

Travelling Theories

Gerhard van den Heever | ORCID: 0000-0001-6267-9248

University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

vdheega@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

This introductory essay takes recourse to the work of Edward Said on travelling theories and Michel Foucault on discursive formations, to highlight the historicity of all theorising, and the manufacturedness of all theoretical work. Particular attention is paid to experience as embeddedness, the construction of knowledge formations and disciplines, and the effects on knowledge formation of reappropriations and recontextualisations of theories and concepts. The metaphor of travel and of being in transit has been appropriated across diverse discourses and disciplinary domains to signal adaptations and re-applications of theories and concepts from one context to another, from one conceptual domain or discipline to another, and the embedment of theories and concepts in the concrete historical vicissitudes affecting the life of the theorist. This serves to frame the essays collected in this issue by the constellation of issues highlighted with appeal to discursive formations, retooling disciplines, and hosting travelling theories.

Keywords

travelling theory – travelling concepts – historicity – Dominick LaCapra – Edward Said – Mieke Bal – Michel Foucault – discursive formations

1 Discourses in Transit

History is always in transit, even if periods, places, or professions sometimes achieve relative stabilization. This is the very meaning of historicity. And the disciplines that study history – both professional historiography and the other humanistic or interpretive social-scientific disciplines addressing it – are also to varying degrees in transit, with their

self-definitions and borders never achieving fixity or uncontested identity. ... History in the sense of historiography cannot escape transit unless it negates itself by denying its own historicity and becomes identified with transcendence or fixation. This transitional condition affects the very meaning of historical understanding; it requires a continual rethinking of what counts as history in the dual sense of historical processes and historiographical attempts to account for them.¹

Theories and concepts travel in the carry-on hand luggage of theorists – they go where theorists go, who are themselves travellers in transit (or in their toolbox, if you would rather emphasise the work-aspect of concepts and theories).² The metaphor of travel and of being in transit has been appropriated across diverse discourses and disciplinary domains to signal adaptations and re-applications of theories and concepts from one context to another, from one conceptual domain or discipline to another, and the embedment of theories and concepts in the concrete historical vicissitudes affecting the life of the theorist.

The citation above comes from Dominick LaCapra's book, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory*. In the broader context of LaCapra's critical reflection on the discipline and craft of historiography through the lens of the "linguistic turn" in intellectual and cultural history (mediating between positivism or "referential essentialism," and radical constructivism), conjoining such reflection with critical theory (with poststructuralism and psychoanalysis as its primary manifestations in LaCapra's oeuvre) and thinking through experience and trauma (LaCapra wrote extensively on the Holocaust both as experienced history and as represented in historical writing), *History in Transit* enunciates a number of themes pertinent to the essays collected in this issue of *Religion & Theology*.³ To see how these cohere with the argu-

1 Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 2004), 1–2.

2 The image of travelling theorists with theories in tow, is attributed to James Clifford, "Notes on Travel and Theory," *Inscriptions* 5 (1989): n.p., <https://culturalstudies.ucsc.edu/inscriptions/volume-5/james-clifford/>: "Lukacsian Marxism in his essay seems to travel by immigrant boat; theory nowadays takes the plane, sometimes with round-trip tickets."

3 In spite of criticisms levelled at LaCapra for his reading of Marx and authors standing in the broader Marxist and post-Marxist critical tradition (e.g., Bryan D. Palmer, "History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory," *History Cooperative*, 5 October 2022, <https://historycooperative.org/journal/history-in-transit-experience-identity-critical-theory/>; this review originally appeared as book review in *The American Historical Review* 110, no. 2 [2005]:

ment of LaCapra in *History in Transition*, it pays to summarise very briefly its main emphases. Some of the main lines of argument in *History in Transit* enabling the framing and unpacking of the citation at the beginning are a focus on experience (both that of research subjects and the authors theorising those experience, whose theorising is equally embedded in experience), especially how memorialisation archives are constructed; a concentration on lived experience central to literary studies, ethnographic research, and minority studies (the latter with the nuance of ideological investment in the oppressed); questions of identity-making where psychoanalysis contributes to historical understanding in relation to social and political problems which makes possible critique of ideology, propaganda, and dogma; the relation of text and context and therewith the embeddedness of the archive and the study thereof in concrete social and political contexts; and finally, matters of the institutionalisation and professionalisation of disciplinary formations in the academy.

While the words cited from the “Introduction” to *History in Transit* obviously address the craft of historiography and the making of the discipline of historical studies, the implications can be drawn much broader such that they also comment on the manufacturing of academic discourses in general, that is, across a wide sweep of knowledge formations and institutionalised disciplines. First, knowledge and disciplinary formations have no existence outside of the flow of historical events that gave rise to them and to which they stand in a relation of second-order or even third-order intellection – this is what the historicity of knowledge formations mean; they do not transcend their worldly, material, embeddedness (and thus, have no timeless truth quality, and neither are knowledge and discipline formations independent of the socio-cultural-historical contexts and sub-contexts from which they emerged and which they encode). The Wild On Collective (Ethan Kleinberg, Joan Wallach Scott, and

437–438, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/110.2.437>), LaCapra is credited as one of the recent theorists reimagining the discourse and practice of history as a decentering of the European perspective along with Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Michel de Certeau, Edouard Glissant, Reinhardt Koselleck, Hayden White, Edward Said, Joan Wallach Scott, Aníbal Quijano, the Subaltern Studies Collective, and Saidiya Hartman, cf. Ethan Kleinberg, Joan Wallach Scott, and Gary Wilder, “From the Authors of the ‘Theses on Theory and History,’” *In the Moment*, 10 July 2018, <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2018/07/10/from-the-authors-of-the-theses-on-theory-and-history/>, note 6. Much of LaCapra’s oeuvre is concerned with the “linguistic turn” in reflecting on historical writing and representation in historiography; among many writings, see for instance, as a pointed statement, Dominick LaCapra, “Writing History, Writing Trauma,” in *Writing and Revising the Disciplines*, ed. Jonathan Monroe (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 147–180.

Gary Wilder) phrased it succinctly (although speaking of the discipline of History, as statement on discourse this is applicable to all knowledge formations):

Critical history recognizes all “facts” as always already mediated, categories as social, and concepts as historical; theory is worldly and concepts do worldly work. ... This then forces them to confront the way that what constitute the “facts” in an historical argument are bound up with the social conditions, the circumstances of the historian, and the range of acceptable questions asked of the past at any given moment in time.⁴

Second, because knowledge and discipline formations are essentially fluid, they have no fixed and stable identities – they are as complex, composite, and internally discrete as all human experience and reflection on such experience (in the sense of invention of tradition on whatever level, from lived experience to higher levels of intellectual work).⁵ In this sense, regardless of the various “turns” regularly claimed as turning points in humanistic studies (the linguistic turn [reflexive/discursive turn], the cultural turn, the deconstructive turn, the postcolonial [decolonial] turn, the material turn, the performative turn, the religious turn, the digital turn, the global turn, translational, spatial, and iconic turns),⁶ none of these defined a singular framework, theory, methodology, paradigm if you wish, operative across whole scholarly communities or across a whole of an institutionalised discipline and its canons of practices and discourses – simply due to the complexities of the exigencies of the historical embeddedness of the scholars involved in their contexts and resulting different and divergent experiences, in addition to the encoding of the ideological investments that come with intellectual work. At most, each “turn” exercised a performative function in shining a searchlight on a previously unthought-but-

4 Ethan Kleinberg, Joan Wallach Scott, and Gary Wilder, “Theses on Theory and History,” #*TheoryRevolt*, May 2018, 9, <http://theoryrevolt.com> (the original website is no longer active, but the text can be found at https://www.gc.cuny.edu/sites/default/files/2021-12/Theses_on_Theory_and_History.pdf). See also, similarly, Gerhard A. van den Heever, “Introduction: Reflections on the Ampersand: A Manifesto of Sorts, Etc. Etc.,” *Relig. Theol.* 26, no. 1–2 (2019): 1–39, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15743012-02601008>.

5 Birgit Neumann and Frederik Tygstrup, “Travelling Concepts in English Studies,” *Eur. J. Engl. Stud.* 13, no. 1 (2009): 3–4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13825570802708113>; Michael C. Frank, “Imaginative Geography as a Travelling Concept,” *Eur. J. Engl. Stud.* 13, no. 1 (2009): 64–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13825570802708188>.

6 See for instance Doris Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns: New Orientations in the Study of Culture* (Berlin; Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2016). And now the ecological turn? See Phillip Öhlmann & Ignatius (Naas) Swart, “Religion and Environment: Exploring the Ecological Turn in Religious Traditions, the Religion and Development Debate and Beyond,” in this issue.

now-to-be-foregrounded, but which is also expressive of academic fashion of the day, as manifestations of a scholarly *Zeitgeist* tracking public discourses *du jour*. As Michael Frank puts it so succinctly:

Because the humanities and the social sciences of the postmodern era are characterized by methodological pluralism and theoretical syncretism, it is strictly impossible to identify all-comprehensive paradigms or epistemes shared by every “scientific community”, let alone whole “cultures”. “Turns”, in this context, are rather to be understood as processes of differentiation and specialization, as (gradual) shifts in critical perspective and attention. ... they are signs of the ongoing reorientation of the disciplines concerned, in the course of which each newly emerging paradigm supplements and coexists with its predecessors rather than entirely superseding and replacing them. ... It should also be noted that declarations of “turns” are calls to action more than statements of fact. They have a performative character. Once the turn is under way, it functions as an act of empowerment through which a particular discipline – often a formally marginalized one like anthropology in the case of the “cultural turn” or geography in the case of the “spatial turn” – is brought to the centre of transdisciplinary attention, acquiring new authority and importance by lending its expertise to the neighbouring disciplines.⁷

And third, finally, the conjunction of text, context, and experience emphasises not only the contextual nature of the archive of evidences scholars work with, but also that scholarly work (i.e., theorising) encodes vicissitudes of lived experience, and thus that there is some correlation between theory and lived experience (however this latter is imagined, constructed, and enshrined in memory – social, or collective).⁸ “Theories, in short, are not stable, located as it were in a fixed place, but they are part of the general dynamics of history.”⁹ In fact, if theories and concepts do not transcend the lived experience contexts of the

7 Frank, “Imaginative Geography,” 65–66.

8 Space does not allow for a fuller, critical consideration of the category of experience, save to say that experience is not to be taken as simple, direct, unmediated access to an external world through the faculties of perception, but is itself a discursive formation of sorts, Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Crit. Inq.* 17, no. 4 (1991): 773–797; Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985); Frances Flannery et al., “Introduction: Religious Experience, Past and Present,” in *Experientia, Volume 1. Inquiry into Religious Experience in Early Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Frances Flannery, Colleen Shantz, and Rodney Alan Werline, Symposium 40 (Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2008), 1–10.

9 Frank, “Imaginative Geography,” 62.

scholars involved, then they are indices of the political character of all concept formation and employment, and all knowledge and discipline formations (or as I would prefer to call it: their politicality) – “political/politicality” understood here in the sense of *la politique*, as “the political,” the sum total of human interactions, at one end of which spectrum does stand employment (or in worst case scenarios, the weaponisation of such) in more or less direct political direction or investment. From the metatheoretical and metadiscursive perspective taken here, all knowledge and discipline formations are kinds of social sciences. To sharpen the point made in the foregoing: sociology of knowledge, which is what these perspectives in fact are, comments on how humans imagine, construct, discourse, and theorise their various world/s, and how these then have the ability to sediment in public sensibilities as worldview/s and social habitus (see the further remarks on this below). Disciplines and fields of study are reconfigured in accordance with location changes and historical vicissitudes: “Each theory, we may conclude, thus involuntarily reveals the historicity of the socio-cultural contexts in which it has emerged, and may thus be best understood as an attempt to negotiate objects and the prevailing exigencies of its social and historical situation.”¹⁰ With respect to all three main points made above, one should more appropriately speak of the essential *speech-actness* of theory and concept formation – theories and the act of theorising *do work*, social, cultural, and ideological work.

It should be quite clear that implied in the foregoing lurks the concept of discursive formations. The term “discursive formations” has gained much currency in metaconceptual reflection on the making and practice of disciplines since its iteration in Michel Foucault’s second chapter of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.¹¹ In short, the concept is taken here to indicate that we do not encounter knowledge formations or complex realities as brute in-themselves-subsisting objects, as things “hidden behind the words in the discourse, nor as ... stable transcendent object[s],”¹² but as complexes constituted by grammars, syntaxes, and semantics of representations, significations, and enunciations institutionalised in emerging (and eventually maintained) conventions of stating factual states of affairs, both on the level of everyday life-world-knowing as well as on the level of scholarly-discipline-knowing of a defined set of phenomena.¹³ The

10 Neumann and Tygstrup, “Travelling Concepts,” 1–2.

11 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge: And the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith and Rupert Swyer (New York, NY: Vintage, 1982), 31–38.

12 John C. Brady, “Foucault’s ‘Discursive Formations,’” *Epoché Magazine*, 20 August 2019, <https://epochemagazine.org/25/video-foucualts-discursive-formations/>.

13 In the discussion following below, there is an implied comparison between the use of the

enunciation of factual states of affairs translates complex, composite clusters of representations and significations such as texts, reports, recorded observations, cultural and ritual performances – all of which are “data-objects” referring to and interpreting other “data-objects” – into phenomena understood *as this or that*.

Knowledge formations or complex realities are “manufactured” through the arrangement of representations and facts in a logical order via a range of “steering mechanisms,” such as base assumptions, theories, cultural scripts and frameworks, many of which operate quite subconsciously. And thus, “discursive formation” naturally raises the question of what a “discourse” is.¹⁴ While “discourse” is often understood as simply the content of what is communicated, a discourse is a *complex of related facts* that circumscribe a factual state of affairs regarding a certain topic. And, thus, “discourse” is actually the collective noun for sets of significations (ranging from the spoken word, texts, gestures, rituals, etc., that is, all the kinds of acts of signification, that construct our way of knowing the world), and which way of knowing-through-acts-of-signification is socially conditioned, and that is institutionalised in accepted (one can say, “canonical”) ways of thinking about whatever topic or states of affairs are at issue.

Built into the concepts of discourse and discursive formation is the realisation that knowledge formations, fields of study, and institutionalised disciplines do not suddenly appear and announce themselves as objects worth knowing – they are not natural objects. The organisation and institutionalisation

concepts “discourse” and “discursive formation” by Foucault and Edward Said, Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, NY: Random House, 1978). Whereas for Edward Said the concept discourse continued to operate in the general domain of scholarly knowledge formation, Foucault broadened the scope of the concept to also include general public knowledge, more or less something akin to the general episteme of an era, as in how people imagine their world to be, which is also the double sense in which I take it here. The link between this appeal to Foucault’s concept of discourse and discursive formation, and the foregoing discussion lies in his argument that knowledge fields only become imaginable and thinkable when certain conditions of possibility obtain and become operative in generating a defined, delimited field of knowledge or conceptual domain, Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Routledge Classics (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2002).

- 14 I appeal here to past publications where I have given longer and more detailed expositions of the concept of discourse: Gerhard van den Heever, “Twilights of Greek and Roman Religions: Afterlives and Transformations – A Response,” *J. Early Christ. Hist.* 10, no. 2 (2020): 124–126, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2222582X.2021.1928526>. See also Jay Johnston and Kocku von Stuckrad, eds., *Discourse Research and Religion. Disciplinary Use and Interdisciplinary Dialogues* (Berlin; Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2021), 3, doi.org/10.1515/9783110473438.

sation of knowledge into epistemes and knowledge regimes, are products of social processes. As Pierre Bourdieu¹⁵ and Jean-Louis Fabiani¹⁶ have argued, knowledge, knowledge fields, and disciplines (that is, academic work and its outcomes) are not free-floating in-itself-subsisting entities. The broad corpus of academic discourses and symbolic production as a subset of cultural production cannot be extracted from wider processes of signification as if it exists *sui generis*.¹⁷ Scholarly production (and the circulation of theories and concepts) is not the free floating of disembodied ideas, but, as Fabiani suggests, the operational site of the socially and contextual determinant factors in the production of the discourse, hence the relocalisation of discourse production in this encompassing sense in sets of institutions and institutionalised practices (and here I freely expand on David Little's exposition of Fabiani): the force of canons of themes, topics, and methods; the publication industry with its own defined priorities; the marketing and publicising industry; the academic industry of "graduate programs, journals, tenure processes, associations, prizes;" gate-keeping as the policing of entry into membership of academic production sites, gate-keeping with respect to who may be a field player in the various outlets where the social capital of academic work accrues – none of these are ideologically acontextual (hence the origins of disciplines, literally the *disciplining* of scholarship into the internalisation and habituation of the rules of the knowledge game); and the production of second-order literature which is itself a production process of commodified intellectual labour.

It is precisely these processes of scholarly production that Kleinberg, Scott, and Wilder identify as sites of contestation, as at once the production processes in which disciplines and disciplinary identities are forged (where gate-keeping, editorial, and reward processes serve to maintain certain ranges of perspectives-made-canonical or authoritative) and thus naturalise the resulting states of the discipline, and on the other hand, where the introduction of critical theories (e.g., semiotic, psychoanalytic, Marxist, hermeneutic, phenomenological, structuralist, poststructuralist, New Historicist, critical historiography, feminist, postcolonial, queer, etc.) prise open existing paradigms,

15 Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

16 Jean-Louis Fabiani, *Qu'est-ce qu'un philosophe français? La vie sociale des concepts (1880–1980)* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2010).

17 I draw on the translations from the text of Fabiani in Daniel Little, "French Philosophy?," *Understanding Society*, accessed March 14, 2016, <http://understandingsociety.blogspot.com/2010/10/french-philosophy.html>. In so far as Fabiani writes a sociology of philosophy, I take his remarks to have a wider significance that is also relevant for thinking about the industry of academic production as such.

as conventional ways of operating within disciplinary boundaries, towards “‘new territories’ of alternative epistemological inquiries, orientations, or starting points.”¹⁸ In the process, such revisioning goes hand in hand with self-reflexivity, that is, the introduction of critical theories do enable and elicit reflection through the “production histories of disciplines” of their own

conditions of possibility: i.e., on what counts as evidence, how methods may prefigure how such evidence may make arguments legible and valid, how such validity implies assumptions about social order and historical transformation; on the relation between social forms and forms of knowledge, accepted ways of relating and acceptable ways of knowing, normative orders and normalizing concepts; on the socio-political fields that inevitably shape and thus over-determine [academics’ – GvdH] intellectual, professional, and institutional orientations, priorities, and hierarchies.¹⁹

Travelling theories and concepts are part of this retooling of regnant disciplinary paradigms.²⁰ Cue to travelling theories ...

2 Enter Travelling Theories and Concepts ... and the Retooling of Disciplines and Fields of Study

It was Edward Said who gave currency to the metaphor of travelling theories in his 1983 essay on “Traveling Theory”:

Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel – from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another. Cultural and intellectual life are usually nourished and often sustained by this circulation of ideas, and whether it takes the form of acknowledged or

18 Kleinberg, Scott, and Wilder, “Theses,” 2–3. The same arguments had been posed in the 2015 V21 Collective, “Manifesto of the V21 Collective,” *V21: Victorian Studies for the 21st Century*, n.d., <http://v21collective.org/manifesto-of-the-v21-collective-ten-theses/>.

19 Kleinberg, Scott, and Wilder, “Theses,” 4.

20 Much ink has been spilt on the subject of paradigms in science. While Thomas Kuhn’s concept of paradigms lurk in the background (and has been commented on in the literature drawn on here in this introductory essay), I believe the point of the production and maintenance of disciplines has been made adequately such that further elaboration on paradigms and Kuhn’s own nuancing of the concept need not be entertained. I will leave that for a later fuller discussion. But see Frank, “Imaginative Geography,” 64–66.

unconscious influence, creative borrowing, or wholesale appropriation, the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity. ... It necessarily involves processes of representation and institutionalization different from those at the point of origin. This complicates any account of the transplantation, transference, circulation, and commerce of theories and ideas.²¹

The core of Said's essay centres on the idea that theories are neither stable (remaining fixed irrespective of where, by whom, and for which purpose they are used), nor floating above historical conjunctures (as argued above, they encode contexts, experiences, and traces of vicissitudes of discipline-making and intellectual production). To make the point, the essay considers the "travel story" of György Lukács's interpretation of Marxist theory (itself a history of intellectual evolution, direction changes, political action from pre-World War I Hungary through the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919, various exiles – in the Soviet Union, from Hungary after World War II and again after the 1956 failed uprising against the Soviet Union), the reinterpretation of Marxist theory of totality as structure by Lukács's pupil, Lucien Goldmann, the Romanian philosopher who studied in France in the 1930s to remain there after World War II (and whose Marxism-derived theory of literature differed markedly from that of Lukács), and the reception and adaptation of Marxism as analytical lens in the work of the British literary and cultural critic, Raymond Williams.

Said's argument is that no theory travels completely: in all such travel and displacement, some aspects of a theory are resisted in the recontextualization and adaptation, while it is the composite nature of theories (seeing that theories are in themselves complex archives of layers of discourses, that are themselves historical and contextual appropriations and adaptations of traditions and re-inventions of traditions, and so on and so on literally ad infinitum) that creates the openings for "hooking" on to new fields of study – disciplines

21 Edward W. Said, "Traveling Theory," chapter 10 in idem, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 226–247, the citation on p. 226. There has since been quite some interest in the concept of travelling theories, at least it surfaces from time to time: see the 1989 theme issue of *Inscriptions* volume 5, "Traveling Theories, Traveling Theorists" (as far as I can establish it was a short-lived online journal of the Center for Cultural Studies at the University of California Santa Cruz, <https://culturalstudies.ucsc.edu/inscriptions/>); as well as the 2009 theme issue, "Travelling Concepts in English Studies," in the *European Journal of English Studies* 13, no. 1, <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/nej20/13/1>.

and fields of study are polyparadigmatic complexes.²² In this respect theories contribute to revisioning existing fields of study but also to founding new disciplinary formations (or the institutionalisation of such) and functions in an original sense of embassy to consult an oracle (thus signalling the mode of inquiring), or contemplation, speculation, looking at – theories guide the scholarly vision in order to see in a new light to arrive at a new understanding, to enable selecting and classification of data into contemplatable clusters.²³

But there is also irony in the travel of theories – as they traverse contexts and reappropriations, theories can come to facilitate quite opposing ways of seeing and intellection. Two short anecdotes are offered to illustrate this (simplifying a far more intricate history that cannot be treated here): the historical-critical method in biblical study, born in the early years of the nineteenth century in the work of David Friedrich Strauss, Ferdinand Christian Baur, and the ongoing reception of this foundation into the later Religionsgeschichtliche Schule with such scholars as Franz Overbeck and William Wrede who both claimed that historical criticism made New Testament theology impossible because it relegated the New Testament documents as artifacts back into the “library” of Graeco-Roman religions, had an explicitly anti-theological agenda. However, in the course of the next century the method became increasingly domesticated, and insofar as use is made of the method in recent commentaries on New Testament texts, the historical-critical method serves to *establish* the historical

22 See my arguments on this in van den Heever, “Introduction,” 31–32; and Gerhard van den Heever, “New Testament and Early Christian Studies: Theses on Theory and Method,” *J. Early Christ. Hist.* 10, no. 1 (2020): 1–3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2222582X.2020.1848443>.

23 In her essay, “Working with Concepts,” in the “Travelling Concepts in English Studies” theme issue, Mieke Bal makes a case of rather working with the idea of concepts rather than theories, Mieke Bal, “Working with Concepts,” *Eur. J. Engl. Stud.* 13, no. 1 (2009): 13–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13825570802708121>. Bal calls concepts “miniature theories,” sites of debate and exchange; and because of their elasticity ideal for intellectual adventuring. “[W]hat, then, is a concept? Concepts are the tools of intersubjectivity: They facilitate discussion on the basis of a common language. Mostly, they are considered abstract representations of an object. But, like all representations, they are neither simple nor adequate in themselves. They distort, unfix and inflect the object. ... In fact, concepts are, or rather do, much more. If well thought through, they offer miniature theories, and in that guise, help in the analysis of objects, situations, states and other theories,” Bal, “Working with Concepts,” 18–19. Just like theories, concepts are flexible because each concept is part of a framework, a systematic set of distinctions; behind concepts like religion, culture, society, ideology, etc., lie layers of case studies, narratives, interpretations, theoretical discourses, and so on. In addition, concepts act – like theories – as taxonomisers aiding classifications for the purpose of closer scrutiny.

accuracy and trustworthiness of such texts. The historical-critical method has simply become a method doing conservative work in opposition to its original intention.

The method of biblical interpretation known as South African Discourse Analysis, the authoritative approach in academic biblical study in South Africa from around the middle 1970s through its heyday in the 1980s to its disappearance in the early 1990s as a mode of analysing the discourse of New Testament texts, was based on a new semantics developed by the then professor of Greek at the University of Pretoria, J.P. Louw.²⁴ As an approach to interpretation it was built on cognitive anthropology, anthropological linguistics, psychosemantics, and logical semantics.²⁵ At the time of its appearance, it was offered as a scientific and objective method, in contrast to the regnant (mostly) historical-grammatical exegetical practice and generally impressionistic commentary in South African biblical scholarship at the time. In context, it is clear it was in a sense revolutionary, seeing that the method appeared at the same time as the publication of the 1974 statement by the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk) on apartheid, *Ras, volk en nasie en volkereverhoudinge in die lig van die Skrif*, which provided a theological defence of apartheid.²⁶ The method was clearly aimed at “correcting” the kind of biblical exegesis that underlay apartheid theology. Against its own intention, it began to function as an acontextual and ahistorical method, and thus served for a generation of ministers (insofar as they actually did exegesis for preaching) as a conservative exegetical method insulating theological discourses from any engagement with the political situation of the day; it was a way of occulting and avoiding the messiness of the revolutionary period from 1976 (the Soweto uprisings) through the states of emergency in the middle 1980s to around 1994 (the negotiations and regime changeover 1990 to 1994).²⁷

24 The original class notes published first in Afrikaans and then, in a fully revised version in English, J.P. Louw, *Semantics of New Testament Greek*, Semeia Studies (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1982).

25 Chapter 2, “Semantics – not only a Linguistic Concern,” in Louw, *Semantics*, 5–16.

26 Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika, *Ras, volk en nasie en volkereverhoudinge in die lig van die Skrif* (Cape Town: N.G. Kerk-Uitgewers, 1975).

27 This is perhaps due, in some measure, to the class notes on discourse analysis of the Letter to the Romans by J.P. Louw, along with other such class materials, which inspired many then theological students to see the meaning of the text simply in its structure. Codified as a 10-step method, it did make space for “historical background,” but in practice, *context* disappeared from view. One just needs to consult the articles published in the course of the decade and a half, from roughly 1974 to 1990, in *Neotestamentica* (the journal of the New Testament Society of Southern Africa) to see the extent to which the investment

3 On to Discursive Formations, Retooling Disciplines, and Hosting Travelling Theories

The foregoing considerations served to create a framework to situate the essays assembled here in this issue of *Religion & Theology*. Not every essay in this issue will on its own have addressed these issues highlighted here, but taken together in ensemble, they demonstrate how discursive formations get constructed and operate, how theories travel and get appropriated in new knowledge formations to create new understandings and new disciplinary discourses, how experience intrudes to shape theory formation, and how theory remains a site for ideological contestation, what in a previous issue of *Religion & Theology* was called a “conceptual architecture for the study of religion.” Since the purpose is merely to indicate how these essays fit into this framing, there will not be any in-depth introduction, discussion, or responding to these.

Johannes van Oort’s essay, “Manichaeology”: Origin and Development of the Study of a Gnostic World Religion,” does not explicitly speak of Manichaeology as a discursive formation, but nevertheless does clearly show Manichaeology to be constituted as an object of discourse and a field of study through an industry of text collections, text editions, strident debates, historiographies ranging from less to more critical. Incidentally, for a critical historiography and appreciation of this once world religion that deeply impacted numerous other religious formations and tradition-making (in itself an issue that begs questioning, as demonstrated by Chris de Wet’s response, “Manichaeology, Early Christianity, and Religious Identity: A Response and Reflection”), it would greatly add to the understanding of “Manichaeology” as discursive formation to compare the making of this field of study with the process of “manufacturing” the library of Islamic classics as described in Ahmed El Shamsy’s monograph, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics*.²⁸ El Shamsy traces how the collection, printing, and editing of Islamic texts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries transformed the intellectual heritage of Islam. But there is a broader implication that begs comparative theorising. Almost contemporaneous to the historical processes El Shamsy describes, a similar development took place in the Christian West – since the Renaissance, but especially since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the race to collect ancient Christian manuscripts (often through similar processes of division of manuscripts, illegal sales and acquisitions as El

in structural discourse analysis bred acontextual readings, on the reading of which one would never have guessed that South Africa was engulfed in a violent revolution.

28 Ahmed El Shamsy, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition* (Princeton, NJ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020).

Shamsy describes), to collate and making critical editions took a similar form as in the Islamic world. And it had a similar effect: the explosion in the availability of other texts (critical editions or more popular translations) like Old and New Testament apocrypha, pre-canonical versions of texts that later became canonical (including the Dead Sea Scrolls with respect to the Old Testament; many unknown gospel fragments or divergent versions of known Gospels), the collection known as the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Coptic Gnostic library, early Christian literature encompassing a wide range of texts from the Apostolic Fathers to church fathers, all these almost completely redrew the contours of how one should now conceive of Christian origins, the formation of early Christian tradition, and the social histories of early Christian cult groups and movements (in fact: it puts in question what Christianity *is*); not to speak of how early Christians related to their Graeco-Roman context and religious heritage and continued to be bound (more or less) to their Jewish heritage.

In addition, Chris de Wet shows how the retheorising of early Christian discourse through critical theories reconstituted early Christianity as field of study, now no longer as theological endeavour (traditionally called “patristics”) but as studies of discourses, practices, tradition-making, power, in fact it changed the whole way in which early Christian historiography is conceived – famously in the work of Elizabeth Clark (the linguistic turn and history writing),²⁹ in addition to discursive formations of identity,³⁰ cultural studies,³¹ and the huge impact of Foucaultian discourse studies (on the manufacturing of the Christian self),³² to name only a very few select examples.

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- 29 Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). See also Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1–4, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199271566.003.0001>; Elizabeth A. Clark, “From Patristics to Early Christian Studies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7–41, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199271566.003.0002>.
- 30 Isabella Sandwell, *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity: Greeks, Jews and Christians in Antioch* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007). See also Todd S. Berzon, *Classifying Christians: Ethnography, Heresiology, and the Limits of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, CA; London: University of California Press, 2016).
- 31 Kim Haines-Eitzen, “Reimagining Patristics: Theory’s Vital Role in the Study of Premodern Texts,” *Church Hist.* 74, no. 4 (2005): 816–820, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640700100915>.
- 32 Chris L. de Wet, “The Priestly Body: Power-Discourse and Identity in John Chrysostom’s *De Sacerdotio*,” *Relig. Theol.* 18, no. 3–4 (2011): 351–379, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15743011X614736>; Chris L. de Wet, “‘Le devoir des époux’: Michel Foucault’s Reading of John Chrysos-

The two essays by Tomasz Mikołaj Dekert, “Catholicism or Post-Catholicisms? The Effects of Catholic Liturgical Reform Considered in the Light of Roy A. Rappaport’s Theory of Ritual,” and Khegan Delport, “Between *Imperium* and *Sacerdotium*: On the Dialectics of Religious Freedom, with Special Reference to the South African Context,” deal with constructions of religions as discursive formations but with some telling differences. Dekert’s post-conciliar Catholicism and its liturgical (ritual) reform evoke Fabiani’s exposition of the material processes of producing a discourse formation (now applied to a religious formation), the institutionalisation of a new religious discourse and its organisation, but also introducing a specific ritual theory to highlight how the trauma of change is negotiated and dealt with. Delport investigates the intersection of religious discourses and practices on the one hand, and legal (constitutional) discourses on the other, and questions the impact of these latter on and shape the definition and practice of religion.

Phillip Öhlmann and Ignatius (Naas) Swart advocate for a new “turn” in the study of religion and development, namely the ecological turn, “Religion and Environment: Exploring the Ecological Turn in Religious Traditions, the Religion and Development Debate and Beyond.” They host theories of development in combination with ecological discourses within theological disciplines and traditions, but also intersect these with questions of sustainable economic development. In doing so, they argue for a new agenda for theological thinking and practice, and that precisely in a historical context of rethinking economic models (of unbridled capitalism), sustainable development, and the social and political effects – and fallout – of unstopped climate change.

The essay on “Women on the Move in the New Testament” by Anna Rebecca Solevåg constitutes in a sense a double movement of travel and transit: not only by hosting migration studies as theoretical framework in her study, but also highlighting migration as activity in the characters she interprets. Migration theory gained in importance in recent years in studies of religion and in the humanities generally, most probably as a result of the vast population displacements (particularly from Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan) resulting from the devastations caused by constant war in the Middle East (now for more than two decades running), but also from migrants fleeing poverty and political

tom’s Marital Ethic in *Histoire de la sexualité 4: Les aveux de la chair* ([1982–1984] 2018),” *Relig. Theol.* 27, no. 1–2 (2020): 114–151, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15743012-bja10003>; and Chris L. de Wet, “Nemesius of Emesa on Desire, Pleasure, and Sex: A Case of the Medical Making of an Early Christian Sexual Culture,” *Relig. Theol.* 28, no. 3–4 (2021): 206–232, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15743012-bja10027>, to name only a few and only those that appeared in this journal in recent years.

turmoil in Africa into Europe. The vast movement of migrants and the resulting fears and questions regarding the changing identity of Europe (fears of a so-called Eurabia) anchor this theory directly in experience – there is a pervasive sense of political urgency inhering uses of migration theory. It has already begun to impact studies of religious identity and studies of diasporas with obvious significance for the study of early Christianity since much of the earliest documentary tradition (the canonical New Testament itself) was written in situations of migration and some of the earliest debates directly emanated from this context and addressed issues relating to experiences of and social and cultural adaptations to being displaced.³³

Lastly, the two essays by Craig Martin, “Attempting to Make Sense of Postcritique, or, I’m Confused,” and Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, “Ruthless Critique of All that Exists and a Poetic-Political-Prayer,” respond to the recently published “manifesto” by Robert T. Tally, Jr., *For a Ruthless Critique of All That Exists: Literature in an Age of Capitalist Realism*.³⁴ In short, Tally takes issue with the effect of “capitalist realism” on the practice of cultural criticism with a growing tendency in literary and cultural criticism over the past 30 or more years to eschew critical theory and even critique itself, while championing approaches to cultural study that emphasise surface reading, thin description, ordinary language philosophy, object-oriented ontology, and post-critique (with regard to the lat-

33 Steven J. Gold and Stephanie J. Nawyn, eds., *The Routledge International Handbook of Migration Studies*, Routledge Handbooks Online (Abingdon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203863299>; Martha Frederiks and Dorottya Nagy, eds., *Religion, Migration and Identity: Methodological and Theological Explorations*, Theology and Mission in World Christianity 2 (Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004326156>; Martin Butler, Paul Mecheril, and Lea Brenningmayer, eds., *Resistance: Subjects, Representations, Contexts*, Migration – Power – Education (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017), <https://www.transcript-verlag.de/media/pdf/28/ec/20/0a9783839431498DyUtWRhWIZsPD.pdf>; Ilsup Ahn, *Theology and Migration*, Brill Research Perspectives: Theology (Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2019), <https://brill.com/view/title/55633>. There are also the journals, e.g., *Migration Studies*, <https://academic.oup.com/migration>, and *Comparative Migration Studies*, <https://comparativemigrationstudies.springeropen.com/>. For studies of migration and the New Testament see, for instance, the use made of migration theory to account for historical data and representations of such in the texts, Heike Omerzu, “Paul, the Praetorium and the Saints from Caesar’s Household: Philippians Revisited in Light of Migration Theory,” *J. Study New Testam.* 43, no. 4 (2021): 450–467, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X21990615>. A whole session at the 2018 Nordic New Testament Conference was devoted to the theme, “Migrating Texts and People in Early Christianity.” At the same conference Heike Omerzu read a keynote paper on “A Stranger Amongst Strangers: The Pauline Mission as a Migration Phenomenon.”

34 Robert T. Tally, Jr., *For a Ruthless Critique of All That Exists: Literature in an Age of Capitalist Realism* (Winchester; Washington, DC: Zero Books, 2022).

ter, Tally takes aim primarily at Rita Felski's advocacy of postcritique).³⁵ Craig Martin responds to a long list of "postcritics," but mostly centres on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedwick, Bruno Latour, and Rita Felski to defend poststructuralist critique against accusations of skepticism as a "a perfectly suitable mode of engagement when addressing sexism, racism, inequality, etc." Meylahn sites the question of the possibility of critique within a world of almost limitless image-representations (what Debord called the "society of the spectacle"), in a world where there is no "outside text, besides that which calls the text forth from the contradictions and paradoxes *within* the texts themselves." Critique means "not just to read the surface or to be read by the surface, but to read-write and thereby rewrite the surface." Both Martin and Meylahn move in the ambit of the Wild On Collective's argument of thinking the conditions of possibility of discourse, which argument, while not stating so explicitly, have as implication that calls for surface readings and postcritique arose at the same time as neoliberal economic theory, Reaganism, and Thatcherism.³⁶ Hence, the charge of ideological distortion levelled at structuralist or poststructuralist theorists should be seen as itself politically committed and ideologically laden.³⁷

In sum, the essays collected here speak to the constellation of issues highlighted with appeal to discursive formations, retooling disciplines, and hosting travelling theories.

35 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, IL; London: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

36 Simon Schleusener, "Surface, Distance, Depth: The Text and Its Outside," in *Surface, Distance, Depth: The Text and Its Outside*, ed. Michel Chaouli et al., *WeltLiteraturen/World Literatures* 9 (Berlin; Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2021), 175–202, here 180, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110688719-013>: "Indeed, if Sedgwick notes that, in retrospect, certain theories and theoretical attitudes of the late 1980s and 1990s, despite their pronounced radicalism, manifest themselves not as resistant to, but, to the contrary, as reflective of the realities of the new neoliberal order, one could justifiably argue that this is even more the case with the postcritical turn of the late 2000s. ... postcritique's 'political unconscious': its seeming indifference to (or non-consideration of) the political implications of its discursive positioning ... what she fails to mention is the significant decline of precisely the kind of Marxism [Fredric] Jameson represents in the early 1980s, which saw the rise of poststructuralism and American-style cultural studies, including disciplines like gender studies, ethnic studies, and queer theory. As many authors have noted, what went along with this development was not only a growing avoidance of economic issues in cultural and critical theory, but also a shift from 'structure' to 'identity' and from 'redistribution' to 'recognition'."

37 Kleinberg, Scott, and Wilder, "Theses," 7.

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