Do we need a homeland in order to conceive of a diaspora? Even asking this question may have seemed absurd to the older generation of scholars and to those who pioneered the growth of diaspora studies in the 1990s. It was, in one sense, logically and etymologically impossible. A diaspora meant ‘dispersion’ and if people were dispersed, some point of origin—more concretely a homeland—was necessarily implied. One of the most influential statements marking the beginning of contemporary diaspora studies was Safran’s article in the opening issue of the then new journal, *Diaspora* (Safran 1991). Safran was strongly influenced by the underlying paradigmatic case of the Jewish diaspora, but correctly perceived that many other ethnic groups were experiencing analogous circumstances due perhaps to the difficult circumstances surrounding their departure from their places of origin and as a result their limited acceptance in their places of settlement.

Safran was, of course, not alone in recognizing the expanded use of the concept of diaspora, but he was crucial in seeking to give some social scientific contour to the new claims rather than allow a journalistic free-for-all to develop. The Jewish experience continued to influence Safran’s view of the vital importance of homeland in defining one of the essential characteristics of diaspora. For him, members of a diaspora retained a collective memory of ‘their original homeland’; they idealized their ‘ancestral home’, were committed to the restoration of ‘the original homeland’ and continued in various ways to ‘relate to that homeland’. He further maintained that the concept of a diaspora can be applied when members of an ‘expatriate minority community’ share several of the following features:

- They, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from an original ‘center’ to two or more foreign regions;
- they retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their *original homeland* including its location, history and achievements;
• they believe they are not—and perhaps can never be—fully accepted in their host societies and so remain partly separate;
• their *ancestral home is idealized* and it is thought that, when conditions are favourable, either they, or their descendants should return;
• they believe all members of the diaspora should be committed to the maintenance or restoration of the original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and
• they continue in various ways to relate to that homeland.

**Social Constructionist Critiques of Diaspora**

Though the emphasis on an original homeland may have been too strongly stated, a group of critics, who I will describe as ‘social constructionists’, argued that Safran, this author and others were holding back the full force of the concept.1 Influenced by post-modernist readings, social constructionists sought to decompose two of the major building blocks previously delimiting and demarcating the diasporic idea, namely ‘homeland’ and ‘ethnic/religious community’. In the post-modern world, it was further argued, identities have become deterritorialized and affirmed in a flexible and situational way; accordingly, concepts of diaspora had to be radically reordered in response to this complexity. Showing scant respect for the etymology, history, limits, meaning and evolution of the concept of diaspora, they sought to deconstruct the two core building blocks of diaspora, home/homeland and ethnic/religious community.2 The first target of their deconstruction, home/homeland, is considered in this chapter.

While a degree of decoupling of diaspora from homeland was signaled in my earlier work (Cohen 1997), this rupture had taken a more insistent turn in Avtar Brah (1996). ‘Home’ became increasingly vague,

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1 I have used the expression ‘social constructionist’ to signify a mode of reasoning, closely associated with post-modernism, which suggests that reality is determined by social interaction (or intersubjectivity), rather than by objectivity (the acceptance of a natural or material world) or by subjectivity (a world determined by individual perceptions). The perspective tends to favour voluntarism and collective human agency over structure, history and habituation.

2 It might be worth recalling Marx’s crucial insight that ‘Men [read “people”] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living’. See Marx 1959: 321.