

**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.

*Introduction*

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building. This special issue in *Geoforum*<sup>2</sup> 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 Varadarjan, 2005; Mohan, 2006; Lerner, 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 (Biao, 2005; Kuznetsov, 2006; Aikins and White, 2011). However,

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<sup>2</sup> This special issue draws together the proceedings of a workshop organized at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore during November 2012.

critical diaspora scholarship contends that the idea of ‘diaspora’ must be examined conceptually (Brah, 1998; Butler, 2001; Dirlik, 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<sup>3</sup>. 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 emigrant 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

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<sup>3</sup> These have been reviewed extensively by Delano and Gamlen (2014) in their special issue introduction for the journal *Political Geography* hence we will not replicate this literature here.

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.

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 complementary fashion and at other times in rivalry with one another. Diaspora strategies not only project a state's extraterritorial agenda of a purported homeland, but also reflect the co-presence of multiple territorial extensions and the jostling of different state and non-state actors for influence over diaspora populations. Topologies of power signal how such heterogeneous 'techniques, material forms, institutional structures and technologies of power' exhibit patterns of correlation, and are redeployed in various combinations to transform such patterns of correlation again and again (Collier, 2009: 400). The sections that follow illustrate these arguments by drawing 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.

### *Subjects of diaspora strategies*

Difficult questions of national identity, belonging and citizenship arise when states engage emigrants through diaspora strategies. The documentation practices of states

historically, such as passport regimes and visa requirements, determine who is considered part of or lies outside of a national community, as well as who is allowed to move legitimately to another country or return to the homeland (Chen, 2012). By extension such historical practices of documentation further shape which social groups are included or excluded in a country's diaspora today. The assumptions underlying these identity labels feature – with or without public acknowledgement – in policy decisions on diaspora strategies. Thus they need to be examined in relation to specific historical contexts and contemporary socio-economic imperatives influencing the categorisation of emigrant subjects today.

Dhooleka Raj's paper in this special issue rises to such a task. Her paper illustrates not only a growing sense of urgency among migrant sending states to engage with their diasporas extraterritorially, but also the political, philosophical and bureaucratic complexities of implementing such 'emigrant infrastructures' (Raj, this issue). Raj considers how changes in identity documentary schemes for diaspora populations are influenced by geopolitical events across three key periods, including past indentured migration and the border partition of India and Pakistan, both of which impact assumptions of belonging or non-belonging from the perspectives of these states. Such assumptions factor into contemporary diaspora strategising as the Indian state advances its version of who is considered part of the Indian diaspora that it desires. We further suggest that from a topological viewpoint, her paper shows how the changing nature of citizenship and political subjectivity under India's contemporary diaspora strategising is part of a wider topology that inflects historical events and materialities into the present. In a topological analysis, the complex bureaucratic paper trail that accompanies legislative changes also 'has the potential to be actualised



differently depending upon the relations of which they are a part and such arrangements may even throw up new capacities' (Allen, 2012: 191).

Raj's paper reminds us that when nation-states construct 'diasporas' they deploy identity labels suggestive of their approaches to creating categories of diaspora subjects. There is an established literature on how migrant sending states reach out to emigrants through diaspora engagement initiatives that encourage remittances and small-scale investments (e.g. Fitzgerald, 2000; Smith, 2003). But recent literature on diaspora strategies also highlights the importance placed on social groups labelled by migrant sending countries as 'talent' (e.g. Lewin and Zhong, 2013). This refers to highly skilled emigrants believed able to help advance the economic development of their countries. The diaspora subjects targeted include financial professionals, scientists, engineers, creative specialists, and capital-bearing investors or entrepreneurs. Neoliberal strategies and programmes emphasise the market value of their skills while encouraging entrepreneurial activity and diaspora knowledge networks.

The diaspora knowledge networks of Muslim entrepreneurs are the topic of Johan Fischer's paper (this issue), which highlights the Malaysian state's ambition to incubate and promote *halal* food industries globally. His paper also underlines the hospitality cultures through which the Malaysian state subtly marks its territorial presence to the Malaysian diaspora in London, such as by providing temporary accommodation for Malaysian students or encouraging *halal* food consumption which is associated with Malaysian patriotism. Fischer's paper alludes to the ethno-national and religious framings of Malaysia's diaspora strategies despite its multicultural

national population. The Muslim entrepreneurs and *halal* food consumers identified by the Malaysian state are more likely to be of Malay ethnicity than Malaysians of Chinese or Indian ethnicity who also constitute the Malaysian diaspora. In these ways, the *bumiputra* policy that affirms Malay privilege in Malaysia is extended into the diaspora and reinscribed during diaspora strategising (also see Koh, forthcoming).

Indeed, productive insights can be yielded when diaspora strategies are studied alongside ethnically privileged migration policies, which describe the actions by ‘kin-states’ to promote the return of their co-ethnics abroad (e.g. Tsuda, 2009; Waterbury, 2009; Ho, 2013; Dumbrava, 2013). Yamashiro’s paper examines such a case concerning the preferential policies provided by Japan for ‘global co-ethnics’ whom politicians and policymakers presume can integrate more smoothly into the ancestral homeland. While Yamashiro acknowledges the significance of global co-ethnics, she highlights as well the potential presented by the ‘affinity diaspora’. Members of the affinity diaspora may be of different national or ethnic background from Japan, but they have cultivated meaningful ties that can be called upon for the host country’s benefit. In line with Jons et al’s (2014: 13) call for a ‘civic’ understanding of diaspora, Yamashiro’s paper in this special issue extends arguments about diaspora strategies by shifting the analytical lens from assumed membership premised on ancestry or natal ties to underline the significance and potential of biographical ties as a type of diaspora resource instead.

These three papers not only prompt critical consideration of the ethnic privilege underpinning diaspora strategies, but also by extension which subjects are excluded or included in the state’s vision of ‘diaspora’. Mezzadra and Neilson (2012; 2014) argue

that the spatial formations connected to borders are elusive because they are marked as much by differentiation as connection, influencing the allocation of citizenship rights. Likewise different degrees of internality and externality characterise diaspora strategising. These axes of inclusion or exclusion are determined by the state's vision of diaspora, but implicate as well a variety of social actors who intervene in diaspora strategising. We examine next the web of connections that populate the topological arrangements of power arising out of diaspora strategising.

#### *Webs of connections during diaspora strategising*

The activity of non-state actors in diaspora, such as the Muslim entrepreneurs discussed in Fischer's paper and their activities in trade fairs, restaurants and religious organisations, provokes the question: apart from state actors, who else asserts 'claims' over the diaspora? The existing scholarship on diaspora strategies focuses mainly on initiatives by state actors, delivering arguments that diaspora strategies are reconfiguring state sovereignty extraterritorially and resulting in new spatial formations of scale and networks. But as diaspora strategies mature, how might other social groups mobilise emigrants as a diaspora resource and what are the topological effects of their activities?

Discussing the Bollywood cultural industry, Mohammad (2007) signals the iconography used in Hindi cinema to reinforce the relationship of the Indian diaspora in the United Kingdom (UK) to the homeland. She adds that government agencies in a host country, such as the British tourism office in her study, profit from the relationship as well by promoting Bollywood film sites as tourism attractions to

Indian travellers. In another study, Fitzgerald (2009) highlights the partnerships between Roman Catholic churches in Mexico and the United States, as well as between Mexican churches and the federal or local governments in Mexico. For the Mexican state, partnering the church promotes nationalism to garner remittances and investments, while for the church, such partnerships facilitate its pastoral reach abroad and encourages support for left-behind communities.

Elsewhere, Biao (2011) advances the idea of a 'ritual economy' to describe the large-scale ritualistic conventions organised by Chinese officials to recruit overseas Chinese professionals. He suggests that these activities bolster an economy of diaspora engagement costing ministries millions of dollars and which draws in a wide range of industry partners. They provide logistics support for running gala dinners, making travel and accommodation arrangements, delivering consultancy services and more. In separate writing, Ho and Boyle (forthcoming) argue that cultural communities, chambers of commerce, alumni groups and non-governmental organisations function as diaspora brokers and intermediaries that mediate in exchanges between their countries of origin and the countries in which they are based, or where they are developing business and educational links.

We suggest that such studies signal the array of social actors implicated in diaspora strategising and who may promote diaspora engagement to advance their own interests, soliciting as well willing partners whose agendas cohere with their own. In this respect, educational institutions are also leveraging diaspora strategies in partnership with a variety of social actors, including diasporic academics. The papers by Maggi Leung and Wendy Larner in this special issue focus on universities that

enhance their global connections and reach by mobilising academics who belong to another country's diaspora or co-national academics who are working abroad. The diaspora strategies of such universities traverse space and scale as they deepen network relationships with partner universities and other allies.

Leung (this issue) considers diasporic academics through a study of the Chinese knowledge diaspora. Her paper highlights that Chinese state agencies operate at different levels of governance to promote the 'diaspora option'. At the municipal level, governments use conduits such as job fairs to reach out to overseas Chinese experts and rope in training organisations, headhunting firms and human resource services for this purpose. The activities of the municipal governments are in turn coordinated by provincial governments, which report to the central government and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Leung's paper also enunciates how the Chinese and German states support educational initiatives that promote reciprocal exchanges, thus 'co-producing' diaspora relationships that influence bilateral ties.

For Larner (this issue), diasporic academics act as cultural intermediaries that broker international relationships and collaborative research projects between Anglophone and non-Anglophone institutions. She observes that such practices transform academic knowledge and practice as universities and diasporic academics become embedded in globalising knowledge networks. Her paper also signals how 'the research ambitions of universities sit alongside those of other research providers such as multinational corporations, NGOs and think tanks' (Larner, this issue). While cautious of the uneven power geometries that may emerge through university partnerships especially with developing countries, Larner is optimistic that the power

relations in international partnerships might be shifting to challenge conventional academic hierarchies and promote mutually beneficial relations instead. Both papers underline the horizontal, vertical and cross-cutting linkages borne out of diaspora strategising, producing polymorphous spatial imaginaries and a topological constellation of power relations. The ethics that inform the design of diaspora strategies is a theme that merits more substantive discussion in the penultimate section of this paper.

### *Recuperating diaspora strategies*

Diaspora strategies have been critically examined through governmentality analyses that question the instrumental subjectification of diaspora populations to advance neoliberal agendas. For example, Graham (2014) disputes that diaspora-owned firms display greater social responsibility to the homeland; rather he argues that they capitalise upon their social networks to rent or purchase real estate for profit. The spatial implications of diaspora strategising are highlighted by Mullings (2012) who cautions against the unequal spaces of development or spaces of stasis that can emerge from diaspora strategies and serve to entrench the power of elites. For de Lange (2013), diasporas play a role in embedding their homeland countries in the core economies of their host countries by facilitating the exchange of labour, knowledge, trade and capital. While de Lange (ibid) argues that this improves the position of semi-peripheral countries and their development, Ho (2011) cautions that there are still winners and losers. Although developing countries with significant diaspora resources may benefit from the advantages presented by their emigrants, other countries without significant diaspora resources fall further behind. Countries that

stand to gain most are those that source cheap labour and supplies from semi-peripheral countries. Such critiques prompt concerns over whether diaspora strategies indeed benefit homeland states or perpetuate inequalities within and across national societies. As Pellerin and Mullings (2013) caution, risk and responsibility for social transformation can shift from the state and private corporations to migrant populations when the mantra of diaspora strategies is adopted uncritically.

If diaspora strategies result in greater inequality, should they be discarded from the policy agenda? Arguably, diaspora participation through homeland investment and trade is not necessarily positive or benign (Gillespie and McBride, 2013). In the spirit of proposing a more progressive agenda for diaspora strategies, the final paper in this special issue by Elaine Ho, Mark Boyle and Brenda Yeoh offers a normative framework that recasts diaspora strategies within a framework of feminist care ethics. They suggest that principles of interdependency and reciprocity underpinning feminist care ethics can serve the formulation of diaspora strategies that seek to fortify and nurture caring relationships as resources flow between states and their diaspora populations. Referring to the complex webs of relations braiding migrants into everyday events in the homeland as a 'diaspora economy of care', they further propose three types of diaspora economies of care centred on the emotional, moral and service aspects of the state-homeland relationship.

This contribution by Ho, Boyle and Yeoh focuses on the state-diaspora relationship as one component in a wider topology of power arising out of diaspora strategising (henceforth diaspora-centred topologies of power). But in each of the diaspora economies of care proposed, they identify social actors, ranging from businesses to

civil society partners and individual migrants or diaspora intermediaries, that can come together to cultivate more equitable relations of care. Feminist care ethics can be extended to inform and recalibrate other components within diaspora-centred topologies of power that privilege political and economic rationalities over socially just outcomes. This entails, as Allen (2012) advocates, a commitment towards identifying and conceptualising carefully the different components within those webs of connectedness, the nature of their relations to one another and the ‘multiple shapings of space’ (Martin and Secor, 2014: 435). Only then can we pinpoint openings in the design of diaspora strategies that will allow for nourishing a sense of interdependency, reciprocity and social solidarity within the webs of connections making up diaspora relationships.

### *Conclusion*

The picture derived from this collection of papers on diaspora strategies highlights an entanglement of state and non-state institutional interests alongside those of migrants, diaspora brokers and diaspora intermediaries. This special issue proffers an approach that is attentive to the topologies of power arising from how diaspora mobilisations by a variety of social actors are connected to one another, even if they are advanced separately. We suggest that more can be done to unravel these webs of power, especially since the dialogical production of diaspora populations has received limited academic attention thus far despite the implications it has for citizenship, identity politics, cultural production, international relations, ethics and geography. Studying diaspora formations dialogically means deploying an analytical lens that is attentive to how the actions of different social actors and institutions from one country towards



diaspora populations can influence the attitudes and actions of that diaspora towards another country that also claims their loyalty and contributions.

Some scholars argue that the diaspora initiatives of a migrant sending country can affect migrant incorporation in immigration countries, or conversely the immigration context in migrant receiving countries may impact the diaspora initiatives of another country (e.g. Sinnati and Horst, 2014; Penafiel, in review). Another point of view suggests that diaspora engagement policies by migrant sending states facilitate migrant integration by directing emigrants to political institutions and social organisations in the immigration country that can help improve their quality of life (e.g. Delano, 2010). In all likelihood, both possibilities exist.

Herein lies the value of a topological approach that holds in tension the multiple entanglements (Allen, 2012) between different countries managing their emigrant or immigrant populations (including re-migration), various institutional and organisational interests represented in the state and non-state sectors, and how these traverse multiple sites and scales of analyses. The study of diaspora strategies can in turn inform topological analyses of power since the initiatives directed at mobilising diaspora populations influence subjectivities, economic livelihoods, and social and political justice. The assorted permutations in which such social formations coagulate or dissolve at specific moments in the past and present prompt constant revision of the spatial vocabulary we use to describe these unstable power formations. Such an endeavour will hopefully also prompt careful recalibration of the ethical approaches underpinning the design and delivery of diaspora strategies in order to achieve socially just outcomes.

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