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**Development Under Erasure:
Deconstruction in Development Discourse
By Micah Gill**

Abstract

Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction has been historically underappreciated in development. Yet Derrida's critical theory realizes development as an inherently deconstructive field, one which advocates for the Other when disciplines such as economics and international relations overlook them. By examining the history of development through a Derridean lens, we can see how deconstruction was working within some of the development discourse's prominent shifts leading up to its "impasse" in the 1980s. Heightened critical attention around this time catalyzed a flurry of deconstructive processes in the following years which have reshaped the landscape of development scholarship and practice. The story of the "impasse" itself will serve as a hinge for the essay. After a deconstructive examination of development before and then during the impasse, the essay will consider the deconstructive dynamics that are driving and enlivening five of the (partially) distinguishable post-impasse movements in development. While none of these are perfect or completed, they are structural manifestations of the deconstruction at play in development, and they are moving the field into a closer relationship with its impossible yet necessary goal: to pursue justice for the marginalized. The last of these movements to be analyzed, the "theological turn" in development, undergirds the rest and provides the clearest picture of how deconstruction can help us think constructively about development's future.

And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.
Hebrews 12:27 (KJV)

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Introduction

The theory and critical approach of Jacques Derrida, which he called “deconstruction,” helps us understand the nature of structures and discourses, as well as how they change. This understanding is broadly applicable and has been most explored within philosophy, literary theory, and the social sciences. The field of development¹ is one such venue where Derrida’s insights have historically been underutilized beyond passing reference. Juan Telleria, Peter Westoby, and Kate Manzo are examples of notable exceptions that prove the general neglect. Yet Derrida gives us a lens to see and understand many structural dynamics—indeed, deconstructive dynamics—that are playing out in this field of development. When we examine how development discourse has unfolded since it began in the 1950s, we see that development is in fact inherently deconstructive; and its most vibrant and valuable centers of energy, both now and moving forward, are and need to remain focused on ongoing deconstruction.

To make this case, we will need to say some things about what “deconstruction” is—and isn’t. Derrida’s writings are notoriously dense and difficult to read; what’s more, deconstruction is widely understood (and, I’ll argue, widely misunderstood) as a radical rejection of any truth or institutional stability. For many readers, “deconstruction” strikes the ear as “destruction.” This is not what I’m suggesting drives development at all. Rather, a serious engagement with Derrida’s own writings shows that one only deconstructs in order to reconstruct more justly and truthfully—and humbly. We must not ever bow down to our own new constructions. So

¹ Throughout this essay, when I refer to “development” (as a structure and not the concept), “the field of development,” or “development discourse,” I am referring to the structure of development studies thought and language, as well as development practice, as they are traditionally presented and pursued by most influential authors, researchers, and practitioners in the field. When, in any way, I mention deconstruction in relation to development, I am specifically referring to deconstruction’s relationship to this specific conceptualization of the structure of development. When mentioning “development studies,” I am referring to the academic discipline of development. When mentioning “development practice,” I am referring to the creation or implementation of development processes, or the achievement of development goals, in a specific local context. The term “development praxis” describes the intersection of the “academic” and “practical” in development.

deconstruction, as I consider it in relation to development here, is an ongoing effort to reexamine, break down, and refresh our view of important truths at the center of the discourse which inevitably tend to become rigid, blurred, and hidden.

Beyond a fuller understanding of development's past and present, deconstruction will help us envision and enact development's future. Deconstruction does not provide a manual that dictates step 1, and then step 2, and so on, in some sort of evolutionary discursive process by which we could ever arrive at a perfect praxis. This linear, ossified thinking is exactly the type of approach that deconstruction undermines. Rather, we can expect deconstruction to steer development away from certain linguistic, epistemological, and social pitfalls that litter its path and compromise its contribution towards a just and flourishing world. We can also anticipate that deconstruction will help us more clearly discern which are especially promising shifts in development thinking, research, and practice, so that we can lean into their most valuable qualities and bring the field into a fuller realization of its potential to holistically empower the underprivileged.

Just development may be an unachievable goal, an impossible feat. Yet, it is one that deconstruction urges us to seek while allowing us to stay flexible and agile with our approach. For Derrida, the "least bad" definition of deconstruction is "the experience of the impossible" (Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 32). So, we will continue to pursue the impossible through development, but put our discourse and practice "under erasure." In the practice of erasure, which Derrida adapted from Heidegger, he marks through his language while writing, like ~~this~~, to emphasize that our concept is flawed even while we continue to use the best term available to us. For development studies, a posture of holding our ideas under erasure would acknowledge that all of our doing and speaking is a provisional effort which likely needs ongoing

deconstruction. (Because it is the currently impoverished who gain when development grows increasingly just and agile, and because they lose when the field becomes ossified, the stakes are quite high for development. The field betrays itself and those it serves when it loses sight of its deconstructive nature.) We work within a discourse, which means that our tools and language always verge towards an abstraction out of touch with the realities of those on the ground who our discourse seeks to serve; we work with inevitably broken structures which are bound to be displaced at some point, but which are necessary for the time being; and we do so in pursuit of justice for “the Other,” one whom existing systems are failing to serve. That pursuit is a goal which will never be displaced.

The pages that follow trace the arc of development studies, starting from its birth after World War II through its first thirty years to the “impasse” that stalled development and became visible around the mid 1980s. At this point the narrative pauses to explain some of Derrida’s ideas, providing the reader with the theoretical scaffolding needed to bring deconstruction into dialogue with the arc of development. In light of Derrida’s critical theory, we can see how deconstruction was working within some of the development discourse’s prominent shifts leading up to the field’s “impasse.” The story of the “impasse” itself will serve as a hinge for the essay.² It was a stark turning point for the discipline, where many in the field became more acutely aware of and honest about development’s challenges and flaws up to that point. This heightened critical attention catalyzed a flurry of deconstructive processes in the following years,

² FJ Schuurman’s famous identification of an “impasse” in development, his edited volume *Beyond the Impasse: New Directions in Development Theory* (1993), serves as a valuable anchor around which to structure the essay’s narrative reflection. Though the work is 30 years old, from today’s perspective, Schuurman and his collaborators on the project were generally right in both their chronological identification of the impasse, when it occurred, as well as their qualitative descriptions of the impasse, what exactly it was and meant to the field of development. Thus, their proximity to that moment in the history of development gives credence to their interpretation of it and endows their text with the value of seeing the impasse from the inside, yet amidst its critical mass without clear assurance of how (or if) it would resolve.

and even up to the current day, which have profoundly reshaped the landscape of development scholarship and practice. The essay will focus on movements that are most pronounced in the 1990s-2010s, as that period is recent enough to be considered moving away from the “impasse,” but removed enough from the present moment to allow for more detached historical and theoretical reflection.³ The essay ends by considering the deconstructive dynamics that are driving and enlivening five (partially) distinguishable post-impasse movements in development. While none of these are perfect or fully developed, they are moving development into a closer relationship with its impossible yet necessary goal. The last of these movements to be analyzed, the “theological turn” in development, undergirds the rest and provides the clearest picture of how deconstruction can help us think constructively about development’s future.

³ Many development scholars think that the field is currently in another impasse; see, for example, *Building Development Studies for the New Millennium* (Baud et. al, 2019). Given its chronological proximity, deconstructive analysis of the current impasse would be particularly provisional, and the essay would thereby sacrifice some of its primary purpose, demonstrating the value of the integration of deconstructive theory and development, by setting itself up for diminished relevance as soon as the dynamics of the current impasse change. Fortunately, the initial and current impasses share many key characteristics that make analysis of one quite relevant to the other; this essay will then open up profitable consideration on how deconstruction relates to the present impasse. While this essay’s treatment of the initial impasse is in many ways applicable to understanding the current one, further work which relates deconstruction to the specific qualities of the current impasse would be of great value. Moving forward, I will refer to the initial impasse as “the impasse”; the current impasse will only be referenced specifically.

The Rise of Development Studies

In the wake of widespread financial crises, two World Wars, and bloody revolutions populating the first half of the 20th-century, humanity looked up to see desolation and poverty, much of which had been there all along but came into sharper relief in a period of such suffering. Leaders rallied in resistance to the global order which precipitated not only these devastating events but also issues present before the conflict. These sentiments were internationally unifying and led to the Bretton Woods Conference of 1944. Delegates from all 44 of World War II's Allied powers convened to set humanity on a new path towards prosperity, introducing a broad range of policies and intergovernmental organizations (IGO's). The World Bank, the IMF, the UN, and NATO were formed either in those meetings or several years thereafter. The desire to uplift human life transcended borders and expedited globalization but still necessitated concrete practice. As nations rebuilt, special attention began to be paid to those societies who were being "left behind" and who were missing out on the "progress," particularly from the effects of decolonization. Beginning in the 1950s, the word "development" was first used to refer to the efforts of IGO's and leaders from business, political, and civil sectors across the globe, but primarily from the West, to spur the "growth" and "progress" of marginalized societies.

Modernization Theory

After the early post-World War II origins of development, the field sought to concretize its discourse and rally practitioners behind a standardized, effective development model. This structural impulse led to modernization theory, the first identifiable theoretical movement within the field of development studies. This approach, most popular in the 1950s and 1960s, posited a linear, normative conception of development, and advocated for democratic governments and free-market economies to facilitate industrialization. In a Darwinian, evolutionary spirit, the

nations seen as farther along the path (primarily in the West) were said to have the responsibility to help those who were lagging (primarily in the Global South). Talcott Parsons was a key modernization theorist who exalted Western principles and beliefs in the development process through a sociological lens. He disparaged values such as collectivism and fatalism, more common in the Global South and East, as barriers to societal growth and progress. Parsons' landmark 1951 book *The Social System* laid the sociological foundations for modernization theory in development studies.

Marion Levy, who studied under Parsons at Harvard, produced the *summa* of modernization theory, a two-volume, 800-page work debuting in 1966 and entitled *Modernization and the Structure of Societies*. One of the key bases for his structuralist development paradigm is the “comparative analysis of relatively nonmodernized and relatively modernized societies” (Levy 5). He acknowledged that this distinction was controversial but viewed it as the most helpful delineation to inform development theory and practice. Levy was David Apter's dissertation advisor at Princeton, and Apter would go on to incorporate politics into the development paradigm of modernization, most notably in his 1965 book *The Politics of Modernization*.

Walt Rostow was a key contributor to the economic aspect of modernization theory. In his 1959 article “The Stages of Economic Growth,” Rostow formulated a five-stage process of economic growth. He argued this to be a normative progression in development, and his framework became influential both in academia and the highest levels of the U.S. government; he served as national security advisor to Lyndon B. Johnson from 1966 to 1969. The West posited itself as a developed ideal, and those who did not correspond to this vision were prescribed a Western “development” antidote: industrialization, urbanization, public education,

democracy, and disposal of their “traditional” culture and values. Modernization theorists claimed that after implementing their prescriptions, “underdeveloped” countries would then procure a “modern” economy that integrated with the burgeoning global order of Western maritime hegemony and market dominance.⁴

Modernization theory also assumed the maintenance of the contemporary global economic, political, and military order, and did not acknowledge alternatives. If you want to develop, if you want to win, you need to play by our rules. Follow the “five stages” that we describe so that you can integrate into our system, the way we want you to (not entering in any radical way, of course; one is only allowed entry if they do not rock the boat). Through dominating the discourse of development and setting its terms and limits, Western scholars and actors crowded out input from the “developing” societies and limited their ability to choose for themselves a path of development.

The cracks in this limiting, broken dialogue of modernization became more evident. What was the goal of development? To achieve high GDP facilitated by capitalism and democracy. How would we get there? Capitalism and democracy. Who will help the underdeveloped achieve that? The developed nations, those with a robust capitalist-democratic system. The only questions left to be asked were how this would be done and how long it would take, and even those questions were thought to be clearly defined (as in Rostow’s widely influential “five stages” model). Those were the rules of the game, and they were meant to be unquestioned. As development thinkers in the next wave pointed out, modernization theory left little space for the actual voices of the poor in conversations about development.

⁴ International relations scholar Walter Russell Mead still sees this order as the current fundamental organizing reality of international politics.

Dependency Theory

To a group of scholars in the 1950s and 1960s who came to formulate dependency theory, Latin America's continued economic vulnerability and poverty relative to North America and Europe presented a real venue through which to explore and critique the functioning of the capitalist structure up to that point. Their vision was for a global order where Latin America could flourish without necessarily subjugating themselves to the leaders of the West. As the development discourse deconstructed through questioning its Western, democratic, capitalist origins, it broke open to more possibilities than the confines of the contemporary economic order presented. Scholars, with dependency theorists representing an initial surge in revisionist thought, began to think beyond the structural limits.

Dependency theory emerged against modernization theory in the 1950s and 1960s as scholars tried to think outside of the inherited, unquestioned economic order to understand Latin America's ongoing economic and political instability. Theorists argued that Latin America's economic woes did not stem from lack of resources. In this view, the problem was not to be solved by aid from newly minted intergovernmental organizations, nor from continued Western interference in state affairs. Instead, dependency theorists saw exclusion and oppression of Latin America and the Global South more broadly as interwoven into the global economic order. The Western hegemony, with their power reinforced by capitalism, would run markets by buying resources and materials from the South and reserve materials processing and distribution, more profitable activities, for themselves. Then, the West would sell those finished goods back to themselves and to the South, reinforcing a vicious cycle of industrialization in the West and agricultural stagnation and primary economic activity in the South.

Raúl Prebisch was the first to articulate dependency theory in his 1950 report *The Economic Development of Latin America and its Principal Problems*. The theory was slow to gain popularity until later in the decade, around the time of another of Prebisch's influential publications, his 1959 article "Commercial Policy in the Underdeveloped Countries." Prebisch's critique of the global economic structure attempted to balance severity and moderation, inspiring a side of dependency theory that was sympathetic to the international capitalist system while seeking more equitable reform. Fernando Henrique Cardoso was a key figure of dependency theory's more conservative branch. He articulated his views most prominently in his book *Dependency and Development in Latin America*, written alongside Enzo Faletto and translated into English in 1979, and would later serve as Brazil's president from 1995-2002.

While Prebisch and Cardoso found a following in their moderate version of dependency theory, the theory's influences are fundamentally Marxist and acutely aware of the bourgeoisie's subjugation of the proletariat. Andre Gunder Frank led a radical branch of dependency theory that more thoroughly followed the paradigm's underlying Marxism. In the late 1960s and into the 1970s, Frank produced many influential works advocating for a socialist upheaval against the poverty-reinforcing oppression that he saw as encoded into the global order. Opposed to the modernization theorists that would prescribe further capitalist inscription to the ailments of the Latin American economy, Frank argued that "it is capitalism, both world and national, which produced underdevelopment in the past and which still generates underdevelopment in the present" (Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* xi). He viewed Latin America as already participating in the capitalist system, not as hegemony (a role which was reserved for those advocates of modernizing development) but as extorted victims.

Latin American governments implemented sweeping policy changes based on dependency theory in hopes of cultivating manufacturing and other secondary sector activities within their countries, but the popularity of dependency theory diminished as its practical adherence proved ineffectual: “Basic Marxist concepts such as mode of production had proved incapable of consistent application to the subject matter of development studies” (Booth 51). While dependency theory was unable to provide the results it promised, the movement still constituted a valuable deconstructive step for development across several fronts. Crucially, dependency theory brought critical evaluation of the status quo and popular terms within the discourse into mainstream thought. The movement also represented increased concern for the underprivileged. Even in its simplistic origins, the field of development arose out of and was oriented towards those at the margins. With dependency theory, though, the stakes were raised, as the ideas and approaches called Western leaders to be willing to compromise on some aspects of their treasured hegemony for the sake of those who accrued less systemic benefit.

Neoliberalism

Structuralist economics more broadly, of which dependency theory is an example, was challenged by a rise in neoliberal economics in the 1970s and into the 1980s (also called neoclassical economics, though there is a slight distinction between the terms). Whereas structuralist economists like John Maynard Keynes argued for government intervention in steering economic systems and were inspired by Claude Lévi-Strauss’s approach to the social sciences, neoliberal economists condemned the heavy-handed government interventions into development which characterized both modernization and dependency theories. They instead advocated for deregulated markets, small, localized, and democratic governments, and the privatization of goods and services, a blueprint applied to both development projects and

flourishing economies. Neoliberal development scholars argued that the invisible, supposedly indiscriminate hand of market forces would generate explosive economic growth and catalyze development in impoverished societies once its perceived impediments, such as excess state power and regulation, were stripped away. The idea of development started to merge with the movement for globalization. While dependency theory had advocated that “underdeveloped” countries should disentangle themselves from the unfair economic hegemony in which they were losers, neoliberals argued that the Global South integrate with the international markets and political economy to whatever degree possible.

Neoliberalism shares many features with modernization theory. They both emphasize democracy, capitalism, access to education, integration into international capital and trade, and subscription to the Western hegemony as prerequisites for development. They also share a vision of development that is linear and yields industrialization and globalization. Neoliberalism can even be seen as an outgrowth of the earlier modernization theory. They differ primarily, though, on their view of state involvement. Modernization theory did not mind leveraging the state as an actor to encourage and steer development along its five stages. Neoliberalism, though, called for privatization and deregulation wherever possible. Neoliberalists argued that markets function best when left to their own devices, free from state or other influence. This view was extended to development: purge underdeveloped nations from state control and influence and integrate their economies into the broader capitalist structure. Without unnatural influence, their development would progressively unfurl.

Neoliberal economics, championed by Milton Friedman, exploded in popularity in the 1970s and was particularly dominant in the 1980s; Ronald Reagan was even seen carrying a copy of Friedman’s famous 1962 book, *Capitalism and Freedom*. Friedman became perhaps the

most trusted economic advisor for Western conservative leaders during the second half of the 20th century, as, in the words of John Kenneth Galbraith, “the age of John Maynard Keynes gave way to the age of Milton Friedman.” Reagan in the U.S. and Margaret Thatcher in the U.K.

championed the West towards privatization, lower taxes, lower interest rates, and deregulation.

Deconstruction at the “Impasse”

The neoliberal efforts wrought mixed effects in the West, but were more clearly ineffectual in the Global South, where “many developing countries will remember the 1980s as the lost decade” (Schuurman 1). The West was slow to realize the shortcomings of their approach to and conceptualization of development. As Telleria identifies,⁵ prominent voices within the development discourse, such as the United Nations Development Programme, had internalized the dominant economic and political mindset. This mindset is typified by Fukuyama’s claim to “the end of history,” where “the liberal and capitalist West is the winner of the historical conflictual struggle and the only human group to have reached the post-historical civilizational stage” (Telleria 75). Despite the modernist belief in linear progress that Fukuyama and development adhered to with religious fervor, “The gap between poor and rich countries continued to widen” (Schuurman 10), and scholars began to identify problems within development that lay even deeper the apparent failures of neoliberalism:

From the mid-1980s onwards, an increasing number of publications outlined the contours of what became known as ‘the impasse in development theory.’ Major factors contributing to this impasse were post-modern criticism of theory formation in the social sciences, the growing awareness that the emphasis on economic growth—awarded a central role in development theory—resulted in an insupportable burden on the natural environment, and loss of the socialist paradigm as the link between theory and development praxis. (Schuurman 1)

At this moment around the late 1970’s and early-to-mid 1980’s, the discourse was burdened with theoretical dissonance, and development actors struggled to reach consensus on best practices, effective strategies, helpful development principles, etc. Moreover, the non-theoretical, “social research” in the field was similarly failing, as “crucial real-world questions were not being addressed and the gulf between academic enquiry and the various spheres of development policy

⁵ See chapter 4, “We are the champions,” in Telleria 2021.

and practice seemed to have widened” (Booth 49). Yet, were development practitioners and politicians supposed to step out of the way, cross their fingers, and watch as market forces dictated the rise and fall of societies? The Global South had not seemed to profit much from this neoliberal assurance in the 1980’s. To many, the first 30 years of development praxis seemed like a wash, and the next 30, if development was to make it that long, needed to see a change or movement “beyond the impasse” as the title of Schuurman’s volume suggests.

The Theory of Deconstruction

It is at the moment of impasse, though, of impossibility, of feeling trapped and not knowing where to go, that deconstruction is most at work: “This is a general rule, a nutshell, of deconstruction: it always inhabits the distance between something impossible, justice or the gift, say, of which we dream, and all the existing actualities and foreseeable possibilities, with which we are more or less discontent” (Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 70).⁶ To see how, it is important to have a base-level understanding of Derrida’s theory of deconstruction.

In describing deconstruction, Derrida was heavily influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic theory, particularly as articulated in Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics*. Saussure argues that language derives meaning not from an inherent relationship to reality but from an abstract difference to other words. There is no fundamental connection/relationship between the word “tree” (this word being an example linguistic unit, or sound-image, with semantic potential that Saussure would call a “signifier”) and the brown organism with branches

⁶ In discussing certain aspects of deconstructive theory, I will often cite Caputo. This is primarily because Derrida is notoriously difficult to understand, and Caputo has a knack for clearly explaining his ideas. While Derrida’s work leaves much room for interpretation, Caputo’s interpretation of has, in some ways, Derrida’s stamp of approval; they collaborated on several projects together, and Derrida read through the manuscript of Caputo’s book that I cite most (*Deconstruction in a Nutshell*).

and leaves that exists independently of language and speaker (this real entity, outside language and other than the speaker, being an example of what Saussure would call a “referent”). The real entity that, in English, is called a “tree” may just as well be called an “eert,” or a “noltun,” or whatever combination of morphemes that a group of speaking subjects is willing to build consensus around.

While reality does not militate the formation of signifiers, there is a linguistic necessity that not all of them be the same. Signifiers must differ from each other in order to be intelligible and combine to form unique meanings. If everything in a given language was called a “tree,” then that language would lose its semantic value; it is only because there are 10, or 100, or 1 million other words besides “tree” that “tree” is able to have its meaning relative to them. Each signifier exists in a larger semantic structure, a language, where its meaning is shaped by every other word in that language. Even words that seem unrelated, like “love” and “spider,” are semantically linked by their existence in the same linguistic structure where no words are fundamentally meaningful, true, or connected to reality, but rather derive their meaning from their difference with and relationship to each other.⁷

Derrida’s neologism “différance” is a bit of French-language wordplay (which also works in English) that references this quality of language: signifiers only find their meaning in their “difference” with other signifiers, which in turn are being defined by other signifiers. In searching for the origin of meaning in language, the track we follow (or what Derrida would call the “trace”) is always “deferred” back to another word ad infinitum. Différance, this reality of

⁷ As the semantic possibilities of each word are limited and shaped by every other, “A particular word is like the center of a constellation; it is the point of convergence of an indefinite number of co-ordinated terms” (de Saussure 126).

infinite deferral in language, this definition by difference rather than substance, is the force at play shaping semantic structures.

Along with the linguistic concerns that separate “signifier” and “referent,” phenomenology⁸ highlights a further distance between the speaking subject and the reality which she is speaking about. The referent in its “pure form” is inaccessible to the speaking subject because the subject must perceive it. This perception will never be perfect; it will inevitably obscure or distort the perceived object in some way. To state it in metaphysical terms, the object will never become fully “present” to the subject. For example, if two friends at an art museum discuss the painting they are looking at, they will be communicating about the same referent, but with different conceptions of it. This is partially due to sensory discrepancies; one friend may have clearer eyesight than the other, for example. More fundamentally, though, the differences in their experience of phenomena (such as the painting, or anything else) are due, among other factors,⁹ to the fact that perception is prefigured and shaped by language. We delineate and evaluate the reality we perceive through concepts, words, and other such linguistic elements, with our prior language directing our attention (or limiting it). When looking out at a countryside landscape from a nearby hill, we do not see merely a wall of color; we see “houses,” and “barns,” and “pastures,” and “forests,” and different patterns of reality that we have delineated

⁸ Phenomenology is a domain of philosophy that studies consciousness and experience from the first-person perspective.

⁹ David Woodruff mentions the following factors of which “phenomenology develops a complex account”: temporal awareness “(within the stream of consciousness), spatial awareness (notably in perception), attention (distinguishing focal and marginal or “horizontal” awareness), awareness of one’s own experience (self-consciousness, in one sense), self-awareness (awareness-of-oneself), the self in different roles (as thinking, acting, etc.), embodied action (including kinesthetic awareness of one’s movement), purpose or intention in action (more or less explicit), awareness of other persons (in empathy, intersubjectivity, collectivity), linguistic activity (involving meaning, communication, understanding others), social interaction (including collective action), and everyday activity in our surrounding life-world (in a particular culture). Furthermore, in a different dimension, we find various grounds or enabling conditions—conditions of the possibility—of intentionality, including embodiment, bodily skills, cultural context, language and other social practices, social background, and contextual aspects of intentional activities” (see “Phenomenology” SEoP article). The potential for difference between the enabling conditions of different subjects further emphasizes the provisional nature of human experience of the world.

through language. Without language, the physical matter, the referents corresponding to these signifiers, would still exist, but they would be perceived differently by the subject. If, for example, the perceiving subject standing on the hill only knew one word for any man-made structures, calling them “buildings,” he may look out on the landscape and see only “nature” and “buildings,” assimilating the barns and houses together in his mind and disregarding their general differences. Moreover, deconstruction is sometimes most interesting when it complicates (or, better, reveals the complication) in the relationship between such seemingly dichotomous terms as “nature” and “building.” Examples of binaries that Derrida often returns to and allows to deconstruct are “nature” and “culture/technology” and “writing” and speech,” showing where the delineation between terms dissolves into an abstraction which obscures a more complex reality.

Thus, language mediates and shapes the way we experience the world, what seems present to us, and what we perceive; or, as Derrida would frame it, “From the moment there is sense there is nothing but signs. *We think only in signs*” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 54). This insight renders Derrida’s most famous claim more intelligible: “*There is nothing outside of the text*” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 172), i.e., language is inextricable from the processes of sensing, perceiving, and reflecting. Humans cannot see the world outside of the language that has already shaped their thinking and their seeing. We are constantly reading reality. Even in the simplest communication, we move from referent, to concept, to speaking subject, to signifier, to signified, to listening subject (and this seemingly linear progression is problematized throughout, as each step influences the other). At each stage in this drama of perception, speech, and reflection, the referent is further distorted, the reality becomes further occulted, the “truth” is lost in translation. Through a deconstructive understanding of language, we can quickly see its

arbitrary, provisional nature which leads to a correspondingly arbitrary, provisional understanding of the world.

A seeming paradox arises here. If Derrida ruins the concept of truth as embedded in language and shatters the Enlightenment dream of reason and logic paving the way to perfect knowledge, then why did he spend his career writing, thinking, reading, and speaking? His life was uniquely invested in language, through extensive linguistic study, writing 350-page books, painstakingly preparing lectures, conversing and debating, etc., yet he used that language to critique language. Yet we should not, as many already have, write off Derrida's work as incoherent because he uses language to foreground its own deconstruction. Derrida does not seek to destroy language; rather, he wants to highlight the logocentric¹⁰ assumptions that have led to an overvaluation, or "inflation of the sign 'language'" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 6), which do not acknowledge the limits of language and its capabilities. In other words, Derrida argues that:

The letter, by its very structure, is repeatable, disseminative, public, uncontainable, unfettered to any *fixed* meaning, definition, destination, or context. [Derrida] is arguing not that our discourse has *no* meaning or that *anything* goes but, on the contrary, that it has too many meanings so that we can fix meaning only tentatively and only so far. (Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 59)

Derrida thus recognizes that there is no intelligible sense before language, that absence and the trace complicate perception, that meaning cannot be more than a play of *différance*.

Language is then something instrumental to Derrida; it is a provisional tool to be used and then discarded, not a venue of truth to be realized. That is why he advocates being a "bricoleur"

¹⁰ Derrida uses this term to encapsulate his core qualms with the Western philosophical tradition, especially Western metaphysics, which has assumed that discourse is characterized by presence and an origin. Instead, Derrida argues that discourse is characterized by absence and the trace (i.e., that quality of language which always makes the origin of the meaning feel one more step away). Logocentrism glorifies rationality, reasoning, and logic as the means to truth and harbors a "metaphysics of presence," uncritical assumptions about the ability to abstract Platonic concepts like "Being" and to reproduce presence through language. Derrida instead advocates "grammatology," his neologism for a deconstructive alternative to logocentrism that is aware of the play of the trace and *différance* in language. Grammatology destabilizes simplistic conceptions of presence being embedded in language and pushes against the idea of truth as something one wraps their mind around and dominates through a priori reasoning.

(roughly translating to a handyman) in relationship to language, structures, and institutions. A bricoleur uses whatever tools she can find at her disposal to get the job done. What the tools do and create is the point of focus and value, not the tools themselves. Derrida does not write books or give lectures thinking that he can sidestep *différance* if he writes well enough. As Spivak explains, “The reason for *bricolage* [the work of a bricoleur] is that there can be nothing else” (xxxviii). Derrida knows that his language, like all others’, will never be able to break out of its metaphysical shortcomings, the “metaphysical closure” which can never actually render the referent faithfully nor make it present. Moreover, the structure and institution in which he acts will always be broken. In that sense, “The enterprise of deconstruction is always in a certain way defeated by its own work” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 25). What differentiates Derrida and others informed by deconstruction, then, is their self-awareness that they are bricoleurs and their understanding of language as necessary, yet provisional. That self-awareness, and to remind the reader of the limits of the language he is using, is why Derrida adopted the earlier-mentioned practice of occasionally putting his writing “under erasure.” Our language will not escape the metaphysical closure, nor will it correspond to reality, nor will it make present something other than itself. Provisional structures and institutions permeate our context. Yet, language, structures, and institutions are necessary to accomplish anything in the world. So, like Derrida, bricoleurs keep on thinking, writing, reading, speaking, and acting. Deconstruction leads us not away from language and structure, but towards it, this time with additional critical awareness, greater humility, and a heightened sense of “responsibility, which is undeconstructible” (Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 60), towards “the Other.”

Responsibility towards “the Other” is the key ethical concern of deconstruction and mediates a deconstructive evaluation of the efficacy of a discourse. “The Other” is that which is

by default excluded or considered outside of the discourse or structure, particularly people (those who are marginalized). Often, our language can be loaded with certain damaging centrisms: ethnocentrism, logocentrism, econocentrism, etc. Our language also occults important truths and realities, often appearing innocent and impartial but actually propounding damaging narratives and ideologies. Deconstruction is that process where the language, structure, or institution in question becomes aware of its shifting center, its assumptions, the realities it leaves unconsidered, and the provisional nature and consequences of its language. In other words, deconstruction is the process where a structure opens up to the Other.

As transparency, honesty, and nuance spread and deepen, they create space for the concerns of the Other, concerns which had previously been occulted by power structures that linguistically encoded their own priorities and centrisms. Justice is that process in which the Other becomes increasingly less “other,” and the structure becomes more hospitable (ideally, to the point of seeing the Other as someone who actually belongs). Paradoxically, justice is also that process where the “otherness” of the Other comes into sharper relief and is appreciated rather than assimilated. Deconstruction creates space for this simultaneous unifying gesture of welcoming and steadfast acknowledgement of difference: “I think we do not have to choose between unity and multiplicity [. . .] pure unity or pure multiplicity—when there is only totality or unity and when there is only multiplicity or dissociation—is a synonym of death” (Derrida, “The Villanova Roundtable” 13). Thus, Derrida summarizes, “Deconstruction is justice” (“Force of Law” 15). The attempt for justice is constantly deconstructing based off the shifting needs of the context where it is embodied, and the speech about justice is a provisional play of *différance*. The pursuit of justice and the discourse surrounding it are the next attempt by the bricoleur to throw together something that works with the tools and pieces that are available to him. Yet, the

goal of justice and its hope is the undeconstructable that kept Derrida writing even when his words were trapped in the metaphysical enclosure, and which keeps the field of development straining onwards towards its arbitrary, provisional, yet empowering ideal of justice through development.

Deconstructive Examination of Pre-Impasse Development

It is unsurprising, then, that development studies has been deconstructing since its inception. Deconstruction is not a symptom of a floundering structure, but rather a critical description of how all language and structures work. This is even less a disappointing realization, as “Derrida was trying to persuade us that deconstruction is on our side, that it means to be good news, and that it does not leave behind a path of destruction and smoldering embers” but is instead a process through which the discourse, structure, or institution can become a bit more just, aware, nuanced, and effective than it was before (Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 37). With an understanding of the theory of deconstruction, we can see how deconstructive dynamics were at play in the shifts amid the first thirty years of formalized development.

Development studies’ origins are themselves an example of the process of deconstruction. While exceedingly interdisciplinary, the field is especially focused on economics, politics, and anthropology; yet academic study of all these disciplines preexisted formal development studies. Why, then, is there a demarcated professional and academic discipline of development if it does not have a wholly original focus, but only considers topics that other disciplines are already concerned with? Is poverty not an economic concern? Is addressing the negative effects of political instability not a public policy and international relations concern? Development arises, then, not to address a new concern, but to

deconstructively draw attention to aspects of other disciplines that were being occulted. Its origins trace back to Harry Truman's concern,¹¹ raised in his 1949 presidential inauguration speech, to make "the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas" (Truman "Inaugural Address"). Gustavo Esteva interprets this moment as the coining of "development" as a "euphemism" for "American hegemony" (*The Development Dictionary* 2). We can certainly see some of the damaging Western self-concept of superiority, which would plague the development discourse for years to come, latent within even this short mission statement. Regardless, there was, from the imperfect beginnings of formalized development scholarship and practice, at least a purported concern for nation states, communities, and individuals to fairly participate in and benefit from the fruits of modernity. The changes in its theories, argumentation, methodology, practice, etc. have not always, but often, been oriented towards effectively fulfilling that mission; likewise, the understanding of what that mission is constantly deconstructs.

Development economics, for example, stands as a deconstructive outgrowth of the older, broader discipline of economics. In classical economics since Adam Smith, the primary object of analysis defaulted to the nation state, but the nation state is generally most clearly defined, and valued as an aspect of individual identity, in the wealthiest nations. This object of analysis also neglects regional and communal differences, which are paramount to consider when fighting poverty in diverse contexts. In turn, the wealthiest nation states were also those who educated and produced the most economists, who reflected most of the focus of their study back onto those leading nations. Poorer nation states played a less prominent role in the global economic order, so their experience, perspective, and goals were cast to the margins of the economic

¹¹ *The Development Dictionary* names Truman's speech as the starting point for the field of development.

discourse. Additionally, economic discourse frequently assumes maintenance of the current global economic order, along with the unitary analytical application of economic qualities that really only apply to wealthy nations; James Buchanan called this “the equality assumption” (“Equality as Fact and Norm”). The assumptions and the information and perspectives that were being excluded allowed the contemporary hegemonic structure to circumvent critique.

Deconstruction, though, always tries to notice and recover what has been excluded; embodying this deconstructive impulse, “Development economics, can, therefore, be seen as a field of study that refuses to yield to the metaphors from physics which portray the market as a mechanism creating automatic harmony” (K.S. and Reinert xii).

Development plays a similar deconstructive role in its relationship to international relations, a field which primarily directs its geopolitical inquiry towards leading powers and thereby occults the experiences and concerns of the Global South. Deconstruction highlights what a given discourse assumes as the default, the “inside,” versus the Other, the “outside.” The Global South is “other” in relation to international commerce, access to resources, influence on world affairs, etc. Deconstruction calls us to step into the margins of the discourse, where the Other has been discarded, and to bring them back to the table; for, “Deconstruction is respect, respect for the other, a respectful, responsible affirmation of the other, a way if not to efface at least to delimit the narcissism of the self (which is, quite literally, a tautology) and to make some space to let the other be” (Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 44). A deconstructive lens enables us to understand the origins of the field of development as concern for the Other within the global economic, political, and social order.

When modernization theory is considered in a deconstructive light, its ossification and inflexibility becomes evident. The difficult questions had easy answers. What is development?

Increasing GDP. How does a society achieve that development? By structuring themselves as a democratic nation state with a free market and riding the coattails of the wealthiest victors of World War II. Indeed, Rostow's notion that development could be consolidated and standardized into 5 steps reflects the structuralist paradigm that Derrida and other post-structuralists constantly critiqued throughout their work. When creatively and openly solving problems in a discourse in pursuit of justice, deconstruction emphasizes how we have more options than merely rearranging the given terms and their assumed value. At the height of modernization theory, "capitalism" and "democracy" were transcendental signifieds, organizing values within economics and development that were meant to be unquestioned and set the terms for the rest of the discourse. Yet, Derrida and deconstruction are "resolute about preserving the right to say things that are not allowed, to analyze and criticize what the powers that be consider a closed question" (Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 59). Deconstruction, then, encourages us to dig deeper and constantly question the structure and its key terms in light of their various embodied contexts.

Dependency theory demonstrated this deconstructive impulse to crack open the discourse and invite new possibilities. Deconstruction is concerned with widening horizons, of breaking out of closures (e.g. metaphysical, structural, historical) and centrisms (e.g. logocentrism, ethnocentrism): "Everything in deconstruction is turned toward opening, exposure, expansion, and complexification, toward releasing unheard-of, undreamt-of possibilities *to come*" (Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 31). Dependency theorists allowed the development discourse to deconstruct by calling capitalism to question and calling for a more nuanced, context-driven understanding of the path to development, in Latin America and beyond. Though the mechanics of its economic approach were ineffective, dependency theory evinced an impossible hope for another way than was currently visible; for, "A paralyzing impossibility is not an objection for

Derrida [and deconstruction], but rather an impulse and an indicator that things are really getting interesting” (Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 64). This bold step created space for more practically effectual movements later on.

To further underscore the deconstructive impulse underlying dependency theory, it is also worth noting that many of the scholars in the movement were Latin American. Deconstruction calls attention towards who is holding the pen, which reveals the biases behind the way a given narrative is presented. As any given text may be interpreted a variety of ways by a multitude of subjects, it is rarely advisable to listen to only one voice to hear the truth. Instead, deconstruction advocates openness to a variety of perspectives as they relate to a given text, in this case Latin America’s economic woes. Furthermore, the powerful should go out of their way to seek the voices which have less power to self-amplify, especially if, as in dependency theory’s case, those are the same voices who are most negatively affected by the structure: “For deconstruction is [. . .] a way of releasing and responding, of listening and opening up, of being responsible not only to the dominant voices of the great masters, but also to other voices that speak more gently, more discreetly” (Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 57). It is of great deconstructive value, then, that the development discourse expanded its horizons beyond the Harvard halls of modernization theory to be able to hear and speak as a Latin American in Latin America. As the process of deconstruction continued to unfold within development, scholars could now question not only how to play the development game, but the game and its rules as such, with the possibility of greater sacrifice on behalf of the Other.

The ensuing rise of neoliberalism amidst and beyond dependency theory initially seems like a curious moment in the development narrative. Did dependency theory not emphasize the need to question the structure on behalf of the marginalized Other? Neoliberalism, on the other

hand, seems like a free-market reboot of “many of the most serious contradictions of modernisation theory [. . . which] make neoliberalism susceptible to many of the same criticisms that have plagued modernisation theory and, eventually, contributed to its demise” (Brohman 121), such as its problematic linearity, uncritical universalism, and selfish ethnocentrism. Yet deconstruction never happens in a straight line. In fact, much of Derrida’s work is meant to disrupt notions of linearity and problematize clear-cut delineations between beginnings and ends. The statement “we used to think ‘X,’ but then we figured out ‘Y,’ so we eliminated ‘X’ from our thought and now operate exclusively out of ‘Y,’” is not to be trusted from a deconstructive perspective. When certain language, concepts, or beliefs invade our perception, they are not immediately (and sometimes never) disentangled when we decide their implausibility. This means that the language and experiences of the past always come to bear on our interpretation of and action in the present, which then shapes the possibilities for the future. Distinctions between the past, present, and future, especially in a discourse, now become provisional. While neoliberalism does not represent a complete reincarnation of modernization theory, the movement’s rise in the 1970s exemplifies the deconstructive insight that discourses do not march linearly towards their fulfillment or perfection, but are instead dynamic venues of the play of *différance*. The path of development, like that of other structures and discourses, is not one of straightforward progress, which is why the field found itself at an “impasse” 30 years after its formation.¹²

¹² That structures do not iterate linearly towards their perfection is further underscored by the argument that development is currently in another impasse (see footnote 3). Development could not have been expected to spring out of the first impasse as a phoenix, rising pure and spotless from the ashes after its transformation. The reality of how structures and discourses change over time is much more complex, involving constant dynamism that is difficult to predict, steer, and even evaluate retrospectively. Deconstruction is then ongoing; we may expect many more impasses to come.

Development Under Erasure: Five Post-Impasse Movements

When discussing the development impasse in 1993, development scholar David Booth detected a change underway, optimistically noting that “the heavy atmosphere of intellectual stagnation and self-imposed insulation from practical issues that was so prevalent in the early 1980’s does seem to have cleared” (49). He goes on to identify several shifts within the field that represented positive steps beyond the impasse. Since the mid-1980s, development has continued to transform in ways that solidify its value, as well as expand and diversify its awareness and applicability. The impulses that powered the initial responses to the impasse, as well as many movements since then, evince the principles of deconstruction. Deconstruction then renders those shifts more intelligible and provides an intellectual framework through which to contextualize their value. That understanding equips us to lean into and facilitate the positive, beneficial deconstruction that is already at play within development, and to actively create space for more valuable deconstruction within the field.

Post-Impasse Deconstructive Movement #1: Critical Development Studies and Post-Development Theory

The first deconstructive response to the impasse that we will examine is the growth of critical development studies. Critical development studies is a sub-discourse within development that posits “diverse ideas of alternative development and alternatives to development” (Veltmeyer and Bowles 1-2), normally focusing its critical approach on development theory. The discourse frequently enlists the humanities, particularly critical theory, and the social sciences, particularly Marxist and neo-Marxist economics, to highlight mistaken assumptions, structural and systemic flaws, distorted narratives, and missing information in the mainstream development

discourse. Critical development studies is broad, but does frequent some areas of focus, including rereading development history, raising questions of gender, exposing and questioning latent capitalism in development, highlighting environmental concerns in development efforts, rethinking basic development terms and concepts, and exposing biases that arise in development (e.g., Eurocentrism). More generally, critical development studies directs its lens, which is deeply informed by postmodern, postcolonial, and post-structuralist perspectives, onto different topics that arise in the mainstream development discourse. This is done in hopes that the broader discourse does not ossify in theories, methodologies, or practices which in some way compromise justice and benefit towards the stakeholder.

Gustavo Esteva's intellectual project in the early 1980s was a landmark in the formation of critical development studies, in which he extensively questioned the discourse of development as it applied to his home country of Mexico. His 1980 book *La Batalla en el México Rural* is perhaps the most notable work from that period, and Esteva would continue to be a leading post-development voice in the years to come. In 1983, Arturo Escobar incorporated insights from philosophical and social scientists to remedy the void that "there has not been until now a systematic study of the ways in which the production of development discourse itself has contributed to the creation and propagation of the conditions of underdevelopment" (*Power, knowledge, and discourse as domination* 2). He followed up on this study a year later by more thoroughly incorporating Foucault's philosophy of power into a critique of the development discourse. The ensuing article, "Discourse and Power in Development: Michel Foucault and the Relevance of His Work to the Third World," generated substantial traction and attention for the burgeoning critical development studies discourse.

As critical development studies formalized and began to distinguish itself from dependency theory, scholars offered increasingly radical critiques of development. Many critical development theorists seek to reconstitute a more nuanced and just praxis on the far side of their critique. A subset of critical development studies termed “post-development theory,” though, condemns the entire field of development as a failed attempt at economic liberation and as an imperialistic imposition of Western lifestyle and culture on the Global South. In 1992, post-development theory received its definitive statement in Wolfgang Sachs’s edited volume *The Development Dictionary*. Sachs brought together the leading post-development theorists of the time and assigned them each a chapter to place a “key concept under examination and call attention to its ethnocentric and even violent nature” (“Introduction” xxxiii). Thus, the theorists systematically deconstructed (without mention of Derrida) a compendium of development terms, including “poverty,” “progress,” “one world,” “market,” “helping,” and even “development” itself (which was Esteva’s chapter). The internal critique of development studies was at its apex as Sachs declared, “The idea of development stands like a ruin in the intellectual landscape” (“Introduction” xxviii).

The critical development studies discourse is one area of post-impasse development where deconstruction can most clearly be seen at work. As discussed, the field of development is a deconstructive reaction to discourses like economics or international relations, meant to highlight voices, perspectives, and information that these disciplines occult. Critical development studies is then a type of deconstruction squared, promoting a deeper level of awareness where the deconstructive discipline allows itself to further deconstruct. On the surface, post-development theory, the radical branch of critical development that calls for the end of development, seems like an even more fully realized vision of what Derrida would prescribe to development over and

beyond general critical development studies: deconstruction cubed. Indeed, post-development thoroughly exposes the Eurocentrism and flawed modernity that drove the origins of the development discipline after World War II and which have guided much of its evolution since. It is especially deconstructive in its success in unearthing key critical insights through careful linguistic and conceptual analysis, as is performed in *The Development Dictionary*. In its means, evidence, and content, post-development is an exemplar of deconstructive thinking.

It is in the theory's conclusion, though, that it sharply departs from deconstruction. Post-development calls for an end to the development project, and sees this end as desirable, inevitable, and near: "*Development*, like monarchy or feudalism, is about to move further and further into the haze of history" (Sachs, "Preface, 2019" xvii). Exploding centrist discourses seems like the type of thing that Derrida as popularly conceived, as a conniving, rogue, contrarian philosophical villain, would be likely to do. Sachs goes in for the opening jab, and Derrida will finish the job with his critical linguistic uppercut! This is another area, though, in which Derrida and deconstruction are commonly misunderstood. Development certainly contends with damaging conceptual baggage, such as its Eurocentric origins (the Global South must become like Western Europe, "for their own good"!) and historically myopic focus (disproportionately prioritizing GDP relative to other relevant quality-of-life indicators). Post-development valuably underscores these discursive flaws, so that their manifestation in development practice can be mitigated and their theoretical entrenchment resisted.

Yet, every discourse is centrist. All speech, all thinking "responds to a moment of *economy*" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 8) where one privileges something to focus on, thereby implicitly rendering a hierarchy of value which violently excludes other referents which themselves could be considered: "Every structure [. . .] that organizes our experience is

constituted and maintained through acts of *exclusion*” (K.S. and Reinert xii). Development is certainly not an exception to this rule,¹³ but as Derrida describes, we must always operate within the limits of language: “There is no signified that escapes, eventually to fall back, the play of signifying references that constitute language” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 7). Moreover, discourse is further distorted in that it is prefigured by imperfect perception and must occur within broken institutions. Our conceptions are then provisional, temporary, *bricolage* (the work of a *bricoleur*), meant to be utilized now but susceptible to substitution or transformation later. Therefore, when *The Development Dictionary* exposes the problematics of the term “poverty,” for example, or even the term “development” itself, deconstruction would have us incline our ear, absorb and implement the critiques as seems profitable, but not be surprised. These terms were never able to be stable, anyway. The critique, the attention we pay to the deconstruction that is always already going on, does not lead to an exasperated giving-up, or a violent annihilation of the discourse and institution. Instead, we must emphasize that “deconstruction is not—we will repeat this again and again—a destruction or demolition, but a way of releasing and responding, of listening and opening up” (Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 57).

Deconstruction leads us not away from the institution and structures like the development discourse, but deeper into them, with a renewed faithfulness to exploring their potential and a heightened sense of responsibility to ensure that the overlooked Other is represented.¹⁴

¹³ Kate Manzo notes how development discourse, like any other discourse, “Easily slips into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest, for it can never step completely outside of a heritage from which it must borrow its tools—its history, its language—in its attempt to destroy that heritage itself” (8). Development’s attempts to break free from its logocentrism, an impossible yet necessary task, are themselves susceptible to deconstruction.

¹⁴ Peter Westoby has identified how deconstruction in development discourages surrender in the face of development’s inevitable shortcomings (“A community development yet-to-come”). Instead, deconstruction affirms the ongoing pursuit of justice in and through development despite its imperfections.

This openness to the Other *through* language and institution is why Derrida submits one of his most surprising comments at a roundtable inaugurating Villanova's philosophy department (which Caputo invited him to): "So, you see, I am a very conservative person" ("The Villanova Roundtable" 8). As Caputo explains, Derrida "sees deconstruction as a way to keep the *event* of tradition [or, we may say, discourse, discipline, institution, etc.] going, to keep it on the move, so that it can be continually translated into new events" (*Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 37). Thus, deconstruction encourages us to be skeptical about the call to destroy development. Instead, deconstruction encourages us to first ask what it means to be truly responsible to the lives of the poor and faithful to the pursuit of justice, a pursuit which we currently (and provisionally) call "development." This questioning about "responsibility, which is undeconstructible" (Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 60), should always be active, and is never completed: "The only attitude [. . .] that seems absolutely condemnable to me is that which, directly or indirectly, circumvents the possibility of a questioning that is by nature interminable, of an effective and thereby transformative questioning" (Derrida, *Points de Suspension* 252; my translation). A shifting, dynamic world compels us to live out justice in different ways, so development must always ask what responsibility and faithfulness to the poor looks like in each context, and must continue to ask that question as the context changes over time.

Maybe, given the provisional nature of its label, continued critical reflection will prompt the field of "development" to change its name. Or, perhaps, its institutions and agencies will even surrender an identity distinct from other economic or political organizations, finding that the points of specialization delineating development (investing into low-GDP societies, combatting political corruption and facilitating diplomacy in regions rife with conflict, promoting access to resources in localities where they are especially scarce, etc.) is unhelpful.

This second possibility, though, hardly seems desirable. As discussed, the advent of a specialized development discourse and focused development institutions constantly acts as a deconstructive voice to highlight the preferences, conditions, and voices of the marginalized in “standard” disciplines like economics and international relations and in the regular functioning of the global order, where they are often overlooked. Deconstruction has never been keen on homogeneity, which is often just a linguistic illusion that effaces *différance*. Active practice of homogeneity, such as dismantling the distinct, systemic pursuit of political and economic justice that is termed “development” and assimilating it into other distinct venues, risks compromising its impact and letting the voices and preferences of the marginalized slip back into obscurity relative to the power and loud voice of wealthier societies.

What seems more likely than either a renaming or a diffusing of development, though, and more profitable than its elimination as advocated by post-development, is that development continue to shift the context, application, and verbage of its discourse, a practice which is already common within the field. Development vocabulary has seen many helpful alterations as the field’s language continues to deconstruct, such as the recasting of “the Third World,” a term that is ethnocentrically formulated in a Western, modernist hierarchy, to “the Global South,” a more inclusive term which, while still normally employed in the context of industrial values, has an organizing principle which is more immediately geographic than classist. Another example of valuable terminological deconstruction in development is the shift from discussing “recipients” of aid or development to “stakeholders.” This shift nods to how local leaders should be driving and defining the development process instead of having an imperialist development narrative prescribed and implemented by a wealthier, more powerful cohort.

More fundamental concepts are less likely to be fully replaced, but are still seen to deconstruct in the context in, and awareness with which, they are used. “Poverty,” for example, a word attacked in *The Development Dictionary*, has continually been problematized (for its own good). Development scholars and practitioners are now much more likely to consider poverty as a multi-faceted phenomenon, encompassing political, social, and security factors, alongside an economic and material dimension. As development practitioners are rightly focused on understanding and engaging the challenge of enhancing the flourishing within their specific operating environment, they may see the problematics of unhelpful terminology play out, but may lack the theoretical background to abstract that experience or the voice to spread their findings. It is crucial, then, that a lively critical development discourse humbly yet confidently continue to rock the boat, questioning methodologies, theories, terms, concepts, etc., that create space for the field’s deconstruction. Indeed, deconstruction seeks to destabilize the distinction between theory and practice, showing how each one prefigures the interpretation and possibilities of the other, and how each (we continue to say “each,” even as the distinction between them slips away) must be considered in every context. Development’s linguistic fluctuation, then, is evidence of a healthy deconstruction at play. This process is sometimes strained when post-development theorists veer away from deconstruction’s faithfulness to discourse, but is encouraged and energized by the broader critical development dialogue.

Post-Impasse Deconstructive Movement #2: The Intertextuality of Poverty and Development

Critical development studies and post-development theory highlighted how, if development was to bring valuable insight and practice into complex economic, geopolitical, and social contexts, then the discipline needed to be correspondingly complexify. A simplistic and

imperialist understanding of poverty and how to fight it was no longer adequate. This push to nuance the discourse facilitated the advent of another post-impasse deconstructive movement which sought to rethink development and its aims, particularly by reconceptualizing “poverty.” The most pronounced example of this movement is the development of Amartya Sen’s thought from the late 1970’s through the late 1990’s, for which he would receive a Nobel Prize in 1998. In a lecture entitled “Equality of What?”, delivered at Stanford in 1979, Sen introduced his “capabilities” approach. This framework viewed “a person being able to do certain basic things” such as feed themselves, clothe themselves, participate socially, and move physically as a ground for equality that development should strive towards (Sen, “Equality of What?” 218). Sen’s approach cast poverty negatively as the deprivation of freedom, which thereby limits peoples’ capabilities to do and be what they wish and what is good for them.¹⁵ Meeting basic material, economic, social, and other needs opens up humans’ capability to move beyond survival and into flourishing. Sen has refined this understanding of poverty throughout his career, with his 1999 book *Development as Freedom* representing its most definitive statement.

Like Sen, Robert Chambers also sought to reformulate development discourse and practice nuancing the concept of poverty. He called for a deep humility in the field, as well as an awareness of the bias and limits that scholars and practitioners bring to development contexts. In his 1983 book *Rural Development: Putting the First Last*, Chambers complexifies the concept of poverty, not allowing it to be reduced to a solely economic metric such as GDP. He instead identifies “interlocking disadvantages” as necessary for development to consider, including

¹⁵ Sen’s utilization of the language of “freedom” or “unfreedom” to conceptualize poverty makes his development paradigm easier to subscribe to. It is hard to build consensus in development around a positive view of how people should live their lives (we are developing people *towards* this lifestyle), but much easier to rally parties with disparate motives, worldviews, and values around a negative goal (we are developing to *take away* the factors that are limiting freedom). Some (but not all) of the weight of value judgments is then shifted away from the development practitioner and to the stakeholder, thus empowering the stakeholder and leaving less space for conflict in the formulation and implementation of development goals.

“physical weakness, isolation, vulnerability, and powerlessness” which “trap [the poor] in depravation” (Chambers 103). These insights complemented Sen’s burgeoning formulation of poverty as a multi-faceted phenomenon, and development studies began to realize the interrelated social, political, material, geographic, and economic nature, among other qualities, that poverty comprises.

In the early days of formalized development, especially when modernization theory or a rigid neoliberalism reigned in the mainstream discourse, development may have been acknowledged as difficult to execute, but simple in theory. The idea would run something like what follows: “Some countries have a much higher GDP per capita than others; the wealthy countries should help the poorer countries get wealthier in the same way they initially did, through industrialization and capitalization.” The field learned, though (perhaps not as quickly as it should have, and still not thoroughly), that poverty is not solely an economic phenomenon. In today’s development discourse, it seems like a platitude, almost a cliché not worth mentioning, that poverty is multi-dimensional; yet, thinkers like Chambers and Sen were instrumental in theoretically articulating that reality. The honesty and efficiency of a political structure facilitates economic improvement; thus blurring the line between politics and economics. Ongoing military conflict can cripple local productive capacity; alternatively, the post-conflict reshuffling of the regional hierarchy can shift respective nations’ economic influence, and a strong military is often linked to a strong currency. Thus blurs the line between geopolitics and economics. Or, on an individual level, social networks are one of the most effective deterrents of poverty, thus blurring the line between sociology and economics. An individual’s self-concept can affect their ability, confidence, and success in seeking employment, and likewise poverty may exert a negative influence on individual self-esteem; thus blurs the line between psychology and economics.

Thus, “Economic unfreedom can breed social unfreedom, just as social or political unfreedom can also foster economic freedom” (Sen, *Development as Freedom* 8).¹⁶ Chambers and Sen encouraged development to expand and deepen its scope when trying to fight poverty.

NGO’s and IGO’s began to take notice of this fulsome approach to development and poverty alleviation. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) decided to launch a new, more multidimensional development measurement and tasked Sen and Mahbub ul Haq, who had served as the Minister of Finance to Pakistan, to lead the effort. The measurement, entitled “The Human Development Index” (HDI), was based off Sen’s capabilities approach. The HDI reflects the trend towards a more holistic understanding poverty by focusing on individual lived experience and examining attributes such as life expectancy and education in addition to economic growth. The HDI debuted in 1990 in the first Human Development Report (HDR), which releases and analyzes annual changes in HDI with new issues published to this day. Since then, many new indices have formed which also seek to capture a broader understanding and measurement of development goals, including the Genuine Progress Indicator (launched 1995), the New Economics Foundation’s Happy Planet Index (launched 2006), the OECD’s Better Life Index (launched 2011), and the UN’s Inclusive Wealth Index (launched 2012).

Deconstruction is the structural reality that was guiding the complexification of poverty in development. The theory of deconstruction always emphasizes interrelatedness and the connection between things, particularly phenomena and language. Différance is that description of the interrelatedness of language and phenomena, how words define each other (rather than

¹⁶ Sen highlights many forms of freedom and unfreedom, which including physical concerns, (mortality, undernutrition, health care and morbidity, sanitary arrangements, clean water), education, employment (available employment, voluntary labor), economic security (free transaction), social security, gender equality, political liberty (voting rights, possibility to criticize authorities, uncensored press), and civil rights (*Development as Freedom*). He also identifies 5 different types of “instrumental freedoms,” capabilities that, if possessed by an individual and community, enable them to achieve the ends that they “have reason to value”: political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security (Sen, *Development as Freedom* 10).

being defined by some exterior reality) and the representation of reality that we produce in consciousness arbitrarily delineates between different objects in the real world. Derrida uses the term “intertextuality,” or occasionally “pluridimensionality,” to describe the complexity and interrelatedness of reality that we become aware of when understanding the role of *différance* in our perception and interpretation of the world.

Western metaphysics encourages the demarcation of reality in simplistic ways, to search for and cling to “beings” or “forms,” each of whose essence is supposed to differ completely from the others. This Western philosophical tradition has described the virtue of “courage,” for example, as a concrete, stable reality that can be fully present in and of itself. Deconstruction first starts to highlight the “intertextual” nature of courage by considering it linguistically: “courage” only has its specific meaning through its relational difference to the concepts of “brashness” and “cowardice”;¹⁷ therefore, “courage” does not have an essence external to and pure from them. Therefore, “courage” is never something present on its own, but something intertextual, a “text” which must always be “read” or “interpreted” anew to discern how the play of *différance* is constituting it in each context.

Sen and others demonstrated how poverty, like courage, is not an essence or presence, but an intertextual concept that is embodied in manifold ways (e.g., insufficient drinking water, illiteracy, subjection to violent conflict), in a myriad of contexts (national level, communal level, civic sphere, interpersonally), and is shaped by a multidimensional mix of forces (e.g., economic, political, sociological). This is a far cry from pre-impasse development, much of which was

¹⁷ Aristotle noted the *différance* at play in virtue through his concept of the “golden mean” (see his *Nicomachean Ethics*). This is the idea that each virtue is situated between a binary of polar opposite vices. The above example of “courage” applies; another example would be “patience” as the golden mean between “passivity” and “recklessness.” Aristotle argued that virtue, the proper balance of the two opposites, leads to flourishing. This normative ethical paradigm does not function without *différance*.

founded on a purely economic conceptualization of poverty's essence. Indeed, Sen's career-defining intellectual project could be summarized as an argument for the intertextuality of poverty and the implications of that consideration, which also created space for intertextual development solutioning (e.g., collaboration across functionalities and disciplines, adjusting project formulation and implementation in relationship to scale, holistic human development).

A realization of the intertextuality of poverty helped development to break through the impasse towards greater relevance and effectiveness. As deconstruction questions discrete beginnings and endings, though, the process of realizing and leaning into intertextuality in development should be interminable. It is not a question of scholars checking the box after coming up with a new multi-dimensional index. While the explosion of multi-dimensional poverty and development indices and conceptualizations is an encouraging step, development conversations should constantly create space to allow their understanding of poverty to deconstruct into intertextuality. Deconstruction in development looks like doubling back on one's tracks to ensure that a given aspect, manifestation, or definition of poverty is not being inappropriately favored among others to the detriment of the stakeholders in each development context.

Post-Impasse Deconstructive Movement #3: Reconceptualization and Empowerment of the Stakeholder

Another post-impasse deconstructive movement has been a rethinking of those who inhabit the target localities and communities in development, often referred to as the "locals" or the "stakeholders." Throughout the life of development studies and the formal practice of development, a key point of focus for many critical scholars, including dependency theorists and

post-development theorists, has been to call into question and problematize the relationship between the “developed” and the “underdeveloped/developing.” These critiques became especially prominent around the time of the development impasse, amidst a dominant, damaging neoliberal economic rhetoric that posited wealthy Western nations as the gatekeepers of economic and political flourishing (you must enter through our markets, policies, and general conduct). If polities in the Global South conducted themselves in a manner amenable to Western leaders, then they would be provided access to international markets (subject to supervision by their Western arbiters, of course). If they were especially submissive to the plan and vision of the “developed,” then the “developing” may even receive some help to “catch up” in the form of foreign financial aid.

The problematic nature of these dynamics between “developed” and “developing” are now widely acknowledged. In the development process, which purported to exist on behalf of uplifting the poor, the perspectives of those experiencing poverty were almost always occluded. Instead of the poor having a contributive voice in the discipline, academicians remote from the real problems they were writing about crowded the dialogue. The postcolonial impulse to listen to the disenfranchised prompted the World Bank to conduct an enormous study between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s that sought to increase the role of the poor in formulating and advancing development considerations. Robert Chambers advised extensively on this project due to his visionary work in considering the perspectives of those who would most be impacted by development theory and practice. The findings of the 3-part *Voices of the Poor* project, headed by Deepa Narayan, affirmed the importance of stakeholders having a voice when formulating development objectives and the processes to achieve them, instead of merely having the Western leaders hand them a diagnosis of their societal ills and writing a prescription on how to fix them.

More fundamentally, these shifts all sought to reformulate stakeholders not as recipients of development, but instead to describe them as and empower them to be active in the development process (or, to put it more rigorously, to more fully realize their already active role).

This movement, beginning before the impasse but finding additional popularity since then, is a result of deconstructive processes at play in the development discourse. Like dependency theory before it, the shift towards listening to the stakeholder exemplifies the deconstructive impulse to notice how the text is impacted by who is writing it (e.g., the development plan), particularly when the discourse is dominated by a disproportionately powerful group (e.g., Western leaders).¹⁸ This awareness becomes even more valuable as the distinction between “developed” and “developing” is questioned, a point which the field’s discourse has often raised for the purposes of amplifying the voices of the poor.

Deconstruction is particularly observant of how, in language, contrasting terms form a binary in which they prop each other up, giving the illusion of a simplistic “black” and “white” reality in which phenomena can be cleanly and discretely demarcated. Spivak explains that it is “a longing for a center, an authorizing pressure, that spawns [these] hierarchized oppositions. The superior term belongs to presence and the logos; the inferior serves to define its status and mark a fall” (xci). The center of a discourse is its organizing principle, the set of values and assumptions that structure the discourse and inform which information and perspectives are included (and, thereby, which are excluded).¹⁹ The values at the center privilege one of the terms

¹⁸ Derrida notes how “the possibility of capitalization and of politico-administrative organization had always passed through the hands of scribes [. . .] and whose function was always irreducible, whatever was the procession of delegations in which one could see it at work” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 100). Power structures are perpetuated by discourse and language, which can often circumvent the possibility to think outside the current hegemonic order. Yet, institutional hierarchies cannot themselves escape the play of *différance* (see p. 57) and are thereby ripe for justice-oriented deconstruction.

¹⁹ Derrida explains the problematics of the center of a structure, which is “a point of presence, a fixed origin. The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure—one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure—but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we

in a linguistic binary over the other (for example, “developed” is clearly privileged over “developing”); not only, then, do binaries give a false sense of linguistic and extra-linguistic stability and simplicity, but they also subliminally encode hierarchy into our understanding of the world. The center and the discourse which it structures obscure a reality that is almost always more complex.

It is tempting to view Derrida’s critical focus on linguistic binaries and on word choice as petty nitpicking, a contrarian delighted to find some tiny, immaterial problem to magnify and fuss over to prop up their intellectual avarice. Derrida spends the entire second half of what many consider his most important and robust work, his 1967 book *Of Grammatology*, roughly 175 pages, discussing the usage of a single word (“supplementarity”) in one of Rousseau’s more obscure essays. A common misinterpretation of deconstruction’s curious approach²⁰ characterizes Derrida as a vain anti-philosopher on the hunt for the next petty squabble. Yet, as a deconstructive way of thinking often emphasizes, our language shapes our understanding of reality, and our understanding of reality in turn is made manifest and noticeable in our language, each informing the other. We act in and shape the world in ways that are guided by our perceptions, and those perceptions are encoded and manifested in our language, thus blurring the line between language and transformative action in the world. The center of a discourse obscures

might call the *play* of the structure. [. . .] As center, it is the point at which the substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible” (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 278-79). The center is the basis of the exclusion and hierarchization within the structure; yet, what is the basis or justification for that center? When considered in light of deconstruction, the center reveals itself as neither absolute nor static, but as provisional, shifting, and inscribed in arche-writing (see pp. 57-8), just like the concepts and words that it arranges. Derrida aims to highlight this “structurality of the structure” and its center, showing that they do not transcend deconstruction and that all along “there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play” (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 280).

²⁰ Telleria calls this approach highlighting “volcanoes,” those points in the text in “which all the underground tensions burst and emerge to the surface, causing disruption and jeopardizing the general solidity and legitimacy of [a given] discourse” (85).

complexity at the linguistic level; this is dangerous in that it is hardly perceptible, but ends up manifesting in real thought, perception, and action. Language, then, as well as being a potent instrument of change, is a vital critical venue through which we can unearth and discover our latent assumptions, biases, perceptions, etc., allowing them to deconstruct before our eyes.

It is eminently valuable, then, to direct critical focus on how poverty and those in it are spoken about, written about, and defined. The center which spawns the developed/developing binary sustains itself by linking “the West and liberalism” to “reason and freedom – the essential values of the Enlightenment – while the Rest and other ideologies are instead portrayed as plagued by dogma and diversity” (Telleria 83). The binary immediately casts the privileged party, the “developed,” as a complete, full ideal who has achieved the desired end state.²¹ What defines those nations or societies in the privileged side of the binary is what is deemed to be good about them, their wealth, while what defines the “developing” nations or societies in the underprivileged side of the binary is what is deemed to be inadequate, or even bad, about them, their poverty. The binary additionally occults and minimizes the problems in leading Western societies. Even when development actors from a nation like the United States acknowledge the problems in their country of origin, they often still proceed in a way that assumes the ability to easily separate the good aspects of the U.S. economic, political, and social structure from the bad aspects; yet such a separation is also often implausible. We do not have space to fully examine the U.S. homelessness crisis, but it is worth alluding to as an example of how the structures that

²¹ The theory of deconstruction helped Manzo identify how the development discourse harbors a modernist logocentrism that spawns damaging binaries and hierarchies: the discourse has “a disposition to impose hierarchy when encountering familiar and uncritically accepted dichotomies between West and East, North and South, modern and traditional, core and periphery, rational and emotional, male and female, and so on. The first term in such oppositions is conceived as a higher reality, belonging to the realm of logos, or pure and invariable presence in need of no explanation. The other term is then defined solely in relation to the first, the sovereign subject, as an inferior or derivative form. It simply ‘stands to reason,’ we might say, that the East should become more like the West, the South like the North, the traditional like the modern” (8).

lead to the wealth of many in a society (e.g., rewarding innovation through low taxes and high executive salaries, which then leads to job creation in the middle and lower-middle class) are often inextricably linked, or even the same, structures which come to bear on the poverty of others (e.g., lack of a robust, nationwide continuum of care addressing the manifold needs of the unhoused to reintegrate into standard U.S. patterns of living). Would the U.S. seek to develop a nation to be just like them, indiscriminately passing on a societal structure that has fostered a homelessness crisis? Deconstruction alerts us to the violence and narcissism burdening that question.

The developed/developing binary also preemptively diminishes the potential for mutual interchange and transformation in the development process. By privileging “the developed” as a group which is stable and has already “completed” development, the binary discourages the idea that the developing societies have anything of value to contribute and reinforces the notion that the developed teach and help the developing, and never the other way around. As Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert argue in *When Helping Hurts*, this is damaging not only to the self-concept of the developing by formalizing them into a relationship of inferiority, but also enacts an unhealthy effect on the developed, propping them up with a false sense of inferiority. Moreover, as the finality of the term “developed” would be quick to occult (again, deconstruction questions beginnings and endings), countries like the United States have much to learn from various states in the Global South across economic, political, and social dimensions.

Similar to the developed/developing binary, the actor/recipient binary has also been deconstructing, creating more space for the voice and involvement of the marginalized. Indeed, the deconstruction of one has been encouraging and shaping the deconstruction of the other, and vice versa. Modernization and neoliberal paradigms of development steered the discourse

towards seeing the “developed” as the subjects of the grammar of development, who perform and act out the verb “development” onto “the developed,” the objects of development. Thus, the narrow-minded development grammar reads, “The developed develop the developing.” The poor are rendered as impotent recipients of the generosity of the wealthy.

Just as a deconstructive ear is attuned to the voice of the marginalized in formulating development objectives, a deconstructive eye is attuned to their agency in program implementation and achievement. Development studies has increasingly acknowledged the necessity that the stakeholders be involved in implementation, which decreases dependency on development practitioners and increases long-term self-sustainability. It is not merely a kindness to involve local stakeholders in development implementation; the development process needs their expertise, awareness of local specificities, and continual evaluation of progress. In addition to increasing the effectiveness of the already available development solutions, treating stakeholders as agents, or subjects, in development broadens solutioning possibilities. The deadening language of actor/recipient fosters creative nearsightedness, where development practitioners are limited in their strategic approach to only consider solutions which separate them and local stakeholders in implementation and which circumvent collaboration. The development practitioners see themselves as acting upon and helping those who need it, which often results in them only addressing surface-level concerns. For example, internalization (whether conscious or unconscious) of the actor/recipient binary can lead to inappropriate foreign aid solutioning. Is the proposed financial aid a critical shot of stimulus to overcome a dire, temporary shortage? If not, could it perhaps be a surface-level solution, addressing material poverty in a nation, when the problem is really more directly caused by political corruption (for example)? In that case, diplomatic efforts would be more effective than siphoning capital into

corrupt hands.²² Deconstruction, as we have discussed, is an opening, always looking for new possibilities and formulations. The critical attention it encourages us to direct towards binaries such as developed/developing and actor/recipient are already beginning to be realized in the development discourse. Ongoing focus on these linguistic dynamics, empowered by deconstruction, further amplifies the voices of the poor and empower the local stakeholders in development.

Post-Impasse Deconstructive Movement #4: Increased Focus on Diversity, Context, and the Individual

In 1993, David Booth identified an intellectual current that formed around the early 1980s and extended through the early 1990s, a post-impasse movement animated by deconstruction. Arising out of the “heavy atmosphere of intellectual stagnation and self-imposed insulation from practical issues that was so prevalent in the early 1980’s” and which characterized the impasse, this current movement brought an increased “interest shown at all levels, and in relation to the whole gamut of substantive problems, in the investigation of diversity – and hence the illumination of choice – in development” (Booth 49). To Booth, this shift “does seem to have cleared” much of the stupefying impasse fog (49). He contrasts how former “influential theories ignored – more or less deliberately – the complex diversity of the real world of development, [while] the styles of research that have come into prominence since the early 1980s take as their central task explaining significant variations in patterns of development in different local, national and regional settings” (49). Though Booth acknowledges

²² William Easterly (*The White Man’s Burden*) and Dambisa Moyo (*Dead Aid*) have discussed the problematics of such misapplied aid. Jeffrey Sachs (*The End of Poverty*) has represented the more pro-aid stance, and Paul Collier (*The Bottom Billion*) provides a balance in the aid debate by advocating limited, incentive-based aid and market and trade inclusivity for the Global South.

that heightened awareness of setting and variation in development has not been the sole factor in constituting a viable post-impasse discourse, it was certainly a leading reason that development scholarship maintained its relevance at a time when it was particularly under question.

A deconstructive impulse inspires this movement within discourses and structures to increase their focus on diversity and context. Deconstruction is, in many ways, the practice of identifying and considering complexity, of making sure that our concepts, paradigms, and characterizations through which we see the world do not falsely characterize reality as simple by amassing a plurality of things under an umbrella term or concept that feels more manageable and comfortable. We are thus unsurprised and encouraged, then, to see greater awareness of heterogeneity between geographies as the development discourse matures. A development solution that might work well in one locality might not be applicable, relevant, or even possible in another. Thus, as scholars tried to understand the economic advances of Asian societies like Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore compared to relative stagnation in other parts of “the Third World,” that generalizing, ethnocentrically hierarchical concept lost much of its popularity and utility as the variety it tried to occult broke through (Harris). At an even more granular level, Booth notes how “studies of the politics of economic decline and structural adjustment in Africa moved rapidly from generalities about ‘the African state’ towards comparative national studies,” concluding that the more granular focus has “enhanced enormously our sensitivity to historically-grounded variations in national political economies,” (53). The increased prevalence of comparative national studies indicates a greater focus on differences between geographies. Moreover, the consideration of states as units of geographical analysis is now under discussion, as “variations in state structures or ‘modes of domination’, as distinct from societal structures and modes of production, are now established as worthwhile objects of enquiry” (Booth 53). All

these lines of questioning have opened the possibility for more nuanced yet actionable development research and practice.

Like other deconstructive movements making themselves manifest in development, being attentive to diversity and context is not a goal that can be finished or attained at a certain point. Instead, it should be constantly woven into discourse, practice, and research. Norman Long provided the human sciences, and the development discourse specifically, some terminology which helped them to further internalize a faithfulness to diversity and context. He offered the neologism “actor-oriented” to describe a research and development paradigm which focuses on social actors and even individuals, thereby acting as “a kind of counterpoint to structural analysis”:

It is theoretically unsatisfactory to base one’s analysis on the concept of external determination. All forms of external intervention necessarily enter the existing life-worlds of the individuals and social groups affected, and in this way are mediated and transformed by these same actors and structures. Also to the extent that large-scale and ‘remote’ social forces do alter the life-chances and behaviour of individuals, they can only do so through shaping, directly or indirectly, the everyday life experiences and perceptions of the individuals concerned. (6)

The actor-oriented approach refused to deal solely in abstraction, instead demanding recognition of “the central role played by human action and consciousness” in development (Long 6). This idea quickly made its way even to such mainstream development discourse as the United Nations’, who affirmed in their 1993 Human Development Report, “The implications of placing people at the centre of political and economic change are thus profound” (Nassef 8). Though Telleria demonstrates how the United Nations Development Programme’s homage to actor-oriented development thinking was far from internalized in its methodology and broader discourse (75-95), a wide array of development organizations and scholars began to shift their focus away from generalities of poverty and onto its lived experience.

This call away from normative abstraction towards the specificity of individuals inspired the Nobel-Prize-winning work of development economists Esther Duflo and Abhijit V. Banerjee, who have continued a pursuit of faithfulness to diversity and context in development. In line with the actor-oriented approach, Duflo and Banerjee choose not to focus on the next grand development theory, because “the debate cannot be solved in the abstract: We need evidence” (5). So, instead of fixating “on the ‘big questions’: What is the ultimate cause of poverty? How much faith should we place in free markets? Is democracy good for the poor? Does foreign aid have a role to play?” (3), they focus on analysis of specific events such as “whether particular instances of aid did some good or not,” “whether democracy could be made more effective in rural Indonesia” (5), etc., and more readily empirical topics like “how best to fight diarrhea or dengue” (3). The shift of their research is away from the normative and theoretical towards specific events that are more conducive to empirical analysis and yield answers about the context in which they are raised. Duflo and Banerjee exercise the utmost caution when extending insights from one locale, people group, or development problem to another.

Duflo and Banerjee’s emphasis on human action, desires, and decisions, looking at the “actors” beyond merely their environment, is especially resonant with Long. While the rise in comparative national studies within development has been a welcome sign of the diversification within the field beyond simplistic regional analysis (e.g., “the Third World”), their landmark 2012 book *Poor Economics* does not relegate itself solely to geographical analysis, but finds even more opportunity for understanding diversity and the concrete realities of poverty by being “ultimately about what the lives and choices of the poor tell us about how to fight global poverty” (xi). The focus pierces even further, all the way to the individual: “To progress, we have to abandon the habit of reducing the poor to cartoon characters and take the time to really

understand their lives, in all their complexity and richness” (viii). Duflo and Banerjee add, “For the past fifteen years, we have tried to do just that” (viii), positioning this pursuit as the core of their intellectual project.

Duflo and Banerjee use an innovative research method, “randomized controlled trials” (RCTs), to incorporate this awareness of context and valuation of the individual into their research. This methodology corresponds to the specific, problem-solution orientation, such as whether well-digging or goat-rearing are effective; if they are in one country, will they be in another? These specific questions are tested by randomly assigning individuals or communities “to different ‘treatments’—different programs or different versions of the same program. Since the individuals assigned to different treatments are exactly comparable (because they were chosen at random), and difference between them is the effect of the treatment” (14). The findings from these tests are used to inform solutioning to real-world development problems. This approach is a step towards realizing “the complex diversity of the real world of development” (Booth 49) that Booth was anticipating would further unfurl in the development discourse.

As a post-structuralist movement (though Derrida did not like that label), deconstruction alerts us to the dangers of dealing exclusively in normative theories and broad abstractions that undergird our perceptions of structure. A deconstructive approach to problem-solving prefers, like Duflo and Banerjee, to first get as close to the ground as possible, and then apply insights from that individual experience to others with the utmost caution and awareness. RCTs cannot claim to be arbiters of truth, as what is “effective” differs between geographies, and between time; what works in a given community right now might not work next year, or even tomorrow. Yet, that does not mean empirical, mathematical analysis is not valuable; in fact, “We have to calculate as rigorously as possible. But there is a point or limit beyond which calculation must

fail, and we must recognize that” (Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 19). RTCs then evince a deconstructive bubbling in the development discourse by recognizing that their findings are always provisional and always hide something important, but do not surrender in the face of this impossibility to capture truth through analysis. Indeed, deconstruction “always inhabits the distance between something impossible, justice or the gift, say, of which we dream, and all the existing actualities and foreseeable possibilities, with which we are more or less discontent” (Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 70); “*The impossible, is never the end of action in deconstruction but the start, the condition of possibility of a genuine action, one with teeth in it*” (Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 71). So, as surrender to impossibility is not an option, RTCs are, at their best, an example of doing the best we can given our limitations. The studies represent an attempt to try and see beyond unhelpful development language and into complexity, diversity, and context, letting humility and a concern to understand the Other, rather than assimilate them, guide the study.

Post-Impasse Deconstructive Movement #5: The Theological Turn

The final post-impasse deconstructive movement we will consider, which undergirds the rest, will be called the “theological turn in development,” alluding to what Dominique Janicaud identified as a “theological turn” in French phenomenology. This choice is intentional: the theological turns in both phenomenology and development share core deconstructive impulses that have guided their movement and, correspondingly, created similar structural and discursive results, particularly registered in the domains of theology, ethics, and religion. The theological turn in French phenomenology is even more relevant considering Derrida’s active involvement in it, both as a contributing theorist and as one whose thought it deeply influenced. Further

discerning the ensuing intellectual kinship between deconstruction, Derrida's theory, and the theological turn in phenomenology, a key moment in his intellectual life in which he experienced his own "theological turn," will shed further light on how development has been deconstructing since the impasse.

In 1991, Dominique Janicaud identified what he saw as a "theological turn" in phenomenology ("The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology"), most prominently advanced in the 1970s and 1980s by Parisian phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Michel Henry, Emmanuel Lévinas, and Derrida. The publication sparked a flurry of debate, including on Janicaud's description of the turn, evaluation of whether the turn was good or bad, when it happened, and whether it actually occurred at all.²³ What was undeniable, though, was that these French scholars were in the process of introducing a "new phenomenology," or at least a new understanding of phenomenology, that responded to some of the field's defining questions. These were questions that the pioneers of phenomenology, and those who initially received their work, had not been able to solve in the first half of the 20th-century.

At that time, Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre were concretizing the formal field of phenomenology. Husserl had delimited phenomenology as a philosophical discipline that would study only those things that are immanent in consciousness, knowledge that is inherent to the knowing subject, and objects that are fully given, or present, in the subject's experience.

Achieving the requisite access to pure presence that would allow for its isolated study could only

²³ See, for example, Arthur Bradley's "Derrida's God: A Genealogy of the Theological Turn," where he concedes that there was a theological turn in phenomenology but finds it misguided. Alternatively, J. Aaron Simmons in "Continuing to Look for God in France" argues that there was not a theological turn, and that what most scholars refer to as "the theological turn in French phenomenology" was really phenomenology more fully realizing its scope, not changing or compromising on its fundamental character.

be accomplished through “the exclusion of the transcendent as such as something to be accepted as existent, i.e., everything that is not evident givenness in its true sense, that is not absolutely given to pure ‘seeing’” (Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology* 7). Husserl calls this exclusion the “phenomenological reduction,” by which he attempted to break through the limitations of conscious to arrive “back to the things themselves” (Husserl, *Logical Investigations* 168).

Phenomenology would then be a science that only studied those objects indisputably present to consciousness. Yet the next wave of scholars carrying the field forward could see that Husserl, as the father of the phenomenology, had “never liberated himself from an idealist metaphysics” (Janicaud 21); he was never able to achieve a consideration of immanent phenomena fully distinct from absolutes, ideals, or other metaphysical conceptions that compromised the phenomenological reduction.

Deconstruction helps us understand why phenomenology failed to obtain a pure reduction to the “things themselves,” an insight which prefigures the field’s theological turn. We have considered how deconstruction is at play within language, concepts, discourses, relationships, hierarchies, and even individuals, the way they relate to themselves and others. Différance is a deconstructive description of how meaning is constituted between words; words are distinguishable (differ) from each other and are always pointing back to another word (defer) for its definition, a process which, instead of leading to a stable source of meaning, ends up looping back on itself. Language, then, never arrives at an essential, stable source of meaning, but represents only a “trace” of that presence. This means that elements in a linguistic structure, words, phonemes, concepts, and such, are always going to be contingent, provisional, shifting, and unsettled. They have no anchor which keeps them stable; instead, “The meaning—and reference—is a function of the difference, of the *distance* or the ‘spacing’ between the traces,

what is called, in a perfectly serious way, the ‘play’ of differences or traces” (Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 100). The animating principle of the structure in which they find themselves is not logic, grammar, or even truth,²⁴ but rather the “play” of the “trace” or *différance*.

Yet, *différance* is not just a description of the contingent, relational constitution of meaning within linguistic structures. It is the space within which all structures²⁵ constitute themselves, relying on notions of difference, relationship, and organizing principles, values, and hierarchies, all of which are already themselves inscribed in the play of the trace. All structures maintain themselves through a continuous act of inclusion (and thereby exclusion), where some organizing principle, or center, is the point of gravity which regulates the act of exclusion but is itself subject to *différance*. Caputo provides a helpful example of how *différance* runs deeper than (but is also manifested in) words, down to the structural level:

In an institution, individuals are distributed across a hierarchized, institutional spacing, a play of places, which define in advance the role, the power, and the voice of the individual, something that is embodied in expressions like the “main office,” the “top floor,” and “power corridor.” To live and work within an institution is to exercise a “differential” function, to be inserted or inscribed within the differential space of the institutional hierarchy. That spacing is true no less of society at large. (*Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 104)

This is why nothing escapes the “text”; all relationships and meaning are necessarily inscribed, or written into, this play of space and *différance*, which Derrida calls “arche-writing” or the “instituted trace.”²⁶ Arche-writing “orders all objectivity of the object and all relations of

²⁴ Caputo emphasizes that “Derrida is not denying that we have ‘principles’ and ‘truth’—let the word go forth and let there be no mistake about that. He is just reinscribing our truths and principles within the an-arche of *différance*, attaching to them a co-efficient of ‘contingency’” (Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 102).

²⁵ Spivak defines a “structure” as “a unit composed of a few elements that are invariably found in the same relationship within the ‘activity’ being described” (lxxvi), and elsewhere as “the natural object plus the subjective intelligence of the structuralist” (lxxix). These “units” are unified and organized, or spaced, by their relationship to the structure’s “center” (see the discussion of center on pp. 44-6).

²⁶ Derrida will often refer to “arche-writing” simply as “writing.” This is what he is referring to (not graphemic inscription) when he calls grammatology “the science of writing” (*Of Grammatology* 4) and the “science of writing

knowledge” (*Of Grammatology* 61), without which (imagining that it could ever be otherwise) relationships and meaning would be an unintelligible congealment of sameness.

There is no discipline, language, discourse, or structure that can escape arche-writing to see purely into “the things themselves” as Husserl had hoped, including phenomenology. The structure may give the illusion that it is rooted in a stable, static, solved center that is immune to *différance* (logic, reason, virtue, and grammar often pretend to come before arche-writing), but “‘usurpation’ has always already begun” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 40).²⁷ If the structure is undermined, then it “always possible, *in principle*, as a ‘structural matter,’ to repeat differently” (Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 101), meaning that the current representation of the structure is always provisional (just like the current meaning of a word) and that it does not access a pure presence or essence. Phenomenology was supposed to be that philosophical discipline which liberated essences from their disfiguration into phenomena; yet phenomenology could never experience the thing before arche-writing, before the text.

Heidegger picked up on this problem in his last seminar, given in 1973 and in which he advocated for a “phenomenology of the inapparent” (*Four Seminars* 80). This which would later be realized in the field’s theological turn. As the phenomena experienced by consciousness were themselves textual, it did not seem rigorous or honest to Heidegger to continue a myopic pursuit of presence, a mission failed from the outset. His call towards the “inapparent,” then, was an encouragement to shift the focus of phenomenology towards the transcendent, i.e., those things which are not present, which are beyond the initial purview yet still broach it, which always

before speech and in speech” (*Of Grammatology* 55). So, when Derrida says that “language is first, in a sense that will gradually reveal itself, writing” (*Of Grammatology* 40), he is highlighting how language always functions within a play of *différance*.

²⁷ Heidegger, for example, notes how classical conceptions of logic feign to be absolute, but are provisionally rooted in a specific Western metaphysics: “The whole logic that we know and that we treat like a gift from heaven is grounded in a very definite answer to the question about beings” (Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics* 28).

invade and influence phenomena while lurking at the margins of consciousness. With assistance from Derridean terminology, we can see that Heidegger was essentially opening phenomenology towards consideration of the Other, highlighting how arche-writing, the play of *différance*, shapes the experience of phenomena in ways that are not always obvious. What slips away, what is overlooked, the things that seem absent but actually influence and are indispensable to what seems present; exposing these is the concern of both deconstruction and Heidegger's proposed "phenomenology of the inapparent," and would soon be taken up by the theological turn.

The theological turn in phenomenology was a response to this "paradoxical revelation of Transcendence in a source at the heart of phenomenality" (Janicaud 23), this deconstructive "phenomenology of the inapparent." The movement's leading scholars sought to pay "more attention to the giving of phenomena and to what is beyond the apparent than to the phenomena themselves" (Evink 127). Lévinas and Merleau-Ponty specifically answered Heidegger's call through "their opening [*ouverture*] of phenomenology to the invisible" (Janicaud 26; brackets and italics are Janicaud's), a consideration of how what is considered absent or not even perceivable is exerting influence on what is more obvious. Merleau-Ponty highlighted how "the visible is never pure, but always palpitating with invisibility, and even the vision I have of it is not anything that could be definitively circumscribed, but is inscribed in corporeality" (Janicaud 24). The theological turn in phenomenology was a deconstructive opening of the field which made space for transcendence, absence, and "the inapparent," leading to a deeper understanding of how the play of *différance* comes to bear on conscious experience.

The development discourse, like any other structure, also finds itself constituted in arche-writing, founded on shifting linguistic, conceptual, and experiential centers that are influenced by what's inaccessible and ungraspable. Phenomenology confronted this problem in the 1970s and

responded with a theological turn towards the transcendent. Development confronted this problem in its impasse in the 1980s, and responded similarly in what can be considered a theological turn of its own. Any field of knowledge runs into the same epistemological problems that phenomenology faced in its theological turn, but what drove development to open up to transcendence, while some other discourses ossify or stay closed, is that the field is defined by responsibility to the Other. The development discourse is compelled to do whatever it can to act responsibly towards the poor and the marginalized, a dedicated pursuit of that-which-is-not-yet-fully-known: justice, wealth, flourishing, peace. The field cannot wait till the essence of these goals is comprehended beyond doubt, for these goals are always shifting, dynamic, playing in différance. Neither can the field ossify in the way it pursues these goals, as the stakes are too high to irresponsibly formulate and implement development projects without rigorously putting ~~development~~ under erasure, doubling back and see what information and perspectives are being excluded, what untenable assumptions work their way into the development project or theory.

Each post-impasse deconstructive movement in development, then, constitutes some part of a structural opening to, or theological turn towards, the Other. This deconstructive impulse is what unifies the movements: critical development studies and post-development theory (Post-Impasse Deconstructive Movement #1) are development sub discourses which specialize in opening. They constantly seek to expose centrism, assumptions, and missing context in the field's broader movements, leveraging critical insight (Foucault or Marx, for example) to undermine hegemonic theories, methodologies, and practices in the discourse. They try to protect the broader development discourse from the menace of ossification, that a certain view of development would ever be accepted by default without critically considering its real-world impact. The heightened awareness of the intertextuality of poverty and development (Post-

Impasse Deconstructive Movement #2) cracked open these concepts beyond economic consideration and into a pluridimensionality that did more justice to the complexity of the lived experience of stakeholders. These stakeholders, accordingly, became more included in development formulation, implementation, research, and theorizing (Post-Impasse Deconstructive Movement #3), as deconstruction created space not only for more “information” but for more perspectives and voices. In the increased focus on diversity, context, and the individual (Post-Impasse Deconstructive Movement #4), the field of development realized how each development site comprises its own unique mix of the apparent and inapparent. There are factors which are easy to plan for and are common with other development projects, as well as factors which are special to that place and must be learned over time in humble relationship with local leaders and those in poverty.

The theological turn as a structural opening towards the Other in both phenomenology and development naturally led each towards ethics, the consideration of how to have a “good” relationship with the Other. Lévinas led a surge in ethical dialogue in phenomenology amidst the discourse’s theological turn, and Lévinas’s views were a foundational influence upon Derrida’s later ethics. Lévinas argued for ethics to be considered “as first philosophy” (hence, his *Ethique comme philosophi première*), of primary theoretical import before other such philosophical concerns as ontology (what is there and what does it mean to be?) or epistemology (what does it mean to know, and how do we do that?). Rooting his argument in the Other, he claims that before being is conceptualized, before knowledge is pondered, and before ethics are logically debated, there is always a sense of responsibility which arises and gives shape and form to the self when the self looks at the Other. Thus, “The experience of the face,” that moment when the perceiving subject looks at someone else and recognizes them as Other, “will not be grounded in

perception but will *ground* perception's intentional content" (Cromwell 567). This ethical focus towards the Other, an absolute which defines the self's relationship to the world yet is outside, or transcends, the self, is a natural ethical extenuation of the phenomenological theological turn's focus on opening towards the transcendent.

Responsibility towards the Other is the impulse that compels structures to open themselves towards that which is inapparent, absolute, absent, and transcendent, considerations which the theological turn in phenomenology also foregrounded and which have now likewise led to the increased discussion of ethics in the broader development discourse. The growth in ethical dialogue has come as the development discourse began to acknowledge the various absolutes that had been steering development scholarship and practice. What were those values that development had assumed, which previously transcended the scope of development debate, but which had figured into and guided the discourse nevertheless? Some of the most important were conceptions of poverty and underdevelopment, deemed as bad, and conceptions of wealth (or, with the added nuance of late 20th-century and early 21st-century development language, the "flourishing") and development, deemed as good. Those definitions (which scholars in "Post-Impasse Deconstructive Movement #2: The Intertextuality of Poverty and Development" challenged) are not merely impartial, empirical assessments of reality. They are interpretations, mediated by value systems and exclusion of other potential data, that congeal into an ethics, which defines effective development practice and is used to evaluate "progress." The theological turn in development studies is, among other things, a critical impulse to focus on, or a deconstructive creating-of-space to examine, the ethics which transcend development, ethics that were previously thought to be absent in a field that has been straining to demonstrate its

scientificity.²⁸ If ethics, notions of absolute values and beliefs, influence development whether we like it or not, it is irresponsible towards the Other to leave them assumed.

Moreover, ethics as a branch of philosophy is intimately concerned with how to define “goodness” in one’s relationship with the Other, how to be good to the Other. Deconstruction, then, which opens to the Other, naturally leads to ethical inquiry in whatever discourse it is considered. This is particularly the case with development, given the field’s fervor for justice. Vis-à-vis sustainable development, Christine Winters notes how deconstruction opens “to alternative ways of understanding the concepts that, it may be argued, encourage us to think differently in the future—in ways that are more ethical and ultimately, more true” (80). True faithfulness to the development mission, then, requires getting philosophical and deconstructive hands dirty by opening up space in the discourse for ethical dialogue and critique.

That deconstructive responsibility has been driving the surge in ethical dialogue in development, as well as opening conversations about what our development goals and objectives really are. David A. Crocker had, by 1991, identified a “recent emergence of international development ethics” (461) as it became “increasingly common to recognize that theories and models of ‘Third World’ ‘development’ and ‘underdevelopment’ have ethical or valuational as

²⁸ This is an example which demonstrates how some of the post-impasse deconstructive movements in development are not fully deconstructive. In fact, none of them are fully resonate with deconstructive critical principles. In this case, for example, “Post-Impasse Deconstructive Movement #4: Increased Focus on Diversity, Context, and the Individual” already emphasized the deconstructive value of Duflo’s and Banerjee’s contextualization of poverty and passion for directly considering the experiences of the poor. In their push to bring development into the realm of an empirical science, a space which seems to them beyond subjectivity, they lose sight of the inevitable textuality of any model of experimentation, and in that way depart from a deconstructive approach. Seeing these post-impasse movements as each displaying, and not displaying, deconstruction in different ways further encourages us not to consider development as a field that is moving in a straight line towards its perfection, gradually getting closer with each step. We have already noted how deconstruction discourages us from drafting simplistic narratives of linearity. Instead, development has been and will be a dance, a play of change, and to discern what “progress” is at each moment and in relation to each theory or action requires its own act of interpretation. This does not mean that changes in development are arbitrary, and that anything goes; it just means that we need to be rigorous each time we try to assess the value of certain shifts in the field and how they relate to the ~~evolution~~ of the broader discourse (evolution is put under erasure for smuggling in linear, modernist conceptions of change).

well as scientific components” (457). Ethics and morality had been mentioned as early as the late 1960’s and 1970’s, when Denis Goulet began writing prolifically on the subject and arguing that “‘development’ needs to be redefined, demystified, and thrust into the arena of moral debate” (xix). Crocker narrativized the ascent of an ethical development discourse, connecting it as a natural extension to other movements in development, including the popularization of Sen’s capabilities approach.

Sen, an impressive philosopher in his own right, worked closely with philosophical ethicist and classicist Martha Nussbaum throughout his most productive and influential academic years; their formulation and dissemination of the capabilities approach was a joint effort. The capabilities approach compelled questions of ethics, as the fundamental goal of the capabilities approach is to increase one’s “freedom to do the things one has reason to value” (Sen, *Development as Freedom* 18). Though the capabilities approach was partially designed to unite development scholars and practitioners from disparate backgrounds under the banner of freedom, “Values” are still immediately invoked, not through neglect but by necessity. There cannot be unified movement towards a shared goal without values informing what that goal is and guiding how it is pursued. Sen recognized this, acknowledging that “the exercise of freedom is mediated by values” (*Development as Freedom* 9) and that “it is best to see human rights as a set of ethical claims” (*Development as Freedom* 229). So, instead of shrinking from or trying to occult ethical concerns as was commonplace in the development discourse, Sen and Nussbaum embraced them. Sen constantly engages in explicit ethical inquiry, deeming it as even of sufficient importance to be included in his landmark text *Development as Freedom*, where he devotes extensive energy to engaging utilitarian and deontological normative ethical frameworks before departing from them in his approach to development ethics.

Beyond her intimate involvement with the creation of the capabilities approach, Nussbaum advised on the creation of the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index and ensuing Human Development Reports. Her frequent collaborations with Sen in the 1990's included co-editing a 1993 edited volume with him entitled *The Quality of Life*. This text broaches the deeply ethical matter of defining, measuring, and researching quality of life. This productive stretch of ethical development inquiry led to her 2000 book *Women and Human Development*, which posits the enhancing of human capabilities as a guiding ethic for political practice. She leverages robust philosophical knowledge to ground her development approach, and continued writing on ethics and development in her brief yet influential 2009 article "Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach and Its Implementation," which was followed by her more thorough 2011 book *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. In collaboration with Sen and other scholars, she launched the Human Development and Capability Association in 2004 which revises, advances, and promotes the capabilities approach both theoretically and practically across the world.

The capability approach directed an unapologetic focus on values and ethics, and mainstream adoption, particularly in the Human Development Reports (which debuted in 1990), rapidly diffused. This led, particularly in the mid 1990's, to a "new terminology" entering "the social science and development literature. Phrases like 'development ethic', 'human good', 'good living' and 'well-being' were finally being used alongside more familiar terms such as 'living standards', 'quality of life' and 'human development'" (Clark, Abstract). Several years earlier, Crocker issued the call for a more formalized development ethics discourse with that was more widely appreciated: "What is needed are explicit development ethics" (458). Sen's and Nussbaum's open ethical focus was one of the leading forces, among others, that led to such a

discourse being formed. In 2004, Des Gasper offered a further crystallization of this burgeoning discussion in his book *The Ethics of Development: From Economism to Human Development*, casting “development ethics” as a conversation that “looks at meanings given to societal ‘development’ in the broad sense of progress or desirable change, at the types, distribution and significance of the costs and gains from major socio-economic change, and at value-conscious ways of thinking about and choosing between alternative paths and destinations. It aims to help in identifying, considering, and making ethical choices about societal ‘development’, and in identifying and assessing the explicit and implicit ethical theories” (Gasper xi). This young “development ethics” discourse had also seeped into mainstream thought, as Denis Goulet, the patient champion of ethics in development, was pleased to note from his perspective in 2006 (*Development Ethics at Work*). It is now broadly realized that development has been, all along, an inherently ethical project driven by values which are subject to examination. Deconstruction compels honesty and awareness about where ethics figure into the development process.

Alongside the theologically structural and the ethical, the theological turn manifested in phenomenology and development through an opening to religion. In phenomenology, the leader’s of the theological turn made a “decisive move toward the biblical God as the proper name for the transcendence that underlies and accompanies the immanent phenomena” (Simmons 19). The theological turn scholars constantly drew on biblical and religious language to express the transcendent and absolute concepts and realities which they were trying to broach.²⁹

²⁹ Examples: Simmons lists some examples of how the biblical God specifically manifests in the theological turn: “Levinas does not refer simply to the Heideggerian-Hölderlinian ‘gods,’ but also to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He does not offer ‘Quasi-religious Writings,’ but *Talmudic Writings*. Similarly, although Marion uses examples from aesthetics to illuminate his notion of the ‘saturated phenomenon,’ he also goes as far as suggesting that the example par excellence is Christian incarnation. In *God Without Being*, Marion does not merely talk about the possibility of various iconic rituals; he speaks of the importance of the Eucharist (in its specifically Catholic

Development likewise opened to religion during its theological turn. Perhaps the first noticeable moment in this shift came in 1980, when *World Development*, the Society for International Development's flagship journal, devoted Volume 8 Issues 7-8 to inquire how specific religions, as well as religion more broadly, impact development (this issue included an article from Goulet, "Development experts: The one-eyed giants"). This was the first major publication on religion and development, but it would be 8 years until a similar project, an edited volume coming out of Vrije University in Amsterdam entitled *Religion & Development: towards an integrated approach*, would continue the religion and development dialogue. These two publications eventually inspired an effort which caught more traction, the formation of the World Faiths Development Dialogue in 1998. This organization was launched through collaboration between James Wolfhenson and George Carey who were, at that time and respectively, the president of the World Bank and the Archbishop of Canterbury. It seeks to unite faith-based and secular development through hosting conferences, performing studies, and facilitating both informal and scholarly dialogue.

As Swart and Nell identify in their chronological bibliography of all scholarly work under the religion and development subject fields, 2003 marked the beginning of an explosion in the discourse ("Religion and development: the rise of a bibliography"). 21 publications in 2003 created enough noise to draw the attention of the United Nations Development Program, who, relative to previous reports, placed a heightened focus on religion in their 2004 issue of the Human Development Report. The following year, the Religions and Development Research Programme, headed by Gurharpal Singh, further continued religious research emphasis. In this program, the UK Department for International Development funded Singh and a consortium of

conception). This liturgical framework can also be found in Lacoste's discussions of presenting oneself before God and Chrétien's focus on the phenomenon of prayer" (19-20).

universities, particularly the University of Birmingham, from 2005 to 2010 to further study religion from a sociological and developmental perspective. Religion would be considered alongside, political, geographical and other such domains that had gained increasing importance in the increased multidimensionality of development studies. This intellectual activity resulted in 74 publications on religion and development between 2003-2006 and 388 in the period between 2006-2015 (Swart and Nell). The focus on religion has only increased in recent years, as development scholars such as Sabina Alkire and Séverine Deneulin have produced work that demonstrates how Sen's popular capabilities approach to development resonates with a consideration of religion in the development process (see, for example, Deneulin's *Integral Human Development*). Neither do these academic shifts do capture the entire picture, as faith-based organizations, religious development actors, have begun to make an enormous development impact: "Faith-based organizations (FBOs), which exist in all religious traditions, remain the most significant non-state providers of basic social services to the poor in many developing countries" (Deneulin, *Religion in Development* 15). A holistic shift towards religion has occurred in development field, welcoming further dialogue between them and blurring the lines which distinguish them.

The religious current of development's theological turn was in part due to the ethical burden of responsibility to act on behalf of the Other right now, before every inapparent phenomenological factor has been considered, before every relevant stakeholder voice is fully included, before all possibilities surrounding a project and its consequences are factored in. The theological turn in phenomenology, particularly in Lévinas and Derrida, described this problematic as an ethics of the impossible. To Derrida, any ethical action is impossible because it is decided upon and enacted at a moment when its worthiness, value, and consequences are only

potential, not yet realized: “To desire the impossible is to strain against the constraints of the foreseeable and possible, to *open* the horizon of possibility to what it cannot foresee or foretell” (Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 133-34). Yet, one must still act. Faith and hope are those religious values which inspire the development project in the face of this impossibility. Like the theological turn in phenomenology, development began to draw on religious language for its ethical expression.

It's not surprising, then, that development has witnessed an increase in religious scholars and an even more pronounced surge of religious practitioners (especially FBOs), those who see their development work as emanating from and inspired by their relationship to God and their relationship to the Other that is mediated by God. Additionally, many of the key moments that catalyzed the rise of religion in development discourse came not from a detached sociological perspective, but from leaders like former Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey, who bring deep religious and theological commitments to bear on their approach to development.

The Christian development discourse is a key example of a development subgroup that has rallied around a religious tradition and its robust theological and ethical paradigm to formulate a distinct approach to development, one which also empowers them to collaborate with those who do not share their beliefs. Initially, Christian development and the Church's response to poverty primarily tracked with movements in the broader development discipline. In the early 1990s, though, amidst the deconstructive space created for religion and ethics in development studies' theological turn, Christian development began to find its own contributive voice.

In 1994, Jayakumar Christian completed his doctoral thesis at Fuller Theological Seminary: *Powerlessness of the poor: Toward an alternative Kingdom of God paradigm of response*. Christian, who would later become CEO of World Vision India, founded Christian

development studies by casting poverty as distorted relationships with different aspects of reality, including relationship with God. He argues that the Gospel narrative and vision for the Kingdom of God are the most powerful catalysts to heal the poor's broken relationships with God, themselves, others, and the world around them. In that sense, even those of elevated socioeconomic status are poor, just in different ways: all may collaborate to heal their impoverished relationships. Christian provided a more popular articulation of this Christian development framework in 1999 with his book *God of the Empty-Handed: Poverty, Power and the Kingdom of God*.

In the same year, Bryant L. Myers, published a book that was inspired by Jayakumar Christian's relational, spiritual understanding of poverty. This text, entitled *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, is still the most thorough and respected formulation of Christian development theory. Myers roots Christian's relational paradigm in a robust theological framework and describes this approach as "transformational development," alluding to poverty's multi-faceted nature and shirking modernist, imperialist notions of "development." Myers positions Christian transformational development within the post-impasse development discourse that had been so reliant on theories such as Sen's and Robert Chamber's for its continued justification:

In the first decade of the twenty-first century the language of human well-being and increasing human and communal capabilities became normative. The struggle now is to figure out what human well-being actually is and how one goes about increasing it. The development conversation may now be ready to join the other conversations on human flourishing, including religious conversations. (31)

Throughout the book, he systematically places his concept and corresponding approach of transformational development into dialogue with the leading secular development perspectives to frame the collaborative potential and (as he argues, necessary) value of spirituality, religion,

and Christianity in development, incorporating Sachs, Sen, Chambers, Easterly, Paul Collier, and Muhammad Yunus, among others. The most popular Christian development book, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor... and Yourself* published in 2009, is a commercial reformulation of Myers' landmark 1999 book.

The theological turn in development, then, in its theological, religious, and ethical dimensions, is not, as Bernard G. Prusak would accuse of the theological turn in phenomenology, merely the introduction “of a god—the biblical God—who does not belong there” (Prusak 4). The theological, religious, and ethical dimensions of development are not to be brushed under the rug by development workers, nor to be considered as a factor to manage, mitigate, or even maximize on the way to development goals. Rather, the theological turn in development represents a deconstructive, intertextual opening of the discipline and an affirmation to continue its efforts. For much of the history of the development discourse, theology, religion, and ethics were excluded from the conception of development; mostly ignored, sometimes disparaged, and often seen as a tool to be used to obtain development objectives, such as higher economic productivity or democratic governance, and then to be discarded when they had fulfilled their use. Development discourse has often adopted this “differentiation process of modernity,” which creates “the illusion that the economic, political, social, cultural, scientific, family, and religious spheres can all function independently from each other” (Deneulin, *Religion in Development* 56). This is the view of how development *and* religion, theology, and ethics interact.

Deconstruction is suspicious of such decisive exclusion, though, tending instead to notice how seemingly disparate aspects of life are actually intertwined. Any concept, discourse, institution, or other type of structure necessarily exists in an embodied context (as opposed to existing purely metaphysically, as a Platonic ideal floating unattached to the world). This context

is thoroughly complex; looking back to Sen's description of poverty, he saw various factors that are typically delineated (economics, politics, sociology, etc.) playing off each other any time "poverty" is lived in and experienced. To Derrida and deconstruction, then, anytime someone abstracts out a given aspect of reality from its contexts, it should certainly not be seen as definitive nor absolute, but provisional, and likely to be considered dangerous if not held under erasure with the utmost awareness and caution (responsibility).

Derrida gives the example of plucking a plant out of the earth when describing how abstractions and concepts such as "development" can hide its intertextuality and relationship to concepts they are normally differentiated from, such as "religion," "theology," and "ethics": "We are sure that something [irreducible] is captured there but we have carried off, at the same time, a yet quite unformed mass of roots, soil, and sediment of all sorts" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 175). Sure, we can grab hold of a certain development project, campaign, or community, pluck it out of its embodied context, and examine its messy, "Quite unformed mass" using whatever totalizing or obscuring lens we like, including one that refuses to acknowledge religion, theology, and ethics in the mix of "roots, soil, and sediment" that constitutes the reality's intertextuality. That "particular path will assure us the economy of a synopsis" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 175), the ease of synthesizing a very heterogeneous reality, one where religion, ethics, and theology factor into and disrupt the conception of development at every step, into a more manageable conceptualization of reality that maintains its homogeneity through an artificial exclusion of religious consideration. This would be merely one arbitrary reading of the development text, though: "But are other paths not possible?" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 175). One may have chosen to abstract the reality through any other combination of selection and exclusion of the manifold options in the intertextual soil of context.

It would be impossible to read the development text with a full consideration to intertextuality, though, because there must always be an act of exclusion if we are to focus on anything; there are simply too many factors to consider. Neither is the answer to try to find the “one right way” to read the development text, with a static mix of factors that we consider; what is important in each context varies, meaning that if we want to be responsible to where we are and who we are with, we will need to fully reinterpret the intertextuality of each new event of development. The provisional nature of the interpretation of a development context is inescapable. The best that can be done, then, is to try to stay low-to-the-ground, close to the context, in each act of interpretation, to deconstructively create space for the consideration of a variety of factors, and to iterate this opening as often and thoroughly as possible. To this end, Caputo explains that “deconstruction, as a movement of transcendence, means excess, the exceeding of the stable borders of the presently possible” (Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* xix). A transcendent questioning of how things could be otherwise is deconstructive responsibility to the Other: to refuse to let our understanding of what development should look like in a given context ossify, instead staying faithful to a constant questioning of past readings and the perpetual hunt for intertextuality.

Thus Deneulin, as discussed in the religion in development survey, called the development field to a more honest recognition of religion as *in* development (hence, the subtitle of her 2009 *Rewriting the Secular Script: Religion in Development*). This move may be recognized as part of the broader theological turn in development when considering religion’s inextricable relationship with ethics and theology; if you bring any one of them in, the rest will follow. Deneulin argues that “there is no separation between religion and development. Development is what adherents to a religion do because of who they are and what they believe

in” (*Religion in Development* 4-5). This means that religion, ethics, and theology will influence local stakeholders’ goals for the development process, view of the possible means to achieve that process, and even their fundamental understanding of what development is, ingraining religious, theological, and ethical influence into every step of the development process. Religion, ethics, and theology, then, are not offshoots subordinated to the broader goal of development, but are inextricable components of considering what development is and how it is practiced, the realization of which is an important consequence of the theological turn in development.

Conclusion

It requires rigor and willingness to honor the space that deconstruction creates for other voices to be heard, fresh perspectives to be considered, insights from other disciplines to be incorporated, or any other inclusion of intertextuality. Additional work is required to actually understand what that new voice or discipline is saying, which means learning the concepts and idioms that are engrained in their discourse and actually trying to inhabit their perspective, trying to see things the way they do.³⁰ It would be much easier for development scholars to maintain a façade of simplicity that excludes intertextuality in their development paradigm, because “a consequence of [recognizing the importance of religion, or we may also say theology or ethics in] development theory and practice is that each religion needs to be studied in its entirety” (Deneulin, *Religion in Development* 5). No shortcuts can be taken in this rigorous study “by segmenting elements of a religion that are good or bad for ‘development,’” because limiting learning to only the aspects of religion, ethics, or theology that seem “relevant” to development already assumes the very movement of flimsy demarcation that deconstruction is seeking to undermine (Deneulin, *Religion in Development* 5). Creating space for the Other in pursuit of honesty and justice is hard work; deconstruction makes no pretensions otherwise.

Yet, a deconstructive consideration of intertextuality in development, which, among other insights, leads to an acute awareness of the importance of the theological turn, does not just mean trying to poke holes in and let the air out of the tires of the prevailing discourse. Just as marginalized perspectives must be sought out and understood in deconstruction, so must the dominate tradition of thought be thoroughly explored and understood, all the more considering

³⁰ To Alasdair MacIntyre, seeking first to understand another’s discourse or tradition through honest, fulsome engagement with it is prerequisite to mutual understanding, collaboration, and peaceful appreciation of diversity, particularly amidst irreconcilable worldviews or ethical paradigms (*Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*).

its influence: the “moment of doubling commentary” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 172)³¹ should no doubt have its place in a critical reading. Without recognizing and respecting all its classical exigencies, *which is not easy* and requires all the instruments of traditional criticism, critical production would risk developing in any direction at all and would authorize itself to say almost anything” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 172; italics mine). Therefore deconstruction is not, as is commonly assumed, a sidestep of tradition by those who lack the discipline to read it thoroughly, leaving them to resort to attacking it. It is quite curious that deconstruction is accused of this intellectual laziness. This is a critical misunderstanding of deconstruction that threatens to limit its transformative theoretical influence wherever assumed. On the contrary, deconstruction is “always passing *through* the classical discipline, and never having abandoned or jettisoned it” (Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 79). Deconstruction, as discussed earlier, is not only responsible to the classical tradition, but also to constantly learning and opening to new voices and discourses. This responsibility to all sides makes deconstruction the opposite of its caricature as a lazy, haphazard, post-structural critical nit-pickiness; instead, deconstruction is uncommonly serious, rigorous, demanding, and time-consuming.³²

Deconstructive responsibility to intertextuality in development, then, means listening first to the prominent voices in the field, rigorously studying the prevailing theories, methodologies, and their respective findings, and interacting with poverty all the way from its theoretical deliberation in university halls to on-the-ground interfacing in the most impoverished local

³¹ Derrida is here referring to what happens when someone’s initial critical reading of a text is implicitly assumed in part or in whole, thus “doubled,” as the starting point for the next critical reading. The multiplication of this process eventually constitutes the dominant point of view or interpretation, which wears a mask of authoritativeness and necessity but is actually reliant on provisional steps were taken all throughout its formulation.

³² Caputo provides a helpful image to convey the serious responsibility with which deconstruction carries itself: “A deconstructor is like an inspector who is gravely concerned with a little crack he observes in an airplane’s fuselage (given the laws of gravity), while everyone else on the inspection team is eager to break for lunch” (Nutshell 79).

communities. *Then*,³³ this initial reading of the dominant text, which is an “indispensable guardrail,” must be allowed to deconstruct, as it “has always only *protected*, it has never *opened*, a reading” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 172). Our next, more deconstructive reading, where we are “closely, seriously, minutely following the text” (Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 85), may reveal to us a problem or encourage us to seek a new voice or factor that we had not previously considered, such as the inclusion of religion, theology, and ethics into the development paradigm amidst development’s theological turn or a hospitality to the voices of the poor as in “Post-Impasse Deconstructive Movement #3.” In this way, development under erasure, ~~development~~, will be a structure that leans into deconstruction; not because it is easy, nor to prop itself up in the pride of criticism. Deconstruction is hard, and results in humility when one realizes how their perception, language, and interpretation is inscribed in the same arche-writing that they see destabilizing their surroundings. ~~Development~~, then, will embrace its necessary deconstruction because it sees this as the most responsible way to care for the poor, marginalized Other. Deconstruction animates and empowers that interminable pursuit of justice wherever it occurs; it *is* that pursuit of justice. The opening amidst post-impasse movements has shown the transformative potential of deconstruction in the discourse of ~~development~~ (or whatever you would like to call it).

³³ Of course, the linearity of this process is under erasure, and openness to the dominant tradition never means it needs to be automatically accepted wholesale. Deconstruction just wants to ensure that the dominant, or classical, tradition or discourse be first understood before trying to pull out the rug from under it.

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