

## **Financialization or Transculturation? Poverty Knowledge in South Africa Revisited<sup>1</sup>**

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The history of social science research in South Africa, as well as controversies over how to reduce poverty and inequality after apartheid, could be fruitfully analyzed through the lens of *financialization*. However too narrow a focus on “life under finance capitalism” risks oversimplifying South Africa’s recent past. After reviewing some of the recent literature on financialization—work primarily concerned with the deindustrializing United States—this paper discusses *transculturation*, a term first coined by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in 1940 to describe colonial encounters he saw as both productive and destructive as well as mutually transformative for all parties involved. Returning to the question of how to theorize financialization, the third part of this paper proposes yet another neologism, *transeramation*, in order to highlight the transcultural aspects of historical conjunctures, and the creative and uneasy theoretical work that people can do when navigating between two divergent eras. Finally, this paper concludes with some questions about what this proposed object of study might allow historians and anthropologists to learn about the production of knowledge vis-a-vis economic change.

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<sup>1</sup> Note to Wiser readers: Thank you for this opportunity to share work-in-progress. This essay does not present new research but rather revisit my first book, *Poverty Knowledge in South Africa: A Social History of Human Science, 1855-2005* (Cambridge University Press, 2015). This paper is also an effort to think through some current research questions. In 2014, I began interviews and archival research for *Webs of Power: Labor Union Corporate Campaigns in the United States, 1960-2015* (under contract with University of North Carolina Press’s Justice Power Politics series). The book will show how one group of former civil rights activists and New Left intellectuals in the U.S. devised creative labor organizing strategies starting in the 1970s when consumer boycotts and labor strikes were failing, trade unions facing harsh attack, and the first inklings of financialization as a new system were being felt and theorized by my actors through “corporate campaigns.” The result was an experimental set of community-labor struggles for economic rights and racial justice that began with power structure analysis and often ended with attacks on financial interlocks and various forms of shareholder activism, sometimes in support of the anti-apartheid movement. I welcome your questions and critical feedback

## Financialization

Since the late 1960s, financialization has had profound effects on industries, governments, workers, employers, households, culture, and discourse in the United States and elsewhere, scholars argue. In the mid-twentieth-century, Americans enjoyed what some economists have called the Great Compression, a three-decades period of sustained growth in which income inequality shrank and living standards rose, although unevenly. Financialization replaced that period with today's Second Gilded Age. The term refers to the "increased accumulation of profits through financial means, such as interests, dividends, and capital gains" as well as non-financial companies growing more reliant on the financial sector, "both in terms of access to capital as well as investments made in financial assets and subsidies." For companies, it means stock price serving as the preeminent metric of value. For households, financialization involves increased debt, concern with personal portfolios, and retirement savings lodged in indexed stock funds. For workers, financialization has been linked to the "gig economy" in which employers demand endless flexibility from temporary workers, not because they share one ideology *per se*, but because firms of all kinds everywhere now have to ensure their own credit-worthiness, service their debts, and maintain their stock values even when that means disinvesting the reproduction of a workforce. The word is also now being used to call attention to the sheer proliferation of "financial motives, financial markets, financial actors, and financial institutions" across all kinds of communities and sectors.<sup>2</sup>

Most of this literature focuses on the deindustrializing United States. In their detailed study, Appelbaum and Batt attribute financialization in the U.S. to the convergence in the 1970s and 1980s of economic recession, shareholder dissatisfaction, government deregulation, leveraged buy-outs, new debt management practices, and "agency theory." In this period, corporations, states, and electorates lost power relative to large institutional investors as a result. Extant economic theories associated with neoliberalism facilitated financialization, yet those ideas were not its singular or even

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<sup>2</sup> Bradford M. Van Arnum and Michele I. Naples, "Financialization and Income Inequality in the United States, 1967-2010," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 72, no. 5 (November 2013): 1158-1182, 1159.

primary source.<sup>3</sup> They quote Milton Friedman who said famously in 1970 “maximizing profits is the only responsibility of corporations.” Around the same time, neoliberal “agency theory” began to define business managers, not as elite decision-makers or corporate leaders, but mere agents acting on behalf of shareholders.<sup>4</sup> Deregulations and banking innovations thus freed up investors to profit from new tax codes in the context of the repression and decline of U.S. trade unions, stagnant wages, all of which contributed to rising inequality and the remaking of firm culture, with new stock-based CEO pay structures. Meanwhile, state institutions and public sector unions financialized as pension systems from California to New York were tied to publicly traded stocks. Aided by automation, firms stopped seeing human labor as an important fixed asset and employees were urged to be flexible and to “invest” in their own movable short-term employability.<sup>5</sup>

Gerald Davis’s work on financialization moves beyond the U.S. and beyond the realm of banks and businesses. Like others, he notes the way full-time workers were made temporary by firms compelled by their own debt burdens to focus only on “core functions.” This meant exchanging vertical integration for strategic outsourcing and subcontracting.<sup>6</sup> Davis describes state and national governments becoming “vendors of laws, competing with other vendors to attract corporate customers.”<sup>7</sup> With states eager to offer corporate tax breaks and legal reforms (deregulation), as well as access to tax-payer funded infrastructures, the winners in this new economic system have been international or otherwise mobile investors. For American households, financialization has encouraged “portfolio thinking” but also left vast segments of people more vulnerable and more on their own. Like Applebaum and Batt, Davis attributes the rise of finance capitalism to new forms of governance among states and among businesses now that bosses have

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<sup>3</sup> “The rise of institutional investors, the formation of new financial engineering strategies and intermediaries, and the activist elaboration of academic theories combined to provide the institutional opportunity structure for Wall Street to replace the management-controlled firm with the finance-controlled firm.” Eileen Appelbaum and Rosemary Batt, *Private Equity at Work: When Wall Street Manages Main Street* (New York: Russell Sage, 2014), 28.

<sup>4</sup> With agency theory, the need to repay debt kept “managers focused on cost reduction and maximizing shareholder value—what Jensen refers to as ‘the control function of debt.’” *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>6</sup> Following Bell, Davis speaks of the U.S. as a “post-industrial society.” Instead of lodged within bounded firms, financial obligations bring firms into a whole “nexus of contracts” oriented inevitably toward maximizing stockholder value.” Gerald F. Davis, *Managed by the Markets: How Finance Reshaped America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 21.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-90, 23-24.

become dependent on investors and access to credit. “Corporate elites” are no longer “feudal nobility...but voluntary servants of the stock market.”<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps because financial activities are so opaque this literature leans heavily on metaphors. Davis compares financialization the Copernican Revolution. Financial markets not large firms, nor ideologies for that matter, now comprise the axis around seemingly everything turns, and those who still see corporations or nations at the center are misguided, the metaphor implies. Drawing on Davis, Michel Feher develops this further. “Western economies no longer revolve around the industrial corporation wagering its prosperity on vertical integration and internal growth, as in the Fordist era.”<sup>9</sup> Both states and firms are subordinate to financial markets “dominated by large universal banks and institutional investors.”<sup>10</sup> For Feher “life under finance capitalism” is reshaping democracy. Whereas elections are periodic, today’s political leaders are constantly evaluated by markets wanting the promise of future returns.<sup>11</sup> As Feher stresses in a review of the work of David Harvey and others, financialization and neoliberalism were two sides of one coin yet the former is the dominant.<sup>12</sup> Here financialization appears to absorb neoliberal ideas and use them for unexpected ends.

Feher thinks finance capitalism has caused a crisis for the Left in Western democracies. The Left offers only a hodge-podge of backward-looking salvage efforts.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 20. One reviewer points to connections between Davis’s views and sociologists of knowledge concerned with the performativity of models. In this case, financial models predicting future returns shape human actions and social life. Models are interactive not simply descriptive.

<sup>9</sup> Feher agrees with Davis that post-1970s financialization—not neoliberal ideologies alone—produced this Copernican Revolution. Michel Feher, *Rated Agency: Investee Politics in a Speculative Age* (New York: Zone Books, 2018), 17.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> “Because lenders are able to buy or sell government bonds at any time, they exert a form of pressure on politicians that is not intermittent, like that of the electorate, but continuous.” Ibid, 107 CHECK, XXX

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 25. “Because market deregulation featured prominently in their program, neoliberal reformers played a decisive role in freeing up finance. In return, the hegemony of the financial markets has largely fulfilled their hopes.” Ibid., 24. One irony appear in the fact that neoliberalism’s romantic vision of individual entrepreneurs freed from government intrusions and inefficiencies has been undercut by the realities financialization that unleashed since financialization “breeds credit-seeking traders keen on speculative wagers instead of the profit-seeking entrepreneur...” Ibid, 24-25. Under finance capitalism, Feher continues, workers are not made into neoliberal subjects here either, they are still entangled, since “the subscription of economic agents to the dictates of financial markets and institutions does not deactivate the polarity between employers and employees without fostering another kind of conflict—one that involves the allocation of credit that pits investors against the ‘investees’ who depend on their largess.” Ibid., XXX.

Meanwhile voters turn understandable to nostalgia or apathy.<sup>13</sup> Feher is no pessimist however. With financial capitalism diagnosed as the sickness, the cure seems clear to him: changing the environment in which financial markets operate and investors bet on returns. “Challenging investors on their own ground—as labor unions [once] did with employers—today involves acting on the conditions under which credit is allocated. For in financial markets, the reputations that attract investment are not earned at the end of tough bargaining, but constructed through wagers on the promising character of projects submitted for evaluation.”<sup>14</sup>

But how, you might ask, would Left movements, coalitions, labor activists, popular assemblies, or civic groups manage to fight on this reputational terrain? This is an open question in this literature, it seems to me. Feher hopes political actors will “inhabit their condition as investees in such a way as to match their opponent’s skills in the art of speculation.”<sup>15</sup> Investee activism would require “altering the conditions of accreditation.”<sup>16</sup> To summarize Feher, financialization requires inventions in Left politics in order to take collective action, not at the point of production, as in a strike, or at the point of sale, as in a boycott, but at those “sites” where market returns are predicted.

Similar arguments appear in the slightly older literature on globalization, structural adjustment, and the so-called Washington Consensus. In 2000, Bourdieu wrote, posit the rise of a new “global economic field.” Much like a scientific field, Bourdieu defined it as a domain of asymmetric conflict. He also cautioned against seeing “globalization” as an overly predictable thing, comparing the term to “modernization.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Feher writes of defenders of social democracy who must “paradoxically spend most of their time and energy defending the remaining scraps of the postwar social compact that earlier generations of anticapitalists used to denounce as the most alienating of snares.” With nowhere to turn, “it is no wonder that left-leaning voters find refuge in melancholy, when they do not give up on politics altogether.” *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 57. The premise of my current book is that this kind politics did begin to take shape in a very scattered, experimental (tension-filled) manner in the 1970s in the U.S. Only ahistorically is this kind of politics “called for” today, as if people living through these changes did not begin to theorize them at the time and practice investee activism. In any case, if Feher is correct in his diagnosis of the present, it behooves us to learn about these piecemeal proto-anti-financialization campaigns as they were invented by the cohort of activist-researchers who developed the first labor union “corporate campaigns” which they also called “financial campaigns.”

<sup>17</sup> Globalization comes with assumptions, like its neighbor term, modernization, Bourdieu notes. He also calls “stockholder democracy” a utopian myth. Pierre Bourdieu, Wacquant trans., *Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market 2* (New York: The New Press, 2013).

Most importantly, Bourdieu warned of national governments becoming mere “masks.” Politicians might excite attention with their wild gestures, yet beneath their statements lay “the dictates of international bodies whose aim is to strip the entire world of all obstacles to the exercise of an increasingly concentrated economic power.”<sup>18</sup> Investors with no fealty to any polity now enjoyed “increased freedom to invest and, perhaps more crucially, to divest capital so as to obtain the highest financial profitability.” The result was the “mobility of capital and the generalized delocalization of industries and banking” acting in supranational zones in ways that “weaken all regional or national powers.”<sup>19</sup>

Africa comes up in Bourdieu’s discussion of the ironies of “concentrated capital” whose freedom gets justified by “the Darwinian tenant that exposure to competition will make firms more efficient.” The United States ignores the IMF’s requests to lower its entrenched public deficits yet the IMF still “forced many an African economy, already greatly at risk, to reduce its deficit at the cost of increasing levels of unemployment and poverty.”<sup>20</sup> Not unlike Feher, Bourdieu questioned the logic of continued advocacy around legal codes, as if these were becoming relic. Instead, he envisioned a future politics learning how to wage battle on the global financial field and on its terms. The key combatants in this struggle, which might still look like a regional or national one requiring “Europe,” would be those “competent researchers” who, if properly funded and supported by organizations, could use their financial knowledge to challenge the tyranny of the market.<sup>21</sup> When “a small oligarchy looking only after its own short-term economic interest” co-opts national, now states shrunk down to their “law-enforcement functions,” we should not, concludes Bourdieu, hope to achieve “truly universal ends” through the harmonization of national laws. Instead, we should work for “the gradual emergence of political forces, themselves also global, capable of demanding the creation of transnational bodies entrusted with controlling the dominant economic forces.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 15. Compare to Distinction XXX.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>21</sup> He also notes that meeting and talking (and books like his) were not enough since “no synthesis by a theorist can substitute for the product of a confrontation between all those researchers oriented toward action and all the thoughtful and experiences activists of all the European countries...” Ibid., 16.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 96.

If financial markets are the center of today's institutional universe, what does that mean for historical narration? With this perspective on power and causality in view, will we rewrite our accounts of political and cultural change in the last four decades in order to bring finance capitalism into the picture? Do we need revisit the question of what exactly "turned the tanker" in South Africa at the end of apartheid?

In 1992, ANC economist Viv McMenamin expressed argued the tripartite alliance needed to "shift away from policies which may be morally and politically correct, but which will cause strong adverse reaction from powerful local and international interests."<sup>23</sup> [Recall here Feher's observation that, under finance capitalism, "the slightest expression of skepticism on the part of the markets can be enough to affect the ability of the government to borrow and can thereby deprive politicians of the resources considered necessary to ensure reelection."<sup>24</sup>] That year, the ANC's "Ready to Govern" statement replaced the phrase "growth through redistribution" with an emphasis on "the need to maintain confidence."<sup>25</sup> Looking back in 2014, Coetzee described Mandela's party in the early 1990s as "blindsided by the collapse of socialism worldwide...with no philosophical resistance to put up against a new, predatory economic rationalism."<sup>26</sup>

The financialization literature seems to demand a rethinking of such account. It might also offer a new way to explain the kinds of questions surveyors were asked to ask and businesses paid them to answer. In the mid-1990s, opinion pollsters in South Africa were very busy trying to make stability foreseeable. They concluded liberation was "an accomplishment not easily overwhelmed by inflation, unemployment, lack of housing or corruption." Should discontent increase, black voter allegiance would remain steady before eroding slowly. The so-called typical black voter was loyal, pragmatic, patient,

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<sup>23</sup> Vin McMenamin, quoted in Matthew Kentridge, "Turning the Tanker: The Economic Debate in South Africa," Report No. 32, Centre for Policy Studies, Johannesburg (September 1993), 10. McMenamin recalled how, in Davos, the leaders of Vietnam and the People's Republic of China "made it clear to the President of the ANC that widespread nationalisation was not a strategy the ANC could afford to pursue in the present international environment," Ibid. 73, note 17.

<sup>24</sup> Feher, *Rated Agency*, 107.

<sup>25</sup> LODGE? Ibid, 9 XXX

<sup>26</sup> J. M. Coetzee, "On Nelson Mandela (1918-2013)," *The New York Review of Books*, 9 January 2014.

and interested in jobs and houses, but also in honor and dignity.<sup>27</sup> Did individual experts, institutions, or funders pose these questions, or was it the global economic field that really “asked?” In 1996, just before the ANC closed its Reconstruction and Development Programme offices, economist Pieter le Roux praised the decision to abandon “macroeconomic populism” and promises regarding excessive welfare transfers.<sup>28</sup> So, what turned this tanker? How and in what sites were socialist ideals, social democratic models, and aggressively redistributionist plans reframed and contained, investors courted, capital flight prevented? Did it happen in Davos? In study sessions on failed Latin American experiments? Or in private conversations? As Marc Gevisser noted it was Alec Erwin and Thabo Mbeki who did the most to hammer out the details of the ANC’s business friendly Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) program. When COSATU complained Mbeki’s next move was “under the tree” meetings with cabinet ministers in which he reportedly used back-of-the-envelope to illustrate the dangers of deficit spending.<sup>29</sup> When GEAR was unveiled, Mbeki quipped “Call me a Thatcherite.”<sup>30</sup>

Many have recounted this sequence of events. Yet to my knowledge financialization has not been part of the story, in the sense of a narrative wellspring, axis, causal starting point, or all-encompassing terrain of conflict. Who convinced President Mandela to abandon calls for a “mixed economy”? Why were Mbeki and Erwin able to overcome the resistance? COSATU boycotted parliamentary discussions of GEAR two years later but neither it nor the SACP broke from the ANC at the time.<sup>31</sup> What compelled Mandela to tell investors his party’s policies had been purged of “anything

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<sup>27</sup> People were not numb to “economic pain,” but “people’s evaluations of current political and economic performance will be weighed by their entire record of prior experience of a party.” Lawrence Schlemmer and Ian Hirschfeld, eds., *Founding Democracy and the New South African Voter* (Pretoria: Human Science Research Council, 1994), 112.

<sup>28</sup> Spending on child welfare might soon skyrocket to “unsustainable” levels, he warned, and “totally undermine the developmental thrust of the RDP.” Pieter le Roux, “Poverty, Social Policies and the Reconstruction and Development Programme,” in *South Africa: Wealth, Poverty and Reconstruction, Lual Deng and Elling Tjønneland* (Cape Town: Chr. Michelsen Institute/Centre for South African Studies: 1996), 47, 59, 74.

<sup>29</sup> Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred*, XXX 672.

<sup>30</sup> Mbeki quoted in *Ibid.*, 666, 671.

<sup>31</sup> Jo Beall, Stephen Gelb, and Shireen Hassim, “Stability, State and Society in Democratic South Africa,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 31, 4 (December 2005): 681-700, 689.

that will connect us with any Marxist ideology”<sup>32</sup> Was this an unmooring? A lack? Did the absence of an adequate ideology prompt this change as Coetzee suggested? Or could these events be read as yet another site-specific example of varied institutions and personalities being absorbed into the same global economic field in which neoliberal ideologies were secondary not causal? While we know the alliance came to power at a time when states were pressed at the end of the Cold War to adopt orthodox policy ideas, that kind of periodization, with its emphasis on the late 1980s not the origins of financialization in the late 1960s, might indirectly imply there were still choices to be made when in fact states were becoming “vendor states,” and for some, mere “masks.”

## **Transculturation**

Binary oppositions have long interested theorists of modernity. Friedrich Nietzsche described good and evil, us and them, free and unfree emerging together despite their polarities.<sup>33</sup> Reinhart Koselleck noted the pairing of revolution and reform. “Once the revolutionary trend had been unleashed, the concept of ‘reform’ converged here and there with that of ‘revolution,’ a convergence which, while often severely strained by political polemic, was in essence contained within a general impulse to plan the social future.”<sup>34</sup> Scholars of colonialism have given us some of the boldest critiques of oppositional categories seen by many as instrumental to racial domination.

Edward Said argued the answer to reproducing these categories was to generate “insights, methods, and ideas that dispense with racial, ideological, and imperialist

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<sup>32</sup> Mandela quoted in Hein Marais, *Limits to Change: The Political Economy of Transformation* (New York: Zed, 1998), 95. Also see, Patrick Bond, *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neo-liberalism in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2000).

<sup>33</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, Walter Kaufmann, ed., (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 20, 29.

<sup>34</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Keith Tribe, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983 [1979]) 51. Also see Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Rodd Presner, Krestin Behnke, and Jobst Welge (Sanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002). On how concepts travel, especially in periods of rupture and crisis, see Rodrigo Cordero, *Crisis and Critique: On the Fragile Foundations of Social Life* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

stereotypes.”<sup>35</sup> For Said, disrupting colonialism’s “dominating frameworks” required confronting, among other things, the binary between Self and Other.<sup>36</sup> Yet since anthropology found its backing from Western funders and colonial states, too often it accommodated itself to the worldview of its funders, noted Talal Asad in 1973.<sup>37</sup> In South Africa, Shula Marks, Stanley Trapido, and other founders of the Wits History Workshop made a similar point about state commissions of inquiry comprising a “ruling class response” to the threat of unrest.<sup>38</sup> To the extent binaries authorized the construction of hierarchies and the shoring up of state power after an insurgency, they served colonial and nationalist projects while also polarizing everyday and academic language. In 1980s, *Subaltern Studies* scholar Ranajit Guha reacted against this kind of epistemic entrapment by announcing the need to recover the “politics of the people.” In stark language, he argued subaltern consciousness could be extracted from the misrepresentations wrought by colonialism even as he defined subaltern consciousness as something homogenous, autonomous, and always opposed to colonial thought.<sup>39</sup>

By the 1990s, historians and anthropologists were blurring such lines by asking about the appropriation and transgression of colonial categories. Bernard Cohn showed British census categories in India being absorbed into popular discourses.<sup>40</sup> Achille Mbembe called on scholars to transcend impoverished readings of domination that oppose “resistance v. passivity, autonomy v. subjugation, state v. civil society, hegemony v. counter-hegemony,” as well as “conservative” and “progressive.”<sup>41</sup> What social theory needed to discover or invent were ways of seeing “beyond institutions, beyond formal

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<sup>35</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 328.

<sup>36</sup> “Knowledge of the Orient, because generated out of strength, in a sense *creates* the Orient, the Oriental, and his world.” In all such writings “the Oriental is depicted as something on judged (as in a court of law), something one studies and depicts (as in a curriculum), something one disciplines (as in a school or prison), something one illustrates (as in a zoological manual). The point is that in each of these cases the Oriental is *contained* and *represented* by dominating frameworks.” *Ibid.*, 40 (original emphasis).

<sup>37</sup> Talal Asad, “Introduction” in Talal Asad, ed., *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1973), 17.

<sup>38</sup> Shula Marks, *The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa: Class, Nationalism, and the State in Twentieth-Century Natal* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1986), 82.

<sup>39</sup> Ranajit Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>40</sup> Bernard Cohn, “The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia,” in Bernard Cohn, ed., *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>41</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Provisional Notes on the Postcolony,” *Africa* 62, 1 (1992): 3-37, 3, 29 note 6. Also see Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). On life v. death, see Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” Libby Meinjes trans., *Public Culture*, 15, 1 (Winter 2003): 11-40.

positions of power and the written rules” to the ways “the practices of those who command and of those who are assumed to obey” become entangled in performances, desire, and play.<sup>42</sup> More recently and in the context of debates over how to provide economic growth and life with dignity in South Africa, Francis Nyamnjoh reflected on the contradictions of post-apartheid citizenship discourses that valorize diversity while branding black outsiders unwelcome.<sup>43</sup> In addition to these insider/outsider binaries, temporal dichotomies and misleading periodizations are being questioned for their political uses. Mahmood Mamdani has critiqued today’s “social apartheid.”<sup>44</sup> And this discussion has continued to reverberate in discussions of the university and society.<sup>45</sup>

The rest of this section ask how *transculturation* might offer a useful alternative to binary thinking about states, institutions, knowledge, and especially historical change. In the 1990s, Fernando Coronil, a U.S.-based historical anthropologist of Venezuela, joined in what was becoming a wide-ranging discussion about the many research problems that arise when scholars rely on notions of center and periphery, Self and Other, West and non-West. The domination of “the West,” wrote Coronil, is “always partial” and takes place “through processes of *transculturalation* which also transforms the

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<sup>42</sup> Mbembe, “Provisional Notes on the Postcolony,” 26, 29, 37.

<sup>43</sup> Francis B. Nyamnjoh, *Insiders and Outsiders* (New York: Zed Books, 2006). In a helpful review, Ayanda Maqoyi focuses on Western universalisms, not binary concepts, yet he notes how the two are related; the universalism of liberal democracy seem to rely on oppositional thinking. “Universalism and the extension of rights from one to ‘all’ has not served African nations or their people.” Ayanda Manqoyi, “Inclusive Citizenship: Review of Literature,” in *Citizenship in Motion: South African and Japanese Scholars in Conversation*, Hazama, Itsuhiro, Umeya, and Kiyoshi, eds. (African Books Collectives), Google Books, Accessed November 15, 2019, page 63. On the insider/outsider binary, also see Peter Geschiere and Francis B. Nyamnjoh, “Capitalism and Autochthony: The Seesaw of Mobility and Belonging,” *Public Culture*, 12, 2 (2000): 423-452; Jonathan Crush and David A. McDonald, “Transnationalism, African Immigration, and New Migrant Spaces in South Africa: An Introduction,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 43, 1 (2000): 1-19; Mamadou Diouf, “Engaging Postcolonial Cultures: African Youth and Public Space,” *African Studies Review*, 46, 2, (2003): 1-12; Bill Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders: The Indian Working Class of Durban, 1910-1990* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1995).

<sup>44</sup> Reflecting on mobilizations by the Economic Freedom Fighters, Mamdani has called for “a land reform that passes control over communal areas from traditional chiefs to the present tillers of the land in rural areas, allows the urban poor to produce food and graze livestock in municipal commons, and provides land for housing for the millions in informal settlements.” Mahmood Mamdani, “Why South Africa Can’t Avoid Land Reforms,” *New York Times*, June 17, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/17/opinion/south-africa-land-reform.html>, Accessed November 15, 2019.

<sup>45</sup> In 2016, Mbembe pointed to “Western epistemic traditions” that claim detachment of the knower from the known,” a particularly persistent and flexible dichotomy. Achille Mbembe, “Decolonizing the University: New Directions,” *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education*, 15, 1 (2016): 29-45, 32. My book on poverty knowledge concluded with a series of arguments against this kind of knower/known split.

West.” Using Westernization synonymously with modernity, he wrote: “Westernization entails not the homogenization of the world’s societies under the force of capitalism but their reciprocal transformation under diverse historical conditions.”<sup>46</sup> From this perspective, co-dependent concepts could be historicized, such as the development concept in Latin America and its binary twin, disorder—a pairing used to justify state power as well as transnational interventions in the name of market growth.<sup>47</sup>

Coronil’s reading of transculturation was an elaboration of the original definition of the term by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (1881-1969).<sup>48</sup> In Ortiz’s *Cuban Counterpoint* (1940), a semi-allegorical analysis of sugar and tobacco in Cuban history, Ortiz recognized, according to Coronil, “the play of desire in the construction of colonial oppositions” and how colonial encounters “forged cognitive categories as well as *structures of sentiment*.”<sup>49</sup> In the mid-1940s, Bronislaw Malinowski adopted the term yet assimilated it into his own functionalism. The Polish anthropologist welcomed transculturation as an alternative to acculturation but failed to maintain the critical difference between the two. Malinowski helped circulate Ortiz’s term while “blunting its critical edge [and] diminishing its originality.”<sup>50</sup> Coronil thus brings transculturation back into use for historians and anthropologists still searching for complex readings of cultural

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<sup>46</sup> Fernando Coronil, “Beyond Occidentalism: Toward Nonimperial Geopolitical Categories,” in: *The Struggle for Life is the Matter*, Julie Skurski, Gary Wilder, Laurent Dubois, Paul Eiss, Edward Murphy, Mariana Coronil, and David Petersen, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 356 (emphasis added).

<sup>47</sup> “Its [modernity’s] universalizing force is inseparably linked to expansive and yet exclusionary movements of capital that polarize nations across the globe as well as people within societies. Spurred by the pursuit of profit, capital’s continuous transformation of economic relations dissolves established customs and makes obsolete the new, yet its innovative force is constrained by the structures of privilege within which novelty is itself produced. . . .modernity promises abundance and endless progress. This promise is fulfilled within conditions of inequality that redefine its meaning and is constrained by powerful interest that confine and condition its fulfillment. ‘Progress’ is thus constituted through a contradictory movement that erodes and establishes boundaries, that releases and contains energies. The future, as a modern construct, is rent by these tensions. The expansion of capital across space and time entails the dissolution of barriers to ‘development’ but also the construction of walls against ‘disorder.’ While capital’s expansion is the condition of its stability, stability is the condition of its expansion.” Ibid., 357.

<sup>48</sup> XXX Cuban Counterpoint essay. Perhaps I should note here I knew Coronil in Ann Arbor as a graduate student in 1998-2001. We were not often in conversation, but I am sure I heard these kinds of ideas about how to do history and how to think transculturally expressed by Coronil’s students and my own mentors, who I realize now never picked up the term as a relevant one for African history. I also want to thank my fellow members of the Committee on Globalization and Social Change of the CUNY Graduate Center for inspiring me to revisit Coronil’s essay. I especially thank Julie Surski.

<sup>49</sup> Fernando Coronil, “Transculturation and the Politics of Theory Countering the Center, Cuban,” in: *The Struggle for Life is the Matter*, 74 (emphasis added). Link to discussion of Williams below

<sup>50</sup> By the late 1940s, notes Coronil, Malinowski had a more open and generous reading of Ortiz’s work.

formations as well as the silences in colonial archives. Comparing Ortiz to Franz Fanon, Coronil concluded that Ortiz provided a theory that validates “the experiential value of these [binary] terms for people subject to imperial domination but that also refuses to imprison an emancipatory politics in them.” That people experience categories in exclusionary ways must be acknowledged, yet the analyst does not presume that future struggles will play out within binary oppositions handed down from the past.

Transculturation allowed Ortiz to show how “Cuban popular sectors countered their violent history” and to demystify “ruling fantasies” around “notions of the authentic native, of separate pure cultures, of a superior Western modernity.”<sup>51</sup> Transculturation offered a way to “apprehend at once the destructive and constructive moments in histories affected by colonialism and imperialism,” including, I would add, the production of knowledge and the theorization of lived experience. In this sense, transculturation resonates with what Jean and John Comaroff have more recently called “theory from the South,” in which “the South” is not a thing or a place but “a *relation*” that shows the world being continually recast dualisms being forced to give way to “grounded theory.” This relation they describe as “ways of knowing-and-being that have the capacity to inform and transform theory in the north, to subvert its universalisms in order to rewrite them in a different, less provincial register.”<sup>52</sup> Transculturation would also seem to resonate well with Mbembe’s attention to the intimacies that conjoin postcolonial contradictions in Africa such as the supposed opposition between fact and fiction, experience and fantasy, “the imaginary realized and the real imagined.”<sup>53</sup>

For Coronil, transculturation offered a starting point for seeing theory as practice. In this view “all theoretical travel is inherently transcultural.” While disciplinary canons and standardized narratives of intellectual lineage tend to be “imperial” in their neatening up of the divides between place and texts, theory and experience, there is “no reason to assume that theory travels whole from center to periphery, for in many cases it is formed

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>52</sup> Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “*Theory from the South, or How Euro-America Is Evolving Toward Africa* (Boulder, CA: Paradigm Publishers, 2012), 47, 49 (original emphasis).

<sup>53</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony: Studies in the History of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 242.

as it travels through the interactions between different regions.” Cultural anthropology might instead be called “*transcultural* anthropology.”<sup>54</sup>

In my work on colonial encounters and knowledge-production in South Africa in *Poverty Knowledge in South Africa*, my starting place was not transculturation, but *co-production*, a term I borrowed from Science Studies writers interested challenging assumptions about objectivity, in exploring the role of science and technology in the making of popular representations of social life and social roles, and in documenting the intricate techno-social engineering efforts that can precede and bolster what come to seem like *a priori* categories. Looking back, I wonder if I might have looked for different sources and arrived at different arguments if *transculturation* had been my primary object of study as opposed to the making of social science knowledge about poverty over a century-and-a-half-long stretch. Would I have de-emphasized the movement of concepts in order to more explicitly show the mutual transformation of groups, schools, and methodologies?

In addition to Malherbe, MacMillan, Verwoerd, Schlemmer and a number of other university-based social scientists (almost all white and male), in one chapter I paid especially close attention to social surveyor Edward Batson. In 1937, this recent graduate of the London School of Economics became the first chair of the Social Science Department at the University of Cape Town.<sup>55</sup> Like Rowntree in Britain, Batson defined poverty, not as a lack of income alone, but as a lack of access to food, housing, heating, clothing, and transportation. Batson’s *Social Survey of Cape Town* transplanted the idea of random sampling innovator Arthur Bowley, Batson’s mentor, from London to Cape Town.<sup>56</sup> By the early 1940, Batson was publishing reports on the Poverty Datum Line (PDL)—a baseline measure premised on the assumption that all *urban* households, irrespective of racial classification, needed access to the same essential provisions.

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<sup>54</sup> Coronil, CC, 101.

<sup>55</sup> On Batson, also see Diana Wylie, *Starving on a Full Stomach: Hunger and the Triumph of Cultural Racism in Modern South Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001).

<sup>56</sup> On Bowley, see Desrosières, *The Politics of Large Numbers* XXX As a postgraduate in Germany, Batson was also exposed to the “value-neutral” social research methods. See Irmela Gorges, “The Social Survey in Germany before 1933,” in *The Social Survey in Historical Perspective, 1880-1940*, Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales, and Kathryn Kish Sklar, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 337.

Batson's initial sample included 2,000 Cape Town households.<sup>57</sup> Like other social scientists, Batson liked to quote statistician Karl Pearson's assertion that "the unity of all science consists alone in its method, not in its material."<sup>58</sup> Even the most complex human relations could be scientized. Batson referred to his UCT offices as his "laboratory" and he strove to distinguish social surveying from what he dismissed as older non-scientific endeavors, including commissions of inquiry and scattershot liberal social reform schemes that tended in South Africa, as elsewhere, to be organized by women and the church.<sup>59</sup> In this sense his professionalizing efforts were also secularizing and gendered. Batson joined a national effort to standardize social work curricula. Over the decades, he and his wife Helen Batson, also a LSE-trained graduate, supervised dozens of students, predominantly white and almost all female.<sup>60</sup>

In the 1940s, Batson played a minor but important role in an ultimately aborted attempt to remake South Africa's welfare state after the innovations of the Hertzog years. Surveys promised to modernize public administration. In 1943, he made his strongest case for "social security for all" in South Africa based on the PDL as a universal means test. "There has been some excuse in the past for our numerous shots in the statistical dark, but the excuse is no longer valid," he announced.<sup>61</sup> The Social Survey of Cape Town showed precisely how many people were poor, and that non-Europeans suffered the greatest burden. 53% non-Europeans were below this line compared to a much smaller percentage of whites. Seventy-five percent of the four hundred social welfare organizations in the country served Europeans only.<sup>62</sup> For Batson and his allies in public

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<sup>57</sup> Batson defined his fieldworkers as skilled professionals. "There are differences between ordinary social conversation and the interview planned and controlled by the skilled social investigator." *Official Report of the Social Survey Conference, Cape Town, February, 1942* (Cape Town: Paul Koston, 1942), 22, 29, 23.

<sup>58</sup> Karl Pearson, *The Grammar of Science*, Second Edition (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1900), 12. Social science's unique prestige was that it afforded the same "power of prediction" as the natural sciences, Batson stressed. Social surveyors do not "prescribe remedies." Their task was to "faithfully describe the main features of social life as they find them." Batson, *Towards Social Security*, 75.

<sup>59</sup> Like social scientists affiliated with the Chicago School who sought to pry social research from the hands of the female-dominated Settlement House Movement, Batson kept reform groups at professional distance. See Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, XXX.

<sup>60</sup> Batson created a postgraduate diploma in Social Surveying as well as diplomas in Social Work and Social Science. He lectured on the "poor white question;" the socio-economic status of non-Europeans; legislation affecting the poor; and "standards of human need." See *Waste of a White Skin*, XXX

<sup>61</sup> Edward Batson, "Winning Freedom from Want," *Cape Times*, 5 February, 1943.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

health and affiliated with the South African Institute for Race Relations, the “social organism” would never be truly healthy without more rationalization and standardization.

In this context, Batson called for removing South Africa’s “social disservices,” inequities such as old-age pensions that protected only whites and the mixed race, although the latter had to be much poorer to qualify.<sup>63</sup> These oddities were holdovers from a past incompatible with a modern welfare state. Marketing codes, restrictions on wages and apprenticeships, and the entire “civilized labor policy” had to be reformed. Quoting the Beveridge Report, Batson argued: “We cannot establish an island of security in an ocean of insecurity.” Ethnic discrimination ought not to be tolerated in any nation that recognizes “the human claims of all of its members.”<sup>64</sup> After being asked to survey Salisbury, Rhodesia, Batson went further in 1945 by pressing colonial administrators everywhere to cast off their old analytic habits, which he suggested had been accumulated from culture not science. Ethnicity and race were “dubious indicators.” Africans might have a “much simpler diet” than Europeans. Indian women might wear silk saris while “the Natives often go in rags or barefoot.” Yet they all had the same physiological needs. Urban planners should focus on minima not the vagaries of presumed habits. In urban areas “the same expenditure for food must be allowed in the Poverty Datum Lines of all members of a given sex and age category, irrespective of their ethnic or cultural categories.” Echoing nutrition scientists, Batson insisted that Africans required the same proteins, fats, vitamins, and minerals as Westerners.<sup>65</sup>

If I were investigating this history anew, but with *transculturation* as my object of study, I think I would have asked more questions about what Ortiz called the “human groups” changed by their interactions with one another. The challenge would have been, not to show the appropriation and redefinition of scientific categories and technologies such as the PDL—a relatively manageable, albeit time-consuming, archival project—but instead to examine the creative, playful, ambiguous, making of science in contact zones.

The Smuts government did not take up the wartime language of “human claims.” Committees on postwar social welfare planning shuttled between universal categories and

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<sup>63</sup> Batson, *Towards Social Security*, 29, XXX.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>65</sup> Edward Batson, *The Poverty Line in Salisbury* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 1945), 3, 4, 10-11.

particularistic thinking without landing on either side.<sup>66</sup> Would attention to transculturation have helped me tell this story with more nuance rather than speaking broadly about “English-speaking liberals” and “Afrikaner nationalists”?

In my chapter on Batson, I cited United Party members who followed Beveridge and Batson in proposing a social security code to “completely and absolutely remove the menace of poverty and want from the life of every citizen by making provision for every contingency of life from birth to death.” For his part, the Secretary of Public Health wanted “minimum wages capable of meeting the bare cost of living.”<sup>67</sup> I also showed “Afrikaner nationalists” ignoring social science minima and once again using the findings of the Carnegie Poor White Commission as a tool for the protection of one imagined group seen as vulnerable and in need of restoration. South Africa was “one of the richest countries in the world with a poor [white] population of over 300,000 who cannot make a decent living in their own country.” Unless the government enabled white farmers to “live decently like Europeans” it would be “making a kaffirland of South Africa.”<sup>68</sup>

I could make the same self-critiques of my chapters looking at “social reformers,” “African nationalists” and “black labor leaders.” These labels allowed me to move from point A to B in a sweeping narrative about the popularization of science, yet they may also have presumed links between political speech and the ostensibly shared motives of collectivities. While these phrases allowed me to ask a number of empirical and conceptual questions, about how, for example, nineteenth-century distinctions between the deserving and undeserving poor were revised and repurposed under apartheid, they perhaps disallowed attention to the *mutual transformation* of groups.<sup>69</sup>

When the Federation of South African Women used PDL statistics to lobby Johannesburg’s township authorities in 1955 and to define African workers as living in households needing the establishment of fair housing costs, I saw this as indication of the transgression of the constructed boundary between science and politics, a barrier that existed only in the realm of polemics and pragmatic credibility-seeking. Yet the experiences of the women involved were not really interrogated. One advocate pointed to

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<sup>66</sup> Union of South Africa, Parliamentary Debates, House of Assembly, 1943, col., 3319; 1908.

<sup>67</sup> Union of South Africa, Parliamentary Debates, House of Assembly, 1942, col. 3298; 3347.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 1942, col. 331; 1848; 3340.

<sup>69</sup> See Andries Du Toit, “The Trouble with Poverty,” XXX.

“scientifically and objectively conducted” research proving the need for new native rent scales.<sup>70</sup> I noted how Anna Mokhetle and other African social workers trained at the Hofmeyr School of Social Work diagnosed housing problems as due to “lack of income,” with the result that the “moral standard of the household” fell.<sup>71</sup> Still, in my drive to explore what Ian Hacking (following Barry Barnes) called “looping effects,” I wonder if I missed examples of transculturation in my attention to circulation of the PDL.

Perhaps I got closer to transculturation in my chapter on the 1973 Durban Strikes. There I did document, to some degree, the mutual transformation of students and workers, as well as the strategic revising of these categories, as part and parcel of the PDL’s vernacularization. Starting in the late 1960s, the black consciousness movement radicalized campus politics, as did events abroad, as did the ideas of the young philosopher Richard Turner’s. After forming the Durban Student Wages Commission at the University of Natal, student activists, including David Hemson and Halton Cheadle, began urging factory workers and dockworkers to attend the Department of Labor’s Wage Board hearings open to the public.<sup>72</sup> Dockworkers had threatened strikes at various points in 1971 and 1972. Then, in October of that year, stevedores in Cape Town and Durban told the Wage Board they wanted to be paid wages equal to the PDL.<sup>73</sup> In January 1973, brick workers launched a walkout that became a week-long citywide general strike.<sup>74</sup> The crisis of this unplanned but not “spontaneous” labor revolt decisively relocated the concept of measurable basic needs from the liberal fringes to the heart of corporate decision-making and global anti-apartheid activism.

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<sup>70</sup> “To depress living standards below the present dangerously low level” would “further oppress the low-paid African population, already engaged in a desperate struggle for existence.” However eloquent, these claims were ignored. After months of debate, in 1956, the Department of Native Affairs declared it would continue to require township residents earning more than £15 a month to pay full rents, despite the fact that they were living in poverty. *Rand Daily Mail*, 6 April 1956, NTS 5473(H), Vol. III, SAB.

<sup>71</sup> A. Mokhetle, “A Description of Life in Orlando East,” in Betty Spence, “How Our Urban Natives Live,” National Building Research Institute, Reprinted from *South African Architectural Record*, vol. 35, 10 (1950), 11.

<sup>72</sup> In 1974, an state commission investigated NUSAS, the SAIRR, the University Christian Movement, and Biko’s South African Students Organization (SASO). All were accused of communist agitation. Pamphlet reprinted in Republic of South Africa, *Fourth Interim Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Certain Organisations* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1974), 464-487.

<sup>73</sup> “Stevedores on Strike,” *Daily News*, 23 October 1972. See Peter Cole’s new book XXX

<sup>74</sup> Newspapers blamed sub-subsistence wages. As one striker put it: “Nowadays money is indispensable. Everything is dear. With our low wages we cannot satisfy our needs.” Institute for Industrial Education, “African Workers Interview,” 1973 Strikes File, Alan Paton Centre, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.

More importantly, the 1973 Durban Strikes spurred the rebirth of the black trade unions. Afterwards, white trade union leader Harriet Bolton suggested strikers still fearful of retribution after the arrests of SACTU leaders in the 1960s come together to create the General Factory Workers' Benefit Fund.<sup>75</sup> In 1974, it became the Trade Union Advisory Council. By 1979 that fund had grown into the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU). Groups, individuals, and institutions were transculturated in this process. In creative ways business leaders altered their practices if not their underlying motives. For instance, before the Durban Strikes, employers paid little attention to research by Johann Potgieter at the University of Port Elizabeth's Institute for Planning Research, a colleague of Batson who became a prolific surveyor in his own right. When Potgieter measured average poverty levels in Port Elizabeth and neighboring areas in February 1972, his report was essentially ignored. After the Durban Strikes his statistics shot up in value and relevance.<sup>76</sup> Employers now urgently wanted to know the cost of living. As the Bureau of Market Research put it, "South African firms have begun to view non-White wage levels from a different angle...the financial position of their employees is gaining increasing prominence in their wage policies." Hastening this trend in 1973, marketers admitted, was negative publicity from "overseas since the beginning of the year."<sup>77</sup>

In this context collecting PDL statistics became a tool for business, an official planning mechanism, and a means of regaining lost ground and colonizing a new normal. Competing poverty research centers sprang up and competing poverty lines with competing assumptions. In 1974, the Trade Union Research Project as well as the South African Labour and Development Research Unit formed to monitor unemployment levels nationally and to provide the media and the unions with statistics on poverty, inequality, and consumer prices at time when employers and marketers were cultivating their own preferred statistical sources. Additionally, activists abroad wanted statistics they could

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<sup>75</sup> Worker-education projects were launched and new publications. Black intellectuals including Judson Kuzwayo, Bexsisa Nxasana, and Omar Badsha also helped to organize black workers, although their work less well recorded in the records of this period retained and shared by this generated by white students. Ari Sitas, "Thirty Years Since the Durban Strikes: Black Working-Class Leadership and the South African Transition," *Current Sociology* 52, 5 (September 2004): 830-849.

<sup>76</sup> Johann Potgieter, interview by the author, East London, 9 April 2002.

<sup>77</sup> P. A. Nel, M. Loubser, and J. J. A. Steenkamp, "The Minimum Subsistence Level and the Minimum Humane Standard of Living of Non-Whites Living in the Main Urban Areas of the Republic of South Africa, May 1973," Bureau of Market Research, Research Report, no. 33 (1973), vi.

use to condemn Pretoria's race policies. In this process, poverty research entered an especially dynamic phase hastened by disruptions in the streets and theorizing in all kinds of small and unofficial spaces that, over time, had dramatic effects on political thought. Groups that had before refused to use the social categories of their political opponents now found ways to cleverly appropriate and redefine those categories, updating and transculturating them. The result was the halting emergence of new lexicons, new reasons for refusal, and new modes of protest for people on all sides of the poverty question.

In 1974, the Bureau of Market Research held a conference on minimum budgets in which representatives from South Africa's Chamber of Commerce in Johannesburg argued employers needed to abandon "the idea that Africans don't eat so-called 'Western' foods."<sup>78</sup> The *Financial Mail* declared "poverty datum lines, once scorned by employers, are gaining ground—if only in the form of lip-service."<sup>79</sup> Others held fast against the change. "Where did all this stuff about the PDL come from?" asked a skeptical member of the President's Council. "It was orchestrated by people overseas to make South African less competitive than them."<sup>80</sup>

At this juncture, Batson felt his methods were being "misused and abused." In 1975, he complained that PDLs were being linked to "arguments and policies which in fact cannot claim their authority."<sup>81</sup> Such complaints did not stop Western governments from adopting PDLs. Devised under pressure from the liberation movements, and in the context of ongoing boycotts and calls for divestment, the British Code of Practice asked British firms operating in South Africa to immediately pay all adult males wages that would place them above the PDL, but also to make plans to increase pay above Batson's Effective Minimum Level (EML), calculated at one-and-a-half times the PDL.<sup>82</sup> By 1977, the European Economic Community had adopted a similar employment code that also called for "collective bargaining between employers and institutions representative

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<sup>78</sup> *Financial Mail*, 27 May 1977. Press Clippings Collection, South African Labor and Development Research Unit, University of Cape Town (hereafter Saldru Clippings).

<sup>79</sup> *Financial Mail*, 23 March 1979, Saldru Clippings.

<sup>80</sup> Landau, of the President's Council, linked this allegation to one made by a colleague, Braam Raubenheimer, who had argued that German trade union leaders were behind recent strikes in Port Elizabeth. "Pay Rises Undermine SA's Competitiveness," *Cape Times*, 20 August 1982, Saldru Clippings.

<sup>81</sup> Batson also announced that he was developing a new measurement technique that could be legitimately used to debate wage policy and welfare policy. *Daily Dispatch*, 12 November 1975, Saldru Clippings.

<sup>82</sup> Definitions of "standards of need" saw similar changes in 1960s America. See Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

of and freely chosen by African workers.”<sup>83</sup> Canada and Australia devised codes using these minima. Meanwhile, black clergy and community leaders in South Africa also cited PDLs. Amid ongoing youth-led protests and violence in the townships in 1977 ministers printed leaflets saying, “Far too many of our people are receiving wages below the Poverty Datum Line let alone the Effective Minimum Level. . . . The present huge wage gap between rich and poor is totally unjust and a major source of deep dissatisfaction.”<sup>84</sup>

Like the Durban Strikes, the 1976-77 Soweto Student Uprisings transculturated the knowledge practices of scientific and business communities. The same complex transitional moment that inspired a generation of social historians in South Africa also propelled employers to look for predictive social assessment tools including polls. In the late 1970s, Markinor, a private research company, set out to investigate black “expectations of the future.”<sup>85</sup> Another group predicted in 1976 that, given current urbanization rates, by 1996 there would be twenty million more urban black residents and seven more communities just like Soweto.<sup>86</sup> What was the developmental pathway forward? For the *Afrikaanse Handelsinstituut*, the answer was candid reassessment. Despite the government’s “laudable efforts and incentives at de-centralisation and homeland development,” population trends were making “separate development” impossible. The goals of apartheid were being undercut by a demographic crisis. “Economic integration of the Blacks is inevitable and unstoppable if work and welfare are to be created and maintained.”<sup>87</sup> The Urban Foundation, a joint English-Afrikaner business initiative funded by the mining industry, portrayed urban areas as under-utilized engines of growth waiting to be made part of the “free-enterprise” economy. Apartheid had stifled the economy. Regardless of cultural differences Africans needed a higher “quality of life” and more buying power. The time had come for privatization, reform,

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<sup>83</sup> EEC code quoted in Christian Concern for Southern Africa, “The EEC Code of Conduct for European Firms in South Africa,” Horner Papers.

<sup>84</sup> The Ministers’ Fraternal of Langa, Guguletu and Nyanga, “Message for 1977,” Cape Town, January, 1977, reprinted in Thomas G. Karis and Gail M. Gerhart, eds., *Nadir and Resurgence, 1964-1979*, Vol. 5, *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1990* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 593.

<sup>85</sup> Mari Harris, “Monitoring Optimism in South Africa,” in *Quality of Life in South Africa*, Valerie Møller ed. (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997), 302.

<sup>86</sup> *Volkshandel*, April 1976 cited in Stanley B. Greenberg, *Legitimizing the Illegitimate: State, Markets, and Resistance in South Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 150.

<sup>87</sup> *Volkshandel*, May 1982 quoted *Ibid*.

and efficiency, all terms later associated with the “neoliberal” 1990s.<sup>88</sup> In 1978, three years before the Ciskei was declared independent, the Ciskei Commission (Quail Commission) set out to investigate “political, economic, and social aspects of independence” and prospects for “economic development.”<sup>89</sup> (The Ford Foundation provided funds for an ancillary investigation in Soweto.) African pensions were raised to levels closer to that of white pensions. This led some scholars to see the late apartheid state as seeking to prevent unrest in impoverished homelands by purchasing loyalty.<sup>90</sup>

By the end of the decade, the framing of the poverty question had dramatically changed. The idea of measurable non-racial breadwinner wages was becoming accepted as was the premise of equal pay for equal work. In 1979, South Africa’s Weihahn Commission called for the legalization of the growing black trade unions.<sup>91</sup> Weihahn also recommended ending race-based wage scales and white job reservation in core sectors. The 1979 Riekert Commission paved the way for ending the pass laws on the grounds that a stabilized workforce benefited productivity and growth.<sup>92</sup> The value of the Rand had fallen significantly from its 1960s heights, yet rural households were still dependent on migrants’ remittances.<sup>93</sup> In the 1980s, the government-funded Human Science Research Council (HSRC) began investigating “quality of life,” a conceptual cousin to the minimum needs concept that especially appealed to reformers. This kind of attitude research also filled lacuna. The government stopped collecting census data in the Transkei, Ciskei, Bophuthatswana, and Venda after those Bantustans were declared self-governing between 1976 and 1981.<sup>94</sup> This production of ignorance meant absolute poverty and unemployment there was unknown at a time when more and more

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<sup>88</sup> Greenberg, *Legitimizing the Illegitimate*, 150-152.

<sup>89</sup> Republic of South Africa, *Report of the Ciskei Commission* (Silverton: Conference Associates, 1980), 12-13. At this time Transkei, Boputhatswana, and Venda were declared “independent.”

<sup>90</sup> Iliffe, *The African Poor*, 272. Also see Stephen Devereux, “Social Pensions in Southern Africa in the Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 33, 2 (September 2007): 439-560; On pensions see Seekings, XXX.

<sup>91</sup> Republic of South Africa, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Labour Legislation* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1979). See Owen Crankshaw, *Race, Class and the Changing Divisions of Labour Under Apartheid* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>92</sup> Republic of South Africa, *Commission of Inquiry into Legislation Affecting Utilisation of Manpower* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1979). See Alex Lichtenstein, XXX.

<sup>93</sup> Francis Wilson and Dudley Horner, “Lessons from the Project for Statistics on Living Standards and Development: The South African Story,” Washington DC, The World Bank, March 1996, 2.

<sup>94</sup> By 1990, the population of these territories equaled almost one-fifth of the country’s total population, yet the central government did not measure income, spending levels, or employment status there.

employers, and more and more political leaders, wanted credible data they could use to explain what putatively average urban and rural households really needed. In short, by the end apartheid, the more than century-old binary between civilized and uncivilized had been repeatedly reworked and repurposed. The PDL had developed a whole career independent of its creator. And in the process human groups were transculturated.

## **Transeramation**

This section proposes another neologism, *transeramation* (pronounced trans-ERA-mation), not with the intention of promoting its adoption (who would want to use such an awkward word!), but rather as a way of exploring the implications of Coronil's arguments for the study of groups living through transitions large and small. Instead of asking, how as Ortiz did, how "human groups" interact and are mutually transformed in the process, I use transeramation to ask social historians sorts of questions about how groups, cohorts, networks, generations, institutions, movements, artists, theorists, activists, and so on begin to recognize the experience change. While other terms could be used—structures of feeling, conjunctures, modes of production, crisis, articulation, the making of class consciousness, and so on—my notion of transeramation is really an attempt to build directly on Coronil's points, and thus a shortcut through what could be a lengthy literature review. What I most want to highlight are the *transcultural* aspects of conjunctural politics, including creative and unpredictable experimentation, performance, play, and also reassessments of past, present, and future by specific historical actors wanting to name and explain their changing present in order to shape its contours.

Transeramation should be seen as productive as well as destructive. It need not begin from changes in capitalism although I find it hard to see how it would occur outside of materiality, work relationships, racialized and gendered value structures, and the large-scale systems that impinge on people's lives but also create spaces, incentives, and roles. Here the object of study is one generation's or cohort's experiences, strategies, vocabularies, and practices before, during, and after the liminal period between eras, especially the group's early recognitions that their reality is not what it was before.

Although scholars in the Marxist tradition have posed such questions with economic systems as their starting point and the expectation of class consciousness coalescing somewhere along the way, it seems possible to bracket the question of root causes, and the expectation of origin points and end points, and instead begin with the *presence* of a specific present, the experiences for a group of “tension between the received interpretation and their practical experience,” as Raymond Williams said about “structures of feeling.” Transeramation is what people do with this tension, which is experienced as “an unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency...” Transeramation is the kind of creative work that leads to changes in language and culture that create the sense of a new style and a genuine authentic discourse. These interactions between old and new are “exceptionally complex” because what is decisive about the new cannot be expressed in the discourses of the old but and might also be mistaken for some archaic expression.<sup>95</sup>

Transeramation is the process through which language, and more broadly theory, gets “precipitated out” from a period of fluidity, when things are in “solution.” Here there are still aphasias and the mistaking personal situations and local conditions for what are later recognized as general conditions related to the arrival of the new style, the new system, the new age.<sup>96</sup> Williams uses the example of early Victorian authors who commented on a set of seemingly private experiences before industrialization was becoming knowable. In this phase, there may be awkward combinations of backward-looking and forward-looking forms, recourse to metaphors and sketches, or caricatures or symbols that express part of the problem but do not yet capture its full breadth or import. Transeramation goes hand in hand with steps to take action after some phase of inaction.

In addition to pinpointing the beginning of some new period, which is surely a research challenge since documents may not be produced, but more to the point language itself has not yet “caught up” with experience, here the historian can explore the relationship between media and the non-textual sources of texts, especially perhaps the

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<sup>95</sup> These tensions, felt in localized ways, involve “a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange. Its relations with the already articulate and defined are then exceptionally complex.” Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 130-131. Dominant, residual, emergent, XXX.

<sup>96</sup> See Thompson, *The Making of The English Working Class*, XXX. Also Hofmeyr, *Building a Nation from Words*, XXX.

visual and the embodied, but really anywhere that the cohort directs its questions and energies in the search for understanding. Transeramation as an object of study calls attention to the pre-categories of categories and to political language and cultural forms that are invented actions, conversations, intimate spaces where people are comfortable speaking without really knowing what they mean, and of course in refusal and revolt.

Apart from these semi-conscious realms, which might also find expression in already heavily freighted symbols and archetypes, transeramation as a process easily misinterpreted when scholars project their own unresolved tensions from their present (tensions that can double as historiographic debates or disputes over methods) onto their subjects at those tenuous moments when things are most solvent. “Far more important,” writes David William Cohen, than today’s disciplinary tensions, are the mediations of people “whose everyday lives were marked by [their own] tensions . . . . We must see how people compose their own lives in order to understand the composite forces around them.” To see in the past how knowledge is reorganized, “efforts mobilized, emotions handled...interests affirmed,” the tensions of the present in the historian’s field cannot be allowed to blinker her to the tensions that led people in the past to rework *their* lives.<sup>97</sup>

Should we then feel positively about transeramation? Is this human creativity that is always life-affirming? Can we depend on finding a humanistic “emergent consciousness” or an inclusive universality? It seems clear that some of the most “creative” innovations in these fluid cultural contact zone marking historical change become politically useful precisely because they can be theories and narrated in ways that are exclusionary, punitive, self-seeking, kleptocratic, and so on. Transeramative fields of action appeal to nationalists, narcissists, and marketers all wanting to please, to placate, to mobilize, to paralyze, to sell, to incite, to addict, and to marginalize, numb, and silence. Populists would seem to be among the most talented transeramators to the extent they can make the present feel less alienating via direct appeals to the people, reassurances about the return of an imagined past, and promises of safety through vigilant policing.

What I have elsewhere described as poverty question’s *epistemic mobility*—poverty’s capacity to be interrogated and argued over using numbers and voices, quantitative research and qualitative research—could now be re-assessed in light of how

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<sup>97</sup> “From Pim’s Doorway,” Zunz, 227.

keywords everywhere flip and reverse themselves at economic turning point and moments of collective crisis. In other words, part of what is generative about the interface between one epoch and another—although of course we would have to better define “epoch”—might be how these spaces open up room for some—not all—to expose on the limitations of old way of seeing the world, old standards, and to turn dichotomously and abruptly toward alternatives within language or a forgotten and subordinated set of views. Here the reworking of a two-sided concept that has long relied on duality for its temporal or moral force, may come to help reflect, through its own internal tension, and also to symbolically displace, some element of what is unsettling about reality coming into view.

Second, and to conclude this very provisional discussion of transeramation as an object of study for historians and anthropologists, I want to return to arguments made by scholars above about financialization, today’s “Copernican Revolution,” the end of the vertically integrated firm, and dawn of today’s credit society. Here the short-term demands of finance markets, measured in share prices and other models of investor confidence, are the celestial axis around which modern governance and private self-management increasingly come to orbit, and around which any future Left politics for democratic and universal ends must also move and travel. Attention to transcultural transformations at the interface of two eras, what I have called transeramation, promises no formulas for doing this. It is best seen as a way of paying attention to past and present even in the absence of easily interpreted statements, documentary sources, or even stable lexicons for the people experiencing the tensions of two clashing periods. Transeramation happened in the early phases of financialization before “life under finance capital” or “neoliberal rationalities” had been named as general conditions. Yet historians cannot do this work by projected today’s tensions (such as debates over political organizing strategies now) back onto the past, even if there are connections between these tensions.

Put differently, I am proposing an approach to conjunctures (a term that should also be better defined) that starts with the close examination of the creative and often ambiguous innovations of people who, for various reasons, felt financialization’s effects early on and quite strongly yet initially in bewildering ways but who still managed to individually and then collectively perceive, map, sketch, and thus render less confusing and less immobilizing important shared experiences. Theirs was not theory handed to

them from some subsequent position of clarity but a praxis, tested and revised, and only later codified and authorized. Theirs were theorizations of people hungry for effective language, desperate for usable tools, who variously and idiosyncratically recuperated but also manufactured new metaphors and new cultural forms relevant to their times.

Transerimators at the dawn of financialization mapped perceived battlegrounds others did not yet see and worked to render those domains visible. They evaluated the pull of specific markets forces and the questioned binary categories standing in their path such as the false distinction between community organizing and labor organizing. This was an uneasy politics defined by specific “structures of sentiment.”