



Diasporic Memory and the Politics of Preservation

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Abstract

In the aftermath of forced migration, diasporic identity is not erased but transformed by the dynamic interactions between memory, space, and political agency. This paper examines how forced migration reshapes collective memory in displaced communities and explores strategies for sustaining cultural identity beyond the homeland. Challenging traditional views of diasporas as static sites of nostalgia and victimhood, the study draws on interdisciplinary research to analyze how diasporic memory is preserved and reconfigured through oral traditions, symbolic spaces, political mobilization, and digital archives. Case studies include intergenerational storytelling among Palestinian families, spatial reconstruction by Tibetan refugees, postmemory activism in the Armenian diaspora, and digital self-archiving practices among migrants. These examples reveal how displaced communities blend exilic memory with adaptive, diasporic frameworks to maintain identity while navigating host societies. The paper also interrogates structural barriers to preservation and argues that host governments must shift from assimilationist or repatriation-focused approaches toward policies that support grassroots memory work. Institutional measures such as funding, legal protections, and curricular inclusion are proposed as essential supports for long-term cultural resilience.

Introduction

Forced migration has long been understood as an act of traumatic fracturing, leading to cultural loss through erasure and assimilation. Traditionally, scholars equated diasporas with exile and nostalgia for a fixed homeland, where victimhood and the formation of a “memorial narrative” shaped the diasporic condition. However, late twentieth-century post-colonial and critical theories introduced a redefinition: rather than being defined solely by an initial act of dispersion, diasporic communities came to be recognized as “traveling communities” and “international rhizomes” that continuously evolve and reconfigure themselves over time. At the heart of this reconfiguration is collective memory, broadly defined as the shared historical narratives and cultural knowledge passed across generations. However, not all diasporic memories function the same. Scholars distinguish between exilic memory, which reflects the traditional narrative of trauma and attachment to a fixed homeland, and diasporic memory, which involves the outcome of migration itself as displaced groups interact with their host societies (Lacroix & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013).

As global displacement reaches unprecedented levels due to conflict, climate change, and human rights violations, the ways in which diasporic communities navigate these two modes of memory have become especially consequential. According to the U.N. Refugee Agency, as of 2024, 122.6 million forcibly displaced people exist worldwide (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2024). Exilic and diasporic forms of memory often intertwine when communities preserve connections to their origins while reconstructing identity through evolving sociocultural realities. Whether collective memory is preserved, however, depends not only on how communities reconstruct their histories and values but also on how host societies enable or constrain these processes. Rather than asking whether diasporic culture can be preserved, the question becomes how it is transformed—through oral traditions, symbolic spaces, political mobilization, and digital archives—and what responsibilities host governments have in engaging with those efforts.

Oral Storytelling and Intergenerational Memory

Oral storytelling is a tradition in many displaced communities that allows them to sustain and transmit culture and collective memory intergenerationally. For displaced Palestinian families, bedtime stories, lectures, and answering children’s questions about family and village history allowed elders to pass down stories of the Nakba, a war in 1948 that many displaced Palestinian families point to as an experience of exile. Through utilizing group and individual interviews involving at least three generations of families, psychology professor Devin Atallah at the University of Massachusetts Boston observed themes of Muqawama (resistance), Awda (return), and Sumoud (perseverance) in intergenerational storytelling, shaping collective Palestinian narratives. In this case, the act of verbalizing family narratives goes beyond transmitting personal memory into collective history to reestablish the significance of family stories in Palestinian village culture amidst forced displacement and systemic dispossession (Atallah, 2017). This use of oral storytelling to sustain identity under threat finds a parallel in Māori communities in New Zealand, using oral traditions to challenge dominant European written histories, preserving cultural knowledge despite colonization. Professor Judith Binney at the University of Auckland notes that Maori oral tradition does not simply provide a different source or perspective in history, but is a practice that has the ability to “establish meaning for events, and to give a validation for the family’s and the group’s particular claims to mana and knowledge” (Binney, 2004). What begins as personal testimony can become a form of cultural

continuity, blending exilic attachment with diasporic adaptation. Both cases illustrate that oral storytelling has a multifaceted purpose in displaced communities, allowing them to preserve identity and memory through direct, unfettered transmission while creating a new form of heritage.

Spatial Symbolism, Ritual, and Reconstruction

This negotiation of memory also materializes in space. Exilic memory is often anchored to a fixed homeland, embodied in sites of trauma or longing. Acclaimed essayist Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah describes in *My Mother's House* how Black Americans migrated to new cities between 1910 and 1970 not merely for “finding their promised land,” but to afford “a sense of rupture, a shift, a break from their past.” When tinted with nostalgia and shifts in collective memory, spaces take on symbolic meaning for migrants, just as migration itself is more than physical movement. Ghansah alludes to this notion through the “door of no return,” a physical and symbolic threshold tied to the transatlantic slave trade, representing the irreversibility of displacement for enslaved African people (Ghansah, 2012). For these groups, the act of perpetually departing Africa can only exist through the homeland, making the “door of no return” a stagnant memorial. In contrast, diasporic memory finds new expression through symbolic reconstruction. Following the Chinese annexation of Tibet in 1950 and the subsequent flight of thousands, including the Dalai Lama, Tibetans in exile began to rebuild their cultural and spiritual identity outside their homeland. They used monasteries, transnational networks, and the Dalai Lama's political presence as anchors of tradition, linking geography to mobile rituals and practices. Before this mass displacement, regional identities were the primary basis of self-definition, deeply tied to local mountains, chieftains, and dialects (Lopez, 1998, as cited in Houston & Wright, 2003). Exile completely uprooted this dynamic. In many Tibetan refugee settlements, sacred spaces such as stupas were reconstructed. Disconnected from the Tibetan landscape, these spaces emerged as sites of religious tradition, community-building, and cultural resilience, influencing the collective memory of the diaspora while simultaneously reinforcing social networks and maintaining a distinct Tibetan identity within host societies (Houston & Wright, 2003). These cases illustrate not just different experiences but different relationships to space and memory itself. Unlike the static nostalgia of Ghansah's “door of no return,” which captures how traumatic displacement can fix memory in the past, Tibetan reconstruction reflects how physical spaces can hold symbolism that then influences the negotiations of displacement and identity. This contrast reveals that diasporic memory is not bound by geography but is shaped by the agency of displaced communities to redefine identity through ritual, place-making, and reimagined continuity.

Memory as Mobilization through Youth Resistance

Collective memory can also mobilize action. In the Armenian diaspora of Jerusalem, youth use “postmemory”—the inherited memory of events they did not directly witness—to engage in activism around the Armenian Genocide and Artsakh conflict. This informs their transnational identity and activism, partially demonstrated through commemorative events and protests, where postmemory and inherited trauma heavily factor into youth identity construction (Levenson, 2021). Similarly, post-trauma reconstruction and resilience in Kurdish refugee families are deeply embedded in familial and communal memory practices. For many Kurdish refugee parents, memory is viewed as a tool of commemoration and resistance. For instance, traditional Kurdish music is used to honor personal and collective experiences of trauma, with

younger generations actively learning and performing these songs and sharing videotapes on social media. By strategically mobilizing memory through music, traditions, storytelling, and discussions of persecution and displacement, some parents use these strategies for cultural empowerment, some for political resistance, and others for integration without losing identity (Kevers, Rober, & De Haene, 2024). For many youths, this evolving narrative becomes the basis of political awareness and solidarity, reinforcing participation in protests and advocacy efforts. In this way, cultural preservation catalyzes activism, anchoring political engagement in younger generations' connections and sense of belonging to the broader Kurdish struggle. These traditions function as a form of symbolic return, carrying the weight of exilic memory into the present while also evolving through new platforms and audiences. This demonstrates how memory practices rooted in loss can be reactivated to intergenerationally influence transnational identities.

Archival Narratives

Today, technology is gradually recontextualizing the archival of collective memory and cultural awareness. The increasing use of social media and smartphones among displaced communities is not simply a communication tool; it facilitates how diasporic histories are recorded and shared, raising questions about agency and representation. Professor Myria Georgiou at London School of Economics and Political Science and associate professor Koen Leurs at Utrecht University argue that “the smartphone has become a repository of knowledge and of the migrant gaze, carried from warzones to new destinations to tell stories of embodied violence, but also embodied joys” (Georgiou & Leurs, 2022). Unlike institutional archives, these “digital pocket archives” allow migrants to independently preserve and circulate their stories, diversifying both the archiver and the archive. As Maori oral histories demonstrate, history is never neutral but is inherently influenced by the storyteller and the method of dissemination. In a similar vein, forced migrants who document their experiences through personal digital archives are practicing a “tactile act of freedom” by sharing unfiltered accounts of war and displacement beyond the limitations of mainstream media and Western journalistic aesthetics. In doing so, diasporic communities defy dominant narratives of victimhood, asserting resilience and agency over how their histories are documented and mobilized. Still, these personal accounts, while meaningful forms of self-representation, exist within the constraints of algorithmic tailoring and digital impermanence. The decentralized nature of digital pocket archives means that these accounts can be subject to erasure, and perhaps with even greater ease, as individual accounts or devices disappear. This is where archival education emerges as a critical framework for preserving diaspora memory and human rights narratives. The institutionalization and integration of diasporic memory into the education system ensures a higher chance of long-term accessibility and further allows students to actively study how displaced communities' histories are recorded, interpreted, and eroded. UCLA and RMIT University scholars Anne Gilliland and Hariz Halilovich exercise this approach through their UCLA-based course, *Migrating Memories: Diaspora, Archives and Human Rights*, which branches anthropology, archival studies, and creative disciplines (Gilliland & Halilovich, 2017). Rather than replacing grassroots diasporic memory-work, this form of archival education builds upon it, offering scaffolding to protect diasporic narratives, along with the culture and identity that shape and are shaped by these histories.

Institutional Responsibilities

Indeed, while community-driven efforts such as digital archives and archival education reinforce cultural preservation, their sustainability is largely constrained by structural barriers, including legal restrictions, lack of funding, digital censorship, and archival instability. Without institutional support, these initiatives remain vulnerable to erasure, raising the question of how host governments can engage in cultural preservation measures without imposing assimilation. Rather than enforcing top-down cultural interventions that risk miscalculating community needs, host governments should focus on strengthening existing grassroots initiatives. Funding community efforts, such as Tibetan cultural centers, Kurdish music traditions, or Maori oral history archives, would provide displaced groups with resources to sustain their identity without state interference. Similarly, legal protections that safeguard religious expression and traditional practices prevent assimilationist policies from exterminating culture. Education also plays an important role in preservation, as demonstrated by the Migrating Memories course, which integrates archival research and oral histories into academic discourse. If host societies formally incorporated diaspora histories into their curricula, they could further promote recognition of distinct cultural values and establish them as a component of national history. In the digital sphere, government-backed projects that fund independent diaspora-led media or allocate repositories for diaspora narratives and oral histories would counteract the instability of digital memory and encourage accessibility. A sustainable approach to cultural preservation must focus on institutional support that enables diasporic communities to construct their narratives and identities through financial support, legal protection, educational integration, and archival preservation.

Repatriation Debates

Despite the effectiveness of these measures, some argue that collective memory and culture cannot truly be sustained without the homeland and that the most viable solution is to facilitate the repatriation of displaced communities rather than invest in cultural preservation in host societies. From this perspective, diasporic identity inevitably erodes over generations as communities integrate into host societies, making returns the only way to ensure cultural survival. This view undergirds many government repatriation programs, such as those in Iraq and Nigeria, where displaced populations have been incentivized to return home. However, these policies often fail to account for the structural conditions that led to displacement in the first place. Many internally displaced people in Iraq who returned faced security risks and economic instability, forcing them into secondary displacement. Ethiopia's efforts to reintegrate displaced Tigrayans similarly overlooked the critical security situation and dysfunctional public infrastructure. Instead of restoring cultural memory, a forced return to the homeland is more likely to exacerbate the conditions of displacement (Knapp & Koch, 2024). In reality, displaced communities actively preserve cultural identity beyond their homeland, as seen in the various methods of intergenerational memory transmission detailed in this paper. While voluntary repatriation can be meaningful for some communities, host governments that rely on repatriation as a universal solution neglect the fact that culture survives beyond geographic bounds and should instead aim to sustain grassroots cultural initiatives where displaced communities currently reside.

Conclusion

Forced migration fundamentally alters collective memory, not by erasing cultural identity but by transforming how it is practiced. Displaced communities fortify their histories through oral



traditions, symbolic spaces and rituals, political mobilization, and digital archiving, finding unique equilibria and intersections of new diasporic influence and original exilic heritage. For host governments, to support these communities in preserving culture is to disengage from assimilationist or expulsive assumptions in favor of productive institutional measures that empower displaced communities to define their own narratives. The true challenge is not whether displaced communities can maintain their cultural identities but whether the systems around them will allow preservation and identity-making to take root. As forced migration continues to affect global societies, we must step away from the stagnant victimhood that once pervaded diasporic narratives to bear witness to the acts of transformative construction of diasporic communities to better understand the workings of cultural resilience and our institutional responsibilities.

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