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Feeling Diasporic

by

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"If words could change the world, then 'diaspora' is one of those terms that promised much but delivered little." (Kalra et al 2005: 8)

From literary to religious to migration studies, intersecting with geography and beyond, 'diaspora' has come to be viewed in distinctive ways: as bounded and unbounded, as a place without territory or an extension of a territory, or as a cultural state of being. In many, many forums (Chow 1993, Clifford 1994, Cohen 1997, Gilroy 1991, Hall 1990, Mavroudi 2007, Safran 1999, Shuval 2000, Tölölyan 1996, Werbner 2000) the applications and purview of the term 'diaspora' have been defined, contested, reaffirmed and repositioned, so much so that at this point we seem to be cycling some of the same arguments. The redefinition continues unabated (notwithstanding nor excusing this article), and no clear, specific application has come to the fore, within geography or without; this short reflection hopes to contribute to this work-in-progress.

In some sense, diaspora is all these things – cultural orientation, place, imagined boundary or unboundedness. It becomes so popular because the concept is richly expressive, and all of these definitions and examples contribute to our understanding of how it works. However, I am still left with a sense of non-specificity in how 'diaspora' is used – it is all of these things, and so therefore none of them very well. These definition frustrations emerge particularly when trying to talk about my own research in the field of migration, thinking carefully about the implications of calling post-migrant generation Moroccans in Europe a 'diaspora'. What would make them so? is it politics? community? cultural production? desire to return?... Like a number of other terms, it comes to be justifiably applied to so much – or contested by so many – that it connotes less and less. Instead of redefining diaspora here, I would rather separate its effects, focusing on the empirical ways 'diaspora' is realised – sometimes as diaspora, sometimes as 'The

Diaspora', and sometimes as diasporic – as impetus for how it can usefully be applied in different forms for specific meanings.

Defining diaspora

Culling the available definitions down to essentials, diaspora references a triangulation of a (dispersed) population, a homeland (imaginary or actualized), and a connection that is somehow maintained between them. While most definitions focus on aspects of the first two – the manner in which the population left the homeland, the coherence of a population despite having left a homeland, or the possibility of return – the last node is what motivates paying attention to diaspora at all. Both of my parents migrated away from families who had been settled for generations in one city, and before that had been for generations in another country, yet neither of them are part of a 'diaspora' because their connectedness to those places was not part of their daily lives. Yet, bring my mother back to New Orleans and her feeling for it is clearly one of connection to the place – you can take the girl out of New Orleans but you can't take New Orleans out of the girl. Any migrant, no matter how far they have migrated, might experience the same sense of nostalgia and attachment in coming home to a familiar, missed place (Massey 2005, 123-5). That sense of persistent connectedness, despite time and space, or despite even the changing of generations and disappearing of memories, is what gives diaspora potency through multiple redefinitions.

It is that factor which unites the enormity of an idea like the African Diaspora, generations after forced displacement, to more recent African diasporas of refugee and asylum seekers: although it is not the same 'Africa' that they are drawn to, it is the same inalienable sense of imagined, partial, or nostalgic belonging in a place that is not here, while going about the business of building a life here. It also unites ideas like transnational, ethnic enclave and exile as children of diaspora, in that they each describe aspects of this process. Transnational connections (in relation to migrant communities) are motivated by attachment between a place of residence and a homeland, enabled by technologies of mobility that have increased the pulse of this connectedness. Ethnic enclaves constitute communities where this connectedness is practiced more intensively and publicly than elsewhere. The state of living in exile, as opposed to the moment of

departure, reflects the weight of that sense of connectedness and the pressure it exerts when one knows it can never be regained. Cosmopolitan then becomes its opposite: describing the detachment, or the oppositional, centrifugal force of mentally and physically becoming dislocated from a home place. All make reference to how that connection is experienced, practiced and made relevant to the lives of diaspora individuals.

Connection across temporal and spatial distances is only made possible by movement. Another aspect of diaspora that is often mentioned, but also often lost in the course of discussion, is the force of the premise that movement is not the normal state of things. Dwelling and mobility exist as oppositional forces; diaspora lies in the rupture created at the point of transition from one mode to the other, and back, and possibly back again. Having been pulled, pushed, forced or having jumped into a state of motion, the need and the desire emerge not necessarily to return, but to come to rest. To achieve that resting state, the fixity of places, homes, and the impression of motionlessness that surrounds them provides a reference point, laying the foundation for diasporic identities and political standpoints, or for why one doesn't fit in this place but would fit in that place. The existence of a term like 'diaspora' applied to groups that are somehow vulnerable – in defining themselves or their traditions, in achieving political goals, in experiencing ostracization – because they are 'caught up' in movement instead of 'remaining' still. Diaspora becomes the way these groups continue to dwell in the homeland, forming its outer boundary – so external that it is outside its territory. It is a diffuse boundary, that exists in certain communities and not others, in certain individuals and not others, and for certain times, spaces and purposes.

Diasporas

The diffuseness of this border brings into question whether 'The Diaspora' exists. Although there might be 'diasporas' of people who migrated from a specific place, to a specific place, at a specific moment, 'The Diaspora' as the uniting of all people who left one place at any point in history often conflates too many divergent paths, and starting points, to be descriptively useful (Ang 2001). This kind of configuration denies the fluidity of the assemblage. It assumes the eternal nature of the place that was left, and

implies a coherence between places of destination, not to mention an uniformity of connectedness between one and the other. It defines the migratory population by the home and the away, instead of by their movement.

Yet 'The Diasporas' abound. 'The Diasporas' resonate with an affective attachment to the perpetuity of identities, even if the imagined does not match the tangible. The term 'diaspora' takes on geopolitical importance, in being able to claim people as part of territories where they do not live or dwell, or in being able to claim one's own status of existence as part of The Diaspora of somewhere. In that sense, 'The Diasporas' can be politically vital, enabling those who might not otherwise have claims to the right of dwelling to make those claims outside of the territory. Through this participation the diffuseness of the border is made rigid, circumscribing Diaspora communities who make their voices heard from non-Diaspora communities who may choose not to participate in the political space of the diasporic. In their rigidity and silencing, The Diasporas can become a version of the states to which they sometimes refer, defining who does or does not belong to them indiscriminate of an individual's actual participation.

Like many others, I find the idea of The Diaspora or even 'a' diaspora unwieldy because of their tendency to obfuscate the multiplicity of factors that act on the connection between home and here. In fact, perhaps the classic Diasporas, subjected to similar kinds of forced dispersion and uncomfortable settlement (Cohen 1997), and the specificity of their Diaspora-ness may be the best way to meaningfully limit use of the term. Applying 'diaspora' to any form of community that emerges from migration denies the particularities of these historical situations, and makes 'diaspora' itself a term that is too diffuse. This is not to say that these historical situations have not repeated themselves in other places; Diasporas are continually produced. But for the purposes of theoretical argument, there can be a utility to acknowledging the historical, situational specificity of these movements in contrast with others.

Diasporic

Therefore, I posit a terminological perspective I have tried to use in work elsewhere (Wagner 2008; 2011): that it is not diasporaa but the diasporaic that warrants attention for

researchers on contemporary migration. While ‘a’ diaspora may be immense and inert, individuals within it engage in diasporic practices that recognize, promote, maintain and reproduce their connections between a place of residence and a distant homeland, whether inter- or intra-national. Diasporic practices can be big and small, habitual and sporadic, filled with investment of meaning and devoid of significance. They could be enacted through cultural production, political involvement, memory, business, language use or return. As researchers, we are attracted to what diasporic individuals are doing, but not as much to the activities of individuals ‘in the diaspora’ who are inactive – not ‘being diasporic’, enacting their sense of connectedness. Refocusing ‘diaspora’ to ‘diasporic’ also allows us to recognize when such practiced connections are absent: when they do not make themselves felt and force action for certain individuals, or at certain stages of life, or for individuals who leave behind certain places or arrived at others.

Describing as diasporic instead of fixing into diasporas also incorporates all of the contributions made at the panel I organized at the 2009 Annual Conference of the RGS-IBG*. Diverse former residents of cities can practice their diasporic connection to them as much as migrants defined by their nationality can (Blunt 2009); domestic migrants can diasporically connect to their village (Page 2009), and material objects can convey the diasporic attachment their owners practiced across temporal divides (Tolia-Kelly 2009). Instead of defining the people or their patterns of movement and dwelling – for which we have much more precise, less contested vocabulary – diasporic restricts the conversation to the sense of connection that cuts across other factors.

In the end, as is symptomatic of this circular debate, my argument echoes some previous ones.

“In sum, rather than speak of ‘a diaspora’ or ‘the diaspora’ as an entity, a bounded group, an ethnodemographic or ethnocultural fact, it may be more fruitful, and certainly more precise, to speak of diasporic stances, projects, claims, idioms, practices, and so on. We can then study empirically the degree and form of support for a diasporic project among members of its putative constituency, just as we can do when studying a nationalist project. And we can explore to what extent, and in what circumstances, those claimed as members of putative diasporas actively adopt

or at least passively sympathize with the diasporic stance, just as we can do with respect to those who are claimed as members of putative nations, or of any other putative collectivity.” (Brubaker 2005, 13)

What I hope to be adding is a definition of diasporic as the third face of an ever-shifting triangle: between a spatially and temporally distant homeland – however it was left – and the insistent present of a place of residence is the affective state that encourages practices of connecting the two. This feeling of nostalgia for and the desire to belong somewhere, but not necessarily a desire to ‘return’ there, has been defined before: “the concept of diaspora offers a critique of discourses of fixed origin, while taking account of a homing desire which is not the same thing as desire for a ‘homeland’.” (Brah 1996, 180). The combination of Brah and Brubaker leads to a focus on the ‘stances, projects, claims, idioms, practices and so on’ that create the domain of this ‘homing desire’, and what it motivates people to do in order to ‘be diasporic’. In other words, I define the ‘homing desire’ to belong to a distant place as a diasporic feeling, which can be felt even if one is not part of The Diaspora.

This shift in focus away from the dynamics of movement towards the dynamics of connection (and disconnection) shifts attention away from what ‘diaspora’ is or might mean to how different people have been diasporic in continually recognizable ways over time. It points to links between traveling merchants and contemporary transnational businessmen (Ong 1999) or how communities in exile adjust their diasporic communication with the homeland with changes in technology (Naficy 1993). These practices can be specifically transnational or exilic, but they are also diasporic: perpetrated by individuals, who are motivated to maintain a connectedness across space and time with a place they may sometimes – in the past, in the future, or just occasionally when the affect strikes – call ‘home’.

*At the 2009 RGS-IBG Annual Conference, I organized a panel entitled ‘Diaspora as a keyword: Interrogating applications of ‘diaspora’ in contexts of international migration’ with essentially this thought in mind. I organized the panel seeking specificity, with the

idea to challenge the mass and coax the emergence of a useful definition. Although I was not disappointed, I was not completely satisfied. The three panelists in attendance made excellent contributions, which forced me to consider aspects of 'diaspora' that vary from the working concept I apply in my own research. These include challenging the notion that 'diaspora' refers to a nation (Blunt 2009) by considering how multiethnic communities in place might disperse yet continue their attachment; considering domestic movement as 'diaspora' (Page 2009) that can create parallel flows of remittance or political involvement as international movement; or that 'diaspora' is exclusive of temporality (Tolia-Kelly 2009) in that the artifacts of dispersal, forced or otherwise, might reference a distant home without the migrant surviving to remember it.

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