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Special issue introduction: New research directions and critical perspectives on diaspora strategies

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ABSTRACT

As more countries acknowledge the potential resources represented by their emigrant populations, the diaspora strategies of migrant sending countries are gaining policy and academic attention internationally. 'Diaspora strategies' describe initiatives aimed at mobilising emigrants for the purposes of economic development and/or nation building. This special issue in *Geoforum* identifies new research directions for the study of diaspora strategies. While extant scholarship has focused on state-driven diaspora strategies so far, this special issue introduction suggests that considering a wider range of social actors that engage in diaspora strategising across different spaces and scales will reveal new and productive insights for the study of diaspora strategies. Framing this introduction is an approach that deploys topological analyses as a way of keeping in view the variety of social actors involved in diaspora strategising, their connections to one another, and an evolving constellation of power relations ranging from contestation to collaboration. The special issue introduction draws attention to, first, the subjectivities constituted by diaspora strategies; second, the array of social actors found within webs of diaspora connections; and third, the ethical considerations arising from the power geometries of diaspora engagement. In so doing, it argues for the importance of studying diaspora formations dialogically which means deploying an analytical lens that is attentive to how the actions of different social actors and institutions from one country towards a diaspora population can influence the attitudes and actions of that diaspora towards another country that also claims their loyalty and contributions.

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Introduction

As more countries acknowledge the potential resources represented by their emigrant populations, the diaspora strategies of migrant sending countries are gaining policy and academic attention internationally. 'Diaspora strategies' describe initiatives aimed at mobilising emigrants for the purposes of economic development and/or nation building. This special issue in *Geoforum*¹ identifies new research directions for the study of diaspora strategies. Academic researchers are paying greater attention to this increasingly global phenomenon. Some scholars assume a prescriptive approach whereas others adopt a more questioning approach towards diaspora strategies, such as probing the ways in which these policy initiatives govern emigrant mobilities or (re)inscribe inequitable outcomes through migration (Mani and Varadarajan, 2005;

Mohan, 2006; Larner, 2007; Ho, 2011; Mullings, 2012). While such scholarship has focused on state-driven diaspora strategies so far, this special issue introduction suggests that considering a wider range of social actors that engage in diaspora strategising across different spaces and scales will reveal new and productive insights for the study of diaspora strategies. Framing this introduction is an approach that deploys topological analyses as a way of keeping in view the variety of social actors involved in diaspora strategising, their connections to one another, and an evolving constellation of power relations ranging from contestation to collaboration.

'Diaspora' refers to a population scattered abroad but which claims affinity with a purported national homeland and community because of a common sense of ancestry, ethnicity or identification. The relationship between migration and development has been discussed by a number of scholars who identify diaspora populations as one of the groups that can drive development in the country they have left (e.g. Nyberg-Sorenson et al., 2002). International institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank also encourage incubating relationships between the 'homeland' and its diaspora (Xiang, 2005;

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¹ This special issue draws together the proceedings of a workshop organised at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore during November 2012.

Kuznetsov, 2006; Aikins and White, 2011). However, critical diaspora scholarship contends that the idea of 'diaspora' must be examined conceptually (Brah, 1998; Butler, 2001; Dirlilik, 2004). Ho (2011) further argues that the label 'diaspora' attached to diaspora strategies should be unpacked critically since it determines who is included or excluded from initiatives to mobilise diaspora populations for the benefit of the 'homeland' and other institutions.

Although diaspora populations have been long in existence, there is a new neoliberal inflection to the emerging policy focus on the potential presented by diasporas to assist in development. Diaspora strategies tend to be categorised into two overlapping but distinct policy approaches; one approach focuses on development for poverty reduction while the other is geared towards advancing development in the knowledge-based economy (see Hickey, forthcoming). Higher-income countries seek the knowledge, skills, networks or large capital investments of global talent to drive their development. Lower-income countries are likelier to rely on remittances and personal investments by nationals abroad. Nevertheless, these categories are becoming increasingly less distinct as more lower-income countries proactively court the human capital represented in their diasporas (Mullings, 2011, 2012). The importance of understanding the relationship between migration-and-development and diaspora strategies is examined in a separate collection of papers. This special issue in *Geoforum* takes on a different task of identifying new directions in the study of diaspora strategies. In this introduction to the special issue, we signal how topological analyses of diaspora strategies allow for new ways of conceptualising the nature of those relationships and carve out productive avenues for reconceptualising the study of diaspora strategies.

Diaspora strategies and a topological sensibility

Geographers studying diaspora strategies have drawn out the spatial framings of diaspora strategies in terms of space, scale, networks and territory.² The collection of papers we discuss in this special issue signal another productive approach for conceptualising the spatiality of diaspora strategies, namely what Allen (2011: 284) describes as a 'topological sensibility'. For Allen, a topological sensibility is attentive to how geometries of power (henceforth topologies of power) rework familiar geographical metaphors when a wider range of heterogeneous social actors, events, processes and material forms are brought under the same analytical purview, even if they operate under different spatial and temporal frames (Allen and Cochrane, 2010). The logics and materialisation of diaspora strategies, as we show in this collection, resonate with Allen's arguments.

It is now widely recognised that international institutions and migrant sending countries capitalise upon established and emerging migrant activities to map, manage and direct the flows of knowledge, people, networks and relationships across national borders and institutional boundaries (e.g. Kuznetsov, 2006; Weinar, 2010). Diaspora strategies represent a means by which such nation-states exert extraterritorial reach to assert national influence over diaspora populations (Ho, 2011; Collyer, 2014). Since diaspora populations are not directly subject to the rule of the country they left, it can be said they are less easily controlled by that state. Abraham (2014: 74; emphasis original) observes that 'the common feature of old and new diasporas is the idea of a national *absence*' where the former calls to mind a people without a homeland, while the latter refers to people living outside of a national homeland.

² These have been reviewed extensively by Délano and Gamlen (2014) in their special issue introduction for the journal *Political Geography* hence we will not replicate this literature here.

Diaspora strategies enable the countries that diaspora populations have left to continue to assert their national presence abroad by leveraging upon and cultivating social connections to bridge physical distance. Extending components of citizenship, such as membership and certain rights, selectively to diaspora populations represents one means by which states assert a national presence despite their physical absence. These observations do not necessarily replicate postnational citizenship arguments that predict the demise of the nation-state. Rather, we recognise the sustained significance of the nation through state-driven diaspora strategising that produces extraterritorial citizenship as a fluid social and political formation even as actual legal status becomes negotiated in new ways. As Collyer (2014: 72) puts it, the rise of state-diaspora relations suggests a 're-hyphenation of nation and state'.

Extant literature on diaspora strategies tends to study diaspora populations singularly as communities originating from a nation-state purported to be the homeland. But hyper-migration and a proliferation of migrant ties to different countries mean that migrants are likely to develop overlapping memberships to different national communities at a variety of scales (e.g. Bauböck, 2011; Ho, 2011). Through diaspora strategising, what have been accepted as the interlocking components of national citizenship (i.e. recognition, rights, responsibility) show signs of becoming disentangled from one another. They are selectively reassigned to diaspora populations in ways that circumvent legal restrictions tied to citizenship elsewhere, or used to leverage the multiple connections that migrants have to different political jurisdictions and at different scales of membership. Variations in how selective aspects of citizenship are emphasised or downplayed signal aspects of the social compact between state and resident citizens that are considered negotiable or non-negotiable, relative to the state-diaspora relationship. Studying diaspora strategies gives us insights into the power structures of domestic politics and the topologies of power that pleat together political histories, contemporary political or economic priorities, and population governmentality techniques through the management of absence and presence.

For example, states such as India and Pakistan, have designed innovative quasi-citizenship schemes to proffer recognition and right to emigrants or diasporic descendants who no longer have formal citizenship status in the country they or their parents had left. Such quasi-citizenship schemes are especially useful for states or diaspora members who come from countries that prohibit dual citizenship as it allows them to maintain statuses linked to several political entities without rescinding their legal citizenship status elsewhere. The quasi-citizenship schemes come with restricted rights (e.g. political voting or eligibility for political office) to maintain distinctions between resident citizens and overseas nationals. Other countries provide return and resettlement privileges for co-ethnics or preferential visas to facilitate return visits (see Conway and Potter, 2009; Ho, 2013; Collyer, 2014). For diasporic descendants, entitlement to national membership or rights is premised on affiliations from the distant past (e.g. ethnicity or ancestry), but these are folded into the present to justify privileges associated with citizenship.

In referring to the nation-state, we also recognise the range of social actors and events, processes or things, which make its territorial presence perceptible to diaspora populations. If we see territory as the effect of power, as Painter (2010) argues, then mobility and national territory are held together tenuously by different groups, decision makers and institutional actors who individually advance their version of territorial presence during diaspora strategising. This collection of papers brings to view such an array of social actors, ranging from universities, private firms, non-governmental organisations and more, that craft diaspora strategies and come alongside one another. Drawing on mobility as an asset to advance their interests, they sometimes act in a

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