**Beyond the ‘The “Diaspora” Diaspora’: A Response to Rogers Brubaker.**

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**Abstract**

In this short reflection, I revisit Rogers Brubaker’s influential 2005 article on ‘The “diaspora” diaspora’. I consider the key arguments of this important intervention, before addressing three key conceptual issues in diaspora studies: (i) the role of place, origin and scale; (ii) diaspora, race and difference; (iii) sociological and historical approaches to diaspora. In the concluding section, I briefly consider some new directions in diaspora studies.

**Keywords:**

Rogers Brubaker, diaspora, the Bengal diaspora

“When *I* use a word”, Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.”

“The question is”, said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is”, said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master – that’s all.”

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass, Chapter VI.*

**Introduction**

Diaspora is, perhaps by its very nature, a moving target, both as social and historical process, and as concept. It is inherently dispersed, heterogeneous and fragmented, with uncertain contours and incommensurable meanings. At the same time, however, it necessitates an engagement with both ‘roots’ and ‘routes’, with the places where movement ceases and where identities and explanations cohere – however momentarily. ‘The “Diaspora” Diaspora’ by Rogers Brubaker, perhaps fittingly, provides such a moment - mapping the ‘roots’ and ‘routes’ of the concept and a rapidly proliferating academic (and non-academic) field, providing a reflective and cautionary pause, before launching a new direction in the theorisation and empirical exploration of diaspora, and becoming itself part of the ongoing process of proliferation, translation and diasporicisation.

Brubaker’s article provides an insightful and, most of all, timely intervention into diaspora studies – marking a critical turning point in diaspora studies. As Brubaker himself notes, diaspora as a concept forms part of a broader field of theoretical engagement with migration and mobility against a backdrop of increasing scale, diversity and pace of transformation in the global north and west in the past four (or so) decades, and - alongside concepts such as transnationalism, globalisation, postcolonial studies, and hybridity - has exploded since the late 1980s, traversing disciplinary boundaries and the conceptual borders of the academy, and proliferating meanings and linguistic formations. The decade or so since the article’s publication has seen little let up in this semantic stretch - a brief foray onto Google shows an increase from Brubaker’s million Google hits to over 10,600,000 today. A search for the word ‘diaspora’ on web catalogue ProQuest revealed 1,301 dissertations and theses, up from the 130 counted by Brubaker in 2001[[1]](#footnote-1). Brubaker’s own intervention is indicative of the growth of the field as a whole, while the significance of his own precautionary tale within this expanding field is clear. ‘The “diaspora” diaspora’ article itself stands third in the list of *Ethnic and Racial Studies’* most read articles, and fourth in its list of most cited – at the time of writing, the piece has 10,253 downloads, and, depending on the the notoriously fickle vagaries of the impact measurement, between 240 (on CrossRef) and 422 (on Scopus) citations[[2]](#footnote-2).

From a more personal perspective, the publication of the article was a definitive moment – one which was to indelibly shape my thinking and research over the following decade. ‘The “diaspora” diaspora’ was published in 2005, around the time of the newly launched Arts and Humanities Research Council’s *Diaspora, Migration, Identities* programme – which itself testifies to the growth and mainstreaming of the area and, as I will argue later, its more cultural formations – and its delineation of diaspora as a process or stance, rather than an entity, was a central tenet of the bid myself and my colleague, Joya Chatterji, pitched to this programme – though with little expectation of success. Returning to the piece a decade, a three year research project, two hundred interviews and a couple of hundred thousand words later, has been a pleasure, and also an opportunity to reflect on the continuities and changes in the field, and on the limitations, possibilities and potentialities that the concept of diaspora offers.

**Revisiting ‘the “diaspora” diaspora’**

Brubaker’s article falls into three sections: the first ‘maps’ the origin of diaspora studies and traces some of the ways in which the field has grown through the 1990s, both in academic and non-academic spaces. Like ‘diaspora’ itself, the article tracks the ways in which the original meaning of the concept has been dispersed and transformed in new contexts to capture the process of dislocation and re-rooting, so that, as Robin Cohen has argued, the term ‘proposes itself as a master trope of migration and settlement’ (1999:3). While reflecting this expansion, Brubaker’s account is more cautionary, refusing the definition of diaspora as ‘little more than sheer dispersion’ and delimiting its semantic borders to retain a more critical and political edge. He argues, ‘If everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so. The term loses its discriminating power – its ability to pick out phenomena, to make distinctions. The universalization of diaspora, paradoxically, means the disappearance of diaspora’ (p3). For Brubaker, the multiple and various definitions of diaspora cohere around three key features: dispersion, homeland orientation and boundary maintenance, although each can be – and are – problematized, capturing the central ambivalence at diaspora’s core. How far, for example, must one travel to constitute a diaspora? Must state borders be crossed? Is homeland a necessary point of reference or is the process of making home in diverse places the crucial attribute? Are diaspora identities a form of boundary maintenance or a source of transgression? Crucial, for Brubaker – and a point I want to return to later – is the question of time, especially across generations; of the ‘long duree’ of diasporas rather than the ‘instant diasporas nominated into existence today’ (p7).

The second section provides a sharp interrogation of some of the claims made for the unique importance of diaspora in constituting a radical shift in experience and perspective. He asks, *pace* Castles and Miller’s (1993) claims around ‘the age of migration’, ‘Have we passed from the age of the nation-state to the age of diaspora?’ Here again, and perhaps unsurprisingly given his own intellectual trajectory, Brubaker’s critique comes down on the side of caution and conservatism, challenging theoretically ubiquitous, but largely empirically unsubstantiated, claims of ‘radical breaks and epochal shifts’ (p9) in favour of a more nuanced and careful account of both continuity *and* change. In particular, he points to the ongoing role of states in policing borders and monitoring migration, arguing that despite increasing international movement, ‘the mobility of the great majority remains severely limited by the morally arbitrary facts of birthplace and inherited citizenship and by the exclusionary policies of states’ (p9). He argues too against the proclaimed newness of return and circular migration, and notes the place of emerging technologies in both closing down mobility and opening up new forms of communication across borders, while emphasising continuity with older forms of communication and transportation. Finally, he argues both for a reckoning with the continued relevance of the nation-state in shaping diaspora, and for the heterogeneity of the nation-state as a construct.

The final section examines the tensions at the heart of diaspora as a concept - between diaspora as an ‘entity’ and diaspora as a ‘stance’. The first posits diaspora as unitary actors, defined by places of origin, with countable memberships, strongly maintained and affective boundaries and distinctive identities. Again unsurprisingly, Brubaker counters the ‘groupism’ inherent in the conjuring of ‘community’ and ‘identity’ (Brubaker 2006, Brubaker & Cooper 2000) warning that ‘Diaspora… can also represent a non-territorial form of essentialized belonging’ that ‘resupposes that there is “an identity” that is reconfigured, stretched in time to cross state boundaries but on some level fundamentally the same’ (p12). Instead, and here is perhaps his most important contribution to the (sociological) theorisation of diaspora, Brubaker argues:

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. As a category of practice, ‘diaspora’ is used to make claims, to articulate projects, to formulate expectations, to mobilize energies, to appeal to loyalties….It does not so much *describe* the world as seek to *remake* it (p12).

Overall, the piece is more suggestive than programmatic, providing a topographical overview of the field rather than a definitive guide, signalling pitfalls without offering tangible solutions. That this is deliberate is clear – eschewing teleological accounts of diaspora theory as of diaspora identities, Brubaker concludes ‘The point of this analysis has not been to deflate diaspora, but rather to de-substantialize it’ (p13). Nevertheless, the piece offers both possibilities and dilemmas for those of us seeking to examine diaspora empirically as a ‘category of practice’ while retaining its critical and political potentialities. Drawing on some of the questions and challenges identified in the article, I want to now explore three issues around how we understand diasporas ‘in practice’: (i) the issue of place and scale in diaspora theory and diaspora studies; (ii) diaspora and difference and; (iii) the role of history and origin.

**Placing diaspora**

One of the key paradoxes of diaspora centres on the issue of place – on whether the focus should be the point of departure, which provides the descriptive parameters, or the site (or sites) of arrival and settlement. Clearly Brubaker himself maintains a healthy scepticism of the former, with a marginally less sceptical, and very partial, preference for the latter. Of course, as he points out, the question of place of origin (which I want to return to again later) has proved an uncertain foundation, even in the ‘classic’ case of the Jewish diaspora (see also Clifford 1997, Boyarin and Boyarin 2003), and opens up the potential for essentialised assumptions around identity, belonging and homogeneity. At the same time, given the centrality of dispersal and dislocation to the understanding and experience of diaspora (Safran 1991, Gilroy 1997) the question of dispersal *from where* remains a salient one, even – as Brubaker notes – where there is an increasing separation of diasporic formations from any spatial moorings.

While I sympathise with his concerns, there is an additional reason why diasporic places of origin might be worth revisiting – which stems from the critique of diaspora theory as primarily focused on spaces of arrival in the urban centres of the global north and west (Alexander, Chatterji & Jalais 2016, Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk 2005). Here, diaspora theory shares some of the myopia of other migration frameworks, which have tended to ignore both where (and thus why) these migrations start and the much larger movements within the global south itself, as well as the relative immobility of the 98% of the global population that Brubaker himself points to. Which raises a number of questions: what does diaspora look like from the point of departure rather than the place of arrival? How are mobility and immobility connected? How do we distinguish between forced and voluntary or economic migration, particularly within one putative diaspora? Does distance travelled matter? How might we build into diaspora theory a recognition that places of origin are not simple points of departure but an integral part of the ongoing process of transformation that diaspora entails?

A related set of questions centre on the ‘other end’ of diaspora – the place of arrival and settlement. If we accept (though Brubaker himself is ambivalent on this) that diaspora encapsulates the idea of ‘scattering’ to, as Safran insists, ‘at least two “peripheral” places (1991: 83-4), this begs the question of what links these dispersed places and groups without recourse to a place of origin? And, relatedly, how are these links to be operationalised as part of a process of claims-making without falling back on even strategically essentialised collective identities? One response has been to posit the idea of ‘diaspora space’ as a way of avoiding both the sticky question of origins and opening up the possibility of commonality and exchange, as well as specificity and difference (Gilroy 1993, Brah 1996). Gilroy, for example, sidesteps the question of how and where the ‘Black’ in ‘The Black Atlantic originates through a focus on movement through the imaginative space *between* places, on circulation rather than either departure or arrival, on the ceaseless encounters with histories and cultures that are always already themselves in motion (1993). For Brah, in contrast, diaspora space:

constitutes *a point* of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes. It is where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition’ (1996: 208, my emphasis).

One might easily imagine Brah’s ‘diaspora space’ as providing the ‘stuff’ from which Brubaker’s diasporas might stake their claims, although it is interesting that he himself does not use the concept – indeed, the focus for Brubaker is rather on the end (‘what is at stake’) than either the means or the content of diasporic identities, on the boundaries themselves rather than what they enclose or defend. And indeed, any empirical account of diaspora necessitates a fixing, however transitory or artificial, of a longer and ongoing process, both in space and, as I will discuss below, in time. Nevertheless, Brubaker’s account elides the question of the ‘stuff’ from which these claims might be made, where and how boundaries or alliances are drawn, and how these claims might be assessed, or found wanting.

A related question is one of scale, and here again the article is at once suggestive and opaque. Brubaker convincingly challenges inflated claims around the ‘age of diaspora’ and importantly points to the ongoing role of the nation-state (or nation-states in their various guises) in shaping diaspora identities. Our own work on ‘the Bengal diaspora’ similarly mapped, historically and empirically, the ways in which very different state formations, in India, Bangladesh and in Britain, have impacted movement across borders and the settlement of migrants, and how these formations have changed over time, both before and especially in the period after partition and independence (Alexander, Chatterji & Jalais 2016). At the same time, however, the work revealed that the kind of claims-making that Brubaker refers to functions across scales – often simultaneously and multi-directionally – from the transnational through the national to the local and even the intimate spheres of domestic life; for example, through marriage (Alexander, Chatterji & Jalais 2016; Alexander 2013a). Any study of diaspora identities necessitates, then, a recognition of, and engagement with, what Michael Keith has referred to as ‘the shifting optics’ of diaspora (forthcoming) – with a multiplicity of layers and spatial entanglements that is easier to ‘think’ in the abstract than to ‘do’ in practice.

**Diaspora and difference**

A second set of questions raised by Brubaker’s article is around what we might think of as the ‘borders’ of diaspora as a concept. As discussed above, Brubaker’s concern is to rescue diaspora from its proliferating usage, and to retain its specificity and analytic utility. However, his core definitions – dispersion, homeland orientation and boundary-maintenance - remain frustratingly inclusive, and while opening up the various paradoxes around the term, he ultimately refuses to take a side. While we can intuit what he might dismiss as outside the semantic borders of diaspora – the repeated label ‘putative’ is one such indicator – what he might retain as legitimate seems less clear. Ultimately the paper seems to conclude that the proof of diaspora lies primarily in the effectivity of its claims making, and the extent to which this then bears further analysis, which is perhaps more Emperor’s New Clothes than an empirical researcher might like. While I would certainly not advocate an uncritical acceptance of every (or any) diaspora as a predetermined ‘entity’, there is a balance to be struck between ‘de-substantializing’ diaspora through an exploration of its complex and shifting formations and denying its significance in shaping or explaining the experiences of those it encompasses – particularly those invisibly and forgotten people whose claims, projects and practices remain below the sociological radar.

This raises a broader question not only about what diaspora *is*, but why it matters: about the difference that diaspora as a concept makes, and how this marks it out as distinct from the other theorisations of migration and mobility. As Brah notes, ‘while at the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of a journey…. not every journey can be understood as diaspora’ (1996: 182). Key to classic formulations of diaspora is the notion of violence and trauma – of flight and enforced scattering. Gilroy, for example, defines diaspora as, ‘A network of people, scattered in a process of non-voluntary displacement, usually created by violence or under threat of violence or death’ (1997: 328). Brubaker acknowledges this as part of a ‘strict’ interpretation of diaspora (p5) before moving to a more inclusive idea of ‘any kind of dispersion in space’ (p5), an expansion he then critiques. What happens, though, if we retain the link to ideas of violence at the point of origin, and minoritisation, discrimination and exclusion at the point of arrival (Safran 1991)? If, as Brah insists, we consider ‘not simply… who travels but *when, how and under what circumstances* (ibid: 182, original emphasis)?

The link between diaspora and race or ethnicity is a complex one, which Brubaker (intriguingly, since the article is published in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*) never directly confronts. Clearly, in its original formulation, the term is linked to a (highly masculinist) biological notion of descent and continuity, seeds and sperm, blood and soil (Anthias 1998), and these provide a close link to ideas of race or ethnicity – most obviously, of course, in its ‘classic’ Jewish, African/Black, Greek or Armenian incarnations – though Brubaker recodes this as homeland or nation. It is perhaps not accidental that diaspora theory has been so richly suggestive for scholars of colour, both in its essentializing and non-essentialized formulations, particularly those located in, and focused on, the multicultural and global cities of the west and north. From the late 1980s onwards the encounter of diaspora theory with cultural studies in Britain, in particular, has resulted in the complex interplay between race, ethnicity and diaspora, which has levered open both diaspora and racial and ethnic studies, and which has laid claim to the political potential of diaspora identities as a mode of unsettling taken for granted notions of nation, citizenship and belonging (Hall 1990, Gilroy 1993, Brah 1996). It may be this work which Brubaker has in mind in his formulation of diaspora as a process of claims-staking and *remaking,* and it shares his radical scepticism with questions of origin, privileging the ‘here’ and ‘now’ over the ‘there’ and ‘then’ of earlier accounts (Dufoix 2008). More importantly, however, this work retains (theoretically at least) the focus on power and structures that underpin discourses of difference and practices of exclusion, and which are largely absent from Brubaker’s analysis, except in his discussion of the nation-state. Indeed, Brubaker’s is a strangely level playing field in which competing diasporas vie for recognition and membership against a seemingly neutral backdrop. Of course, the ‘cultural turn’ in the study of diaspora has, as in other areas, since watered down the critical possibilities of the concept, focusing inwards on cultural practices and identities at the expense of social, economic and political accounts, and stripping out much of its transformative potential - as Kalra et al note, “diaspora” is one of those terms that promised much and delivered little’ (Kalra, Kaur & Hutnyk 2005: 8).

**Diaspora and History**

A third set of issues return to the question of origins – but to *when* rather than where, and *then* rather than now; or more specifically, to how we think of the intersection of the *then* in the now, the entanglement of past and present and, indeed, future (Alexander 2011, 2013b, Alexander, Chatterji & Jalais 2016, Keith forthcoming). Brubaker himself raises the question of temporality - most specifically around the issues of boundary maintenance across generations - but his focus is strongly sociologically presentist. There is an unresolved tension in the article around the relationship between historical time and its contemporary uses, and more broadly between historical approaches to diaspora and more sociological accounts. Thus while he offers some important historically rooted critiques of claims around the newness of diaspora as an analytical category, Brubaker resists the idea of historical accounts of diaspora itself, perhaps because, as with its spatial dimensions, continuity over time suggests reified identities, quantifiable memberships and the dreaded ‘groupism’. He insists, ‘ancestry is surely a poor proxy for membership in a diaspora’ (p11). Rather, his key interest seems to be in the ways in which claims to diaspora identities over time can be wielded to make claims in the present, rather than as a constituent part of those identities.

This tension speaks to a broader dilemma in diaspora studies between what Brubaker influentially terms the distinction between diaspora as an ‘entity’ and diaspora as a ‘stance’ – the former implies clear boundaries and endurance over time, and can be linked to a more historical approach focused on origins and causes, while the latter, more sociological account, privileges heterogeneity, disruption and transformation; the former looks backwards and inwards for explanation, where the latter looks outwards and forwards, to levering open spaces for future change. This has resulted in a bifurcation of intellectual labour, particularly between historians on the one hand and sociologists and anthropologists on the other, which rarely speaks across the disciplinary divide (Alexander, Chatterji & Jalais 2016).

A key moment in this shift is Hall’s seminal article on ‘Cultural identity and diaspora’ (1990), which argued for a view of history as positioning, but not determining, cultural identities, and as being itself a product of narration in the present (see also Alexander, Chatterji & Jalais 2016, Chapter 8). Hall argues,

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power’ (p225).

Where Hall is careful to retain a focus on history and temporality, while simultaneously opening these categories to scrutiny, the consequence of the deconstructive turn (Cohen 2008, Dufoix 2008) has been to consign any consideration of history to the conceptual margins and eventually erase it altogether – very often along with the consideration of power discussed above. Despite Hall’s insistence that, ‘we all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and culture which is specific’ (1990: 222), we increasingly deny this careful positioning and contextualisation to the subjects of diaspora themselves. There has, then, been an insufficient sociological attention to the historical and cultural specificities of diaspora experiences, and how these impact on diaspora identities.

How are we to understand the entailment of history on the diasporic present? As with the question of origin above, is it possible – or even desirable - to erase the hold of the past, to focus simply on the contemporary performance of ‘diasporic stances, projects, claims, idioms, practices and so on’ (p13), or to position it purely as a fiction of narrative or memory? By the same token, is it possible to engage with the question of history without reducing it to an ironically static and decontextualized origin story – where/when diaspora begins?

Cohen has argued (2008) that a new ‘consolidation’ phase of diaspora studies is now emerging – one which seeks to combine the critical insights of the ‘social constructionist’ theorists with the emotional, social and, importantly, historical insights of more empirically grounded approaches to diaspora: what we might term ‘critical diaspora studies’. Our recent work on ‘the Bengal diaspora’ is one example of this approach, combining historical, sociological and anthropological theories and methods to understand how diaspora is shaped and experienced both over time and in the present - and how the former is integral to the latter (Alexander, Chatterji & Jalais, 2016). This work clearly illuminates how movement and settlement in the present must be placed within the longer historical and social context of migration; that even in times of upheaval and violence, people moved along ‘migratory grooves’ cut through centuries of internal mobility and colonial and state power. Furthermore, this migration and places and patterns of settlement are shaped through what we have termed ‘mobility capital’, ‘a bundle of capacities, predispositions and connections, often rooted in the family and group *histories of mobility*’ (Alexander, Chatterji & Jalais 2016: 12, my emphasis), which can underpin the rituals and resources of diaspora mobilised to stake new claims of status and citizenship.

**New directions in diaspora studies**

As suggested at the outset, diaspora necessarily encapsulates movement and transformation, with opaque beginnings and offering only the illusion of resolution. The field of diaspora studies is similarly in process, reflecting and shaping new forms of migration and settlement, emergent forms of belonging and the precarities of ongoing global inequalities, dislocation and violence. Any study of diaspora as either object or subject can, then, only reflect a momentary pause, which both illuminates contemporary complexities and perhaps, as in Brubaker’s case, provides new pathways for ‘thinking’ and ‘doing’ diaspora.

The decade since ‘the “diaspora” diaspora’ has seen some significant shifts in the global context of migration, from the ever expanding War on Terror and the upheavals across the Middle East, to the resurgence of narrow ethno-nationalisms across Europe and North America and the terrifying rush to re-border and fortify imagined (and real) walls across the world. The looming 70th anniversary of India’s partition in 2017, and the ongoing conflicts along these borders, is testament to the seemingly endless consequences of diaspora and its often violent aftermaths. As argued above, however, these displacements seem not to even be considered ‘diasporic’ – at least not until they reach the comparative safety of the global cities of the north and west. One potentially fruitful direction in the next phase of diaspora studies could, then, be to seek to reconnect, conceptually and empirically, the complex engagements between ‘here’ and ‘there’, while recognising that neither places of origin nor arrival remain unchanged through this process (Sinatti & Horst 2015, Alexander, Chatterji & Jalais 2016).

A second emerging trajectory is to reconnect with some of the origins of diaspora theory – and in particular its ‘roots’ in religion (DuFoix 2008, Keith forthcoming). While in 2005 Brubaker seemed reluctant to acknowledge religious diasporas, placing them as part of the ‘attenuation’ of the concept (p3), he himself has recently focused on the role of secularism and new diasporic religious communities (particularly Islam) as troubling the certainties of the nation-state, particularly in western Europe (Brubaker 2015, 2016). However, as he himself would certainly acknowledge, there are dangers inherent in the positioning of religious identities – and particularly ‘Muslims’ – either as a priori ‘entities’, or as a self-selected ‘stance’, occupying an uncertain space between ascription and choice.

Finally, it is worth reflecting on the – perhaps unintended – consequence of Brubaker’s intervention, and in particular the popularity of cultural accounts of diaspora in the current discourse. Dominated by anthropologists, these have focused ‘down’ and ‘in’ on the dynamics of diaspora spaces as a way of examining micro-encounters of difference in the everyday (Glick Schiller 2015), or the performance of ‘vernacular and encapsulated aesthetics’ (Werbner & Fumanti 2013: 155), in which the political potential of diaspora is eschewed in favour of ‘sensory saturated spaces’ (p163). These groups, according to Werbner and Fumanti ‘do not necessarily want to enter into a dialogue with the state. They do not only wish to challenge narratives of nation or try to insert themselves into them’ (p163).

While this approach might sit within – or at least logically arise from - Brubaker’s more ‘bottom up’ account of diaspora identities as stance or process, one cannot but wonder if this depoliticisation of the concept is one he would recognise or desire. The question remains, now as then: what is diaspora *for*?

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1. The ProQuest search revealed 57,739 results (between 1823 - 2017) in increasingly diverse source types, including: Wire feeds 19,016; Scholarly Journals 17,453; Newspapers 8,295; Magazines 3,002; Reports 1,693; Trade Journals 4,759; Blogs, Podcasts & Websites 276; Books 1,138, Historical Periodicals 190 and Dissertations & Thesis 1,301. Over 96% of these results appear since 1990. <http://search.proquest.com/results/76AB0902396742E3PQ/1?accountid=15390> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Thanks to Amanda in ERS office for these data. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)