

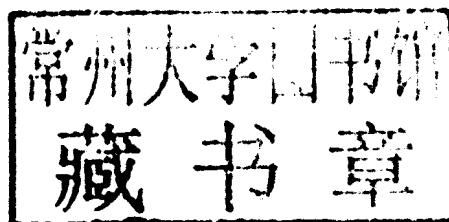
Rethinking Labour in Africa, Past and Present

Edited by

**Lynn Schler, Louise Bethlehem and
Galia Sabar**

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Notes on Contributors

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Pnina Werbner is Professor of Social Anthropology at Keele. She is the author of 'The Manchester migration trilogy' which includes *The migration process: capital, gifts and offerings among British Pakistanis* (Berg 1990 and 2002), *Imagined diasporas among Manchester Muslims* (James Currey, and School of American Research 2002) and *Pilgrims of love: the anthropology of a global Sufi cult* (Hurst and Indiana 2003). Recent co-edited collections include *Anthropology and the new cosmopolitanism* (ASA Monographs 45, Berg 2008), *Debating cultural hybridity* and *The politics of multiculturalism in the New Europe* (with Tariq Modood, Zed Books 1997), *Embodying charisma: modernity, locality and the performance of emotion in Sufi cults* (with Helena Basu, Routledge 1998), *Women, citizenship and difference* (with Nira Yuval-Davis, Zed Books, 1999), and a special issue of the journal *Diaspora on 'The materiality of diaspora'* (2000). Her fieldwork has included research in Britain, Pakistan, and Botswana where she is studying 'Women and the changing public sphere', and a trade union, the Manual Workers Union. Recent awards include an Economic and Social Research Council grant to study 'New African migrants in the gateway city' and a comparative study of the Filipino diaspora in Israel and Saudi Arabia, 'In the footsteps of Jesus and the Prophet', supported by a large grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council in its Diaspora programme.

Abstracts

Dialogical subjectivities for hard times: expanding political and ethical imaginaries of subaltern and elite Batswana women

PNINA WERBNER

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Tracing the careers of three Batswana women leaders, two of them trade unionists and one a public servant who became, first, a politician and then an international civil servant, the article explores ideas of ethical leadership in Botswana and argues that leadership is to be understood as essentially dialogical, linked to notions of dignity and responsibility, while activism has created an impetus for the women to expand their cosmopolitan political imaginaries. The article responds to feminist poststructuralist arguments regarding the possibility of gendered agency and ethical subjectivity. While rejecting Michel Foucault's 'negative paradigm' in favour of a more dialogical understanding of subjectivity, it argues that an alternative reading of Foucault's later work may provide insight into an ethics of the other, beyond the self.

Work discipline, discipline in Tunisia: complex and ambiguous relations

BÉATRICE HIBOU

By looking at tourism, textiles, and call centres in Tunisia, this article analyses the complex relationships between capitalism and political discipline. Starting from the tradition of Weber and Foucault, it shows that the multiplicity of the meanings of capitalist work and the plurality of the ways in which people live with their work stem from a deep heterogeneity in the perceptions of reality: at the same time discipline and freedom, submission and access to some sorts of freedom, rigidity and new latitude for action. In this way, capitalist labour relations can at the same time serve for domination and erode its effects. The analysis that is offered, based on extended fieldwork in Tunisia, suggests the multiplicity and the plasticity of relationships between the technologies of power, the development of the productive forces, and the methods of economic and political regulation.

Migration for 'white man's work': an empirical rebuttal to Marxist theory

ISAIE DOUGNON

Enlisted between 1920 and 1960 for mines in Ghana and for the construction of the Markala dam in Mali, migrant Dogon workers offer a definition of colonial work that runs counter to that of Marxist intellectuals who have denounced it in all its forms. Within the colonial towns, the migrant workers established a hierarchy of tasks according to the amount of labour and the technical and social organisation required to accomplish them. This article analyses why the Dogon migrant workers glorified colonial work in these different dimensions (time, organisation, discipline). This new hierarchisation of activities places 'white man's work' at the top, and other activities at the bottom, of the scale. The following questions lie at the heart of this article: (1) In what manner does the discourse of Africanist researchers reflect the practices, the experiences, and the minds

of those people who migrated and worked in colonial centres? (2) Does the 'ancestral' system of work have any influence on the differentiation and evaluation of the 'white man's work'? (3) Does the local classification of village activities have any effect upon the classification of the colonial world?

Casting aluminium cooking pots: labour, migration and artisan production in West Africa's informal sector, 1945 – 2005
EMILY LYNN OSBORN

This article investigates the history of aluminium casting, a sector of the informal economy devoted to recycling scrap aluminium. Artisans who cast aluminium make a variety of products out of scrap, including various utensils and receptacles for food preparation, such as cooking pots. While labour and its history in West Africa has garnered much historical research, as has the work of artisans who specialise in working other types of metal, especially iron, little attention has been paid to aluminium casting. The oversight is significant, because the diffusion of aluminium casting opens up a history on the transnational movement of labour and artisan production in late colonial and post-colonial Africa.

Transnationalism and nationalism in the Nigerian Seamen's Union
LYNN SCHLER

This article will examine the shifting tactics employed by Nigerian seamen in their struggles to improve their working conditions onboard Elder Dempster vessels in the late colonial period. Nigerian seamen successfully exploited opportunities arising within the context of colonialism to participate in globalised economies and cultures, exposing them to new solidarities and empowering them to seek an improvement in their lives. In crafting their onboard protests, African seamen historically forged ideological and organisational alliances with the wider world of the black diaspora. But the era of decolonisation shifted the balance of power between seamen and the union leadership as they negotiated with colonial shipping companies in the transition to independence. As ruling elites in both Europe and Nigeria took political, economic and ideological actions to secure lasting power and influence for themselves, seamen experienced a profound disempowerment. Although intent on engaging with the globalised world, African seamen were ultimately prevented from securing for themselves positions of power and autonomy as an effective labour movement in the post-colonial context.

What goes around, comes around: rotating credit associations among Ethiopian women in Israel
HAGAR SALAMON, STEVEN KAPLAN AND HARVEY GOLDBERG

This article looks at how working-class Ethiopian women, who have migrated to Israel, have sought empowerment and economic control through the establishment of rotating credit associations known as *iqqub*. In the changing world of Ethiopian Israeli women, *iqqub* associations and their specific cultural manifestations constitute a highly meaningful experience, whose building-blocks incorporate the financial, the social, the ritualistic, and the symbolic. It is a complex mechanism of tradition and renewal: its existence challenges paternalistic assumptions regarding the status of Ethiopian immigrants vis-à-vis the state and its institutions and the experience of Ethiopian Israeli

women specifically. As we shall demonstrate, the *iqqub* serves as a generative focus for gender relations and the dramatic changes that have affected them. Ethnographic examination of the *iqqub* and its internal discourse expands our understanding of the dynamics of change among the group's cultural, gender, and power relations.

Park pictures: on the work of photography in Johannesburg

LOUISE BETHLEHEM AND TERRY KURGAN

This article investigates the cultural economy of an inner-city Johannesburg park through tracking the work of itinerant photographers who operate there. The authors revisit Johannesburg artist Terry Kurgan's interactions with the photographers of Joubert Park in order to raise questions relating to their material and symbolic – or 'immaterial' – labour. They point to the mnemonic or archival dimensions of this labour and investigate the visual idioms in which inner-city migrants conduct their self-fashioning, forging modes of vernacular urbanity in the photographic encounter.

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INTRODUCTION

Rethinking labour in Africa, past and present

The study of labour in Africa has undergone important transformations over the last 20 years. Following a period of intense scrutiny from the 1950s to the 1980s, research on working classes, labour unions, capitalist expansion and proletarianisation in Africa experienced a decline that paralleled the political reality of the gradual marginalisation and disempowerment of the working classes and of organised labour more generally. Early approaches to the study of labour in Africa, heavily influenced by Marxist theory, underwent a process of self-examination and revision as poststructuralist and postcolonial critics exposed the Eurocentric biases underlying prevalent conceptualisations of labour-related research (see, for example, William Sewell 1993). The resulting retreat from universalist conceptualisations of class, work and productivity led researchers to eschew imposed notions of working-class consciousness and proletarianisation.

This shift paved the way to a revised approach toward the study of labour in Africa, one which bears little resemblance to the earlier phase of research born out of the first decades of African independence. The field of labour studies has not so much been abandoned as redefined. A primary focus of this reconceptualisation has consisted in the attempt to accommodate local African perspectives and experiences. This book takes stock of the important tools acquired as a result of the interventions of recent years, but at the same time reasserts the importance of a materialist orientation in the study of Africa. Such an orientation is, we feel, crucial given the exigencies of our times, an era commonly characterised in terms of globalisation and neo-liberalism. As we invoke the notion of 'African Labour' here, we question what an 'African' perspective might provide scholarship against the backdrop of the increasing fluidity of borders, transnational migrations and multicultural alliances. At the same time, we investigate what can be articulated differently from within the perspective of 'labour' while remaining open to fluidity, multiplicity and transition in its construction.

From the outset, the study of labour in Africa was intimately tied to the study of migrations. From the late colonial era and through to the period of decolonisation, colonial administrations throughout the continent commissioned studies of the working classes, hoping that the heightened scrutiny would reveal sites of potential unrest, particularly among the swelling urban working class. It was at this time, as Frederick Cooper (1996, p. 369) has written, that 'the scholarly study of wage labor and African urbanism began to be a sustained enterprise'. But while labour was on the move in Africa, the study of labour on the part of various colonial regimes sought to confine the working class in bounded entities and groupings under constant surveillance, based on categories of ethnicity, professional affiliation, the industries it served and the like. These early studies of labour were deeply enmeshed in colonial agendas which sought to maintain control over local populations, and accumulating knowledge of labour played a role in the paternalist

advancement of moderated modernisation. Colonial enterprises needed a 'modernised' workforce, but simultaneously feared the consequences of local populations breaking with their so-called traditional lifestyles (see Freund 1984, p. 4). Thus, the displacement of labour from rural areas to urban centres was seen as a necessary evil that should be controlled and contained. The colonised subject, standing on the other side of the divide, experienced displacement as multiple and as acute. 'Some people were literally displaced (indigenous peoples, but also the so-called nomadic in many countries),' write Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, Carol A. Breckenridge and Dipesh Chakrabarty. 'Others, in particular those excited by and open to the newly introduced European knowledges, underwent a powerful cultural experience of being dislodged from "tradition"' (Pollock et al. 2000, p. 578).

The process of decolonisation opened up new directions in the study of labour in Africa. Scholars who were sympathetic to African nationalist movements now replaced those contracted by colonial regimes. Research on labour in this period shifted dramatically to a focus on labour unions (see Freund 1984, p. 7). The orientation of these post-independence endeavours was largely Marxist, but they were also heavily sympathetic to the nationalist cause in Africa. Thus, trade unions were identified as the uncontested representatives of working classes while their role in nation-building was scrutinised and debated.¹ The conceptualisation of these histories remained faithful to a universalist narrative of proletarianisation, and evidence of solidarities among labouring constituencies that were not class-based were deemed to require analysis and explanation (see, for example, Waterman 1982).

The commitment to the classic narrative of proletarianisation began to unravel in the wake of widespread disillusionment with socialist regimes both inside and outside Africa at the end of the 1970s. The corollary weakening of labour movements at the end the twentieth century led to a general crisis in labour studies, as William Sewell has noted: 'Because the organized working class seems less and less likely to perform the liberating role assigned to it ... the study of working class history has lost some of its urgency' (Sewell 1993, p.15, cited in Silver 2003, p. 1). It was increasingly evident that Africans had not been transformed into a revolutionary proletariat even when engaged in wage labour within capitalist enterprises such as mining or transport industries. In addition, universalist conceptions of labour and productivity were challenged by the increasing volume of studies on women, rural populations, and the informal sector generated at this time. While debates were initially focused on why Africans did not fit the proletarianisation model, scholars eventually began to question why the model was being used at all.

Postcolonial critiques have, by now, gained prominence in the study of Africa. It is widely accepted that Africans continually reinvent their own meanings for productivity, materiality and accumulation. Theoretical formulations of identities and experiences are generated in fidelity to the local context, and emphasise openness, fluidity and transition. The study of labour has also come to incorporate a conscious rejection of essentialist categories, as Frederick Cooper's description of class powerfully demonstrates in his landmark study on African labour in the era of decolonisation. 'In this study,' he writes characteristically, 'class appears as a contingent, changing set of relationships, and also as an imaginative project' (Cooper 1996, p. 14). Whereas Cooper attempts to recuperate the notion of class to reflect the particularities of African landscapes and histories, it might equally be said that the study of Africa has largely avoided the category of class altogether over the course of the last two decades, and has focused instead on discourse, subjectivity and culture under the influence of poststructuralist thought. Labour continues to be on the move within and beyond Africa, but studies of labourers have shifted from their former

rigorously materialist orientation to reflect a growing preoccupation with representation, imagery and ideology as the means through which the African working classes negotiate their place in global markets. In Mamadou Diouf's formulation:

we must inquire into the modes on the basis of which native modernity relies on, confronts, and/or compromises with global modernity and with cosmopolitanism, the latter considered an instrument and a modality of the incorporation of the local into the global. (Diouf 2000, pp. 680–681)

Embedded in these approaches is an emphasis on agency, as we seek to understand the ways in which local vernaculars confront, resist and avoid the homogenising tendencies of modernity and globalisation. We can see how sensitivity to the particular and the local have transformed our ability to describe the experiences of Africans outside of what might be seen as premature capitulation to the homogenising tendencies of modernity. Yet, in the search for postcolonial subjects who imagine and pursue autonomous and resistant identities, we must not lose sight of the material circumstances that variously enable or block this pursuit. As Craig Calhoun (2003, p. 537) has argued: 'Crucially, differential resources give people differential capacities to reach beyond particular belongings to other social connections'. A sharpened sense of material inequality and disparity also has the salutary effect of reminding us of how we have perhaps become overly preoccupied with *detached* representations in the course of elaborating our poststructuralist and postcolonialist agendas. Cooper's observations, in an anthology that productively investigates the interface between race and class, are appropriate here:

One reads these days too many attempts to read 'the female body' off a magazine advertisement, to locate 'the colonial subject' in a text by Kipling, to find 'governmentality' in a marriage law, or to embody 'resistance' in a passage from Fanon. (Cooper 2000, p. 213)

Cooper seeks to reorient us to the point where 'coal miners dig coal, dock workers carry loads, domestic workers clean floors'. In his view,

To talk seriously about how whiteness or masculine respectability was constructed should not be to assume people spent all day thinking about who they were; they had other things to do. Fresh and thoughtful analysis has emerged from confronting representations with the nitty-gritty of labour. (Cooper 2000, p. 213)

For all that we are party to this return to what Cooper terms 'the nitty-gritty of labour', our new materialism does not imagine that even the most recalcitrant of working contexts is ever experienced without discursive mediation. At the same time, this optic returns us to an appraisal of materiality in everything that concerns questions of inequality, access and empowerment. The point to emphasise is that our understanding of the modes through which Africans represent and negotiate their participation in political and cultural contexts will be enriched and complicated by a sustained awareness of material opportunities as well as by the vectors resulting from articulated identities and allegiances. A broad reinvigoration of material perspectives can bring us closer to unravelling how lived agendas are set.

The invocation of 'African labour' constitutes a particularly useful exercise at this time as scholars continue to debate globalisation, and ask to what extent the increased mobility of resources and people across fluid borders of the present era constitutes 'a fundamentally new situation and a significant historical shift' as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000, p. 8) have claimed. In examining the history of labour in Africa over the long term, we can evaluate what is indeed new or different in this current era of globalisation, and what factors and circumstances might determine the role Africans will play in it (Bonner et al. 2007, pp. 137–138). In her influential study of twentieth-century workers' movements,

Beverly Silver has argued that we need histories of labour to help us understand the continuities and breaks between past and present currents of globalisation. Do labour movements have the potential to re-emerge as powerful agents of political and social change, or 'will they remain too weak and scattered' in Silver's (2003, p. 2) phrase to destabilise the forces of globalisation?

Some of the historical studies presented in this book respond to this question by reaching into the colonial past in order to understand the evolution and resolution of conflicts between African labour and European capital. The contribution of Isaïe Dougnon provides a rich opportunity for uncovering the historical antecedents to the globalisation of labour markets in Africa from the colonial period, and for understanding how Africans of the past negotiated and responded to their inclusion in industries associated with capitalist expansion. According to Dougnon, from the early twentieth century onwards, Africans migrating to work in colonial enterprises embedded pre-colonial hierarchies of knowledge into their identification and exploitation of opportunities for employment in both British and French territories. Thus, Dougnon insists that we must juxtapose our reading of Africans' participation in colonial workplaces against the backdrop of both local cultural formulations of work and productivity on the one hand, and with respect to the availability of knowledge concerning alternative opportunities on the other. Dougnon's work on African labour in the colonial period productively highlights the historic ebbs and flows of globalisation, and demonstrates how collective and individual memory of colonial work in the post-colonial period must also be read through the lens of contemporary political and economic circumstances. Thus, Dougnon's work teaches us that the local has figured prominently in the construction of experience and the generation of meaning for Africans in the globalised spaces of the past.

The affirmation of the vitality and perseverance of local cultures and agents, however, must also acknowledge historic limits to African agency in determining opportunities for work or conditions of employment in capitalist markets of both the past and present. Any description of triumphant autonomy must also acknowledge the disempowerment experienced by Africans in the most pernicious colonial and postcolonial workplaces, where African working bodies and lives have been rendered superfluous in significant respects. This notion of superfluity has been used by Achille Mbembe to foreground, among other things, 'the dialectics of indispensability and expendability of both labour and life, people and things,' in the specific context of the racialised biopolitics of Johannesburg in that city's various incarnations from mining camp to post-apartheid metropolis (Mbembe 2004, p. 374).² For Mbembe, the inception of what apartheid-era South African labour historiography termed 'racial capitalism' (see, for example, Wolpe 1990) entailed the obfuscation of any 'exchange or use value that labour might have' (Mbembe 2004, p. 375). Racism, in Mbembe's analysis, overpowered black labour's power of self-definition. He argues:

In the calculus of superfluity, racism was not only a way of maintaining biological differences among persons, even as mining capitalism, migrant labour, and black urbanisation established new connections between people and things. More fundamentally, racism's function was to institute a contradictory relation between the instrumentality of black life in the market sphere, on the one hand, and the constant depreciation of its value and quality ... (Mbembe 2004, p. 380)

to the very point of being worked to death.

In a context in which native life had become the new frontier for capital accumulation, superfluity consisted in the vulnerability, debasement and waste that the black body was

subjected to and in the racist assumption that wasting black life was a necessary sacrifice – a sacrifice that could be redeemed because it served as the foundation of civilization. (Mbembe 2004, p. 381)

In considering Dougnon and Mbembe's divergent depictions of African labour as it was drawn into colonial capitalist enterprises, we confront a textured and contradictory spectrum of possibilities and outcomes for the engagement of African labour in the globalised spaces of the past, with clear implications for how we should approach the study of African labour in the globalised contexts of the present. With regard to the present, we stress that the most timely intervention which may be accomplished by a reinvigorated focus on African labour in the context of globalisation is to simply insert Africa into a field of study that has elsewhere systematically overlooked African perspectives. James Ferguson has decried the lack of attention paid to Africa in the study of globalisation, attributing this marginalisation to the fact that Africa does not fit the models or narratives constructed around the totalising impact of capitalist expansion. Ferguson invokes Susan George's caustic proclamation: 'One can almost hear the sound of sub-Saharan African sliding off the world map' (George 1993, p. 66, cited in Ferguson 2006, p. 9). Major assumptions prevalent in social theory today regarding the uniformity of globalisation can be called into question when we view these through the prism of African labour. Globalisation in Africa is distinctly uneven, and the implications of this insight for the ethical project of postcolonialism – the more equitable distribution of social, economic, political and gendered rights – are many. It is abundantly clear that the most salient inequalities remain 'intersocietally global', as we would emphasise alongside Craig Calhoun, and these are consequently not amenable to redress 'by intrasocietal measures' (Calhoun 2003, p. 534). The fact of exclusion is an integral part of this differential. As Ferguson has argued:

That a purportedly universalizing movement of 'globalization' should have the effect of rendering Africa once again 'dark' in the eyes of the wider world suggests the intimate link ... between the question of marginalization in a global economy and that of membership in a global society. (Ferguson 2006, p. 14)

In Ferguson's succinct analysis:

Africa's participation in 'globalization' has certainly not been a matter simply of 'joining the world economy'; perversely, it has instead been a matter of highly selective and spatially encapsulated forms of global connection combined with widespread disconnection and exclusion. (Ferguson 2006, p. 14)

It is very much to the point to observe, alongside Ferguson and others, that when the contemporary African worker experiences globalisation at all, he or she experiences it as a form of hyper-extraction of value and of vitality. African working lives, those actually engulfed by the forces of globalisation, are darkened – to revisit Ferguson's trope – by the polluting extraction of human and natural resources. Nor does extraction proceed any longer solely through the agency of its historical, that is to say, Western protagonists as the growing incursion of China into Africa suggests (see, for example, Alden 2007, Rotberg 2008). The historical figure of the black miner in a Johannesburg mine, depleted by the violent extraction of his life force, or the contemporary figure of the rural South African HIV/AIDS mother struggling with the labour of reproduction, the work of parenthood, under conditions of scarcity may be used to mark different points along this continuum. Indeed, invoking the horizon of the HIV/AIDS pandemic suggests that current studies of African labour might do well to revisit questions relating to the extraction and depredation of life under the sway of a differently inflected biopolitics (see, for instance, Sitze 2004).

It is immediately necessary to qualify this depiction, however. We do not mean to suggest that depredation or the equally unsettling alternative of quiescence in exclusion exhaust the analytic possibilities for charting labour in Africa – nor for working there. As a corrective, then, we offer a third set of figures: those of the young black South Africans whom Sarah Nuttall (2004, p. 434) has analysed as they frequent the ‘privatized public space’ of a shopping mall known as The Zone in Rosebank, Johannesburg whether as workers in its service sector or as consumers, or both. The overalls emblematic of their identity, produced under the idiosyncratic brand Loxion Kulcha (a rendering of the phrase ‘Location Culture’), bear a design that ‘improvises on the mineworkers protective garment’ but ‘[appropriates] the utility-oriented, mass-produced overall for new cultural ends’ (Nuttall 2004, p. 437). Nuttall points out that the overalls ‘suture together two economic imaginaries’ such that ‘the history of work and of labour is less forgotten than tied to a service economy’ (p. 437). The spectral figure of the mineworker might still persist residually in these representations, we suggest following Mbembe’s (2004, p. 375) insights into a ghostly spectrality that is the underside of superfluity. But Nuttall’s example teaches that the self-constructions and work milieus of the present enable a post-apartheid generation of black South Africans to revisit the spectrality of the mineworker in something other than a traumatic or mournful mode.

Nuttall’s approach points us in the direction of complex and nuanced representations of ‘economic imaginaries’. In seeking to understand African encounters with globalisation, we believe that a reinvigorated materialism can help understand why and how certain projects, identities and struggles are pursued. Through the prism of ‘African labour’, globalisation takes shape as both empowering and debilitating, encroaching and occluding, extracting and enriching, and we must reject any form of determinism that might hold either exclusion, depredation, or empowerment as the singular and uncontested outcome of Africa labour’s engagement with capitalist expansion. By invoking the notion of ‘African labour’ during this time of prolonged engagement with globalisation, we are proposing a broad set of interlocking and mutually dependent questions about identity, solidarity, and opportunity, without imagining any particular end result. Thus, we seek to direct contemporary analyses of African labour to the chiasmic or criss-crossing paths of materiality and immateriality, bodies and affect, the self and the social, in which work comes to be lived. A number of interventions in this volume instantiate this new materialism, whether implicitly or explicitly.

Pnina Werbner’s analysis of ‘dialogical subjectivity’ in the careers of three Batswana women, two trade unionists and a civil servant, is exemplary here. Departing from E.P. Thompson’s regarding the historicity of the emergence of class consciousness, Werbner draws Foucault’s notion of *askesis* – ascetic discipline or self-mastery – into an analytical relation with the vernacular notion of *seriti* – personal and collective dignity – in Botswana. She stresses the intrinsically dialogical construction of *seriti* since vernacular conceptions of honourable ethics are realised in the public sphere in social interaction. In the Tswana saying, replicated elsewhere throughout Southern Africa, ‘*Motho ke motho ka batho*’ or, ‘a man [or woman] is a person through people’.³ Werbner stresses that the political engagements of the women she depicts occur in a broad social setting in response to the depredation of their purchase over *seriti* when ‘hard times’ make ‘dignity ... a fragile achievement for both men and women’. As her female subjects craft ever more expansive notions of ethical leadership, imbued with the notion of *seriti*, in response to their discovery of a sense of social responsibility for vulnerable others, they emerge as actors in the public sphere, often in the face of powerful male resistance. Werbner’s supple analysis of the manner in which subaltern women in Southern Africa ‘create political

imaginaries that make sense of their citizenship and gendered worlds in specific political or social circumstances' makes an important contribution to feminist discussions of gendered agency and ethical subjectivity. The manner in which Werbner's contribution is routed through an affective category, *seriti*, also underlines the potential value of renegotiating the terrain of the union floor – so beloved of an earlier phase of Marxist labour history – to reveal the emotional repertoires and gendered subjectivities of the men and women who cross it.

In a similar vein, Louise Bethlehem and Terry Kurgan's contribution to this volume works with the horizon of affect explicitly in mind as they offer commentary upon the production of images in contemporary Johannesburg – photographic portraits commissioned from street photographers which help to render concrete the aspirations of migrant workers for new representations of selfhood. Bethlehem and Kurgan do not overlook the conditions of material scarcity in which the 'work of photography' proceeds. They nevertheless enable us to begin to ask how scarcity is renegotiated by means of what they, following Hardt and Negri (2000, p. 28), describe as the 'immaterial labor' of commissioning the portrait of a well-formed family group, for instance. This to-and-fro movement enables Bethlehem and Kurgan to avoid an overly narrow analysis of the material and affective contexts in which Africans live and work in the inner city of Johannesburg.

The case of Johannesburg exemplifies that by mapping the flows of labour, we can gain important perspectives on the significance and potency of political borders. Particularly at a time of growing speculation regarding the diminishing significance of political borders, some advocates of a revival in labour studies have argued that field might well enable us to assess the power of borders to shape identities from a transnational perspective. The focus on labour can help us understand more clearly the role border-crossings play in promoting transnational alliances undercutting and circumventing the hegemony of nation-states. South African scholars Philip Bonner, Jonathan Hyslop and Lucien van der Walt have recently mapped out the critical potential of labour studies from a transnational perspective:

[T]ransnational labour history does not assume that the nation-state is the necessary framework for historical analysis. It is interested in perspectives that move beyond the level of the 'nation' to look at flows of people, commodities, ideas and organizations across national boundaries. It does not seek to be comprehensive: rather it simply does not accept that its field of inquiry should stop at the 'national' border, or that a 'national' unit is a self-evident, or necessarily a particularly useful unit of analysis. It argues for approaches that examine connections across countries, continents, and cultures, for comparative studies, and for rethinking the conceptual vocabulary of labour and working class history. (Bonner et al. 2007, p. 144)

When the transnational perspective is applied to labour studies within the confines of a particular national context, it serves to problematise and destabilise the nation-state as a fixed category of analysis. Béatrice Hibou's analysis of the case of Tunisia in the present volume is deeply pertinent here. Her intervention illuminates the unexpected interface between 'late capitalism' or 'globalisation' and authoritarianism in disciplining the Tunisian workforce, in defiance of accepted traditions of inherited thought on labour and the state. Her astute readings of a variety of conjunctions within the Tunisian economy enables us to understand the forces of a global capitalism as moving in conjunction with disciplinary practices within the discrete constitution of the Tunisian state. Hibou argues that the Tunisian state has de-nationalised specific zones in the economic landscape in order to create opportunities for enhanced exploitation of labour and resources.