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Abstract

Relationality is a persistent concern of socio-spatial theory, increasingly invoked in geographical scholarship. We bring geographical scholarship on relationality to bear on relational poverty studies, an emergent body of work that challenges mainstream approaches to conceptualizing, explaining, researching and acting upon poverty. We argue that relationality scholarship provides ontological, theoretical, and epistemological interventions that extend prior relational poverty work. We synthesize these three elements to develop an explicitly geographical relationality and show how this framework offers a politics of possibility for knowing and acting on poverty in new ways.

Keywords: relationality, relational poverty, post-colonial geographies, ontology, epistemology

I. Introduction

Poverty and inequality are endemic to capitalism around the globe. Piketty's book '*Capital in the Twenty-First Century*' (2014) is receiving broad attention, identifying him as one of a long line of scholars calling attention to the mutual production of privilege and

poverty under capitalism (see also Marx, 1867; Gramsci, 1891-1937; Polanyi, 1944; Piven and Cloward, 1977; Procacci, 2001; Mann, 2013; Sheppard, 2016). Contemporary public commentators also point to the production of poverty as structural, arguing that global political economic relations, austerity policies, and a diminished welfare state produce extreme inequality and render claims of 'equal opportunity' an impossible fiction (e.g., Krugman, 2013, 2015). For example, the wealthy experienced faster recovery from the U.S "Great Recession", securing disproportionately greater material benefits, thereby consolidating their structural advantage over middle classes and those in poverty (Lowery, 2013). Youth in rich countries are mobilized to address 'global' poverty in unprecedented numbers, yet often they only recognize and act upon 'poverty' located in the Majority world (Roy, 2010; Roy et al. 2016). Taken together, these scholarly and popular conversations signal an important political and cultural moment for rethinking poverty in rich countries.

The Marxian tradition of poverty scholarship has long emphasized the ways in which economic and political relations under capitalism produce impoverishment (Marx, 1867; Gramsci, 1891-1937; Polanyi, 1944). In recent decades, this work has been extended by theorists arguing that impoverishment always also entails unequal power wielded through the political, institutional and cultural relations between subjects, social groups and governments (Freire, 1968; Piven and Cloward, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984; Tilly, 1998; Goode and Maskovsky, 2001; O'Connor, 2002; Houtzager and Moore, 2003). Building on this work, the emergent field of relational poverty studies (hereafter relpov) offers a sharp counter-narrative to dominant arguments in rich countries that poverty results from individual failings and poor choices (Lubrano, 2010; Kristoff, 2013). In contrast, relpov work explores how poverty is produced in the inseparable interplay of institutional rules

and practices; processes of meaning-making (for example, by middle classes and elites, policy makers and politicians); class/race subjectivities and identities; economic restructuring; and postcolonial governance (Woolcock, 2009; Mosse, 2010). Further, rather than confining inquiry to a single nation or territory (rich country, inner city, etc.), relpov work poses questions that cut across conventional divides of rich country poverty knowledge and those produced by global development discourse. This enables exploration of novel knowledges and alliances forged across the very different framings of poverty in these worlds (see also Roy and Crane, 2015).

At the conceptual heart of relpov research is relationality, a principal concern in contemporary socio-spatial theory more generally (Tronto, 1995; Somers, 1998; Anderson et al., 2012).¹ Relationality is persistently invoked in geographical scholarship but often with insufficient clarity, running the risk of seeming to be everything and nothing (see Yeung, 2005; Sunley, 2008; Jacobs, 2012; Malpus, 2012 for similar claims). Yet as we will argue, geographers' work on relationality can provide distinct contours for ontological, epistemological, and theoretical extensions to existing relpov work. While developing the definitive geographical statement on relationality is beyond our scope, in this paper we distill 'geographical relationality' from geographers' myriad uses, and trace its implications for relational poverty studies and politics.²

Our paper makes two contributions. First, we clarify the range of ways that geographers invoke relationality, despite often under-specifying the term (see also Sheppard, 2008). We articulate an explicitly geographical relationality comprised of three inseparable aspects: 1) a **socio-spatial ontology** in which spaces, subjects and processes (such as impoverishment) are constantly crystallized, grounded, assembled and

transformed; conceptualizing space itself as constituted through relations that extend beyond a singular place (Massey, 2007); 2) **an epistemological stance** open to surprise and employing an anti-essentialist causality that builds explanation through multiple intertwined causal structures, actants, subjects, knowledge and exercises of power; 3) a **politics of possibility** that disrupts hegemonic modes and relations of knowledge production, engages in boundary-crossing and dialogic processes of learning, and pursues forms of ‘academic activism’ that frame poverty knowledge in new ways. After reviewing relpov research in Section II, our paper details these three aspects in Sections III, IV and V. Despite focusing each section on one aspect for clarity, we understand them as inseparable. Our second contribution, interwoven throughout the paper, is to employ geographical relationality to deepen the transformative potential of relpov theory and research practice to think and act upon poverty in new ways.

Poverty is a crucial site for thinking relationality. It allows us to reconnect that which is represented as separate (rights and rightlessness, privilege and dispossession), and to make visible the hierarchies and exclusions involved in construction of normative subjects. Rancière (2004), Balibar (1991) and other philosophers (Lentin, 2004; Read, 2007) argue that Western democracies assert a universal subject; a normative idealized citizen with equal rights to participate in public/political life.³ And yet for poor people, daily struggles for survival leave little time and limited access to sites of deliberation and action. These de facto exclusions from public life combined with de jure exclusions such as criminalization and removal of rights to formal participation (e.g. voting) mean that poverty effectively excludes people from practices of publicity. Further, this exclusion is secured and rendered politically off limits by discourses of individual freedom and choice

that frame impoverishment as laziness, lack and ignorance (Žižek, 2000; Brown, 2003a; Brown, 2003b). Thinking relationality through poverty tears apart this normative separation of an ideal subject and its Others, revealing these to be interrelated processes of differential political subjectification (Rancière, 2004; Žižek 2000; Balibar, 1991). Precisely because assertions of geo-historical universality obscure poor people's lack of access to full citizenship and render them politically illegible, (Cacho 2012; McKittrick, 2006; Schram, 2000) geographical relational poverty analysis is both urgent and concrete.

II. Relational poverty research⁴

The field articulated as 'relational poverty studies' coalesced in the 2000s, emerging from critical development work and cultural studies (Mosse, 2010; Hickey, 2009; Watkins, 1994; Schram, 2000; O'Connor, 2002). This body of work engages with the multi-dimensional economic, political and cultural processes, and social relations producing impoverishment. Relpov employs a relational social ontology, arguing that poverty and privilege are mutually constituted (Wood, 2003). Relpov scholars conceptualize social subjects as emergent and co-produced, rather than as distinct categories (e.g. 'middle class', 'poor, etc.) from which identities arise (Somers, 1998; Adamovsky, 2009; Mosse, 2010). Further, relpov research critiques dominant poverty theory as North-centric (Roy, 2010), tracing how this poverty knowledge comes to be authoritative through its command of resources and institutional power, foreclosing other possibilities for thinking about and acting on poverty (O'Connor, 2002; Roy, 2003; Lawson, 2012).

For example, relational approaches critique both representations and explanations of poverty within international development circles and in the US poverty industry (see

O'Connor, 2002). Relpov research argues that an obsession with measuring, benchmarking and individualizing poverty has overshadowed structural analyses of its constitution and reproduction (Addison, Hulme, and Kanbur, 2009; du Toit, 2009; Hickey, 2009; Mosse, 2010). Here, poverty is theorized as produced through political economic relations intertwined with social and cultural processes. Scholars trace, for example, how land dispossession or adverse incorporation into capitalist economies intersects with racialization, gendering, and other processes of social categorization and exclusion, sustaining and amplifying the marginalization of impoverished people and places (Harris-White, 2003, Wood, 2003; Green 2005; Kaplinsky, 2005; Green, 2006; Hickey and du Toit, 2007; De Hert & Bastiaensen, 2008). Thus Hickey (2009) explains the persistent impoverishment of northern Uganda with reference to its marginalization from national economic structures and policies and the stigmatization of people living in the north. These processes, he argues, are rooted in colonial imaginaries and are reinforced by Eurocentric anti-poverty programs that assume people in northern Uganda need to be trained and reformed, rather than focusing on the need to shift cultural narratives and development priorities that privilege southern Uganda.

Another central focus in relpov analysis is how encounters between more and less powerful actors reproduce class boundaries and power hierarchies (Waxman, 1977; Tilly, 1998). Much of this work reveals how 'poverty difference' is produced through discourses that separate impoverished people and places as 'other' from a normative group, that name and categorize them as poor, and that signify this poor other as deficient, criminal, backward and/or lazy (Newman, 1999; Guano, 2004; Green 2006; Sharam and Hulse, 2014). Processes of socio-cultural categorization and differentiation work hand-in-glove

with political economic structures and relations. For instance, Schram (2000) explains deepening impoverishment in the US in the 1980s and 1990s as the product of labor market changes adversely affecting poorer groups, diminished welfare state assistance, and a stigmatizing cultural politics of ‘personal responsibility’ and blame advanced in arguments for welfare ‘reform’. Relpov researchers identify intersectional discourses of poverty that harness constructions of class difference and subordination to gendered or racialized representations (hooks, 2000; Watkins, 1994; Schram 2000). Others emphasize how discourses of poverty difference always also produce (and, notably, govern) more privileged class subjects, particularly the normative middle class subject against whom poor others are framed (Goode and Maskovsky, 2001; Fernandes and Heller, 2011; Blokland, 2012).

While relpov analysts from development studies and cultural studies have made critical inroads into understanding the production of poverty, more is possible. First, much relpov analysis lends primary causal weight to capitalist processes, reducing gendering and racialization to the role of ‘amplifiers’ of foundational relations in political economy (Ravazi, 2000; Hickey and du Toit, 2007; De Hert & Bastiaensen, 2008; Harriss, 2009; Woolcock, 2009). The geographical relationality we elaborate below insists on a relational causality that theorizes race, gender, nationality and/or ability as **all** constitutive of poverty, without situating them as secondary to political economy. We build out this argument in sections III and IV, showing how a robustly geographical relationality that starts from the socio-spatial constitution of impoverishment necessitates consideration of the multiplicity and co-constitution of poverty processes.

Second, relpov's focus on the consolidation of social boundaries obscures other possible forms of relation across difference, including alliances. We argue for more open, experimental modes of theorizing, which engage forms of explanation that neither prefigure the production of boundaries for all times and places, nor foreclose the possibility that multiple, contradictory relations and subjects might emerge in poverty processes. A more geographically relational epistemology expands insights generated through relpov analysis. It raises new questions about the kinds of social subjectivities or alliances that might arise in specific geo-historical contexts, formed through shared vulnerabilities or mutual learning across different experiences.

Third, relpov research has focused primarily on the expression of poverty processes in particular places rather than on their broader spatialities. Relpov research to date has not explored how poverty processes circulate through space and time; how multiple intersecting processes congeal across different geo-historical conjunctures; how theorizations themselves are products of the spaces in which they are produced. With roots in postcolonial and feminist geography, geographical relational methods read places through one another (rather than cataloging similarities and differences), tracing the circulations of power that constitute poverty in particular geohistorical conjunctures (Hart, 2002; Roy, 2003).

Finally, prior relpov work has advanced poverty studies by employing ethnographic and archival methods to reveal structuring forces, as a corrective to mainstream approaches focused on measuring poverty (Hulme and Toyne, 2006; Olsen, 2006; du Toit, 2009; Addison, Hulme and Kanbur, 2009). This has generated a range of singular case studies, either framed through a critical development studies lens in Africa, Asia or Latin

America (Mosse, 2005; Green, 2005; Hickey, 2009; Fernandes and Heller, 2011) or focused on rich country poverty largely in the US and Europe (Watkins, 1993; Schram, 2000; O'Connor, 2002). Our geographical relational approach is attentive to the spatiality of poverty processes and forwards comparative analysis across geographic boundaries. Such work traces geohistorical interconnections in poverty processes around the globe, as well as asymmetrical circulations of poverty theory and 'expertise' between Majority and Minority worlds (Roy, 2003; 2012; Leitner and Sheppard, 2015). Geographical relational theorizing prompts engaged practices that reconfigure these uneven relationships and power lines of knowledge-making. These include creative collaboration, centering the voices of ethnographic subjects, and reversing the usual lenses of inquiry to focus on the role of the non-poor, powerful institutions and/or technocrats in producing poverty.

III. Geographical relational ontologies and relpov

"If space is conceptualized relationally, as the product of practices and flows, engagements, connections and disconnections, as the constantly being produced outcome of mobile social relations, then local places are specific nodes, articulations within this wider power-geometry" (Massey, 2007: 167)

A relational socio-spatial ontology rejects atomism, universalism and individualism, apprehending the world in terms of networks, relations and interactions that constitute subjects, places, agency and effects (Thrift, 2000, 5; Brown, 2003; McDowell, 2004; Lawson, 2007). Rather than viewing society and space as agglomerations of 'self-made persons' or discrete, bounded sites *within which* processes are in relation (as in locality studies or conventional case comparisons), geographical relational ontologies posit that spatiality can

and must be theorized through diverse webs of causal relations that extend *beyond the boundaries of specific places* and that mutually constitute space, place, human agency and the more-than-human world (Gregory, 2000: 564). This ontological stance is foundational to the contributions that geographical relationality makes to relpov analysis.

The causal relations constituting place are conceived as both comings together of multiple processes in specific geo-historical conjunctures, and also flows of processes and things that extend beyond specific places to connect and constitute spaces and networks of relations (Hall and Massey, 2010; McCann and Ward, 2010; Robinson, 2011). Thus Harvey posits a relational dialectics and a geographical historical materialism in which “...spatial and ecological differences are not only constituted by but constitutive of ... socio-ecological and political economic processes” (Harvey, 1996: 6). Massey also ascribes space relational ontological status, arguing that space is more than the stage upon which human and more-than-human processes are expressed. She (2005: 10) argues that actors, processes and relations have emergent trajectories expressed in, and arising from, what comes together in geo-historical conjunctures (see Whatmore, 1998; Brown, 2003; Lawson, 2007; Gibson-Graham, 2008).

Different theorists parse a relational geographical ontology with different emphases. Relational theorists agree that space is produced through multiple spatially intersecting human and more-than-human processes as well as through flows and connections between places. And yet within this broad frame some geographers emphasize the analytical importance of spatial fixity (Harvey, 1996; Malpus, 2012), whereas others place greater emphasis on space as restlessly open, extended and becoming (Gibson-Graham, 2008; McCann, 2011). With respect to fixity, Harvey (1996) engages with relational ontologies

that view the world as constituted by flows, but focuses attention on the ways in which flows produce ‘permanences’ of discourse, values, institutions, material relations and politics (see also Gidwani, 2006, 18). In Harvey’s work, these fixities are important because they produce political identities, constituencies and struggles, as for example when union actions fight the closure of their city’s auto plant or middle class homeowners exclude poorer people from a neighborhood they claim as ‘theirs’.⁵ Here, space takes salient ontological form through the particular fixities wherein power coheres in institutions, social relations, economies and ecologies, and from which particular politics can be expected to appear (e.g. anti-homeless NIMBY politics, labor organized to resist restructuring).

Other geographers view spatiality as constantly in flux, constituted through networked, fluid and multiple processes that restlessly open up diverse arrangements of life and power (Massey, 2005; Gibson-Graham, 2008; Bergeron and Healy, 2015; Murdoch 2005). This ontological position builds theory in close relation with the unfolding empirical world, rather than from a priori foundational claims about place, space and spatiality (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Roy, 2015). This post-structural anti-essentialist position rejects determining claims that assume the ontological primacy of capital logics or pre-given social relations (such as the shared ‘sisterhood’ assumed in early second wave feminism). Feminist and post-structural geographers also reject binary conceptualizations of the world that produce a hierarchical ordering of concepts and politics (economy/care, society/nature; poverty/wealth). Instead, they posit an ontological world of difference in which all elements, and relations between them, are constantly being made through fluid encounters in spacetime (Gibson-Graham, 2006, 2008). For these theorists, spatiality,

materiality, meanings, identities and politics are continually co-constituted and negotiated (Thrift, 1996; Whatmore, 1998). This ontological position of multiplicity and overdetermination also emerges in arguments for flat ontologies, reflected in Marston, Jones and Woodward's (2005) argument against the ways in which scale is frequently ascribed ontological permanence as hierarchically nested scales of body, locality, nation and global. In arguing for flat ontologies, seeking to resist fixing either spatial forms or explanations, they deconstruct fixed, hierarchical scalar conceptions of space to posit "...an ontology composed of emergent, complex spatial relations...leaving the emergence of space folded into its own intimate relationalities" (Marston et al. 2005, 422, 426).

Despite broad agreement about the relational production of socio-spatial worlds, these debates within geography indicate an unsettled tension between openness/fluidity and spatial coherences/permanences. We argue (with Malpus 2012 and Massey 2005) that a geographical relational ontology of space is pluralist, entailing a both/and approach to fixity and motion as dialectically interrelated. Malpus argues that conceptual boundedness frames "...a 'here', a 'there', and a 'this' – which establishes certain elements as salient and certain elements as withdrawn" (Malpus, 2012: 238). In this view, conceptual boundaries are integral to relational thinking because they specify what is in relation and make it possible to account for relational structures. Similarly, Massey draws attention to the creative tension between fixity and motion in relational work: "movement [is] itself produced *through* attention to configurations" (Massey, 2005: 148). These propositions suggest the productive possibilities of a geographical *relpov* agenda that actively engages the dialectic of fluidity and coherence to produce new understandings of poverty.

This dialectic between spatial fixity and fluidity also arises in assemblage work. Some authors emphasize how orders arise, are maintained in place and work to enable or close down possibilities (cf. Anderson et al., 2012). This type of assemblage thinking makes apparent, for example, the ways in which processes of racialization re-inscribe fairly stable discourses of poverty difference, even as specific performances, identities and practices around racialization and poverty vary from one setting to another. Others within assemblage thinking focus on the transience of spatial orders that “are always works in progress”, coming apart as they come together (McCann, 2011: 145; Cook and Ward 2012).⁶ For poverty studies, such an orientation prompts a shift from examining particular ‘types’ of spaces (regions, rust belts, urban theme parks, inner cities) toward examining how these socio-spatial expressions (and their boundaries, material and social conditions, implied attributes and subjects, etc.) are made and re-made in particular spacetimes. No matter what the emphasis, assemblage theorists foreground the crucial role of space in the constitution, becoming and embeddedness of things, ideas, processes and politics.

A relational geographical ontology reveals impoverishment to be an always already socio-spatial process. This extends prior relpov work in development studies and cultural studies, which is strongly grounded in a relational *social* ontology (the proposition that poverty is produced by privileged others) while assuming that space is ontologically pre-determined or inert. For example, Hickey and du Toit (2007) have used ‘spatial adverse incorporation’ to explain the impoverishment of particular spaces (regions of a country, rural areas, entire countries) in their relation to national or global political economies (see also Kaplinsky, 2005; De Hert and Bastiaensen, 2008). Relpov scholars have also traced how structurally produced place poverty coincides with socio-cultural narratives that code

impoverished spaces as 'other' (Epp and Whitson, 2001; Ruben, 2001; Hickey, 2009). Thus Watkins (1993), examined the uneven impacts of 1980s economic restructuring in the US, showing how narratives of poor people as backward, obsolete or unproductive maps onto the places they inhabit, without considering how spatial processes and meanings produce or contest those representations and subjects. In these ways recent work has made valuable contributions, tracing how nationally-circulating imaginaries of racialized, lazy, threatening poor subjects (tropes such as 'Latino drug runner' and 'welfare mother') deepen poverty by bolstering imaginaries of personal responsibility and undeservedness, and justifying practices of surveillance, disciplining and criminalization.

However, a *geographical* relational approach insists that a dialectic of place-based and spatially extensive relations (capitalist, racial, gendered, representational, etc.) produces *socio-spatial* processes. For example, geographical work theorizes how a dominant US cultural politics of poverty – the US 'welfare queen' discourse – is always already 'placed'. Spatial relations bring 'the ghetto' into being as a place made by a combination of capitalist disinvestment, racially discriminatory policing and a repertoire of negative spatial representations framing the 'ghetto' as other to the suburbs (the latter understood as middle class, white, safe). The presence of racialized and classed bodies in certain spaces contributes to the production of meanings about who is 'poor' or 'middle class' and why, generating a politics of blame that justifies cuts to the US safety net (Lawson and Elwood, 2014; Elwood, Lawson and Nowak, 2015). A geographical relational analysis also reveals how a wider range of situated subjectivities, and political responses, are produced in relation to a national imaginary of 'poor others'. For example, Cahill (2007; 2010) shows how the work of Mestiza Arts Activism in Utah and Fed Up Honeys in New

York City produced an alternative politics of resubjectification that can only be understood in relation to the particular geohistorical contexts in which they arose. Geographical relational thinking problematizes fixed social imaginaries, arguing that they do not float above space and place, nor do they produce the same subjects or responses in all places.

A relational geographical ontology prompts questions of when, where and how socio-spatial poverty processes come together differently across spacetimes. The tension between boundedness and fluidity draws attention to stabilities in the ways power circulates to produce poverty, while simultaneously insisting on openness to the possibility that it might do so differently. Conceptualizing space as expressions of multiple processes constantly coming together and apart requires epistemological openness to previously unseen political possibilities as well as modes of theorizing that are attentive to how multiple productions of race, class, identity, coloniality and gender assert power over those named as poor (Leitner and Sheppard, 2015; Roy, 2015).

IV. Geographical relational epistemologies and causality

[P]roperties emerge relationally... entities are always heterogenous... they are mutually constitutive within and across scale... the human and non-human are intimately related and co-implicated... change is the only constant... spatio-temporality is an emergent but influential aspect of these shifting socionatural relations; and ... trajectories are contingent and uncertain (Sheppard 2008, 2016).

Emerging from feminist and postcolonial geographies, relational epistemologies are central to geographical relationality. Epistemology deals with how we know the world and, by extension, the kinds of research practices that can build various kinds of knowledge

claims. Relational epistemologies begin from the premise that knowledge is always situated, partial, and produced through relations of power (Haraway, 1988; Gregory, 2000). They reject universal knowledge claims that assume a detached observer who builds realist “Truth” about the world from afar (Rose, 1994). This epistemological stance gives rise to non-determinist approaches to building explanation, invoking a humility in knowledge making that relies on localized forms of analysis and diverse sites to build partial explanations – what Sedgwick (2003) terms ‘weak theory’. Within geographical scholarship, we find this relational epistemological stance present in two ways: i) an openness to empirical/theoretical surprise and unseen possibilities and ii) an attention to the ‘relationality of theory’ (Roy 2015: 16) – the ways that knowing is conditioned by asymmetric geohistorical relations. Geographical relational epistemologies render the world knowable through an anti-essentialist causality that recognizes multiple interrelating processes of impoverishment, thereby expanding relpov theory to include previously under-recognized concepts and processes.

First, geographical relational epistemologies are open to alternatives and surprises beyond what crystallizes in a given spacetime, an orientation that flows directly from geographical relational ontologies. If space is the expression of multiple processes restlessly coming together and apart, it follows that they might do so in unexpected ways, beyond those prefigured by prior explanations. This stance prompts ways of knowing such as ‘reading for difference’: treating dominant narratives or structures as partial, as in need of more complex explanations, and reading for actions that could produce other possible worlds (Gibson-Graham 2006; 2008; MacKinnon 2013).

Reading for difference involves looking for what is absent in existing theory, as a basis for building richer theorizations. Adamovsky (2013) traces how most Argentinian historiography has omitted race from theorizations of class identities and politics, a silence he attributes to a pervasive cultural politics that narrates the Argentinian nation as built by a flood of white Euro-descended immigrants, into which people of African or indigenous descent 'disappear' after the 19th century. Reading for difference, he theorizes the intertwining of racialization and class formation in immigration, diaspora, organized labor, and party politics in Argentina's modern history. By revealing that race is central in theorizing poverty politics, he uncovers previously unacknowledged resistant politics articulated by indigenous groups and actors from the Afro-Caribbean diaspora in combination with Argentinean classed workplace politics.

This openness to the possibility that the world might exceed the limits of prior theoretical concepts makes visible already-existing (but overlooked) alternatives. As another example, Bergeron and Healy's (2014) work understands the economy as exceeding existing accounts of hegemonic capitalist structures and market logics, recognizing an already co-present 'solidarity economy' comprised of diverse economic practices such as common ownership, worker cooperatives or collective economic subjects (see also Kawano et al. 2010). Relational epistemologies recognize a range of counter-hegemonic formations and practices such as cross-class alliances, the centrality of public care to social wellbeing, and the existence of collective subjectivities in neoliberalized societies (Pratt, 1993; Gibson-Graham, 2008; Lawson et al., 2015). Such concepts are largely absent from prior relpov theory, illustrating the potential of relational epistemologies to move relpov research beyond a predominant focus on poverty,

governance and socio-political boundary making towards already existing counter-formations and politics – unexpected resistances, alliances across difference, and collective or ally subjects.

Second, geographical relational epistemologies attend to the relationality of theory and to ways of knowing that confront existing hegemonies. Drawing on the postcolonial insights of Said (1979), Chakrabarty (2000), Mbembe (2001), Gregory (2004) and Chatterjee (2012), Roy (2015) argues that Western modernist theory asserts universal ‘expertise’, relegating knowledge from marginalized people and places to inferior status. Universalizing explanations silence theoretical claims from less powerful places because Eurocentric theory has already narrativized their history as deficient, explaining the present condition of the Middle East or African countries in terms of a lack of modernity, capital, expertise, creativity, ambition, etc. (Ferguson, 1994; Crush, 1995; Gregory, 2004; Li, 2007). Making theory (differently) starts from provincializing claims presented as universal, to show their emergence from particular relations between place, power and knowledge. For example, geographers provincialize theorizations of a ‘global’ urbanism by showing how North Atlantic imaginations of ‘Europe’ and ‘the Global South’ erase relations of dispossession and exploitation that produce their differences (Roy and Ong, 2011; Leitner and Sheppard, 2015; Sheppard, Leitner and Maringanti, 2013). Provincializing paves the way for a different relationality of theory, one that engages theorizations from Southern people and places to build alternative poverty knowledges (Nagar et al., 2002; Roy, 2015).

These epistemological moves prompt new modes of transnational theorizing *from* (rather than *about*) postcolonial settings. For example, Roy (2003) uses theory from India

as an interpretive lens for interrogating processes in rich countries. In “posing Third World questions of First World processes” (p. 463), she asks why squatting, property takeovers, and other informal tactics by landless urban residents in India are not seen in US responses to homelessness? Her transnational analysis disrupts taken for granted connections between longstanding political norms that root citizenship in property ownership, and construct homelessness as outside the responsibilities of a collective public. Theorizing US homelessness through the lens of informality, a concept arising from her work in India, Roy illuminates the US norm of “propertied citizenship” that underlies criminalization of homeless people’s shelter seeking practices and makes space for other possible poverty politics, such as squatting and anti-eviction movements. Such transnational ways of knowing offer generative openings for decolonizing theory and explanation in poverty research.

Relational epistemologies – both openness to as-yet-unseen theoretical possibilities and attention to the relationality of theory – entail an anti-essentialist approach to causality that interrelates multiple causal processes. Just as relational ontologies refuse atomism, aspatiality and individualism, anti-essentialist causality refuses singular and universalizing theoretical claims. This is a relational causality that attends to multiple processes (e.g. governmentalizing practices, capitalist accumulation/dispossession, representational and discursive practices, cultural politics of identity, livelihood practices) interrelating with one another differentially across spacetime. For example, open-ended (post-Hegelian) dialectics analyze the interrelations of capitalism, patriarchy, racism, hegemonies and ecological processes to understand spatio-temporal productions of, and political struggles over, difference (Harvey, 1996; Mitchell, et al., 2004; Gidwani, 2008; Sheppard, 2008).

Gramsci's concept of articulation also invokes relational causality, as "historically and geographically specific but interconnected processes, material conditions, forms of power and processes of subject formation" (Hart, 2007: 91).⁷ Rendering the world knowable through a relational causality entails an engaged pluralism, in which explanations of poverty are opened up to different theoretical claims, without insisting that these be reducible to a consensus monism (Longino, 2002; Barnes and Sheppard, 2010).⁸ To be clear, such pluralism does not entail suturing together ontologically inconsistent theories, nor does it countenance assertions of 'correctness' by proponents of supposedly universal theoretical positions. Rather, informed by a socio-spatial ontology, relational causality insists on the necessity of dialogic engagement among plural theoretical approaches.

Geographical relational causality extends relpov work by theorizing poverty as constituted through multiple, interrelating spatio-temporal processes, rather than a priori anointing a single structural process as primary. Further, poverty is theorized as always simultaneously produced at multiple spatial and temporal scales, rather than as territorially bounded occurrences in a discrete past or present moment. For instance, Bonds (2013) explains a rural Oregon economic development scheme that simultaneously recruits a prison and high-end housing through overlapping processes of impoverishment, racialization and white privilege that ground in *and* extend beyond this spacetime. Here, poverty in rural Oregon is causally related to racialized processes of dispossession and accumulation across the American West that have marginalized Latinos and Native Americans while reaffirming white privilege in land ownership and agricultural economies. She shows how this racialized political economy articulates with socio-spatial discourses framing the development scheme – prison as 'regional development', demolishing 'blighted'

low-cost housing, attracting 'good' residents, and displacing or containing 'bad' ones. This geographically relational causality reveals the mutual (re)production of poverty and privilege through interrelated spatial processes of social and economic differentiation (see also Hankins and Walter, 2012; Elwood, Lawson and Nowak 2015).

Further, such non-essentialist causality attends to processes of class boundary making and norms of idealized raced or gendered subjects, without presuming that these are necessarily reproduced in all spacetimes. Lawson and Elwood (2014) read spaces of poverty assistance as encounters between socially and spatially situated subjects that are consequential for the production of class, race, and poverty difference, but not in prefigured ways. A rural Montana welfare office sets up relations of governance between welfare recipients and middle class staff members, via rules that emanate from US cultural and policy narratives and regulate the behaviors of an assumed deficient poor 'other'. Yet, from their embeddedness within local relationships, white middle class staffers come to understand how global restructuring of agricultural economies impoverishes white ranchers. From this position, they insist that 'the poor are us', rather than deficient and flawed, leading them to question social assistance regulations and challenge exclusionary community development plans. Here, geographical relational causality recognizes challenges to poverty difference that are co-present with forms of poverty governance *while also* revealing compassionate middle class subjects who transform normative class identities and relations in this spacetime.

Relational geographical epistemology and causality expand relpov research by making visible new socio-spatial concepts and processes. For example, prior relpov work foregrounded land dispossession as a crucial process of impoverishment, emphasizing

Marxian political-economic theory (Hickey, 2009; Mosse, 2010). Geographical relationality opens space for postcolonial scholarship that identifies poverty politics within settler colonialism, indigenous genocide, anarchist politics and postcolonial subject formation. In so doing, they foreground interlocked processes of racialized oppression, white supremacy, alternative politics and struggles for cultural survival that have not yet been adequately explored in poverty research (Spivak 1987; Bhabha, 1994; Alfred and Cornthassel, 2005; Coulthard 2008; Goeman, 2013; Kobayashi and de Leeuw 2010; Melamed 2011; Bonds and Inwood 2016). This work opens space for richer theorizing that expands explanatory frames and that involve research practices capable of catalyzing new knowledge politics.

V. Towards a politics of possibility

[W]e embraced a performative orientation to knowledge... this...installed a new kind of scholarly responsibility ... ‘How can our work open up possibilities?’ ‘What kind of world do we want to participate in building?’ ‘What might be the effect of theorizing things this way rather than that?’ (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 615)

Utilizing geographical relational theorizing to make poverty knowledge differently opens up diverse alternative politics of possibility. Such alternatives go well beyond critiquing the modes of academic knowledge production that reproduce authoritative poverty knowledge (cf. O’Connor, 2000). Relational thinking reveals poverty as inextricably tied up with a range of material and discursive oppressions and socially and politically constructed boundaries and norms that can be/are being challenged and transformed. Understanding poverty in these ways is both a theoretical and always already political project that necessarily calls for making new poverty knowledge politics: challenging

divisive geopolitics of knowledge, changing what counts as poverty knowledge, taking apart elite notions of expertise and rethinking who is knowledgeable and who can make change. Thus geographical relational poverty work engages in boundary-crossing processes of mutual learning, creative alliance making, and forms of academic activism that transform the existing poverty knowledge apparatus. Changes in the academy must also entail changes in the world, and here we offer some illustrative examples of such connections and possibilities.

Geographical relational approaches to knowing disrupt the usual 'directionality' of poverty theorizing, taking seriously knowledge from elsewhere and employing cross-site, cross-boundary methodologies that de-familiarize assumptions, universalisms and taken-for-granted expertise. For instance, Theodore (2015) traces the movement of Freirean popular education practices in labor organizing from Latin America to the U.S, revealing immigrant day laborers in Chicago to be oppositional subjects who actively resist the political economic and racialization processes underlying their impoverishment. Whereas dominant theory, centered on the 'norm' of industrial labor organizing in North America and Europe, has represented contingent workers as 'unorganisable', Theodore theorizes and finds resistant political formations coalescing in, and connecting beyond, his research site. Here, disruptions of theory and expertise make space for rethinking who is knowledgeable and how change is made, illustrating how a different knowledge politics can create generative openings for new ways of engaging subjects, making and circulating distinct knowledges.

Relational socio-spatial ontologies and epistemologies also insist that knowledge making is a dialectical process of (re)making selves and worlds together. Boundary-

crossing and dialogic learning between academics, policy makers and lay researchers can tear open siloed and normative categories (of class, race, caste, gender, ability, coloniality, religion, etc.), which depoliticize privilege and obscure the root causes of impoverishment (Rios-Moore et al., 2004; Kinpaisby, 2008; Sangtin Writers, 2009; Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2010; Cameron et al., 2014). Lawson et al.'s (2015) relational comparative analysis of class identities and poverty politics in the U.S. and Argentina, involving transnational theorizing by scholars in Majority and Minority worlds, creates fissures in the seemingly unassailable accounts of neoliberal individualism emerging from Anglo-American theory. Theorizing from the Argentine case reveals how some middle class actors come to understand that they share vulnerabilities with poorer citizens, and express collective class allyship and politics. Performative, testimonial, and artistic knowledge production also can open new windows onto subjectivities, selves and intersecting processes of impoverishment. The Sangtin Writers (2006, 2009) discuss their life histories, incorporating diaries, creative writing, and performance, to explore the possibilities and limits of NGOs' efforts to challenge gender, caste, class, and generational oppressions in rural India. Such collaborative knowing, across worlds often constructed as binaries (academic/activist, theory/practice, urban/rural), illuminates the multiple effects of development interventions upon interrelated oppressions and privileges.

Collaborative mutual learning about processes of impoverishment and oppressive categories can catalyze new understandings, political subjects and actions for change. The Fed Up Honeys (a multi-racial group of academic and youth researchers in New York) illuminate structural causes of gentrification and poverty in their community, re-writing gender, race, and class stereotypes that inflect their own identities, relationships, and sense

of agency in community change (Rios-Moore et al., 2004; Cahill, 2007). Among other activities, they produced an online 'community building' research report and posted short provocative counter-statements – 'stereotype stickers' – in public places (Rios-Moore et al., 2004). By encouraging polyvocal translations of research findings for multiple audiences, places, and media, such collective processes catalyze new ways of challenging poverty (Cameron, et al, 2014; Nagar, 2014). This illustrates how processes of mutual learning, by facilitating debate among situated subjects across pre-existing boundaries of theory, discipline, place, language and geo-history, allow geographical relational work to engage oft-ignored and discredited voices and forms of evidence (see also Silvey and Lawson, 1999; Sangtin Writers and Nagar, 2006; Nagar, 2014).

This kind of geographical relational poverty scholarship requires persistent 'academic activism' (Gibson-Graham 2008) to decenter the existing poverty knowledge apparatus. Academic activism includes disrupting its English language hegemony; expanding who sits on editorial boards and funding panels; making space for a plurality of knowledge forms and knowledge-making processes to be recognized as research or publication; and troubling the theory/practice, scholar/activist, North/South binaries that constrain academic and political possibility. It also involves building new ways of catalyzing and institutionalizing research, such as networked projects by inclusive collectives that enable geography-crossing practices of collaboration and mutual learning. Institutional support is necessary to underwrite relational research practices that facilitate collaborative authorship and multilingual publication, create platforms for junior scholars, and bridge community/academy divides. In keeping with geographical relationality's

commitment to working with already-existing alternatives, we point to several existing initiatives working to re-institutionalize poverty studies along these lines.

The Relational Poverty Network (RPN)⁹ brings researchers (within and beyond academia), teachers, policy makers and activists into intentional collaboration to develop conceptual frameworks, research methodologies, and pedagogies for the study of relational poverty. The RPN is opening spaces for comparative theorizing across scholars' existing work, imagining future collaborative projects across disciplinary and geographical boundaries, and building the next generation of relational poverty scholars. The Community Economies Collective and Community Economies Research Network (CEC/CERN)¹⁰ support linked webs of scholar-activists, collaborating to theorize and catalyze diverse more-than-capitalist, ethical and sustainable economies. It coordinates intentional experimentation by activist/academic/community partners with diverse economies, disseminating reflections and research findings from them. The Comparative Research On Poverty program (CROP)¹¹ coordinates institutions, scholars and research networks to coalesce alternative and critical knowledge on poverty, in dialogue with mainstream poverty research and policy. In this spirit, provincializing global urbanism conferences bring together university faculty, students, community researchers and activists for study and writing from cities located in the Majority World/post-colony (Sheppard et al., 2015).¹²

Taken together, these initiatives share practices that can help realize the political possibilities of a geographical relational poverty studies, transforming how we theorize and act on poverty by developing networks and building open spaces of mutual learning. First, all intentionally 'locate' their network practices and collaborations, directly

foregrounding the ways that this fosters theoretical innovations. Activities are often sited in the Majority World, with fiscal support provided for Majority World thinkers and activists to engage in dialogues typically restricted to Minority World actors. They also engage local scholars, activists, and students from the places where network activities convene, creating space from which to theorize what is happening in particular spacetimes – as with the global urbanism conferences’ engagement with various ‘urban revolutions’ from 2008-2102 (Sheppard et al., 2015). Second, these networks foster open collective dialogue. ‘Un-conference’ practices invite participants to define agendas, welcoming participatory and performative ways of sharing work. They invite contributions in multiple languages and share multilingual resources. They trouble a strict boundary between theory and practice, as in CEC/CERN collaborations that seek to build alternative economies or its ‘resource kits’ for alternative community development. Third, these initiatives offer tangible pathways to form new circulations of poverty knowledge through open sharing of diverse research and teaching resources. The RPN hosts open-access teaching and research resources, and shares successful funding proposals as hopeful models for others seeking funding for relational poverty research. The CEC/CERN shares its work as video-recorded stories told by co-researchers. CROP, the RPN and CEC share research papers or books at no cost online, avoiding the hierarchical restrictions imposed by journal subscriptions or affiliation with advantaged institutions.

VI. Conclusions

Relationality is the starting point for much contemporary social theory. At a moment when relationality is seemingly ubiquitous in geographical research, it is crucial that

geographers are clear and intentional in precisely how we 'do' relationality, and to what ends. We have sought to make sense of the myriad ways that relationality cascades through a vast range of geographical scholarship. From the varied ways geographers engage relationality, we distill an explicitly geographical approach with three interconnected elements: 1) an ontological stance, in which spaces and subjects are constantly crystalized, remade, grounded, assembled and transformed; 2) an epistemological stance that integrates multiple causal processes as they interrelate differentially across time and space *and* sees explanations as always spatialized; and 3) a politics of possibility emerging from challenges to existing knowledge hierarchies; expanding the sites and subjects that produce knowledge, innovation, and transformation; engaging in learning across boundaries; and pursuing forms of academic activism that make space for these practices.

This relationality is *geographical* in that it originates from ontological claims about how the spatial and the social become in relation to one another, both within and extending beyond specific spacetimes. It is geographical in its attention to how socio-spatial processes combine to create geo-historically situated formations of race, class, gender, place, and much more. Finally, this is geographical relationality in its challenge to a divisive geopolitics of knowledge, in taking apart Western assertions of expertise and in rethinking the sites from which, and the subjects who, make political change. While each of the three strands we explore (relational ontology, relational epistemologies, and a politics of possibility) has been taken up in sub-areas of the discipline, we articulate how they interconnect with one another in geographical scholarship writ large. That is, we show how relationality in one realm always also prompts practices of relationality in others.

We have focused here on how geographical relationality opens new theoretical and political horizons that extend poverty scholarship. Thinking poverty relationally lays bare foundational processes of differentiation and hierarchy on which modern society is built, even as mainstream analysis obscures, makes deniable, and excludes from political thought and action, the relational structures (re)producing inequality. We are not critiquing universalist positions on poverty in order to assert empirical particularism in its place. Instead we argue that relational analysis theorizes geo-historically differentiated poverty processes that explain the ongoing production of inequality and impoverishment (Roy, 2015). This geographical relationality reveals processes obscured by much prior poverty research while opening new sites for innovative poverty politics. We argue for geographical relational poverty research that emphasizes the mutual production of space, discourse and material processes, making it possible to trace how processes of capitalism, race, nation and gender work together, but without elevating any one as always the primary causal force. A relational ontology centered on socio-spatial becoming, together with an epistemological openness to unseen possibilities, pushes relpov beyond its focus on boundary-making to uncover already-existing relations of mutual support, or surprising forms of ally-ship and alliance across difference. An engaged commitment to the relationality of theory also opens the door to new politics of possibility in (re)making poverty knowledge. This poverty politics is realized in processes of mutual learning that center previously unrecognized sources and forms of knowledge and political agency, transform institutional structures to make space for new poverty knowledges, and engage in persistent reflexive critique. Relational poverty politics are fundamentally a dialectical

process of remaking selves and worlds that offer urgently needed new ways to think – and act – on poverty in the present moment.

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Notes

¹ The relational turn extends broadly across the social sciences and humanities, including work by scholars in sociology, political philosophy, critical race theory, cultural studies and feminist political science (Hall, 1992; Somers, 1998; Sturm, 1998; Young, 2000; Yosso, 2006; Anderson, 2009; Dépelteau and Powell, 2013; Powell and Dépelteau 2013). Geography's relational turn has strong intersections with much of this larger body of relational scholarship; our focus here is framing a geographical relationality that extends poverty studies.

² Our analysis of geographical relationality draws on post-colonial, feminist and critical race theory in geography, and other critical geography scholarship on social justice and poverty. Geographers' work on relationality also engages debates about environmental relational ontologies (Castree, 2003; Loftus, 2012; Descola, 2013), actor-network theory (Latour, 2005) and psychoanalytic theory (Bondi, 2008; Butler, 2006; Thein, 2005). The full range of this work is beyond the scope of this paper.

³ A full exposition of these philosophical underpinnings is beyond our scope, but this work reveals poverty as an always relational construction at the heart of western notions of the social, the political, subjecthood and agency.

⁴ We use the term 'relational poverty' to refer to a field of study that coalesced in the early 2000s, as described in this section. As we discuss in the introduction, earlier scholars pioneered structural analyses of poverty and privilege that dealt with material, political and race relations (Piven and Cloward, 1977; Wilson, 1987; Marx, 1861; Polanyi, 1944). While this earlier work has a strong affinity with relational poverty scholarship it did not integrate cultural politics, discourse and representation, critical development studies and post-colonial theory that are part of the current trajectory.

⁵ Harvey (1996: 50) draws on Whitehead (1985: 137) to explain permanences as '...the innumerable "practically indestructible objects" [and systems] that we daily encounter in the world and without which physical and biological life would not and could not exist as we know it'.

⁶ For example, the policy mobilities literature views urbanization as a product of circuits of capital, supplemented (in Derrida's sense) by negotiations of global and urban policies and politics that are constantly being 'held' together. Urban governance is then an assemblage of policies, political narratives, localized practices and capitalist flows that combine elements from elsewhere in particular forms in specific cities; an assemblage that always is being remade (Ward, 2010; Martin, 2011; McCann, Roy & Ward, 2013).

⁷ While Marxian, Gramscian and Foucauldian analysis refer to different substantive theorizations of cause, they have kindred relational ontological stances. We do not suggest that these theorizations are substantively equivalent, but argue that each body of theory makes foundationally relational claims. Marxian political economy holds that particular kinds of social relations *constitute* capitalist processes, Gramscian theory articulates hegemony as arising from material conditions and particular class formations, and Foucauldian governmentality understands subjects as emergent from the *interrelations of* discourses, governance practices, subjectivities and geohistories.

⁸ Engaged pluralism contrasts with fragmenting pluralism, which Bernstein (1988) equates with theorists agreeing to disagree, thereby failing to undertake the work of engaging openly with others' theorizations in order to advance relational understandings.

⁹ <http://depts.washington.edu/relpov>

¹⁰ <http://www.communityecomies.org>

¹¹ <http://www.crop.org>

¹² Inter-referencing Asia: Urban Experiments and the Art of Being Global (Dubai, 2008), The Making of Global Cities (Minneapolis, 2008), Making Global Cities and the Global Economic Crisis (Shenzhen, 2010), Provincializing Global Urbanism (Asolimar, CA/Philadelphia, PA, 2011), Urban Revolutions in the Age of Global Urbanism (Jakarta 2012).

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