Defining the Scottish Diaspora: Affinity Scots.

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People here seem to relish being more Scottish than the Scots themselves.1

-Billy Connolly in travel documentary Journey to the Edge of the World

“Diaspora,” when used in an academic historical context, refers to the dispersion of a people to many different places. However, some social scientists have suggested that Diaspora studies and even the definition of diaspora also extend to human culture, as ideologies of ethnic and national identity form the central element of particular Diasporas. These ideologies form “imagined communities” among the participants of the culture,2 and may even be adopted among individuals and groups without ancestral links to the host society. Rogers Brubaker has suggested that “rather than speak of ‘a diaspora’ or ‘the diaspora’ as an entity, a bounded group, an ethno-demographic or ethnocultural fact, it may be more fruitful, and certainly more precise, to speak of diasporic stances, projects, claims, idioms, practices, and so on.”3

This is an appropriate mindset with which to address groups and individuals from the twentieth century onward, who have claimed personal links to Scotland and Scottish culture but are not of Scottish descent, and thus would not be considered part of ethnic Diaspora otherwise. Nevertheless, their prolific adoption of Scottish culture merits their consideration as part of Scottish Diaspora studies. These have been recently referred to by both scholars and the Scottish Government as Affinity Scots. In addressing Affinity Scots, the Scottish Government has stated that while “this group would not be included within the traditional definition of diaspora…the rationale for considering the Scottish diaspora is based on ‘access’ and ‘rights’…the link to Scotland, or adoption of a Scottish identity, provides the ‘right’ to engage with the diaspora, even though they may be nationals of a foreign country.” For the Scottish Government, “the development of diaspora policy provides an opportunity to realise [international development] benefits efficiently.”4 This last statement indicates the presence of economic motives for considering Affinity Scots as part of the Diaspora. It is by their definition of “Affinity Scots” that the Government has estimated a worldwide number of 40-50 million of them. While the methods of calculation for this number are not publicly accessible, the economic benefit of their inclusion can best be demonstrated by the scale of recent Homecoming Scotland initiatives. Homecoming Scotland 2009 generated a gross value of £5.3m for Edinburgh and £5.6m for Scotland, and 38% of 47,000 visitors came from overseas. 72% of those overseas visitors acknowledged a Scottish family background, leaving a noteworthy number who attended—about 5000 people, who travelled from abroad but had no ancestral or family ties to Scotland: international development, indeed.

Safran’s definition of diasporans states that they “regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate.”5 The presence of Affinity Scots around the world means that the definition of “home” has also changed in the eyes of entities such as the Scottish Government to engage not only Scottish descendants for Homecoming, but all who feel a connection with the culture. Notions of heritage and cultural connections help to fuel Scotland’s now booming tourist industry; thus the benefits of adapting Scotland’s image into a homeland not just for those of ethnic descent, but for anyone passionate about the culture, are evident. Graeme Morton has stated that “for affinity Scots… being Scottish involves their objectifying their personal history through cultural symbols of the nation.”6 This can explain the widespread interest in perceived elements and artifacts of Scottish culture in locations not traditionally associated with the modern ethnic Scottish Diaspora. Today, emblematically-Scottish Highland Games are held all over the world,

the effects of diaspora: not all those influenced by the Scottish diaspora were influenced willingly or in a positive spirit; nor do they necessarily wish their relationship with the host country to be referred to by the term "Affinity Scots" or otherwise associated with western commodity nationalism. In this case, the Scottish Government has many more social considerations to address by extending its definition of Scots than simply the tourist benefit.

Geoff Palmer, Jamaican expat, lecturer, and resident of Scotland, argues that "Affinity Scot" is a term used by the Scottish Government for the exclusively economic motivations of attracting well-to-do white American tourists and have not distinctly or appropriately used the term to address other, economically poorer regions of the world where Scotland has left a concededly powerful, yet less favourable imprint. Palmer’s argument is one that includes an element of disinclination to the characterization of Affinity Scots. If Scots such as those of which Palmer speaks are not addressed in a revised definition of Affinity Scots (as they are not addressed under Diasporic terms anywhere else), then it can accurately be understood as a definition based on a chiefly economic viewpoint. Indeed if this is the case, the implied image of Affinity Scots includes those who consume an objectified and idealized Scottish culture, while ignoring those who have been influenced by the social and cultural effects of the Scottish Diaspora in other historical (and potentially negative) senses. Affinity Scots are now broadly considered a definitive segment of the Scottish Diaspora both through human and cultural impact and dispersion. How scholars and chambers of commerce choose to address Affinity Scots in future will continue to evolve their literal definition and range of social inclusion.

13 Wade, Mike. “If you want a true Homecoming for all Scots, you’d better not forget Jamaica.” The Times, December 8, 2008: 7.

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Work Cited

