Talking Diasporas : A Cross-Cultural Comparison

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Talking Diasporas: A Cross-Cultural Comparison [1]

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> *We are in the age of diversity. It is almost impossible to identify with something, given the situation of today's movements as well as my own circumstances...In order to understand each other, we could do nothing other than to talk. In order to explain who I am, the only method is to talk about how I have lived until now and how I would like to live from now on. Yasudo Naoto*[2]

Introduction – Talking identity

The Armenian-American scholar Kachig Tölölyan has called diasporas "exemplary communities of the transnational moment,"[3] It is a challenge for scholars to try and understand this moment and the communities it engenders. While the moment Tölölyan points to is the current epoch of globalization, diasporas have been a recurrent feature of human history, some enduring for hundreds of years. Current globalization processes have produced numerous diasporas, global in their span, involving more people than ever before; hence the particular interest today by scholars around the world.[4] However there is a risk in taking on this scholarly project. Trying to conceptualize a phenomenon can lead to its reification and making it something it is not, thus missing its true importance.[5] Indeed the complexity of diasporas as social phenomenon seems to defy any fixing gaze. Rather diasporas are defined by their heterogeneity, multi-vocality, fluidity, and hybridity. Perhaps diasporas are a neoteric moment in the formation of a more global consciousness and community, providing a new paradigm to understand the world, but only time will tell. For now, we are in the midst of this "transnational moment," what the Korean-Japanese movement leader, Yasudo Naoto calls "an age of diversity," and the best we can do is talk across that diversity.[6]

The purpose of my paper is first to emphatically state that differences exist within diasporas and that these differences are what engender the development of diasporic consciousnesses. Diasporas are sites of intense cultural production due to the movement and mix of peoples, engendering processes of new community and identity formation. Some scholars question whether or not one can have a diaspora without diasporic consciousness and identity. I would agree with them and say that a diaspora is not a diaspora until people in the diaspora recognize themselves as part of a diaspora. Furthermore, I would argue that a diasporic consciousness only arises when different parts of the diaspora encounter each other and establish some kind of communication. This communication across the different communities in the diaspora is a dialogic process that engenders hybrid cultural forms constituting a unique community and identity.

One can talk about diasporas in two fundamental ways, i) in terms of their forms, drawing on the disciplines of history, geography and demography; and ii) in terms of consciousness and identity, discussed in political and cultural terms. A first step in the study of a diaspora is to map the terrain of the diaspora and identifying the differences within it. This terrain becomes the ground, or social field, for the possible formation of a diasporic consciousness. In this paper, I discuss ways to map this terrain and then examine the cultural production that occurs within it in the example of filmmaking. First, I will review recent writings on the common features of diaspora.[7]

Common Features of Diasporas

The word "diaspora" comes from the Greek *dia speiro*, which means "to scatter seed." It referred to the Greek colonization of the Mediterranean, 800-600 BCE. The term became closely if not exclusively associated with the 2500-year-old Jewish Diaspora, beginning with the destruction of the first Temple in 586 BCE, the Babylonian exile, the dispersal of communities around the Mediterranean, the destruction of the Second Temple (71 CE), migrations to Europe and Asia, and culmination in the Holocaust (1938-1944) and the founding of the Israel state (1948). The

idea of diaspora became defined by that experience: one of forced exile, victimization, and the myth of return. A student of Jewish history, William Safran (1991) identified principal features of the Jewish diaspora, which opened the door to generalizing the concept and encouraging a comparative study of diasporas. His common features include:

- Dispersal to two or more locations
- Collective mythology of homeland
- Alienation from host land
- Idealization of return to homeland
- Ongoing relationship with homeland

Students of other catastrophic histories such as the Armenian genocide and African Middle Passage have also laid claim to the term diaspora. A student of the Armenian Diaspora and founder of the journal *Diasporas: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, Tölölyan (2004) lists the following criteria for defining a diaspora:

- Life in homeland becomes intolerable (also pull factors)
- Scattering to several countries
- Not accepted fully as equal by host society
- Preserve ethnic boundaries
- Relationship with kin in homeland and other diasporic communities
- Discourse of return
- Duration matters

For Tölölyan, duration matters. The Armenian Diaspora is 1500 years old. Tölölyan (ibid.) attributes its longevity to the ability of diasporics to find niches in existing states and establishment of secondary diasporic centers such as Lvov in Poland, which rise and fall in dominance to be replaced by other centers.[8] He also points to the leadership role of the Armenian Apostolic church, and the rise of a print culture and with it the codification of a textual canon. In the early 18th century, Armenian monks of the Mechitarist Brotherhood settled on an island in the Venice lagoon and began to write and publish books on Armenian language, history and culture, drawing on resources from throughout the diaspora. Cohen

(1996, 1997) argues that Jewish culture experienced a similar florescence during their exile in Babylon, when their oral histories, myths, and laws were compiled and written down forming the early bible. The Babylonian Talmud was the acme of theological exegesis until the 11th century (ibid.).

For Cohen (ibid.) the Jewish diasporic experience was not all bad, in some instance it led to a cultural florescence. Therefore, he rejects the negative connotation of diaspora and broadens the definition to include a variety of migratory experiences and histories. For Cohen, the African, Armenia, and Jewish diasporas comprise only one type of diaspora, which he calls "victim" diasporas. His typology also includes labor diasporas, such as Indian indentured servants in the West Indies, trade diasporas of the Chinese and Lebanese, the imperial diaspora of the British, and cultural diaspora of West Indians in North America and the United Kingdom.[9] Cohen's common features are:

- Dispersal, often traumatic, to two or more foreign regions; can be an expansion in search of work, pursuit of trade, or colonial ambitions
- Collective memory, myth, idealization of ancestral home
- Development of a return movement
- Strong ethnic group consciousness
- Troubled relations with host societies
- Sentiments of co-ethnicity
- Possibility of cultural florescence in host country

Van Hear (1998) has studied refugee diasporas in the late 20th century, such as the forced removals of South Asians from Uganda (1972), Ghanaians from Nigeria (1983), Palestinians from Kuwait (1990), Nepalis from Bhutan (1991-1992), and Turks from Bulgaria (1992). From these more recent cases, Van Hear has distilled the common features of diaspora into three minimal criteria (bold type added):

- Population is **dispersed** from a homeland to two or more other territories

- Presence abroad is **enduring**
- Some kind of **exchange** among diasporic communities

Van Hear also provides the most economic definition of diaspora: "People with multiple allegiances to place." Therein lays the problem. With "multiple allegiances to place," how can one talk about a diasporic identity in the same way one can speak of a national, cultural, or ethnic identity? Most scholars are cognizant of this problem.[10] Yoon (2004) states that the Korean diaspora is "complex and multifarious." McKeown (2004) writing about the Chinese Diaspora says, "It is now more difficult than ever to speak of a single Chinese diaspora. Chinese divide along the lines of occupation, language, education, class, native place, nationality, and generation (ibid. 74)." Rina Cohen (2004) writes on the Israeli diaspora: "Because the Israeli Diaspora is scattered in many countries and their numbers are small in comparison to other migrant groups, it is almost impossible to characterize the entire Diaspora (ibid. 136)." On the Italian Diaspora, Clò and Fiore (2001) write: "[O]n the meaning of Italianness, an identity and politics constantly contradicted, recycled, and reinterpreted over space and time to the point that for them the very word 'Italian' does not function as the qualifier of an essence, but as an analytical category (ibid., 418)."

For Butler (2001) the answer to the problem of defining a diaspora is to change direction and use the concept as a framework of analysis: "*Rather than being viewed as an ethnicity, diaspora may be alternatively considered as a framework for the study of a specific process of community formation*" (ibid. 194). This framework of analysis has five dimensions:

- Reasons for and conditions of dispersal
- Relationship with the homeland
- Relationship with the host land
- Interrelationships within communities of the diaspora
- Comparative studies of different diasporas

Butler's framework of analysis opens the way for a mapping of diasporas based on his five dimensions, especially the relationships among

homeland, host country, and other diasporic communities, which I will outline below.

Mapping Diversity

Each diaspora is unique, its form shaped by the set of diverse elements and relationships found within it. Mapping a diaspora in terms of its diasporic communities, or nodes, and the relationships and exchanges between them give a diaspora its peculiar shape. Voight-Graf (2004) has come up with a schema to map diasporas in this way. Her mapping identifies the cultural hearth, diasporic nodes, new centers, migration flows, and transnational flows (see Figure 1). Transnational flows between or among diasporic nodes demarcate a "social field," symbolized by a shaded area. The transnational flows can be read as exchanges between different communities and the possible presence of dialogic processes of diasporic identity formation. The underlying social field can also be read as a ground for a possible diasporic consciousness. The maps can get quite complicated (see Figure 2).

Limitations of Mapping

Although maps and a cursory history give shape to a diaspora, they fall short of capturing the true complexity of diasporas. One would have to be able to map the differences within the migrant group in terms gender, class, occupation, generation, home region, circumstances for leaving, number of co-migrants, country of immigration, different peoples and cultures encountered in the host country, political rights conferred on them by the host government, subsequent migrations to new countries, arrival of secondary migrations overlaying the original migrant group, etc. There are differences in the kinds of exchanges between the home region and diaspora, or between diasporic communities, such as letters between kin, trade in commodities, scholarly meetings, raising money in the diaspora for political struggles in the homeland. Each of these circumstances is different and such differences engender specific kinds of community building and identity formation.

If we could include all the variables mentioned above, we would have

a picture of all the differences found in a diaspora and the possibilities for the kinds of dialogic encounters and processes that could lead to the rise of diasporic consciousness and identity. But this map is too complicated and would have to be computer generated. Even then the picture could not tell us if community-building processes are indeed happening and if so what their content is. Nevertheless a simple schematic diagram helps to give a rough shape to diasporas for comparative purposes. Also it outlines a possible social field and realm of consciousness

The Korean Diaspora

The early Korean Diaspora can be mapped easily enough (see Figure 3). By 1950, Korean immigrants had settled in five countries: Japan, China, U.S.S.R., U.S.A., and Canada. However if we look at the Korean Diaspora today, the picture is more complicated. A current map would resemble a pincushion with 150 pins sticking out of the core, representing the total number of countries where Koreans now live. (A crude attempt is made in Figure 4.) Also, many of the pins would be interconnected representing the various kinds of exchanges: scholarly, kinship, trade, business, letters, internet, etc., between them. Envision a skin, but one that is moving--such as something out of a Harry Potter movie--to represent the constantly changing conditions and movements that go on in a diaspora between center and nodes and across nodes. This skin represents diasporic consciousness. However, can one talk about a singular, all-encompassing diasporic consciousness, or do we really have "patches" of consciousness, different points of view depending where you are on the surface? What are these patches? How do we get inside them? In the last part of my paper I will discuss diasporic filmmaking as both expressions of the diasporic experience and an aspect of community and identity formation in the diaspora.

Diasporic Consciousness

As stated above, a diaspora is not a diaspora until it has attained a level of self-consciousness, so to speak. That can only happen when diasporic are confronted with their "doubles," members from other diasporic communities and the homeland, who in a jolting way are both

familiar but different. The double effect can be found in the same family between members of different generations. Exploring that difference and negotiating some common ground across that difference is the subject of many diasporic films. That common ground often means going back to basics, reconstituting the fundamental human relationships based on personal sentiments, such as love, kindness, affection.

Film in the South Asian Diaspora[11]

My Beautiful Launderette

The 1986 film, My Beautiful Launderette by Stephen Frears is set in the South Asian community of London. The star of the film is a young man, Omar, the son of a brilliant left-wing journalist and champion of working class who was forced to leave Bombay for political reasons and now is an alcoholic. The father wants his son to go to college and pursue a professional career. His uncle, Genghis is a wealthy entrepreneur engaged in some shady business practices and has an English mistress. He wants Omar to "make something of himself," i.e., get rich: "You can get whatever you want here. That's why I love England." Omar's cousin and intended bride, Tania, has a different take on the meaning of wealth: "We are nothing in England without money." She wants to escape the stultifying, overprotected confinement of the transplanted patriarchal family. ("I need to leave home. I need to break away.") The uncle gives Omar a rundown launderette to manage. Together with an old school friend, a working-class street punk named Johnny, Omar steals drugs from his uncle's courier, sells them, and invests the proceeds to fix up the launderette.[12] Omar and Johnny become lovers. Genghis's son Saleem, catches up with them and demands they give back the drug money. In a final scene befitting Shakespeare, Johnny's punk friends, who have been dispirited watching Johnny cozying up to the "Pakis," trash Saleem's car, beat him up, and then turn on Johnny, finally smashing the plate glass window of the launderette. The demise of Saleem, the family's enforcer, opens the door for Tania to leave the family and go her own way.

The film *My Beautiful Launderette* contains various diasporic elements, including generational dissonance, encounters with the hard edge and violence of the host society, and the exploration of gender

identity and relations. Diaspora is about the exploration of all sorts of identity, not just ethnic or cultural, because in the diaspora all kinds of moorings are loosened, including patriarchy, opening up possibilities for exploring new kinds of gender relations and identities. It seems that love and sex are feelings that can bridge cultural and ethical differences within the diaspora.

Mississippi Masala

The negotiation of ethnic, cultural, and generational differences is the subject of the film *Mississippi Masala* (1991) by Mira Nair. The film is about a refugee Indian family from Idi Amin's Uganda. The opening scene is the family leaving their beautiful estate overlooking the lush countryside with Lake Victoria in the background. The father was a magistrate who had championed the cause of poor Black Ugandans. "I have been a Ugandan first, Indian second. Uganda is my home...After 34 years, all it came down to was the color of my skin. That's why we left." After seeking asylum in England the family moves to a small town in Mississippi, where they own and manage a motel. The father never recovered from his family's expulsion and cannot stop thinking of Uganda, spending his free time pursuing a lawsuit to get back his property in Kampala. He tells his daughter, Nina, "We are getting old. I do not want to die in some strange country." His daughter gets into a car accident with a young African-American man, Eddie, who has started up his own rug-cleaning business, serving the Indian-owned motels. They begin to have a relationship. He takes her home to visit his family. In a humorous aside, Eddie's brother asks Nina, "How come they got Indians in Africa?" She mentions that she has never been to India. Eddie's mother responds, "Well, you're just like us. We're Africans; we've never been to Africa." Eddie and Nina fall in love to the consternation of her family and relatives. They conspire to put Eddie out of business by not giving him any work, which turns his family against Nina. In the meantime, the Ugandan government grants her father a hearing and he returns to Uganda to plead his case. He finds his house in shambles and his best friend in Africa warns him that "Africa is for Africans, now." The father changes his mind and decides not to go to court. In the last scene, his wife reads a letter from him, in which he says: "Home is where the heart is and my heart is with you."

In this reversal of the diasporic nostalgia for homeland, home is not a place, but a metaphor for the love of family, wherever that family might be. Family love is perhaps a stronger and more mature form than the young love of Eddie and Nina that failed to transcend the politics of race and class. Similarly, one does not expect Johnny and Omar's love to survive the violence at the end of the film, *My Beautiful Launderette*.

Chutney Popcorn

The 2000 film *Chutney Popcorn* by Nisha Ganatra is a about a young lesbian couple, Reena, a Punjabi American and Lisa, an Italian American, living in Queens, New York City. Reena's sister, Sarita marries an American, Mitch, in a traditional Sikh wedding ceremony. She soon finds out that she cannot have children and sinks into depression. Reena decides to have the baby for her and gets artificially inseminated. Her girlfriend accuses her of "perpetuating the heterosexual family model," picks up with an old girlfriend and leaves her. The mother, who desperately wants a grandchild, is reassured: "Maybe it will make her want a husband, help her with her disability." Sarita's husband, Mitch, takes an interest in the pregnant Reena, in one scene caressing her stomach. Perturbed by this misplaced affection, Sarita decides that she does not want the baby, after all. When their mother dies unexpectedly, the daughters reconcile. Also, Lisa comes back to Reena and they reconfirm their love for each other and decide to raise the baby themselves. Looking at old family photographs they are amused by a picture of Reena's grandmother wearing a noticeably butch pair of shoes. "Your mother never would have worn those shoes," Lisa comments. The grandmother had married relatively late in life. "You never know," says Reena. Lisa answers, "I never thought I'd live to the day when you'd call your grandmother a lesbian." Reena goes into labor. Sarita arrives at the hospital on Reena's motorcycle. She quietly acknowledges the baby. "For our mom!" Reena proudly exclaims.

Chutney Popcorn is a jumble of labels, relationships, and expectations: A first-generation American who takes on the most important task of her ancestral culture, continuing the family line; a lesbian who has a baby. Again, the way to survive in the diaspora is to skirt conventions, defy labels, and act on love.

Film in the Korean Diaspora[13]

The 2001 film *Go* based on the novel of the same name by the third-generation Korean Japanese author, Kaneshiro Kazuki, is a self-proclaimed love story. It is a story about multiple relationships between the main character Sugihara and his father and schoolmate, all members of the Korean diaspora in Japan, and his Japanese girlfriend. It is also a film about nationality and how the politics of nationalism frustrates love. Indeed, nationality and love are portrayed in direct opposition, clashing in scenes of explosive violence. The father, a former boxer and pachinko shop owner, changes his nationality from North Korean to South Korean at great expense in order to open a door for his son. Nevertheless, the father, prone to violent behavior, still continues to beat up on his son. The teachers in Sugihara's North Korean junior high school beat up on him once they learn that he plans to go to a Japanese high school. A classmate and soon-to-be best friend sticks up for him and is also beaten up. The classmate is later killed when he tries to defend a lone Korean school girl from being harassed by Japanese boys on a train platform. At the Japanese high school, Sugihara is constantly fighting with his school mates, whom he bests on each occasion. These violent episodes punctuate what is a long conversation on the meaning of race and nationality. Sugihara's father was originally a Japanese national from Cheju. Stripped of his nationality after the war, he chose to become a North Korean because they were "kind to the poor." When he changes his nationality again to South Korean, he takes Sugihara to the beach and gazing out to the open sea, says "Look at the wide world...then decide for yourself." Sugihara contemplates becoming Norwegian, his father responds in Spanish, saying that at one time he thought of going to South America. In his reading, Sugihara discovers that half of the Japanese people are descendents of the Yayoi people from Korea and China, including the family of his Japanese girlfriend. However, his Japanese girlfriend cannot sleep with him after he reveals to her his Korean background. Her father had impressed on her from an early age that the blood of Koreans and Chinese was unclean. She returns at the end of the film to consummate their relationship, but not after Sugihara unleashes a diatribe of frustration and anger about what it is like being a Korean national living in Japan.

> I'm not *zaiNichi*. I'm not a *Kankokujin*, I'm not *Chôsenjin*, I'm not Mongoloid. Stop trying to squeeze me in some narrow space. I am me. No, I'm also disgusted with being me. I also want to be liberated from being me. I'm looking for someone that can help me forget that I'm me, and I'll go anywhere to find it. (Hester, 2002, 747)

It is cry against race, nationalism, and identity politics, and for a fundamental human relationship where all of that does not matter.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued for using the concept of diaspora as an analytical framework for studying community formation as suggested by Butler (2001). Taking the first step in this direction entails mapping the parameters of communities, both real and potential, according to Voight-Graf's (2004) schema. Once the structure of a diaspora is outlined, one can then focus on content. In the second part of the paper, I looked to the work of artists in the diaspora to gain possible insight into community-building processes and associated cultural values. The films discussed herein are not stories of the diaspora, rather they are stories from the diaspora, created to communicate what the filmmakers deem most important about their own experience. They ask of their protagonists what they ask of their viewers: to rediscover the sentiments that lie at the base of human relationships in order to reconstitute those relationships and move on. In each of the films, there is one character (Johnny, Nina, Reena, and Sugihara) who defies labeling and takes on the contradictory roles and statuses found in the diaspora. They are able to do so by acting first and foremost on fundamental sentiments. The Confucian virtue "benevolence," or *ren* (仁) , (some have translated it as "love") is written with the person (man) radical and the number two. It is the basic sentiment realized when two people come together. It is the building block of all human relationships, preliminary to any group association and identity, and status difference and hierarchy. When a people are forced apart and then remix in a strange environment, there is the opportunity, if not necessity, to rediscover the fundamental sentiment of *ren*. The hope in this transnational moment is that diasporics can embrace this virtuous

sentiment in order to revive their common humanity and also the world's.

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Notes

[1] The impetus for this paper came from my work co-editing the *Encyclopedia* of *Diasporas.* I was struck by the complexity and diversity of diasporas, and felt that we are still very much in the early stage of diasporic studies, learning and talking about that complexity and diversity. I wish to thank Drs. Melvin and Carol Ember for providing the time to attend the conference and write this paper. I also thank conference members who provided valuable comments and suggestions for revisions.

[2] Quoted in Kashiwazaki (200, 59)

[3] Quoted in Clifford (1994, 303)

[4] For a compilation of such scholarly studies see *Encyclopedia of Diasporas.*

[5] The scholar Dusenbery (2004) warns that the concept of diaspora is in danger of suffering the same fate as that of culture, a totalized and essentialized concept that ignores difference within a culture and the autonomy of human agency.

[6] The literary and cultural critic Lionel Trilling has called history "the long conversation." Diasporas are now part of that conversation.

[7] "Dialogic" is aconcept borrowed from the Russian philologist, Mikhail Bakhtin (1875-1975) who defined the modern novel as a narrative having multiple characters and voices, no one voice privileged or dominant. The dialogic is the communication that occurs between the different voices, across the different points of view, producing new points of reference and views points (Bakhtin 1981)

[8] Tölölyan (2004) refers to these centers as "nodes" and conceptualizes diasporas as networks with "network-anchoring nodes," deeply rooted in host-country soils.

[9] Scholars have added ideological diasporas to include Yoruba, Islam and Hindu (see the *Encyclopedia of Diasporas.*)

[10] Some scholars talk about diasoras in terms of "oikumene," assuming a congruency between migratory patterns and identity, culture, and community (see the *Encyclopedia of Diasporas.*) For most scholars this oikumene is not a reality but an ideal.

[11] For a broad discussion of the the South Asian diasporic filmmaking see Desai (2004)

[12] The new neon sign above the building is of a package pouring out powder.

[13] This film did not get U.S. distribution and I did not view it myself. I base my discussion on Okada (2004) and Hester (2002)

Abstract

In this paper I review the concept and comparative features of diaspora. I argue that a diaspora is a diverse, heterogeneous, and dialogic Phenomenon. It is diverse in terms of class, gender, generation, homeland region, circumstances of migration, host culture(s) and government, time period, and migratory wave. Diasporas are sites of intense cultural production as diasporans attempt to built community and identity across difference. I discuss ways to compare diasporas in terms of their morphology as measured in time and space, and consciousness as expressed in literature and the arts.

Figure 1 – Mapping diaspora (Voigt-Graf, 2004, 41)

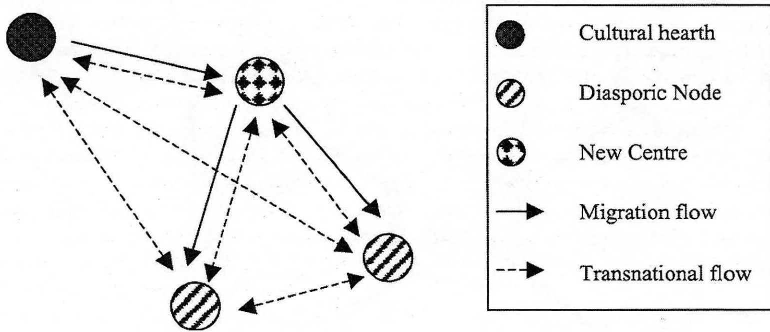

Figure 2 – Sikh Dias pora (Voigt-Graf, 2004, 34)

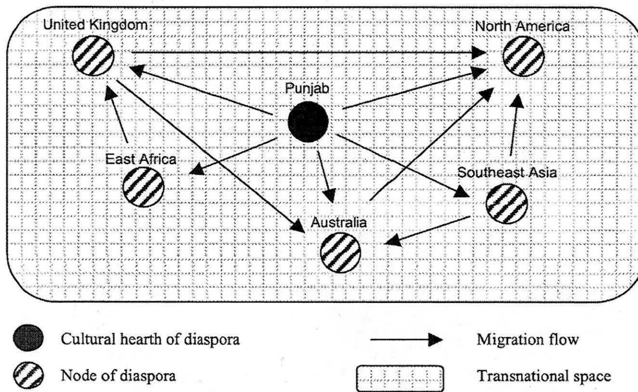

Figure 3 – Korean Diaspora c. 1950

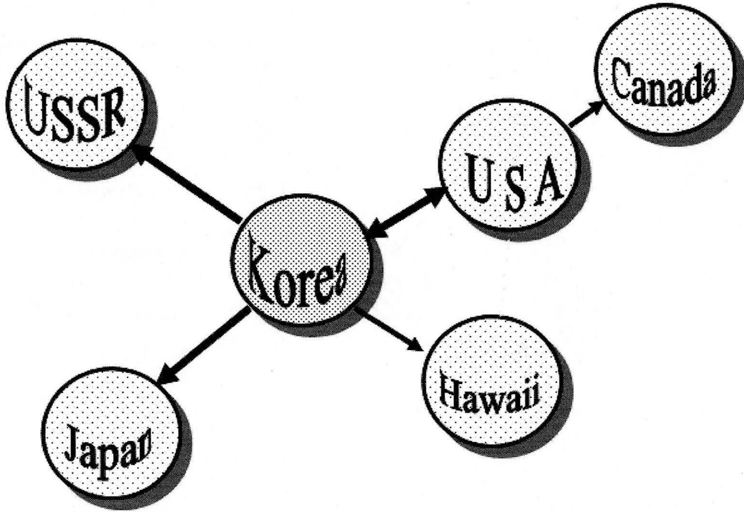

Figure 4 – Korean Diaspora c. 2000