allure of origin.

Place and a shared past may offer no more than illusory forms of group connections, no less problematic than a return to familial origins. But the increasing popularity of the use of population DNA tests to determine group belonging attests to a need for group identity certified through new forms of evidence. In “The Factness of Diaspora” Alondra Nelson shows that while African American root seekers tend to embrace the findings of genetic genealogy that locate family origins in specific places and with specific ethnic groups on the African continent, the experience of “self-making” does not end there. Rather, the technoscientific evidence of identity serves as a first step in a more expansive and complicated process that she calls “affiliative self-fashioning.” Unlike the new historicist trope of self-fashioning at the heart of Stephen Greenblatt’s famous argument about self-construction in the Renaissance, in which the emphasis was on an individual’s self-creation through literature and art, Nelson’s concept entails an identification with a diasporic group and with that group’s ethnic and cultural profile. In other words, while the fact of genealogical material puts a name on a lineage, the outcome of the quest takes on meaning only when the root seeker acts on the desire for a communal affiliation.

What seems productive and interesting about this concept is that while the scientific component of the new identity points toward the power of bloodline, the outcome of the genealogical quest is not simply a label. Motivated by the principles of constructedness that seemed to be lost in the rush to a simple evidentiary truth model, and seen through the paradigm of “factness” rather than fact, the desire for bonds and relations based on what might have once been a shared history leads to the imagining of another kind of community. Root seekers selectively reimagine their lives with the idea of a group and its cultural legacies. “Affiliative self-fashioning” thus becomes a useful tool for creating alternative,

transpersonal models of selfhood that take on meaning in relation and in what we might think of as a diasporic kinship based on shared desires. In the case of African American communities, the stakes of this remaking are high, for they represent an avenue of future repair, a way to counter the pain of slavery's history of displacement through a contemporary politics of acknowledgment.

In the world of biomedecine, the "new genetics," as Nadia Abu El-Haj demonstrates, looking at the meaning of DNA as scientific evidence for group self-image, takes the question of identity both backward in time and forward into the present. Abu El-Haj interprets the project of the U.S.-based group Kulanu ("all of us" in Hebrew). Founded in 1994, the organization's stated aim is to bring about the recognition of nonwhite Jews, thus revising the boundaries of the white Jewish world. While the specific example Abu El-Haj examines emerges from an anthropological study of the Lemba of Southern Africa, who see themselves as descendants of the "ancient Lost Tribes of Israel," what is at stake is something broader, the Israeli state's definition of what it means to be a Jew—genealogical descent or religious practice. This combination of biological material and cultural choice resembles the kind of "affiliative self-fashioning" that Alondra Nelson describes in the creative self-remaking of roots-seeking African Americans, but with an important difference. In the final analysis, for the groups protected by Kulanu, the meaning of affiliation is dependent for validation on legal, religious, and governmental authority in Israel, not just the community and its ideal of kinship.

But neither collective affinity, shared cultural history, nor national belonging can guarantee the protection of a community of citizens from disaster when racism is an unspoken but nonetheless powerful force. This was demonstrated by the U.S. government's response to the disaster wrought on home and family by Hurricane Katrina. Seen against the discourse of "homeland security," Patricia Williams poignantly shows, the "simplicity of 'home' becomes a site for nostalgia, the old country before famine, flood, or pogrom, an imaginary geography of tremendous contradiction, of ambivalence and flight, of (up) rootedness and romance, of magic and superstition." Katrina engendered a violent experience of forced departure and impeded, selective return. As Williams puts it, "despite all the talk about rights of return, the only thing that's happened . . . has been the planting of a few strips of grass in front of still empty buildings." Katrina exposed the vulnerability of a discourse of rights in the face of national policy disorganization and an underlying politics of eco-

conomic and racial discrimination. As evacuees and not refugees—a term rejected as describing the situation of foreign victims of disaster—the American citizens of New Orleans were on the whole unable to invoke any official protection and benefits that would allow them to return to their lost homes, or the sites of former homes, to rebuild and remake community and future. Despite the shocking failure of governmental redress to the poorest of the displaced, New Orleans has spurred a great deal of artistic response as an unofficial site of conscience. The artistic and cultural response to memorializing the catastrophe and conceptualizing possibilities of repair can be understood in relation to forms of site-specific remembrance. Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick have documented life in New Orleans's Treme and Lower Ninth Ward for decades. Their studio and their negatives were destroyed by the flood, but the two of them returned to New Orleans and formed the L9 Cultural Center in a small renovated building in the Lower Ninth. The images included here document this mixture of devastation and resilience, the impossibility and stubborn insistence on return and attempted repair. Like Susan Meiselas's "Homecoming," which serves as the cover image of this volume, "L9 Destruction" depicts a woman's return to a devastated home. Looking at her look at the ruin makes palpable the depths of the losses suffered by women, who are so often the unnoted civilian casualties of war and natural or historical disaster, and the courage they will have to muster to rebuild their lives and those of their families.

In our historical moment, much energy is being spent around the world designing museums and memorials that facilitate the process of site-specific remembrance. In its mission statement, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, founded in 1999, states that "it is the obligation of historic sites to assist the public in drawing connections between the history of our sites and their contemporary implications. We view stimulating dialogue on pressing social issues and promoting humanitarian and democratic values as a primary function." The coalition, described here by U.S.-based founding director Liz Ševčenko, consists of seven accredited and more than one hundred affiliated sites across the world. Many are sites of former atrocity, like the Gulag Museum in Russia, the District 6 Museum in Cape Town, the Maison des Esclaves in Senegal, or the Terezín Memorial in the Czech Republic; others, like the Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site, are memorial and pedagogic sites marking events or conditions of persecution, using them to promote

democratic and humanitarian values through historical knowledge and consciousness.

The risks entailed in the effort to create responsive global citizens are articulated by Marita Sturken. What will transform the consumerist gaze of the tourist eager to say she has been there, and who has purchased souvenirs to prove it, into an engagement with the past and a connection to the inequities and injustices of the present? Sturken outlines some of the techniques used in different museums and memorials to promote responsible memory tourism on the sites of former acts of atrocity or suffering.

But some, like Andreas Huyssen, who calls the belief in the aura of place “tropolatry,” have challenged the importance of “the place itself” in the work of memory and history.²⁰ Svetlana Boym shares this skepticism. Nostalgia, Boym writes, is “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed.”²¹ While “restorative nostalgia” focuses its desire on *nostos*, a home that might be recovered or a past that can be restored, “reflective nostalgia” places the accent on *algia*, longing itself, and the multiple forms of creativity it spurs. Boym’s “Eccentric Modernities” begins with the imbrication of homesickness and being sick of home, and it moves not back toward a return to the past but sideways in search of the “off,” the chance encounter, the freedom that comes from detours, errors, alternative, and, indeed, multiple genealogies.

The practice of return inevitably consists of such detours and errors in the quest for the place itself. Returnees must come to terms with not just the possibility but often the inevitability of the failure to coincide with the lost object of the quest. At the same time, as Eva Hoffman writes in *After Such Knowledge*, it is also possible to feel “consoled by this near-touching of the time before, this near-meeting of parallel lines that, after all these years, seem to be bending towards each other again.”²² There is something of this consolation in Nancy K. Miller’s travel to the last place in Eastern Europe in which her paternal grandparents resided, the place she began looking for under the name Kishinev, the name of the city recorded on the manifest of the ship that brought her ancestors to New York.

The evidence, especially in third-generation returns, is often scant—family letters and inherited objects found, in Miller’s terms, “in a drawer.” But what, after the ravages of time and the transformations wrought by history and politics, remains to be found? No further evidence of her ancestors’ actual residence in Kishinev, no possibility of visiting the exact locations of rape and murder documented in Bialik’s famous poem about the 1903 pogrom. If one follows the desire for the place itself, the story

can be no more than a record of missed encounters, of unsatisfied longing that generates renewed interest in repeated trips and further and ever deeper and more dedicated genealogical and archival research. But, perhaps, as she comes to understand, the exact family story is finally less important than perceiving its relation to the more general history of the community to which it belonged, a transpersonal belonging preserved, in the case of Moldovan Chişinău, through a set of child-sized dolls.

Perhaps places do not actually themselves carry memory, but memory can be activated by the encounter between the visitor and the place. Diana Taylor records such a powerful performance of memory when she accompanies Pedro Matta, a survivor of torture in Villa Grimaldi, an infamous torture center in Chile and a member of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. As she visits the site with Matta, Taylor is left with myriad questions—about Matta, the authenticity of his affect, his willingness to relive his trauma repeatedly for her and other visitors. In her act of what Irene Kacandes calls “co-witness,” Taylor opens the space for him to tell his story of victimization and survival and she transmits his story to her readers.²³ This encounter, outside the official institution of the memorial, testifies to the power of place and to the personal act of engagement through which that power can be activated.

It is such an act of activist engagement that connects Susan Meiselas to Nicaragua and provokes her repeated return there. Having worked in Central America as a photojournalist during the revolution, Meiselas has returned on a number of occasions. Why, she wonders, has Nicaragua been a primary site of return for her as opposed to the many other sites in which she photographed? She thinks of returning to Nicaragua as a “return to hope”—the hope of the revolution that was disappointed but that can, she believes, be remembered and reclaimed—and it is this reparative belief that animates her numerous return journeys, the film she made about bringing her photographs back to the people who were depicted in them, *Pictures from a Revolution*. Meiselas as artist continues to engage with the place in the present. If she returns, it is not to the past she documented, but to the ways in which that past lives on in the present, in part through her images. Her activist return provokes active remembrance and transmission on site.

These acts of witness take return out of the personal and familial to the realm of history and politics. The popularization of return tourism, which has become a familiar activity of our global moment, equally and simultaneously is a matter of rights: who is entitled to return to a home, a

homeland, a place to which one once belonged? When is return a claim to resettlement? In his “The Politics of Return: When Rights Become Rites” Elazar Barkan traces international policies and conventions concerning refugees, which, largely spurred by the United Nations, always insist on the right to return. Yet Barkan also shows, when it comes to populations that would constitute minorities were they to return to the lands from which they were evicted, how those rights are never implemented. In his terms, rights thus become mere “rites”—useful as aspirations or speech acts, but actually harmful to refugees in that they impede other possible forms of political settlement.

Even if every return emerges on some level from a desire to map a loss, at the same time, every return inevitably exercises, or attempts to exercise, a right to acknowledgment. For some, return is an act of undoing—a counterfactual effort to imagine a world before disaster and displacement. That act of imagination can also become an act of repair, however tenuous. For others, it is a claim to justice and restitution or, for others still, a form of memory tourism. Return can thus be directed back toward the past, sideways to detours and alternate trajectories, and, as a critique of the present, forward toward the future. In this sense, *Rites of Return* contributes to new thinking about nostalgia, showing that it need not be simply directed toward what is deemed to be a better past in need of restoration.

In its concern with justice, ethics, and repair, and the ways in which those domains are shaped by structures of family, generational identity, and home, *Rites of Return* marks a new moment in the field of gender and cultural studies. Our project illuminates the feminist roots and affiliations at the heart of narratives that seek to account for loss and dispossession, trauma and cultural memory but that have not thus far been recognized as such. Through our emphasis on the connections between the private and public, the intimate and global dimensions of the diasporic world we all now inhabit, *Rites of Return* aims to reenliven debates about how to face an uncertain future without forgetting the lessons of the past—without, in turn, being paralyzed by longing for its lost places.

Notes

1. Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Toward Mankind* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 43.

2. The year after receiving the Pulitzer Prize, Haley was accused of plagiarism by Harold Courlander, author of *The African*, a novel published ten years earlier. The suit was settled out of court, leaving the authenticity of Haley's research in doubt.

3. In *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), Matthew Frye Jacobson locates John F. Kennedy's 1963 "return" to Ireland (14), as the inaugural moment of white ethnic revival and the emergence of "roots talk" in American postwar culture (16).

4. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 7, 6.

5. *Ibid.*, 130.

6. Edward W. Said, "Reflections on Exile," *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

7. James Clifford, "Diasporas," *Cultural Anthropology*, 9, no. 3 (1994): 302–338.

8. *Ibid.*, 321. See also Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

9. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1989).

10. For the prominence of the paradigm of return in the Jewish diasporic imagination, see Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). In the last two decades, numerous writers and academics have returned in their scholarship to lost-family narratives and to sites of past trauma, before, during, and after the Holocaust. See, for example, Leo Spitzer, *Hotel Bolivia: A Culture of Memory in a Refuge from Nazism* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998) and Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Budapest Diary: In Search of the Motherbook* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), as well as Omer Bartov, *Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); the epilogue of Bella Brodzki's *Can These Bones Live: Translation, Survival, and Cultural Memory* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007); Helen Epstein, *Where She Came From: A Daughter's Search for Her Mother's History* (New York: Plume, 1998); and Claire Kahane, "Geographies of Loss," in Julia Epstein and Lori Hope Lefkowitz, eds, *Shaping Losses: Cultural Memory and the Holocaust* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

On postmemory, see Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). In "Getting Transpersonal: The Cost of an Academic Life," *Prose Studies* 31, no. 3 (December 2009), Nancy K. Miller shows how a generation of academic memoirs produced in the 1990s reveals the affective commonalities of the authors' journey to their institutional identities.

11. Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner, "Introduction: The Global and the Intimate," in "The Global and the Intimate," special issue, *WSQ* 34, nos. 1–2 (Spring/Summer, 2006): 16.

12. Tina Campt and Deborah A. Thomas, eds., "Gendering Diaspora," special issue, *Feminist Review* 90, no. 1 (October 2008).
13. Susan Stanford Friedman, "The 'New Migration': Clashes, Connections, and Diasporic Women's Writing," *Contemporary Women's Writing* 3, no. 1 (June 2009): 22–23.
14. To cite a few examples of this work: David Eng, "Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies," *Social Text* 52/53 (1997); Cindi Patton and Benigno Sánchez-Eppler, eds., *Queer Diasporas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).
15. Adrienne Rich, "Notes Toward a Politics of Location," *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979–1985* (New York: Norton, 1986), 227, 226–27.
16. Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 40.
17. Our approach is related to Michael Rothberg's work on "multidirectional memory": *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009), 3. For more on "connective histories," see Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*.
18. Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (New York: Norton, 1979), 35.
19. Adrienne Rich, "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity," *Blood, Bread, and Poetry*, 110.
20. Andreas Huyssen, personal communication.
21. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 13.
22. Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).
23. Irene Kacandes, *Talk Fiction: Literature and the Talk Explosion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).