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Global Journeys: From Transnationalism to Diaspora

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Abstract

The emerging interest in diasporic studies has recently begun to permeate various academic disciplines, none more so than cultural studies. Today, there are numerous articles, books, and journals that have begun to engage in heated discussions on the importance of recognizing and understanding diaspora communities as collective transnational organizations and movements. However, sociology, the discipline out of which traditional migration theory emerged, has seemingly been more reluctant to embrace the concept of diaspora. In this article, I initiate a much needed conversation between traditional sociological migration theory and theories of diaspora emerging out of cultural studies. I look at the commonalities that exist between the two fields of study as well as points of divergence. Finally, I suggest ways in which the two fields can work together to help us gain a more nuanced understanding and appreciation of what happens when persons migrate.

Global Journeys: From Transnationalism to Diaspora

Advances in information technology, increased accessibility to communication via the internet, and more affordable modes of transportation have facilitated the rapid mobility of information, capital, people, and power to nontraditional spheres. In the twenty first century, such nontraditional spheres include diasporas—groups of migrants originating from the same homeland who have formed transnational movements. “Diaspora—as both concept and social practice—is in vogue” (Dufoix, 2003). This quote by Stephane Dufoix can be contrasted to popular sentiment in previous years when scholars like when William Saffran (1991) observed that scholarship on ethnicity and immigration paid “little if any attention...to diasporas” (as cited in Brubaker, 2005). The concept of “diaspora” has indeed become a “hot topic,” the relevance, and significance, and negotiation of which are actively debated not only in academia (beginning especially in 1991 with the publication of the academic journal *Diaspora*) but also in real life, where governments, politicians, and economists all reference the term “diaspora.”

The political importance of diasporas across the globe is evident in the recent surge in discussions about their geo-political influence. The 2010-2011 Arab Spring (the revolutionary political demonstrations and protests in the Middle East) gained tremendous global coverage for the way in which residents were displaying levels of frustration and intolerance of injustice, but the uprising also was a platform from which diasporas connected to these countries were able to become directly involved in socio-political change. The important role of migrants in the Arab Spring resulted in political analysts, academics, and intellectuals developing renewed interest in the impact of diasporas. One online commentary, *The National*, published an article discussing the important role of diasporas not just in the revolutionary process of change but also in the future reconstruction of the countries affected by the Arab Spring. Specifically, the article highlighted the World Bank’s appeal that these nations call on their diasporas to help them rebuild; the article’s author quotes the organization’s economist, Dilip Ratha, as saying, “The diaspora can be a friend in foul weather. If things are not going well in your country, and foreign investors aren’t there, the diaspora will still be there” (Arnold, 2011). These kinds of discussions about diasporas are not unique to the Arab Spring or to countries experiencing political upheaval. For example, in 2012, the U.S. State Department hosted its second annual Global Diaspora Forum under the theme “Moving Forward by Giving Back.” This conference took place in the nation’s capital on July 25-26, 2012. According to the website for the forum,

The Global Diaspora Forum is an annual celebration of America’s diaspora communities. The gathering challenges diaspora communities to forge partnerships with the private sector, civil society, and public institutions in order to make their engagements with their countries of origin or ancestry effective, scalable, and sustainable.

Such examples of journalists, intellectuals, and political leaders hosting conferences and forums and making public attempts to facilitate the influence of diasporas on their home countries shows just how timely this research is.

This interest in diasporas is not limited to the developing world or to the host countries where migrants reside. Leaders in developing countries such as in Africa, the Caribbean, and South America are also having conversations and reconsidering nontraditional resources that could help them become competitive. Noticeably, diasporas are frequently mentioned in these

conversations, often cited as invaluable assets to aid in the country's development and, therefore, a major part of the solutions they seek.

In this paper, I review and discuss the rise of “diasporic studies” over the past two decades. These contemporary studies, utilizing renewed and recreated definitions of diaspora and the role of diaspora communities, reflect the theoretical shift and current trends in migration studies. In particular, I am interested in trying to determine when and how the term “diaspora” (in its current form) came to play such an important role in academia. The paper is also ambitious in the sense that while trying to assess the rise of diaspora studies, I start what I believe to be a much needed dialogue between the sociological literature on migration and the literature on diasporic studies. To date, the two have often been discussed in different camps (sociology and cultural studies, respectively), giving the impression that neither camp of scholars has anything in common. However, this paper seeks to show what connections, if any, exist between theories of migration in sociology, specifically theories of transnational migration and theories of diaspora studies.

I begin with a brief explanation of the title of this paper and an interpretation of how I believe ‘the migrant’ has evolved in academia. Because diaspora is the central aspect of this paper, I then provide a discussion of the understanding and definition of diaspora, as presented by some of the pioneering scholars. I choose to start with a discussion of diasporas because I believe that obtaining an understanding of diasporas will be helpful in understanding the connections and diversions between theories of transnational migration and diasporas, which are discussed in the subsequent sections. (A thorough discussion and review of transnational migration theory is beyond the scope of this paper, although an overview of the theory can be obtained throughout the paper.)

The Journey of the ‘Migrant’

At the risk of resorting to a fixed, linear progression of the conceptualization of the movement of people across borders, I assert that what we have seen in studies on migration is an “academic evolution” from the notion of ‘migrants’ to that of ‘diasporas’ and then, ultimately, to that of ‘transnational social movements.’ That said, the greatest overlap between studies on diasporas (originating out of the cultural studies discipline) and sociology of migration theories lies in the area of transnational migration. However, where I believe that diaspora studies move beyond theories of transnational migration can be summarized in two points: (1) diaspora studies’ focus on how members of diasporas *self-identify* as belonging to the diaspora communities and eventually formulate a new movement based on this identity and (2) the ways in which members of diasporas connect not only with the host country and the home country but also the ways in which they *connect with each other*.

These distinguishing points seem to be problematic for scholars who intend to reserve the right to categorize people who move across borders and define them as “migrants” or “transmigrants.” Although academics have utilized the concept of diaspora widely, I argue that diaspora studies differentiates itself from studies of migration based on the premise that the members of diasporas are self-identified; they do not quite fit nicely into theoretical typologies or defining characteristics—they define themselves and operate accordingly. In short, diaspora is more than just another concept being introduced to group and categorize persons; it is also a social process. It is a process in which some migrants actively engage—a process that possibly shares qualities of a movement. Furthermore, I suggest that missing from theories of

transnational migration is the deep connection members of diaspora communities share with each other, another somewhat difficult reality for social scientists concerned with quantifiable phenomena to study. This is not to say, therefore, that migration scholars need not try to understand diasporas or the role diasporas play in the current global era. Regardless of whether or not they do, however, I believe that it is crucial to realize that whatever social scholars have to say about the reality of diasporas, diasporas are very real to those who participate in them.

Despite the fact that diaspora communities are often real for those who participate in them, some scholars assert that diaspora studies is just a passing fad in academia. As Butler (2001) put it, many scholars are keen to capitalize on the “sexiness of the discourse of diaspora studies in academia” without putting much effort into forming a methodological and theoretical conceptualization of the term. This may be partly true, as scholars are often seeking ways to make their work innovative and important by somehow incorporating the latest “hot topic.” However, I challenge the notion that such studies are a fad or that they are “passing” in any way. Instead, the challenge facing academia at this time is to shift the focus and unit of analysis from the *scholars* of migration to the *actors* in migration and diasporas. Once we do so, I think we become less concerned with conceptual, theoretical flaws and instead become able to get to the things that matter most: an understanding of how these individuals are defining themselves, changing their lives, and impacting the world.

What is Diaspora?

Before I engage in a more thorough discussion, it is important to remember that among scholars focusing on migrant networks, identity politics, cultural politics, and global movements the definition of “diaspora” remains highly contested because not only are scholars not in agreement on a single definition, but others reject diaspora itself as a new theoretical lens. As Brubaker (2005) remarks, we are in essence witnessing a “‘diaspora’ diaspora—a dispersion of the meanings of the term in semantic, conceptual and disciplinary space.” Furthermore, according to Brubaker, the large number of scholars who have attempted to define and redefine the concept has possibly left “diaspora” as a concept “stretched to the point of uselessness.” It is highly possible that like “transnationalism” before it, what “diaspora” suffers from is what Robert K. Merton (1968) referred to as the “fallacy of adumbration.” As Merton stated in *Social Theory and Social Structure*, “To come very near to a true theory and to grasp its precise applications are two very different things...Everything of importance has been said before by someone who did not discover it” (as cited in Portes, 2001). That is, “if something is new, it is not really true, and if something is true, it is not actually new” (Portes, 2001). And so, we inevitably get to the question that leads to this essay: Is diaspora new? Or even true?

Before we fall into the “age old” trap of romanticizing, we must remember that, like all spaces, diasporas are places of contestation and struggle. They are heterogeneous entities, replete with varying personalities, experiences of gender, race, class, sexuality, immigration status, age, and religion, among other differences. Like any other organization or community, these differences suggest that there are constant struggles for power, for leadership, for common goals, and for agenda setting within them. As Hua (2006) reminds us, no diaspora community is homogenous; “diasporic communities and networks are not exempted from sexism, racism, ethnicity, classism, homophobia, ageism, and other discrepancies and prejudices.” Because of this contestation, Werbner (2002) describes diasporas as “chaordic,” replete with multiple discourses, dissent, and competition—all within the same diaspora. This understanding may

weaken the claim that people actively “choose” to join a diaspora, which leads some scholars to believe that only some persons (i.e. those who are highly educated, wealthy, or elite, etc.) are included in the diaspora, while others (i.e. the poor, struggling and uneducated) are excluded.

Just as we have to be careful not to assume that all persons who relocate become knowledgeable of the existence of diasporas or actively participate in them, we also have to be careful not to resort to the equally problematic labeling and categorizing of the “masses of migrants” who are viewed as poor, uneducated, and struggling. Indeed, the claim that a diaspora necessarily consists primarily of migrants is as faulty as the claim that diasporas necessarily exclude them. These conceptual challenges to our understandings of how diasporas come about do not mean that we should abandon the consideration of agency or choice altogether. In fact, I maintain that agency and choice are essential to understanding diaspora formation. It is also important to remember that diaspora formation is not always a positive phenomenon and that there are instances in which diaspora communities support civil wars and political instability in their home countries. Despite all this, diaspora is a concept worth exploring, to which I will attempt to bring some clarity in the next paragraphs.

In the pioneering work on diaspora communities, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (1997), Robin Cohen presents a thorough assessment and analysis of the world’s dispersed communities. The word *diaspora* is derived from the Greek verb *speiro* (to sow) and the preposition *dia* (over), so its literal translation is “to sow over” (Cohen, 1997). Therefore, when we speak of diaspora, we are acknowledging some form of dispersion from a central location or place of origin that results in the scattering of something or someone over various locations (oftentimes two or more countries). When referring to people, the term “diaspora” implies that people have been relocated or removed from their original place of residence (homeland). In his book, Cohen describes the term as originally being used to describe the experience of the Jews—a group of people who were forced out of their place of residence, shunned into exile, and scattered around the world. Hence, in academia, the word “diaspora” was often used in relation to the Jewish population and has historically had the connotation of a negative experience (i.e. forced relocation). In his discussion, Cohen acknowledges that although the modern conceptualization of diaspora communities has evolved drastically from this view of victimized, exiled diasporans, an understanding of the Jewish diaspora is crucial in understanding today’s dispersed communities.

Historically, there are other “victim diasporas” that have significantly influenced the discourse on diaspora. These historical, often victimized and traumatized diaspora communities include the African Diaspora, the Armenian Diaspora, the Irish Diaspora and the Palestinian Diaspora (Cohen, 1997). But today, there is much more variety in the diaspora communities that are being analyzed, with a shift from a focus on historical, victimized diasporas to that of a living diaspora, conceptual lens that provides a framework for the observation, analysis, and discussion of active migrant movements. As one scholar put it, “Membership in diaspora now implies potential empowerment based on the ability to mobilize international support and influence both the homeland and the hostland” (Clifford, as cited in Butler, 2001). As this quote suggests, “diaspora” invokes a sense of agency and action within those who participate in it. That is, those who have migrated seem to experience a greater sense of involvement in a community when they view themselves as belonging to a “diaspora” as opposed to being just a migrant. This is not to say that the traditional push/pull model of understanding the process of migration is outdated or that it does not apply to specific type of migrants, (e.g. those who move from the Global South to the Global North). However, diaspora studies, compared to traditional migration studies, seem

less concerned with trying to describe reasons *why* people migrate and instead focus on the process that occurs *after* they migrate. In so doing, diaspora studies move beyond traditional push/pull models of migration (the primarily focus of which include exploring the factors that force or “push” migrants out of their home countries and attract or “pull” them to the host country). Diaspora studies are, in contrast, more concerned with understanding the process of community formation after persons migrate.

It is therefore not surprising that we are beginning to see an increase in the emergence of formal diaspora entities and organizations. Evidence of this increase is reflected in the plethora of studies on diaspora communities from various geographical regions around the world such as South Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, and Central Europe. Today’s diaspora communities are also much more diverse, with persons dispersed in multiple lands and with a wide variety of individuals partaking in initial dispersal, including refugees, temporary visitors, international students, permanent residents, and so forth. Here again, there is much controversy concerning who should “legitimately” be included in counts of diaspora communities and who should be excluded. Nevertheless, contemporary studies about diaspora communities are less concerned with who is traveling and are more concerned with when they travel, how they travel and under what circumstances, and their experiences when they arrive (Brah, 1996).

For Cohen, diaspora communities can exist in cyberspace, in a physical location, or as Benedict Anderson (1993 [1983]) would argue, through a shared imagination. In *Global Diasporas*, Cohen offers nine common elements that contemporary diaspora communities embody. In an effort to preserve brevity and conciseness, I will highlight what I consider to be some of the more important elements of the ones he presents in the hope that the reader will develop a more conclusive definition of the term diaspora. The third element on the list states that members of a diaspora community have a “collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history and achievements.” That is, they have a shared understanding of what and where the native country is and utilize their collective memory when reminiscing about the country. It also means that they often share similar nostalgic thoughts—often an idealized conception of what it would be like to return to the country of origin and all of the imagined benefits of returning. Another common feature of a diaspora community highlighted by Cohen is “a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history, and the belief in a common fate” (Cohen, 1997). In other words, members of a diaspora experience a strong bond with each other based on their shared belief of having a unique and distinct cultural and national identity as well as a belief that they have a common and connected future because of this identity. The salience of identity is often neglected in the transnational migration paradigm but cannot be ignored in diaspora studies. As Butler (2001) states, “[Diaspora] calls attention to the relationship between identity and active participation in the politics of hostland and homeland.” It is this identity that eventually facilitates the active involvement in the diaspora community and sustains the bonds and linkages that members of the diaspora form with each other.

Khacha Tololyan edited the only academic journal, to date, solely focused on studying diaspora communities. The title of this journal is *Diaspora: A Journal of Transitional Studies*. In the first publication of this journal in 1991, Toloyan stated that the journal would be “concerned with the way in which nations, real yet imagined communities are fabulated,¹ brought into being, made and unmade, in culture and politics, both on the land people call their own and in exile” (as

¹ To “fabulate” is to engage in the composition of fables or stories.

cited in Cohen, 1997). Diaspora communities are therefore simultaneously “real” in a geographical sense (the actual dispersal of people) and “imagined,” in a conscious sense (the shared imagination of belonging to a community). Either way, they come into existence for very salient reasons. This understanding of diaspora is more in keeping with the postmodern definitions that scholars like Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy propose. The most important thing to remember is that while becoming a part of a diaspora community entails a form of consciousness raising and changing (a mental reality), the people themselves, through their collective action, make up the diaspora through the process of “rooting and branching” (Cohen, 1997). Diaspora communities are often not composed of any physical infrastructure, legal constitutions, or legislative policies (though this may very well be the case in the future). Instead, these communities are often formed as a result of everyday experiences, stories told, and communication and interaction with others from the common homeland. As such, the diaspora community is constantly evolving and changing.

Many authors have preferred to use the term *diaspora community* instead of immigrant or migrant community, because diaspora community not only suggests agency and action but also implies a strong engagement and connection with the homeland on a cultural, political, economic, and social level. Diaspora communities are composed of migrants who, according to James Clifford (1994), “feel (maintain, revive, invent) a connection with a prior home.” As such, this community is unique in its strong sense of connection to “home,” rooted in the community members’ resistance of cultural erasure in the new place of residence—they are often not concerned with conforming to the host society. Clifford argues that diaspora communities are different from traditional conceptions of immigrant communities because they are more permanent and are not as concerned with assimilation or permanent incorporation into the new culture. The notion of diaspora community also embodies post-colonialism, as the narrative of wanting to go home, to give back to one’s home culture, and to help one’s family members who remained in the homeland are all characteristics of the post-colonial subject (Brah, 1996). But as Brah explains, this “homing” desire or narrative is not necessarily the same as wanting to return to a physical homeland. Instead, it is more of an understanding that regardless of where the persons relocate, their conception of home is always with them and that it will remain a central part of their identities and that they will always themselves embody some obligation and responsibility to this home. Indeed, some persons in the diaspora feel a need to physically return to the homeland, but the “diasporic feeling” is that one never leaves the homeland, regardless of their place of residence.

One of the defining characteristics of diasporas is the creation of self identity. Those in the diaspora occupy what some argue is a “diasporic space” that incorporates the physical and metaphoric homeland, as well as some attributes of the new “host” society—a space replete with multiple identities. Because of this, those in diaspora communities have a very global outlook, living in the local but occupying global identities. That is, they often embody identities that transcend their physical locations. For this reason, cultural studies scholars like Stuart Hall (1990, 1992) and Paul Gilroy (1993) argue that contemporary, hybrid definitions of diaspora challenge any essentialized notion of race, identity, culture, or ethnicity and instead focus on differences and the reconstruction of new, multiple, fluid identities. Many scholars have begun to pay special attention to the formation of this new “diasporic identity” that is pronounced within these diaspora communities. These identities are often the quintessential features that determine how and why persons form diasporas. At the same time, we have to be careful not to essentialize this diasporic identity. As cultural studies expert Stuart Hall (1999) reminds us:

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.

Identity then is in a perpetual process of refreshing, renewing, and reforming itself; it is never static. This identity, though in constant fluctuation, eventually results in a sense of belonging to a common identity, and this helps to reaffirm the connection to the diaspora. In reality, multiple identities are created and reconstructed in these diaspora communities; oftentimes “simultaneous diasporan identities” exist (Butler, 2001).

Transnational Migration and Diaspora: Where the Two Meet

Now that we have established some understanding of the concept of diaspora, it is time to engage this understanding in dialogue with traditional sociology of migration theories, specifically transnational migration theories. In reality, despite the tendency to characterize diaspora studies as a novice phenomenon, the field shares similarities with transnational migration theories, primarily in the sense that both refer to the idea that nations are “unbound” (Anteby-Yemini & Berthomière, 2005; Vertotec, 1999). As Knowles argued, “The concepts of diasporas and transnationalism are ‘not distinct but bleed into each other in describing similar sets of people, circumstances and social processes’” (as cited in Ramji, 2006). Rogers Brubaker (2005) has also acknowledged a “fuse” between the literature on transnationalism and the literature on diasporas. Nagel (2001) even uses the two fields as two sides of the same coin, referring to the literature in her article as “diaspora/transnationalism literature.” The obvious similarity between them is that both concepts claim to present an alternative lens through which to view migrants and the migrant experience that departs from the older assimilation theories of migration. The often cited example of the old assimilation model of migration is Oscar Handlin’s 1951 publication of *The Uprooted*, which suggested that migrants experience a “clean break” from their countries of origin, where the place they left remained a distant past and the migrants assumed a new life and a new identity in the host country. This model promoted a linear and limited understanding of the process of migration, suggesting that it simply involved going from “immigrant” to “ethnic resident” to “native citizen” over the course of two or three generations (Smith, R., 2005). It is this assimilation model that, according to most transnational migration theorists, has dominated migration research and the way migrants were viewed up until two decades ago (Smith, R., 2005). But perhaps both transnational migration scholars and diaspora scholars could benefit greatly from a more nuanced exploration of the assimilation model from which they both argue they are attempting to depart. A good reference here is the work by Alba and Nee (2003), who attempt to trace and explain the ways the American mainstream has been affected by and has affected the process of immigration and, specifically, the assimilation of immigrants. In their work, they highlight the differences between the assimilation patterns of early European immigrants and the assimilation patterns of contemporary immigrants, who originate, for the most part, from the Global South. While advocating for the importance of understanding the process of assimilation, the authors nonetheless assert that assimilation is not inevitable and that, contrary to the assimilation model associated with Handlin, all immigrants face a choice when it comes to how much of their own culture they want to keep and how much of the new culture they are willing to accept. The authors also assert that this is not a one-time

process but is instead a continuous social process. Like transnationalist and diaspora scholars, Alba and Nee (2003) also challenge the traditional theories that tended to separate immigrants into the distinct categories of those who assimilated well and those who did not. Alba and Nee discussed an often ignored aspect of assimilation—the reciprocity of the assimilation process. Using America as the prime example, they contend that as much as immigrants are being encouraged to “become” American and are unconsciously versed in the American way of life, the so-called American way of life itself is being changed, altered, and affected by the immigrants (albeit without the acknowledgment of those who seek to preserve the “American way of life”). Because of this, the authors believe, the lines of segregation in America will become more blurred; they say they expect a “blurring of the main ethnic and racial boundaries of American life” (Alba & Nee, 2003). As such, neither transnational theorists nor diaspora scholars portray an accurate picture or understanding of the traditional assimilation theories. Still, these traditional assimilation theories remain significant in that the studies of both transnationalism and diaspora claim to “move beyond” the assumptions of these assimilation theories. By challenging the assumptions (whatever they may be) that exist in this old assimilation model, both transnationalism and diaspora studies camps acknowledge that there is something significant about the way that migrants are living their lives transnationally, a significance that is overlooked or downplayed in older migration scholarship. They both, in this sense, promote a new focus of analysis: the “lived experiences” of the migrants.

Some scholars even present diasporas as an example of transnational communities that must also navigate the ever present tension between “living here” and simultaneously “remembering there,” and fields both certainly move beyond a focus on assimilation and how migrants “fit in” to the host country (Nagel, 2001; Ramji, 2006). In both cases, too, there is often some often idealized conception of what “home” is, and the possibility of return is likewise a salient feature in both areas of study. Also, both camps utilize the concept of ‘imagined community,’ often borrowing from the work of Benedict Anderson (1983) in asserting that the migrants engage in long distance nationalism, as they remain involved and engaged in the politics of the home country in some form. Another connection is that whether in a transnational migrant community or diaspora, members form a community within which they often never engage in frequent face-to-face interactions with each other (Kivisto, 2003). Furthermore, in both cases, the community has benefited from technological advancements that have facilitated communication and connections across national borders (Smith, 2005). In fact, this benefit of technological advancement is very pronounced in transnational migration theory. According to Kivisto (2003), one of the things that makes the current era of transnational migration so different from previous eras is that “modern technology has intensified the rate and extent of circulation between homeland and migratory destination.”

Where theories of transnational migration and diaspora studies also bear similarity is in response to the critique that neither phenomenon survives past the first generation of migrants. The argument is that the desire to maintain ties and bonds with the home country and others in the diaspora or migrant community is more important for first generation migrants than second or third generation and beyond. However, both diaspora studies and transnational migration studies refute this. Indeed, I argue that we should not be so quick to make this particular assumption about the experiences of second and third generation migrants. Butler (2001) believes that one of the distinguishing features of diasporas is their existence over at least two generations. A good example can be found in the case of the Jamaican diaspora. In June 2008, I attended the Jamaican Diaspora conference held in Kingston, Jamaica. At this conference were

the “Future Leaders” of the Jamaican diaspora, where members were mostly individuals aged 30 years and under from England, Canada, and the USA. One of the things that surprised most of the conference participants is that of the nearly 200 youth present, from all three countries, the overwhelming majority had not only not been born in Jamaica, but they had also never been to Jamaica prior to the event. Despite this, their enthusiasm in sustaining the Jamaican Diaspora was evident based not only on their attendance at the event but also on their active engagement on the diaspora’s online webpage and on their own social webpages such as Facebook, as well as their planning of their own conferences of Jamaican diaspora future leaders, the latest of which was held in Jamaica in August 2009. In fact, they seem to be more organized than the larger Jamaican Diaspora organization and were determined to make their presence known by engaging in projects with youth in Jamaica, among other activities.

The concept of space is another point of convergence between transnational migration theory and diaspora studies. In both instances is the assertion that there is something unique and important about the space within which displaced or relocated persons operate. Transnational theories of migration have referred to this as “transnational social spaces” (Pries, 2001), bearing similarity to the “third space” (Bhabha, 1994) often used by diaspora scholars. It is important to note that both frameworks recognize the importance of space, though they may define it differently. Transnational migration scholars often discuss the ways in which geographical spaces give way to social spaces within which migrants operate (Pries, 2001). These spaces help to confirm the notion that immigration is a circular concept and not necessarily a linear phenomenon, something that possibly scholars in both camps can agree on. Although not necessarily admitting so, diaspora studies also borrows heavily from one often overlooked or ignored field in sociology: the sociology of space. Both frameworks place importance on the way in which migrants conceive of space and the new space they find themselves in once they leave the homeland. However, transnational migration scholars have attempted to define and redefine this space, while diaspora scholars are content with knowing that there is simply something unique about the notion of space.

One of the eminent scholars on transnational migration, Thomas Faist, has proposed three analytical types of immigrant transnationalism: kinship groups, circuits, and communities (Kivisto, 2003). Of these three types, diasporas have more in common with the third type—communities. Kinship ties are focused on notions of reciprocity and the role of remittances in maintaining family relationships. Circuits are concerned with the circulation of goods, information, and people. It is his conception of transnational immigrant communities that find commonalities with diasporas. As Kivisto points out, transnational immigrant communities are defined more by space than place. However, it seems that theories of transnational immigrant communities maintain that these communities are only transnational when the majority of migrants in the community frequently engage in some tangible transnational activity, such as hometown associations, school alumni associations, or religious associations. Scholars of transnational migration often go out in the field asking migrants to tell them how many times they send money home, make phone calls home, participate in specific projects on development in the home country, and so on, in an attempt to gather quantifiable data and make general assumptions. However, because diasporic scholars view diaspora as a *process* and type of consciousness, they seem to be less concerned with counting “evidence of transnational connection” and more concerned with understanding the experiences of the migrants, how they are negotiating their new identities and what factors motivate them to be involved, or not, in the home country.

Diaspora Moving Beyond Transnational Migration Theory

Despite the similarities described in the previous section, the distinctions between transnational migration theories and diaspora studies bear some rather significant distinctions. Indeed, not all scholars are comfortable using *transnationalism* and *diaspora* interchangeably. The first editor of *Diaspora*, Khachig Tololyan stated, “The idea of diaspora—as an unending sojourn across different lands—better captures the emerging reality of transnational networks and communities than the language of immigration and assimilation” (as cited in Lie, 1995). Scholars of diasporas suggest that “diaspora” more accurately describes persons coming from one central geographical location who are “scattered” across multiple locations. Typically, transnational migration theory can be applied even in the case where persons from one nation migrate only to one other nation. Diaspora, on the other hand, necessarily suggests a scattering and, therefore, often describes migrants or migrant communities with a common place of origin living in *more than one nation*.

One of the main problems with trying to contrast and compare transnational migration theory with the diaspora framework is that the two concepts come out of very different camps. That is, while transnational migration theory is more or less rooted in anthropology and sociology, diaspora studies “involves a dispersion in disciplinary space” (Brubaker, 2005). That is, as a studied phenomenon, it spans anthropology and sociology, and other disciplines (including cultural studies, geography, race and ethnicity studies, political science, and theories of transnational social movements). In fact, diasporic studies maintains that it is not a theoretical conceptualization about persons but is instead a framework from which to understand the process which migrants go through. So while one (transnational migration theory) maintains its newness as a theoretical concept, the other (diaspora studies) presents itself as a lens through which we can see migrants, a lens that privileges the way migrants define themselves and not the way in which they are defined by others (this will be discussed in more depth later on). Diaspora studies is, as Paul Stoller (2002) commented, a multidisciplinary framework that defies being tied down by any one discipline trying to legitimize itself as a new theory. As such, it is a concept that gets defined and utilized across many disciplines and is hard to “fit” under the sole umbrella of sociology. John Lie (1995) has suggested that one reason that the sociology of migration has been slow in theorizing about diaspora is that the preoccupation of transnational migration studies with getting information through census data and surveys presents a “methodological incongruence” with diaspora studies, which is more about a lived experience than a reported one. Lie also discusses the way in which diasporic writers tend to utilize “poststructural vocabularies” that help with their personal narratives, while sociological studies are more focused on “generalizing and statistical orientation.” In other words, the study of diasporas is essentially and fundamentally different from the more scientific methodological approach often employed in sociology of migration.

Transnationalism has received criticism for its claim that it provides a radical concept describing something new. That is, many scholars have challenged the claim of transnationalist theorists who say that transnationalism is something new that differs significantly from the experiences of migrants in previous centuries (Foner, 1997; Smith, R., 2005; Waldinger & Fitzgerald, 2004). As these critics argue, transnationalism has always existed (albeit in different ways) and perhaps simply without the label of “transnationalism.” Regardless of the available communication methods available, people have always remained connected to their homelands

when they migrate. The concept of diaspora is different in the sense that it cannot and does not claim novelty (indeed, it was used decades ago to describe the experience of the Jews). However, what it can claim, and possibly indisputably so, is (1) that the term has been redefined (as detailed previously) and (2) that while the process of diaspora, like transnationalism, is not new, there is something very new about the way in which migrant communities have adopted this concept to describe themselves, something they have not done previously. Migrant communities have adopted this concept particularly in the case of newly emerging formal networks of diasporas, including the Indian Diaspora, the Filipino Diaspora, the Haitian Diaspora and the Jamaican Diaspora, to name a few. While these people have been migrating for years and engaging in transnationalism throughout that time, it is only recently that they have decided to identify themselves as members of formal organizations mobilizing under the banner of diaspora. This is significant. So while Brubaker (2005) is right in questioning whether or not we can truly speak about the unprecedented penetrability of borders and the movement of people, he fails to acknowledge the unprecedented way in which people have come to self-identify as belonging to a diaspora.

Transnational migration literature, although often claiming to assert that it moves beyond a nation state focus, tends to rely heavily on nation state discussion. According to Schiller, Basch, and Blanc (1995), “Transnational migration is the process by which immigrants forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement.” Yet one of the distinct features of diasporas is that they entail and embody more than just simultaneous connection to the homeland and the host country: They entail connection to others in the diaspora. As Butler (2001) put it, “Contact between communities of the diaspora, independent of contacts with the homeland, is vital in forging diasporan consciousness, institutions, and networks. It is, therefore, an essential point of analysis.” As such, it is the contact between members of the diaspora that helps distinguish it from traditional conceptions of transnational migrants. This contact results in the building of a unique cultural identity within the diaspora and a group identity of what it means to be in the diaspora. In this way, diaspora can be viewed as a cultural identity project.

It should be clear by now that concepts such as culture and identity are central to the studies of diasporas—something that is perhaps missing from transnational migration literature. Because diaspora studies is willing to embrace the complexities, fluidity, and significance of culture and identity, it tends to focus on an individual level of lived experience and the everyday life of migrants. Diaspora scholars like James Clifford (1994) have argued that diaspora populations do not share the same theoretical point of origin as immigrants; they do not come from “elsewhere.” This is because, as he asserts, the theoretical underpinning of traditional migration theories is that the person comes from “elsewhere” and engages in some form of assimilation and integration, always with reference to some conception of a nation state. As he states in relation to diaspora studies, in contrast: “Positive articulations of diaspora identity reach outside the normative territory and temporality (myth/history) of the nation-state” (Clifford, 1994). For Clifford, the sense of shared collective history and loss are salient features of diasporas, features that often never get merged or integrated into some bounded territory. As he argues, diasporas operate in a somewhat alternative public space that cannot be reduced to national boundaries. Transnational migration theories often define transnational identities as those which “[cross] multiple national borders” (Ramji, 2006). For Ramji, the country of departure and the host country are the two reference points from which identities get constructed. Again, the point of reference is the nation state or territorial borders. So while transnational

migration theories still give preference to nation states and use them as key points of reference, diaspora communities move beyond this and, as Clifford discusses, do not easily fit the objects of diaspora studies into linear migration models of assimilation or transnational migration theories. Diaspora scholars are more likely to assert that the diasporic identity is a hybrid identity that is not necessarily restricted to an identity based on home or host. In contrast, the focus on the nation state is naturally the main point of reference for many sociological transnational migration scholars, since, by definition, sociology is concerned with the study of societies, and societies are often defined within territorial borders. As Peter Kivisto (2003) put it, “Sociology, from its inception until recently, tended—often implicitly—to view society as synonymous with the nation state” (10).

In reviewing and researching transnational migration theory, it becomes clear its real focus is on the role of nation states and whether we can conclude from transnationalism that the role of the nation state has declined. For this reason, it is not surprising to find studies on transnational migration are caught up in the discourse of the “eroding power of the state as boundary arbiter” and whether or not we have entered into a transnational or “postnational” world in which the nation state is in crisis (Kivisto, 2003). While this might be the latent agenda of transnational migration theories, diaspora studies seems much less concerned with taking any side in this debate and puts the migrants themselves and their conceptualization of their diasporic identities at the center of analysis. Diaspora studies has no stake in the efforts to further determine, demonstrate, or prove that nation states are declining in power.

One of the unique characteristics of diaspora communities, according to Steve Vertovec (1999), is that diaspora suggests that it is also a form of consciousness. This consciousness is predicated upon participants’ “awareness of decentered attachments,” as the diaspora is held together by a recreation through the mind that reflects a shared imagination (Vertovec, 1999). This consciousness enables members to form a connection with others who share the same “roots” and “routes.” Transnational migration scholars are perhaps more apprehensive to enter the world of the “mind” and the realms of “consciousness,” “collective memory,” or “longing and belonging” and the like, preferring to leave the field of cognition and the mental construction of world view to psychology. These scholars may suggest that the weakness of diaspora as a concept is that it appeals to too many existential concepts and is not based enough in practical and observable structures and institutions. Nevertheless, diaspora studies seems more willing to embrace the multidimensional conception of diaspora, willing to borrow from multiple disciplines (cognitive psychology, cultural studies, identity studies, etc.) to explain a complex reality. Again, we can see the ability of diaspora studies to transcend disciplines, not being bound to any particular one.

Another important difference in my estimation is that transnational migration theorists are deeply concerned with their ability to group migrants into some fixed category. This becomes clear in the work of scholars such as Kivisto, who, in one of his articles, “Theorizing Transnational Immigration,” finds himself asking the following questions:

Should all immigrants today and yesterday be viewed as transnational? What about the immigrants from either era that sever family ties, care little if at all about the homeland issues, and never return home? Would not it be more appropriate to consider which immigrants from both periods qualify as transmigrants and which ones do not? (Kivisto, 2001)

Though these questions present very real problems for transnational migration theory, they do not enter consideration as such within the realm of diaspora studies. In response to the first two

questions, diaspora studies asserts that members of the diaspora are self-defined and make a conscious effort to become part of the diaspora. As Brubaker (2005) has noted, one of the more unique characteristics of the concept of diaspora is the way in which it has transcended the “ivory towers” of academia and has entered the “everyday life” of individuals who have adopted the concept and utilized it to define themselves. As he said,

Dispersion [of the concept of diaspora] has been even more striking outside the academy: in the media, on the web, in the self-representations of a wide range of groups and initiatives. In this respect, the trajectory of ‘diaspora’ resembles that of ‘identity’, which moved from being a technical term of philosophy and psychoanalysis to a key term throughout the humanities and social sciences, and which came to be widely used in the media and popular culture. (Brubaker, 2005)

In my estimation, transnationalism has not yet become an accessible or “trendy” term that has been able to move beyond academia; it remains, for the most part, a concept unfamiliar to most migrants. On the other hand, possibly because of its chicness or “sex appeal,” diaspora has successfully become a part of everyday discourse in both home countries and host societies.

Indeed, many of the pioneers of diaspora studies (at least in the cultural studies discipline), including Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy claim to be part of the diaspora communities they describe. These persons took the initiative to write about an experience that was unique to them and because of this, many ironically criticize diaspora formation as being elitist or only for intellectuals. This is mentioned in the work of Anteby-Yemini and Berthomière (2005), who, in describing the Caribbean diaspora, state, “Most of the actors of this group, most of the leaders were (and still tend to be) intellectuals, writers, very active in the public sphere” (Anteby-Yemini & Berthomière, 2005). John Lie (1995) refers to such scholars as “Third World Intellectuals” whose fiction, memoirs, essays, and even scholarly prose shape the representation of the new immigration. I see no contradiction here. The fact that many scholars of diaspora are writing about or referencing their personal experience only further legitimizes my argument that the significance of diaspora rests within its organic formation. These migrants, who have the opportunity, are simply doing what should have been done before—they are connecting their personal experience with a structural phenomenon and writing about it. These voices (often not visible in sociology of migration literature) “account for the gulf between international migration studies and transnational diasporic studies” (Lie, 1995). Whether or not these persons have been able to present some set, bounded, and fixed definition of the term “diaspora” is probably less important than the fact that they are trying to make some sense of their experiences and gain some understanding of their lives.

Diaspora formation is not an inevitable result of migration, and it is not merely a new category in which to group migrants. It is therefore no surprise that not all migrants belong to diasporas. Unlike transnational migration theory, diaspora is considered a process, a practice, and not a category of people. One can choose to join a diaspora and become active within that entity, but no one is forced to do so; becoming a member of a diaspora community is a process of self-identification and consciousness. It is a social process and a practice that some persons engage in while others do not. Diaspora scholars would remind us that diasporas consist of self-identified persons who feel connected by their sharing of the same process or practice of lived experience. Diaspora communities are organically formed from within and not from without. That is, it is not necessarily the work of a scholar to determine who is included in and excluded from the diaspora, but the migrants themselves determine this by a self-guided processes. As Brubaker states, “We should think of diaspora in the first instance as a category of practice, and only then

ask whether, and how, it can fruitfully be used as a category of analysis” (Brubaker, 2005). That is, diaspora is primarily a lens through which we can attempt to understand a process in which migrants engage and is only secondarily a category of migrants.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have summarized contemporary studies on diaspora communities by attempting to link diaspora studies to its predecessor and close relative (transnationalism) with its seemingly next of kin and “newly found” relative (transnational social movements). In doing so, I briefly discussed the concept of diaspora and then went into two detailed sections, one showing the way in which diasporas and transnational studies are related and the other showing how they diverge. Once we are able to move beyond the need to perfectly define diaspora and show how “new” or not new it is as a concept, then we can possibly begin to actually find ways of understanding how these diasporas have formed, mobilized, and created change. Because whether we agree that it is new or not, the existence of diasporas is undisputed for many who participate in these communities.

The importance of an article like this is that it encourages a conversation (between sociology of migration and diaspora studies) where silence has typically prevailed. Although both camps may have varying foundational philosophies, they could certainly borrow and benefit from each other. Traditional sociology of migration journals (such as *International Migration Review*) and contemporary diaspora journals (such as *Diaspora* and *Public Culture*) need not be archenemies or polarized as extreme opposites. As John Lie (1995) so succinctly and aptly put it:

It would be a pity indeed if sociologists neglect the new journals. Surely there are reasons to be wary of them—their ignorance of the sociologist scholarship, their disregard for numbers and generalizations, and their abstruse theoretical terminology and endless neologisms. Nonetheless, hardhearted empiricism must confront our inescapably transnational world. It is simply bad sociology to ignore the reality that the new ideas and terms seek, however unsuccessfully at times, to comprehend. Impressionistic though they may be, they valiantly attempt to capture the ineffable range of colors and shapes of the ripples through our time and space that the old school has neglected in favor of reproducing standard academic style. The new diasporic voices will not be silenced or marginalized; their sheer numbers and their centrality in academic and nonacademic discourses ensure their continuing significance. This is no cause for lament, however. Sociologists after all, have the splendid example of *The Polish Peasant*. It is time to reconsider the splendor of human waves by once again valorizing the personal and the general; the sociological imagination demands nothing less.

Finally, I believe that the next stage that diaspora studies will enter is to a focus on individual diaspora communities and the way in which each community embodies elements of transnational movements. To date, the majority of the scholarship on diasporas has tended to focus on finding generalized characteristics and attributes of diasporas. At this time, however, it seems that most scholars are willing to go beyond this and have recognized the importance of paying attention to each diaspora community individually and the ways in which each one has

formed and how its members mobilize. For example, while there is a plethora of available literature on the Caribbean Diaspora community, few authors have narrowed their studies to specific case studies of Caribbean Diasporas residing in various parts of the globe. Although there are some similarities among all Caribbean Diasporas, I believe, for example, that the Caribbean Diaspora communities residing in different countries (i.e. the U.S., the UK, and Canada) each warrant their own analysis in order to highlight their unique characteristics and to be able to accurately analyze the evolution of the diaspora community in a particular host location. As diaspora scholar Avtar Brah (1996) reminds us, “It is axiomatic that each empirical diaspora must be analyzed in its historical specificity.” By doing so, we will better be able to understand the ways in which these unique transnational socio-cultural movements arise, why they arise, and the specific implications of these communities on societies.

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