FORUM

Digital Diasporas: Staying with the Trouble

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This commentary proposes a reorientation of diaspora studies towards new configurations of participation and identification. Digital media affordances in this sense are just such new configurations that enable, sustain and multiply diasporic encounters through social media platforms, digital devices and infrastructures. The emerging digital diasporas do not oppose or replace traditional diasporas, but on the contrary further expand and transform their agency in the digital age Mihaela Nedelcu (2018). In our thinking, we are inconversation with, as well as departing from, previous notions of diaspora. In this commentary, we briefly establish the complex and non-linear genealogy of the term, as partaking in multiple disciplinary takes and discursive orientations, and then migrating to the new realm of technology and digital connectedness.

> The point of theory therefore is to travel, always to move beyond its confinements, to emigrate, to remain in a sense in exile.
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> (Said, 2000, p. 451)

Introduction

Diaspora is inextricably linked with the notion of exile, loss and displacement. Yet it remains a potent paradigm for rearticulating experiences of belonging, affinity and connectedness across borders and time. The opening quote by Edward Said captures well the everlasting but mutating nature of exile and that of diaspora. Understanding diaspora as a traveling concept has the function of putting the notion of diaspora under erasure, asking us to rethink its boundaries, conceptual vigor and emancipatory force. Yet it also asks us to mobilize diaspora, to use it as a

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traveling concept, going beyond its genesis and methodological implications in order to establish new lines of flight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

This allows us to understand diaspora not as a normative concept, or as an established and ossified notion burdened by its long history of trauma and loss, but as a fluid and relational concept, always in a process of becoming, and therefore subject to new articulations and negotiations (Glissant, 1997). Such an understanding does not mean appropriation without accounting for the roots and routes of the great variety of existing diasporas. It proposes a reorientation of diaspora studies towards new configurations of participation and identification. Digital media affordances in this sense are just such new configurations that enable, sustain, and multiply diasporic encounters through social media platforms, digital devices, and infrastructures. The emerging digital diasporas do not oppose or replace traditional diasporas, but on the contrary further expand and transform their agency in the digital age (Nedelcu, 2018).

In our thinking, we are in conversation with, as well as departing from, previous notions of diaspora. In this commentary, we briefly establish the complex and non-linear genealogy of the term, as partaking in multiple disciplinary takes and discursive orientations, and then migrating to the new realm of technology and digital connectedness.

The Point of Diaspora

The diaspora paradigm continues to frame various scholarly discussions about the relationship between migration, belonging and identity, having gained a renewed momentum especially in the *digital age*. By now, a rich and diverse body of research has addressed the different sides of the aforementioned relationship. Scholarship coming from more recent fields of study—such as digital migration studies and digital anthropology—together with scholarship from their parent fields—media studies, migration studies, diaspora studies, and postcolonial studies, among others—unpack in both similar and different manners the impact of digital technologies on culture and identity, as well as the shaping of these technologies in practice by migrants.

In previous work on the digital diaspora, we privileged a processual understanding of its formation via digital mediation. Digital diaspora is "mutually constituted here and there, through bodies and data, across borders and networks, online and offline, by users and platforms, through material, symbolic, and emotional practices that are all reflective of intersecting power relations" (Candidatu, Leurs, & Ponzanesi, 2019, p. 34). This definition places digital diaspora more as a heuristic tool that opens up epistemological and methodological routes for more practice-focused research of the digital and the material, in their co-constitution.

Our understanding of the digital and digital mediation is informed by a material approach to culture. With this, the digital is seen as the medium through which meaning circulates via embodied practices. This digital anthropology perspective (see Horst & Miller, 2012) thus situates the research of the digital on the online-

offline continuum wherein a spectrum of culturally specific practices suffuses *the digital* with different meanings.

While methodologically this proposal for studying digital diaspora offers the possibility to discern and account for the countless forms migrant digital engagement takes, it does however risk a form of conceptual removal. Questions therefore still remain about the specificities of the concept of *digital diaspora* in itself, as well as its relevant genealogical links to ideas of nation building and nationalism, exile, trauma, and displacement.

Diaspora: A Traveling Concept

Indeed, diaspora is a *traveling concept* that has evolved through time, from its classical use referring mostly to exiled communities, to the social constructionist and expansive approach from the 1980s onwards, in which the use of the concept expanded to include different types of migratory groups—expatriates, refugees, minorities, etc.—and the more recent interest in the ways in which it can still account for new transnational identity formations without losing its denotative core.

This is in line with Koen Leurs's reference to diaspora as a *traveling concept* in which he shows how the concept is not fixed but gets its meaning through different media practices. Drawing from Mieke Bal, *traveling concept* refers to how concepts travel between disciplines, scholars and historical periods and between geographically dispersed academic communities, which makes their meanings and value change (Bal, 2002; Leurs, in press).

Historically, the term *diaspora* referred mainly to the prototypical case of the Jewish diaspora, to which Greek, Armenian, African and Irish communities were added later. In this early understanding, a diaspora is defined especially by a traumatic dispersal from an initial homeland, the subsequent prominence of the homeland in post-dispersal collective memory (Cohen, 2008, p. 4), a pre-dispersion collective identity and a persistent contact with the homeland (Tölölyan, 1996, pp. 12–14). After the 1980s, in a world marked by a series of historical changes, the definition expanded to accommodate the diversity of migrant phenomena: "expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities *tout court*" (Safran, 1991, p. 83).

Postcolonial theory and feminist theory played an important role in this development of the concept (see Bhabha, 1993; Brah, 1996; Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1990). These theorizations were brought about by different lived experiences in the new postcolonial and post-socialist condition and sought to do justice to intra-group differences and transdiasporic similarities in their account of diasporic identity formation. In our approach to researching the digital diaspora, we retain this more expansive definition that acknowledges the social dynamicity, intersectional and historically contingent character of diasporic formation.

It is also important here to emphasize that the concept of diaspora carries with it the particular genealogy of exile, loss and home-making, often experienced as part of a

larger marginalized social position. In this sense, as an imagined community, it is also characterized by progressive efforts to maintain and reproduce shared cultural norms outside the homeland, in a simultaneous attempt to build new hybrid spaces of belonging. Experiences of loss and *homing desires* (Brah, 1996, p. 201) are central to these processes, making them thus inextricably linked to any conceptualization of diaspora. Competing visions and imaginaries, however, can also enhance conservative tendencies that can have exclusionary and marginalizing effects along the lines of, inter alia, race, class, and sexuality. Furthermore, experiences of long-distance nationalism can keep diasporas out of sync with the homelands and render them susceptible to reactionary influences (Ponzanesi, 2020, pp. 987–988).

The digital plays a part in both these tendencies. More recent work (see for example the special issue "African Digital Diasporas: Technologies, Tactics, and Trends," edited by Victoria Bernal, 2020) and earlier studies (see for example Mitra, 2001; Mitra & Watts, 2002) show how digital technologies play an important role in agential and empowering diasporic practices. For Bernal, for example, in the case of the African diaspora, the digital is central to the formation of "new public spheres, forms of protest, social groupings, and spaces of imagination" (p. 4).

This furthermore strengthens the idea of a digital diaspora where multiple and even contradictory diasporic cultures can participate simultaneously. The question then remains: To what kind of definition of diaspora do the affordances of the digital point?

Witteborn (2019) suggests a move beyond an ethnonational framework in addressing the possibilities the new digital media affords. She reconsiders the explanatory power of the digital diaspora and proposes re-centering the understanding of the digital diaspora through the lens of loss. Here, both the affective experience of loss and the digital permit a renewed look at the concept of the digital diaspora, seen as a space of potentiality wherein the experiences of loss can be reconfigured in agential forms of representation and the building of social bonds of solidarity (p. 180). Her practice-based approach to diaspora studies, informed by ethnographic fieldwork, allows for a shift of vision from the stuck-ness of ethnic and national sameness in its conservative perils, to the possibilities of "diasporic solidarities beyond the ethnonational bond" (p. 184). In this way the concept of the digital diaspora gains renewed power and relevance. Its potential to account for an array of human mobilizations and migratory experiences remains thus meaningful precisely because it captures the different material and affective dimensions of mediated displacement and loss.

Diasporic Digital Cultures: From Shared Vulnerabilities to Bonds of Solidarity

Diaspora remains a concept born out of an initial past displacement that occupies an important role both in the individual and collective memories of migrant people. Understanding diaspora through the lens of displacement, the conditions

surrounding it, and the social and political effects it has puts the emphasis on how power operates nationally and transnationally. Subsequently, it can further allow for the identification of both shared vulnerabilities and oppressions, as well as common visions and possibilities of solidarity.

Both the workings of power and the bonds born out of shared vulnerability take place in the spectrum between digital coding, material infrastructure, and practices in the everyday. So instead of reifying the *digital* in the digital diaspora, we prefer to mark a more ethnographic approach that focuses on how the Internet mediates everyday life and is part of domesticating technologies for the purpose of transnational family relations, digital intimacies, and co-presence. This allows us to chart diasporas and digital diasporas in their different trajectories as well as many intersecting crossroads and mutual shaping.

The notion of *digital diaspora* in itself is far from being unequivocal and coherent. On the contrary, it seems to swim among a plethora of close friends that signal disciplinary or media-specific differences, but also geopolitical variations. "E-diasporas," "net-diasporas," and "web-diasporas" (Diminescu, 2008) are studied in technology and communication studies and focus more on the medium-specificity of Internet interactions, paying attention to web hyperlinks and digital traces online. *Digital diasporas* and *online diasporas* (Bernal, 2014; Brinkerhoff, 2009; Everett, 2009; Trandafoiu, 2013) are studied in migration studies and international relations through discourse analysis, with a focus on blogs, fora, and websites, and on how communities are sustained online. Terms such as *polymedia* (Madianou & Miller, 2012) mark a more ethnographic approach that focuses on how the Internet mediates everyday life and is part of domesticating technologies for the purpose of transnational family relations (Ponzanesi, 2020, p. 983).

So while we account for the different layers that the notion of digital diaspora entails (Internet-specific, network-oriented, and embedded in wider social practices), we foreground the idea of a digital diaspora conveyed through its everydayness. This relates to establishing points of connection and support, based not on national or ethnic bonds, but on conviviality, mutuality, and support within and across diasporas. The notion of the everyday emphasizes the concept of diaspora not as an ethno-bubble or contested political identification, but as a place of belonging, and comfort, a way of place-making that cuts across inward-looking encapsulation versus outward-looking cosmopolitanization paradigms (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2018). The focus on everydayness is also meant to overcome some of the inherent bias of the digital diaspora concept, such as the risks of glossing over the intersecting gendered, racial, classed, generational and geopolitical power relations. While the world might appear interconnected because the costs of travel, technologies and transnational connectivity have dwindled, the capacity to migrate and choose one's place of residence remains unevenly distributed.

This is also the approach we have taken in the ERC project CONNECTINGEUROPE, which focused on how female migrants from Turkey, Somalia, and Romania who have settled in major European cities (London,

Amsterdam, and Rome) engage in *diasporic digitality*, sustaining long-distance relationships through digital practices. We have focused on how, via digital diasporas, migrants create "communities of belonging" to reaffirm connections with their homelands, but also to establish new relations and networks of solidarity in the host countries and translocally, within their respective diasporic groups and transdiasporically.

The focus on digital practices and the everyday allowed us to tap into the politics of emotion and the affective dimension of migration and belonging. Rather than focusing on the abstract capabilities and medium specificity of the apps, platforms, and devices, an ethnographic approach helps to understand digital diasporas as part of everyday practices by situating them in particular contexts and revealing the socially diverse practices and engagements of different groups and generations. For the migrant women who we have met in our project, the use of digital media is strongly embedded in their gendered roles as mothers, daughters, students, expats, and reunited wives who keep the ties both with the homeland and with other diaspora communities through specific digital strategies and tactics—in ways that we deemed revealing and insightful for understanding the paradigm of digital diaspora from the bottom up.

Conclusion

The use of digital diaspora can be understood using the notion of traveling theory by Edward Said. It shows how a concept can travel from its original point of departure and become either deflated or reinvigorated (Said, 2000). In the first case the concept loses its radical power and becomes tamed and domesticated. That would be the case if we understood digital diaspora as just technological mediations, transparent and neutral. In the second case digital diaspora becomes reinforced and reactivated as a critical lens (Ponzanesi, 2006). This would be the case if diaspora develops from its original formulation and flares up in the new context to become more transgressive and transformative, building networks of solidarity beyond the ethnonational bonds.

The analysis of diaspora and the everyday is not only meant to show how diasporas can become sites of solidarity beyond the ethnonational framework. It is also meant to move beyond the false binaries of online and offline, without offering any easy reconciliation but to stay with the contradiction, and as Haraway would say, "staying with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016).

Diaspora's recurring relevance for how we make scholarly sense of migration, identity, and belonging is a sign of its conceptual power to capture an array of experiences that speak to similar affective disruptions. This makes diaspora and digital diaspora specifically unique spaces for the forging of bonds of solidarity. With this, a shared position of vulnerability, marked by loss and home-making (both *homing desire* and *unhomeliness*), triggers particular positions from which practices of digital use give rise to a multitude of diasporic digital cultures.

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