Journal of Business Ethics (2025) 202:243–261
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-025-05985-z

ORIGINAL PAPER

Transnational Capitalism After Postcolonialism: Researching the Interfaces in Global Supply Chains

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Received: 17 April 2024 / Accepted: 8 March 2025 / Published online: 2 April 2025
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Abstract

Management and organisation studies (MOS) increasingly recognises the interconnected and globalised nature of business dynamics, yet nuanced power disparities concerning stakeholders from the Global South often remain under-examined. Such power differentials can have ethical implications for researchers studying transnational business relations including the potential for epistemic violence within research endeavours. We argue for a more nuanced understanding of power in 'transnational interfaces': spaces where Global North and Global South actors meet and negotiate capitalist relationships. Drawing on Chibber's (2013) landmark revisiting of postcolonial theory, we interrogate how simplistic binaries such as 'oppressed' vs. 'empowered' or 'insider' vs. 'outsider' obscure ethical and structural complexities of transnational capitalism. Through a case study of the Bangladesh Accord, established in response to the 2013 Rana Plaza disaster, the article follows Chibber in asking what a Marxian analysis of the relationships of those negotiating the Accord reveals regarding power dynamics. In calling for analysis of the class, labour and capitalist relationships embedded in this instance of transnational capitalism, and not just taking postcolonial theory as a discursive or cultural corrective that risks flattening into identity politics, we also address an ethical tension inherent in MOS research, wherein scholars must navigate their own embeddedness within the capitalist system while critically examining its power dynamics. By arguing for Marxian analysis alongside postcolonial theory, the article contributes to ongoing discourse in MOS about how scholars can explore ethical questions of representation, justice and responsibility when researching capitalist dynamics involving relationships between Global South and Global North actors.

Keywords Postcolonialism · Supply chains · Globalisation · Transnational capitalism · Bangladesh · Rana plaza · Neoliberalism · Marx

Introduction

Management and organisation studies (MOS) pays increasing attention to the globalised nature of business dynamics linking the Global North to the Global South, including how power relations in supply chains affect suppliers (Gereffi & Lee, 2012), workers (Alamgir & Banerjee, 2019; Jenkins, 2013), vulnerable stakeholders (Banerjee, 2018) and socioeconomic development (Khan, Munir and Wilmott, 2007; Khan & Westwood, 2010) in the Global South. These contexts also pose challenging ethical questions about accounting for power differentials and the discipline's potential for epistemic violence in data collection, analysis and writing. As scholars from the Global North studying capitalist dynamics bring the Global South and Global North into supply chain relationships, we confronted these ethical questions during fieldwork and in reactions to our written work, such as through a postcolonial theory-based charge of 'epistemic neocolonialism' against Reinecke and Donaghey's (2015) research on the Bangladesh Accord. Such critiques highlight broader issues of power, privilege and representation that invite critical reflection, especially when analysing contexts where structural inequalities are embedded in global capitalist systems.

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This prompted us to reflect on the ethical implications of studying the transnational business dynamics of neoliberal capitalism in light of postcolonial theory—specifically the dual positionality of being both an 'insider' and 'outsider' to the multi-territorial dynamics of supply chains spanning the Global North and Global South. As scholars embedded in Global North academic institutions, we are participants in systems of privilege enabling access to research resources, influence and publication platforms, even as our work often seeks to understand how to ameliorate the conditions of Global South actors positioned within deeply unequal global supply chains. As consumers, workers and humans, we are meanwhile bound up in our own varied relationships to varying modes of production. This dual positionality highlights the need for ethical reflexivity in navigating the complex power dynamics inherent in transnational research regarding supply chains.

This paper explores a specific facet of the multi-territorial dynamics of neoliberal capitalist relations spanning both the Global North and Global South that implicates actors in both spheres, raising ethical questions for MOS scholars who wish to study related topics. *How should the transnational interfaces of neoliberal capitalism be studied in the context of recent debates in postcolonial theory?* This question has broad implications: globalisation has generated transnational interfaces where multinational actors come together to negotiate business activities. Such interfaces are shaped by unequal power relations and structural dependencies that implicate actors in both the Global North and Global South. Specifying 'neoliberal capitalism' both demarcates our interest in post-1990s political systems marked by the rise of economic privatisation and the rise of private corporations shaping national political economies, cultures and labour practices through global supply chains.

To explore our question, we structure this paper around five main sections. We first provide background to the use of postcolonial theory in MOS, and specifically in Chowdhury's (2022) critique of Reinecke and Donaghey's (2015) article on the Bangladesh Accord. His critique, which centres on postcolonial theories of representation, prompts us to return to postcolonial theory's Marxian underpinnings. Specifically, we draw on social theorist Vivek Chibber's (2013) contribution to the afterlife of postcolonial theory to interrogate how simplistic binaries such as 'oppressed' vs. 'empowered' or 'insider' vs. 'outsider' fall short in capturing the intricate power relations of neoliberal transnational capitalism. Amidst the wealth of postcolonial and subaltern studies theory across the 1970s through the early 2000s, which largely emerged out of history, literary studies and cultural studies, we focus on the afterlife of postcolonial theory: 'post-postcolonial theory', in essence. Chibber's landmark contribution, which has been widely engaged across the social sciences and humanities, is a Marxian-focussed reckoning upon which our paper builds. This aftermath of postcolonial theory (and not just the originary corpus of classic postcolonial texts) and specifically Chibber-initiated debates regarding the salience of Marxian readings contains lessons for MOS that avoid the flattening of postcolonial theory and subaltern studies into identity politics.

Second, we revisit in detail the case study that underpins our debate with Chowdhury: the 2013 creation of the five-year, legally binding Bangladesh Accord, a transnational agreement aimed at improving worker safety through a collective approach between unions and brands (see Reinecke and Donaghey, 2025). We use the Accord as a lens for our subsequent analysis regarding the utility of a Marxian framework to surface complex power dynamics. The Accord illustrates a transnational interface linking the Global South and the Global North: it was (and still is) a legally binding agreement between unions and multinational brands, established in response to the 2013 Rana Plaza disaster, one of history's deadliest industrial disasters, leading to the death of over 1,100 mostly female garment workers. Yet, the Rana Plaza disaster was not entirely 'Made in Bangladesh': multinational corporations outsourcing production to locally powerful Bangladeshi garment producers and consumers enjoying access to cheap fashion are drivers behind the structural inequalities of this global capitalist supply chain and the situated realities of local Bangladeshi contexts.

Our analysis of the Accord points to two interrelated dynamics which we explore in our third and fourth sections: the role of interfaces in transnational capitalism and the ethical challenge of MOS researchers negotiating their status 'inside' or 'outside' these interfaces; and the insufficiency of simplistic binaries of 'elite' and 'marginalised' to explain power dynamics within transnational interfaces. Instead, we describe shades of marginalisation encountered in the Bangladeshi readymade garments (RMG) industry.

Finally, based on our preceding analysis, we offer three invitations for MOS scholars exploring ethical questions of representation, justice and responsibility in transnational interfaces between the Global South and Global North. Following Chibber (2013), we argue for the need to turn to Marx to query forms of labour and value generation in neoliberal global supply chains, to surface nuanced power distinctions and understand possibilities for resistance.

Postcolonial Theory and Management and Organisation Studies

Postcolonial Theory and Knowledge Production

Postcolonial theory is heterogeneous, accommodating an array of academic disciplines and subject positions, from nationalist to diasporic. Understanding how to place

postcolonial theories and theorists in conversation with MOS requires a basic understanding key premises of this literature and ongoing debates. While colonialism was a political economic project of extraction, accumulation and domination (the East India Company notoriously prefigured the modern multinational corporation; Robins, 2006), many postcolonial theorists focussed on ‘the concept of colonialism as an ideological or discursive formation: that is, with the ways in which colonialism is viewed as an apparatus for constituting subject positions through the field of representation’ (Slemon, 1994). Representation, for canonical postcolonial theorists such as Spivak, Said, Bhabha, Guha and Chakrabarty, quite literally concerned how subjects were presented or omitted on the literary page or on the artist’s canvas. However, culture and representation were never separate from the political economy of colonialism and global economic flows, as equally canonical postcolonial theorists Fanon (2004) and Césaire (2000) pointed out in the 1950s and 1960s. The units, measures and currency of trade were a ‘major mediating [agent] in the process of cultural invasion of colonised countries’ (Bishop, 1990). In other words, even expressly literary and cultural projects of the postcolonial theorists have a basis in Marxian theories of accumulation, class, exclusion, labour, ownership and extraction.

Calling attention to colonialism’s role in shaping political economy and culture alike led to an emphasis on reclaiming or positing, after colonialism, what local, national and transnational systems of knowledge, culture, economics and labour look like (Chatterjee, 2004; Ferguson, 2006; Tsing, 2005). In the context of workers, this was not about theorising a ‘return’ to a pre-colonial past, but rather theorising new forms of ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ (Bhabha, 1996) in which local and national identities and practices were shaped by global—often economic—forces (Appadurai, 2006; Ong, 1999 and 2006; Sassen, 1998). The ethical stakes of such theorisation are relevant for the present: culture, political economy and power are entangled in ways can shape ongoing economic disparities including exploitative labour regimes.

MOS researchers have thoughtfully taken up this literature in theoretical and empirical analyses, including critiques of dominant philosophical paradigms in MOS that overlook postcolonial theory (Banerjee & Prasad, 2009); calls for greater reflexivity among MOS researchers (Khan, 2007) to account for postcolonial theory-derived concepts regarding knowledge production; and calls for more robust engagement with ethical implications of MOS topics relating to, for example, labour and exploitation (Mir & Greenwood, 2022).

Apart from explicit engagement with postcolonial theory, broader postcolonial theory-informed explorations of exploitative, hegemonic or imperialist dimensions of postcolonial Global South and Global North economic relationships have been explored in MOS with reference to the field of organisation studies (Jack et al., 2011; Mir & Mir, 2014), knowledge creation (Mir, Banerjee, and Mir, 2008), organisational structures (Prasad, 2003) and analytic Eurocentrism (Prasad, 2011).

While this rich corpus is indebted to postcolonial theory broadly construed, there is more varying reliance upon Marxian concepts of the labour theory of value, capitalist accumulation and class analysis in ways that transcend postcolonial theory’s own foundational reliance upon Marx. Prasad (2003) engages deeply with Wallerstein’s (1974) ‘core-periphery theory’; Banerjee (2011) uses ‘dependency theory’ for a theorisation of corporate social responsibility as a mechanism to entrench exclusion and exploitation of Global South actors. Even when Marx is not explicitly invoked, ethical concerns implied in Marxian analysis remain central: Alamgir and Banerjee’s (2019) careful study of the Bangladeshi RMG industry focusses on labour relationships and contradictions in global capitalism that play out in locally negotiated realities. There is a tendency in MOS, however, for discursive and cultural dimensions to be analysed with the help of postcolonial theory, while more technical or empirical mechanics of transnational exploitation are examined using a basket of Marx-inflected or Marx-based lenses from political economy or international studies. This analytical divide carries ethical implications: it risks decoupling the symbolic and cultural aspects of power from the material realities of economic injustice.

This leads to a question regarding an optimal method for surfacing the nuances of transnational power, which informs MOS studies of, for example, international negotiations and supply chains. Studies of gendered dynamics demonstrate that gender lens-as-method matters when exploring neoliberal capitalist relationships between the Global North and Global South: a gender lens uncovers forms of labour, value, exploitation and gain that would have otherwise been overlooked or elided (Custer, 2012; Fraser, 2013; Nagar, 2014; Tyler and Vachani, 2021). As theorist Assassi (2009, p.130) explains, the global circulation of ‘highly volatile, crisis prone’ capital adds ‘risk and insecurity to the lives of specific groups and societies, within which structures of gendered inequality further impact on existing processes of subordination’. This risk and insecurity is epitomised in the Rana Plaza disaster: an overwhelmingly female labour force bore its greatest costs. The risks materialised; the moral failure is profound.

The arguable flattening of postcolonial theory over the decades into a cultural, representation and discursive approach is critiqued by Vivek Chibber’s 2013 book, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capitalism* as a consequence of postcolonial theory and subaltern studies’ rejection of the universalism of Marxian class analysis and Marxian explanations for capitalist accumulation. The book, whose publication produced deep, lively and ongoing

debate, builds on other notable disagreements with postcolonial classics. This includes, for example, critiques of Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism*, as empirically flawed and highly selective historiography that produces a quite narrow argument, with minimal resonance for colonial or postcolonial South Asia (Ahmad, 1992; Inden, 1990), and that overlooks the role of material economic relationships in shoring up forms of cultural expression, for example, in India (Cohn, 1996; Dirks, 2001). These debates are not just academic. The degree to which economic and material relationships are central (or not) has implications for business ethics and conceptualisations of corporate responsibility, and the moral obligations of contemporary MOS scholars operating across postcolonial divides.

It is hard to overstate the importance of Chibber's text in launching a range of vigorous debates in social theory (Warren, 2016); the conversations it engendered solidified a post-postcolonial era with different strands of particular interest for different disciplines. Some viewed his book as over-simplified and limited historiography of the Subaltern Studies movement (Seth, 2014; Spivak, 2014; Steinmetz, 2014). Others focussed on what they described as over-generalised, under-specific engagements with Marx (Schwartz, 2019). Most salient for this paper is the contention that his explanations of Enlightenment universalism and related categories, e.g. class, are too universal (Spivak, 2014). Local distinctions, cultures and practices matter.

For this paper, we do not seek to settle these debates. The utility of Chibber's bold provocation that class, capital and related power differentials remain salient for non-Western societies, notwithstanding the deep, local knowledge, context and detail privileged by the postcolonial and Subaltern Studies theorists, is that the *absence* of discussion regarding class, capital and related power differentials should be parsed. Perhaps categories of class, capital and power are not universally relevant, as Chibber's critics argue—but perhaps neither are they universally irrelevant.

Our read of Chibber leads us to a challenge for MOS researchers engaging with postcolonial theory as a method for *discursive* critique of the *mechanics* of neoliberal capitalist relationships between the Global South and Global North. As we explore below, Chowdhury's (2022) analysis demonstrates the limits of this approach. We follow Chibber in arguing that, in the case of the Bangladesh Accord and counter to Chowdhury's claims, discursive and cultural power flows from relationships people hold towards modes of production, whether they are the owners of the means of production, workers, middlemen or others. Chibber insists this is the case because Marxian 'universals' are 'universally' true. We do not need to take such a normative stance to make a useful intervention for MOS in the context of transnational interfaces, such as supply chains: in *these* interfaces, we contend, discursive and cultural power flows from relationships people hold towards modes of production. Modes of production are geared towards accumulation. Exploitation, according to this Marxian school of thought, will be inherent due to capitalism's intrinsic accumulation imperative to produce surplus value. This makes *negotiations* occurring in North–South interfaces of such ethical importance. They capture the making—or perhaps unmaking—of these relationships and the moral stakes they entail.

Knowledge Production of Transnational Governance After Postcolonial Theory: The Question of Representation and Identity Politics

In this journal, Chowdhury's 'Misrepresentation of Marginalized Groups: A Critique of Epistemic Neocolonialism' (2022) focusses on two core articles to illustrate 'epistemic neocolonialism' in MOS research. One is Reinecke and Donaghey's (2015) study of the creation of the Bangladesh Accord as an experiment in transnational labour governance, as it brought together both traditional union-based and new transnational forms of worker representation. Reinecke and Donaghey explain the article is neither a comprehensive accounting of all post-Rana Plaza dynamics that had transpired by that year, nor is it a study of the lived experiences, suffering and injustices endured by Rana Plaza's workers.

Chowdhury's engagement with Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) is problematic on two levels. First, as outlined in the Appendix to this piece, Chowdhury misrepresents Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) by attributing empirical work from a different piece to it; criticises the authors for not citing pieces which were yet to be published (in some cases by as much as two years); and makes significant empirical claims about Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) which are inaccurate. Aside from these factual issues, Chowdhury contends that people from specific geographic locations may not understand contextual nuances of areas with which they are not overly familiar, creating conditions for 'epistemic neocolonialism', described as when academics '(re)introduce and (re)produce colonial beliefs (Said, 1978) through sophisticated academic language and theoretical labelling and jargon which fortifies Western-based knowledge production and provides various powerful actors with a set of tools for dominating marginalized groups' (2022, pg. 2).

An ethical concern at stake in this debate is the alleged *misrepresentation* of marginalised groups, namely, Bangladeshi garment workers. The Appendix details rejoinders to specific claims and, most critically, inaccuracies in Chowdhury's characterisation of Reinecke and Donaghey (2015). But in Chowdhury's reading of Said, his higher-level argument is that Global North business school scholars are misrepresenting Bangladeshi garment workers by not centring their experience of the aftermath of the Bangladesh Accord or the Rana Plaza collapse. The

remedy to this, he claims, would be accounting for and demonstrating sensitivity towards local knowledge, tone of voice and lived experience. This argument raises important questions about the ethical responsibility of MOS scholars engaged in transnational research. Do MOS scholars have a moral obligation to privilege local worker voices, including above other analytical perspectives? Or should ethical research interrogate underlying capitalist conditions that determining material outcomes for workers?

Chowdhury's critique presents this as a zero-sum question: the former is privileged, and the latter is immaterial. This artificial 'choice' has, in our view, two problematic implications for MOS researchers. First, that the afterlife of postcolonial theory (a post-postcolonial era) is a binary between 'elite' and 'marginalised', mapped onto a simplified identity politics between the Global North and Global South, with rigid rules of engagement for those from the Global North approaching the Global South, in terms of method and representation. Second, it implies that postcolonial theory's primary ethical function should be discursive, focussed on power differentials in culture and representation, rather than on the material economic structures that perpetuate exploitation.

Our read of Chibber's intervention leads us to argue that such a narrow interpretation limits the ethical potential of postcolonial inquiry by prioritising discursive representation at the expense of a deeper critique of structural, material injustice. Chibber contends that postcolonial theory's emphasis on local knowledge, culture and economy does not undo the salience of Marxian critiques of capitalist accumulation that structure transnational dynamics—which in turn impact local knowledge, culture and economy. The most robust approach, he explains, is to acknowledge local difference while centring analysis of 'universal' categories of class and relationships to the modes of production. Akin to the feminist lens opening up heretofore unacknowledged forms of labour and value, so too does reading the discursive and cultural commitments of postcolonial theory through a Marxian lens open up a more nuanced accounting for power. Indeed, we find the evolution of feminist theorist Mohanty's (1988; 2002) own argumentation, from her landmark essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" to her follow-up "Under Western Eyes Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles" instructive: the imperative of the second essay is move beyond postcolonial cultural constructions of 'Third world women' to interrogate the Marxian structures that shape how such women are understood by Western actors, in ways specific to neoliberal capitalism. Global supply chains in the twenty-first century are firmly transnational spaces in which local knowledge, culture and economy are entwined with global power dynamics and global categories pertaining to workers, labour and class.

With this in mind, studying actors who negotiated the transnational interface of the Bangladesh Accord, including both Western garment buyers and Bangladeshi union representatives, is not an ethically compromised or power-ignorant postcolonial inquiry. An analysis focussed on understanding the actions of these negotiators is not ethically void if it does not centre on, as Chowdhury requires, the voices of RMG workers in order to understand the actions of these negotiators. The negotiators, Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) explain, operate according to the particular logics of their class position and relationships to their powerful peers. Critically, Chibber's materialist critique offers a compelling perspective; he explains that conditions of *capitalism*—and not necessarily local cultures of workers—create conditions for resistance. In other words, ethically oriented research that *is* concerned with the conditions of RMG workers and perhaps does centre their perspectives would *still* require fluency with the conditions of capitalism, i.e. negotiations between the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie—the factory owners, garment buyers, union representatives and government representatives. Ethical research, then, is not simply about who speaks, but about whether the analysis effectively illuminates relevant structures of material exploitation or identifies ways in which these structures can be mobilised to mitigate, however imperfectly, the worst effects of capital accumulation.

Chowdhury's invocation of Spivak and Said to critique Reineke and Donaghey (2015) is notable less for its engagement with postcolonial thought than for its avoidance of the robust Chibber-initiated discussions regarding the continued ethical relevance of materialist—and not just discursive—capitalist critique. Our point is not that one should uncritically accept Chibber. For example, Karim (2022)'s ethnography of the lives and intimate relations of female Bangladeshi garment workers explains how and why the workers reject certain 'universal' class descriptors and understand their social and labour position more nuanced and negotiated terms. Our point, rather, is that without a materialist, i.e. Marxian lens, the implication of Chowdhury's argument is the flattening of postcolonial theory into identity politics complaint. This flattening has ethical stakes: it risks reducing research ethics to questions of symbolic inclusion while leaving intact the exploitative structures that shape transnational economic realities.

A Case Study as Lens: The Bangladesh Accord as a Transnational Interface

Context about the historical, economic and cultural context of Bangladesh is crucial for understanding the ethical implications of adopting a materialist (i.e. Marxian approach) as opposed to a purely discursive read of postcolonial theory. After its 1971 independence, Bangladesh was known for decades in the Western public imagination as a 'development state' par excellence, marked both by deep poverty and an extensive development sector (Jahan, 2000; Shehabuddin, 2008). Neoliberal capitalism can be parasitic towards the Global South, whether in the context of international development (Escobar, 1995; Sen, 1999), foreign direct investment, corporate social responsibility (Gardner, 2012) or the application of business logics to NGO work, with donor countries superimposing their agendas, priorities and accumulative imperatives onto target countries (Khan & Westwood, 2010; Roy, 2010). This risk is especially high for an impoverished postwar country like Bangladesh, raising critical questions about dependency, economic sovereignty and labour justice.

And yet, Bangladesh's trajectory complicates this standard critique of neoliberalism: The country negotiated an astonishingly rapid upward climb into lower middle-income country status, largely due to RMGs as a main export and dominant source of foreign currency. Thus, on one hand, Bangladesh's participation in global capitalism has enabled significant poverty reduction and improved livelihoods. On the other, it has entrenched exploitative labour practices, dependency on foreign buyers and systemic vulnerabilities to economic coercion. Notably, the fact that the needs of Bangladeshi elites have been uniquely aligned with (rather than opposed to) socioeconomic upliftment of the masses (Hossain, 2017) challenges simplified narratives of class conflict. This highlights the importance of moving beyond purely discursive postcolonial analysis towards interrogating the structural conditions that shape power and participation in transnational governance.

Even in the immediate aftermath of the Rana Plaza disaster, from 2015–2019, Bangladesh's annual GDP growth was between 6 and 8%, rendering Bangladesh a lower-middle-income country according to the World Bank. In 2026, Bangladesh is slated to 'graduate' from the UN's 'Least Developed Country' status (Rahman, 2023; UN, 2024; UNCTAD, 2024). This success coexists with ongoing vulnerability to disparate power dynamics with its export markets, whether Gulf Cooperation Council countries that are destinations for Bangladeshi migrant workers or Western destinations for RMGs. Again, attentiveness to Marxian rather than simply discursive dynamics allows for the complexity of ongoing economic dependencies to surface.

The Bangladesh Accord for Building and Fire Safety exemplifies these complexities. It was a transnationally negotiated, collective and legally binding agreement between two global union federations, six Bangladeshi affiliates of the global union federation IndustriAll, eventually over 200 retail brands and four international NGOs as witness signatories (Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021a, b, 2022, 2023). As outlined in the Appendix, rather than Chowdhury's (2022) contention that the process involved Western MNCs collaborating with like-minded global worker unions, Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) focussed on the politics of contestation between the groups and how those contestations produced the Accord. Notably, the Accord is the first such agreement that does not just embody signatories' intentions or pledges but is legally binding (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2023). Donaghey and Reinecke subsequently follow the implementation and transformation of the Bangladesh Accord (2018, 2023) and other initiatives mobilising worker voice through workplace dialogue (2021) through six field trips to Bangladesh and over 140 interviews, with MNCs, Bangladeshi industrialists, unionists, workers and other parties, as further explained in the Appendix.

The creation of the Accord—the discussions, disagreements, media campaigns and public statements—renders the Accord a transnational interface in neoliberal global capitalism. Transnational spaces are heterogeneous, whether they be territorial (e.g. an Export Processing Zone), legal (a trade treaty), commercial (a subsidiary/parent relationship) or relational (interpersonal dynamic between a seller and a purchaser along a supply chain). The relationship is not always linear or direct: highly publicised cases of consumers receiving pleas for help from workers hidden in consumer goods suggest the ability of workers to bypass union or factory owner gatekeepers, in an unexpected break from expected class and voice boundaries.

In the case of the Accord, politics underpinning relationships between global union federations and international NGOs led to a labour coalition that successfully pressured reluctant, high-profile fashion brands into signing the Accord to commit them to improve factory safety (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2015). The Accord thus offers an opportunity to study dynamics of private transnational labour governance actors in response to the Rana Plaza disaster, and specifically 'the question of how production and consumption-based capacities can interact to produce private labour governance in global supply chains' (2015: pg. 724). The choice of how to frame transnational capitalism is where commitments to the afterlife of postcolonial theory and the promise of a cosmopolitan future become clear. For example, garment workers and their proxies feature on international speaker circuits—arguably an important form of 'recognition'. How does this translate into scholarly work?

Within the corpus of Bangladeshi scholars writing in English regarding the Bangladeshi garment labour industry, clear themes emerge over time. The rise of the industry in the early 2000s and the 2005 expiry of the MultiFibre Trade Agreement (leading to a question about whether Western preferences for Bangladesh as a garment export destination would hold after the expiry of the MFTA's preferential treatment) led to studies of women's changing public and domestic status and mobility, and implications for Bangladesh's economic development. There was not a straightforward gender or labour story: women were experiencing poor, exploitative factory working conditions (Muhammad, 2006, 2011) but greater domestic bargaining power, economic independence and freedom of movement (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004), even as historic domestic gendered divisions of labour made this ostensible progress uneven (Kibria, 1995, 1998). While garment labour's role in driving national poverty reduction was causal and generally seen as positive, gendered and urban/rural inequalities *within* garment work remained concerning (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004; Muhammad, 2011; BILS, 2009). In the 1990s, the national story about the economic and social empowerment of the poor female RMG workforce was uneven and complex (Kibria, 1998). Complexity to RMG power dynamics and implications has been threaded through the industry from its start.

In the early 1990s and 2000s, the centrality of foreign investment and foreign demand and the low value-added nature of garment production kept Bangladesh a 'peripheral' economy entirely reliant on the whims of foreign buyers and investors (Muhammad, 2006). Bangladesh's early 2000s status as a peripheral economy shifted as it moved into more specialised forms of RMG processing and export, changing its status in global RMG supply chains. As a result, only five years later, the growth of Bangladesh's home-grown class of factory owners and operators had shifted the balance of power: the RMG industry might still be exploiting female workers, but a Bangladeshi class owning the means of production shifted the globalisation critiques of the 1990s and early 2000s into different territory. A new form of material power was being concentrated into a new local elite. Such local ownership of the means of production complicates traditional globalisation critiques: the question, when it comes to the RMG industry, was not purely Western economic dominance, but how domestic elites engage in and benefit from this expression of transnational capitalism.

Interfaces in Transnational Capitalism

To study transnational neoliberal capitalism is to study interfaces. This includes interfaces between actors (e.g. multinational corporations, suppliers, workers, trade unions, non-governmental organisations, policy makers), geographic locales (e.g. the Global North and the Global South), site-specific organisations (e.g. a factory, a port) and the human and non-human (e.g. worker engagement with algorithms or processes). This is epitomised in global supply chain models, which also de-territorialises the research field, challenging MOS researchers to study interfaces between up- and downstream actors and their dynamics across global supply chains. Globalisation has been described as a social form of deterritorialisation, or 'a transformation of social geography' which saw the emergence of 'a particular kind of social space, namely, a realm that substantially transcends the confines of territorial place, territorial distance and territorial borders' (Scholte, 2002, p. 286). As a result, social and economic relations substantially transcend territorial geography and acquire a new global connectivity such as through transborder production processes. This means that we cannot fully understand power relations without considering the way in which they are materially inscribed within transnational power dynamics. The Bangladesh Accord epitomises this: to study the Accord is to engage a field that is simultaneously global and situated in Bangladesh. Many of the actors participating in the Accord are not Bangladeshi. Bangladeshi garment workers are ostensibly at the heart of the Accord's goals, but so too are Western consumers' preferences and reputational risk.

In other words, one cannot understand root causes of labour violations impacting workers in a RMG factory without studying capitalist dynamics structuring global supply chains. Our debate with Chowdhury's, 2022 paper is thus a productive one, calling attention to the fact that, as Chibber argues, understanding potential forms of resistance and improvement to workers' position requires understanding transnational neoliberal capitalism, as arranged and negotiated by actors with power derived from their relationships to the modes of production.

The 2013 Rana Plaza disaster was not entirely 'Made in Bangladesh'; dynamics leading to the factory collapse were driven by transnational forces. The roots of the disaster lie in the fact that Western-based consumer brands were continually seeking lower costs to sell cheap goods to consumers, compounded by a rising class of Bangladeshi garment manufacturers that came to wield extraordinary power and political influence in a country where garment exports make up the vast majority of exports. Thus, to study the Rana Plaza disaster is to study the links between consumption in the Global North and production in the Global South as well as the capitalist power dynamics shaping these links (Donaghey et al., 2014). Accordingly, the political economy implications of transnational relationships developing governance instruments are material both to the political economy of Bangladesh and to understand the transnational power configurations that continue to shape the country. Studying the interface between an elite class of Bangladeshi

garment manufacturers and their international buyers offers an opportunity to examine how responses to the Rana Plaza disaster are the outcomes of much wider issues of political economy significance. These are not specific to Bangladesh but involve examining mechanisms and pathways neoliberal capitalism developed to be transnational in nature and how actors interact across the transnational realm to develop governance instruments. Studying labour issues in global supply chains implicates a multiplicity of geographies and intersections between actors.

The point is that transnational supply chain-driven capitalism brings together multiple levels, all of which may merit close study. Focussing or not focussing on one part of the complex configuration does not automatically negate research on other parts of the configuration. Yet, Chowdhury overlooks transnational interfaces when contending that Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) 'misrepresented the events that followed the Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh by limiting their focus to the Accord' (pg. 5). As we detail in the Appendix, Chowdhury contends the authors 'imply that reform is best performed when powerful [here: Western] actors coordinate among their elite circles and act accordingly' (pg. 7).[1] However, it has been half a century since Nader (1974) called for scholars of capitalism to 'study up' in order to understand oppressed workers: it is the elites above them who structure the conditions under which they toil. Mills' (1956) canonical sociology of the 'power elite' argues for the analytic value in studying elites: 'top corporations' are 'knit together' by associations across industries and geographies, he explains, allowing them to 'translate narrow economic powers into industry-wide and class-wide powers' (1956, pg. 122). In other words, to understand the conditions of oppressed workers, one must analyse actions and decisions of elites shaping these conditions. The utility in invoking Chibber's critique of postcolonial and subaltern theory is to point out that analytical awareness of local realities and lived experience of workers is not just a question of their discursive representation. One can, of course, represent workers badly. Rather, accounting for their material conditions means acknowledging and investigating the ways those material conditions are set by those with different relationships to the modes of production: owners, operators, purchasers, regulators and consumers.

[1] Elsewhere, Reinecke and Donaghey explain that the ideal situation is where workers democratically elect their representatives (2021a), and that a significant problem of the corporate social responsibility approach is that it operates through headquarters-based representation rather than through representation at local sites, i.e. the factory floor (2021b).

Beyond 'Inside' and 'Outside' at the Interfaces

As discussed earlier, MOS researchers have called for reflexivity as a postcolonial theory-informed practice. Disciplines using qualitative methods similar to those used by MOS have done the same, e.g. anthropology's widely acknowledged 'reflexive turn' involving anthropologists turning their inquiring gaze inward towards the discipline's own methods (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). Anthropologists working in this reflexive register have contributions useful to the development of our argument regarding the utility of surfacing the Marxian—and not just discursive—possibilities of postcolonial theory.

Reflexivity makes one's position vis-à-vis the field of research a generative question. Studying interfaces means that MOS researchers find themselves positioned simultaneously 'inside' and 'outside' of a transnational capitalist field. As MOS scholars employed at business schools dependent on international flows of paying students and corporate sponsors, we are never outside the capitalist dynamics we study. Our subject positions will not fall onto one side of an insider/outsider binary and will almost certainly be hybrid: conflicted, negotiated and fragmented. This hybridity resonates with a world 'after the postcolonial', as anthropologists Veena Das (2022) and AbdouMalik Simone (2018) explain, which is a world in which theorist Homi Bhabha's (1990, 1994) conceptions of 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' and 'hybridity', which were novel and even radical ideas decades ago, have given way to more negotiated categories and emergent understandings of nation, identity and representation. While the individual components of a supply chain have been well theorised, the *links between* the constitutive elements—e.g. negotiations, agreements, frameworks are often under-theorised. Codes of conduct can be useful sites for documenting and theorising how direct clashes in values and priorities attributable to different subject positions manage to find resolution: what forms of recognition ensue and what epistemologies shape starting points and are embedded in conclusions.

Interfaces in transnational value chains embody logics, exclusions and epistemologies of the participating parties. These interfaces can be de-territorialised and not necessarily grounded in a single place or even in a place linked to workers or those implicated along supply chains. Why does this matter for MOS studies of transnational interfaces of neoliberal globalised supply chains? Anthropologist Annelise Riles (2006), writing about reflexive knowledge production in a way that is relevant for qualitative MOS scholars, explains that difference and an 'outside' to one's subject area is prerequisite to anthropological (or indeed, qualitative) knowledge production. Interfaces are useful because one is likely to be both an insider and an outsider, which can strengthen qualitative research, not diminish it. Riles

(2006, pg. 79) explains that a challenge to reflexivity is the 'problem of studying knowledge practices that draw upon and overlap with the anthropologist's own rather than serving as a point of analogy or comparison for the anthropologist's questions'. MOS scholars, regardless of home country or institution, will have to locate and explain to readers their 'outside' to the qualitative knowledge they aim to produce. Chibber gives us the challenge of doing this: Marxian explanations of capitalism are universal, he explains. If they are universal, then how can the MOS scholar be outside it?

The answer to this will have to be negotiated and nuanced. What is *not* implicated in this answer, however, are identity-based rules about what one can or cannot research. If anything, they are anathema to our reading of Chibber as calling for nuanced and self-reflexive analysis regarding capitalist relations—including the researcher's own embeddedness in capitalist relations.

Worker Agency at the Interface: Mobilising 'Up'

Literature on transnational regulation *does* often empirically omit workers and this omission can be reproduced theoretically as well. Contributions from the Global South do not regularly appear in top academic journals and Western scholars tend to self-reproduce in their citations (Venkateswaran & Ojha, 2017; Walsh, 2015; Zoogah et al., 2015). This raises an important question: must MOS researchers always look at the downstream dynamics on the least advantaged in their studies? *Not* discussing the Accord through the lens of workers, Chowdhury (2022) contends, it is an act of meta-ignorance and meta-insensitivity. Does the omission of worker voices from Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) count as a misrepresentation of 'the marginalized'? Does a post-postcolonial imperative mean that worker perspectives need to be centred?

One reason to study transnational interfaces, Chibber reminds us, is understanding modes of possible resistance. This could mean understanding how the interests of marginalised workers *can* gain voice and influence in the development of transnational governance institutions, such as Bangladeshi garment workers in the negotiation of the Accord (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2015). Under neoliberal capitalism, traditional and more local avenues of worker representation and power through trade unions and collective bargaining have been restrained (Baccaro & Howell, 2011; Kelly, 2015). With limited production power at the factory level, workers increasingly mobilise transnational consumption relations in their fight for labour rights, both by enlisting and by being enlisted in international solidarity campaigns fought by global unions and worker rights activists. Indeed, trade union representation coupled with transnational representation leveraging consumer relations has emerged as an increasingly promising avenue for increasing worker voice, power and representation in transnational capitalism (Donaghey et al., 2014).

Accordingly, workers at the upstream end of global supply chains who have been affected by transnational capitalist relations can, in turn, also mobilise these transnational relations to gain voice and representation (Donaghey and Reinecke, 2015; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2023). The 'labour caucus' within the Accord negotiations comprised signatory Bangladeshi and global unions federations, and labour NGOs aimed at representing workers and their interests in the creation and implementation of the Accord. Drawing on fieldwork across eight years, Reinecke and Donaghey (2023) describe a persistent phenomenon: garment workers and their labour representatives sought to find ways to appeal directly to end consumers, whether MNC purchasers or Western shoppers. Despite being spatially and cognitively far removed from Western consumers and MNC headquarters, they found creative ways to jump across links in the supply chain to target foreign end consumers directly. For example, immediately after Rana Plaza collapsed, the US-based Workers Rights Consortium photographed labels of brands in the rubble as proof that brands were sourcing from there. Similarly, the Clean Clothes Campaign, in campaigning to raise the minimum wage, targeted the western brands (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021b). Here, worker voice is enabled or amplified by international labour rights NGOs. Importantly, such tactics have also been employed by Bangladeshi unions.[2]

The ability of Western labour rights groups as well as local unions to mobilise reputational risk among brand consumers, resulting in renewed pressure for improved workplace conditions, is an important phenomenon for supply chain researchers and other scholars of transnational capitalism because it complicates a straightforward notion of what is meant by 'worker's voice', how that voice is expressed and who is meant to hear it. The ability of workers to jump over links in the supply chain is not universally accessible to workers suffering brutalising working conditions. Bangladeshi tannery workers, for example, are not linked to brands in the global public imagination; they remain invisible. Garment workers, by contrast, occupy a highly visible place in the Bangladeshi as well as global public imagination; the horrific Rana Plaza disaster notwithstanding, their place in

[2] While in Bangladesh, Reinecke and Donaghey met with a group or workers from the National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF) who had walked off the job in a factory over safety concerns. The workers showed them the labels of western brands sourcing from the factory. Their Secretary-General said that only brands had the power to change supplier behaviour. Similarly, when union leaders were jailed without trial after wildcat industrial action in Ashulia in Bangladesh, the international union federations mobilised western brands to try to secure their release.

the everyday hierarchy of workers—specifically through their representation in Western media—is not at the bottom.

To be sure, studying representation of workers through the 'labour caucus' does not capture the actual interests or voices of workers. This has been skilfully done elsewhere (Kabeer et al., 2020; Siddiqi, 2020; Tanjeem, 2017). As detailed in the Appendix, Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) acknowledge they intentionally do not focus on Bangladeshi workers,[3] but instead focus on their international union representatives as those actors who could mobilise pressure from workers, given the general repression of garment factory unionisation in Bangladesh by factory owners and the state (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2023).

'Representation' in the context of international unions or activist campaigns has long been recognised as both a fraught analytic concept and empirical process (Hyman, 2005; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2022). Indeed, the Accord's focus on building and fire safety represents a narrow range of worker interests. Scholars have critiqued the ability of trade unions as well as NGO campaigns to represent workers in general and have criticised the focus on the Accord as displacing representation of other interests (Kabeer et al., 2020). While labour rights campaigners and NGOs play an important role in creating a discursive interface between workers, international corporations and global citizens (Nanz & Steffek, 2004), NGOs can remain self-appointed representatives (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021a, b). Unions, by contrast, base their representation on a logic of membership (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2022). However, union representation in Bangladesh is weak (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2023) and many conflicting interests are inscribed onto the so-called 'independent' Bangladeshi unions. This ranges from political party interests (unions are affiliated with political parties); Northern labour interests (unions receive financing for rent; training programs and salaries for union leaders from labour allies in the Global North) (Rahman & Langford, 2014; Tanjeem, 2017); and even employer interests ('yellow unions' or *dalal*/ 'double agents' who cooperate with employer organisations) (Siddiqi, 2020). The representation of workers in transnational solidarity campaigns has been critiqued for reproducing a 'neocolonial image of the "Third World," ignoring complex realities on the ground, and urging Global North saviours to "save" Bangladeshi women workers' (Siddiqi, 2009, pg. 159; Tanjeem, 2017).

Thus, studying how and by whom workers or other marginalised communities are represented is important for understanding levers for workers' rights in global labour governance, but must not be conflated with actual workers' voice. Instead, it must be seen in the context of competing interests of participants in the wider transnational capitalist dynamics that shape the prospects and constraints for advancing worker power.

Beyond Binaries: from 'Elite' vs. 'Marginalised' to Layered Power Relations

In the context of historical imperialism and the hierarchies of global value chains, it is important to ask how the vantage point of scholars hailing from or based at institutions at one end of the supply chain shapes their analyses of issues concerning workers at the other end of the global supply chain. Indeed, Chowdhury's (2022) core critique of Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) is what he describes as their reproduction of exclusionary hierarchies in choosing to focus on 'elites' at the expense of the 'marginalised', in the context of the Bangladesh Accord—with Bangladeshi garment workers, largely female, as the marginalised.

However, we argue that a binary framework of 'elite' versus 'marginalised' oversimplifies the complexity of power relations in transnational capitalism, and in Bangladesh. Indeed, who the normative elite or marginalised actors are in the context of the Accord becomes blurred; in this section, we explain in detail why this is the case. Relying upon a 'marginalised' versus 'elite' binary as the most relevant way to discuss power obscures how complex power disparities unfold in transnational capitalist assemblages (which includes local contexts), given the complex relationships of different actors to the modes of production. A more nuanced approach recognises that power is layered, relational and contingent upon actors' positions within global supply chains and their relationships to the modes of production.

Shades of Marginalisation: Bangladeshi Female Garment Workers

The visibility, political existence and well-studied nature of Bangladeshi garment workers matters, and illustrates that power is not necessarily neatly bifurcated between a singular, monolithic 'elite' versus an undifferentiated 'marginalised' class. To return to our Chibber-informed debate with postcolonial theory as a discursive, historiographic and cultural project: a major part of postcolonial theory in the 1980s and 1990s was the Subaltern Studies group. The subaltern were quite literally, unknown, unnamed masses lost to history as a function of their labours.[4] The 'subaltern' schema

[3] See Donaghey and Reinecke (2018) and Reinecke and Donaghey (2021a, b, 2022, 2023) for discussions of worker representation and unionism.

[4] The omission of the India's common people—the unnamed masses—in history was a crisis for a postcolonial project of national self-fashioning. To *not* represent a group of people in literature, history or the public imagination is thus not just a question of agentive choice on the part of writers and authors of historical records, but potentially an act of reinforcing existing power disparities that

served a clear analytic purpose for the Subaltern Studies group: rice harvested itself; wheat manifested into flour; the individual humans and communities behind these labours were effaced. This dynamic of structural invisibility does not extend onto Bangladeshi garment workers: they are highly visible and accounted for *precisely* due to their exploitation. *Subaltern labour invisibility takes different empirical and theoretic pathways than labour exploitation under transnational neoliberal capitalism*. This distinction is material for several reasons.

First, an uncritical and unnuanced use of 'marginalised' risks obscuring rather than illuminating materially relevant power relations impacting workers domestically as well as how they are represented in transnational interfaces. The rapid rise of the RMG sector in Bangladesh profoundly reshaped Bangladeshi society, shifting religious and cultural norms regarding the mobility of women, and giving rise to an elite Bangladeshi owning and managerial class, enmeshed within local and national government across the two main political parties (Hassan & Raihan, 2017). Meanwhile, Bangladeshi factory owners form part of a national Bangladeshi elite: their powerful business interests jostle against entrenched foreign-funded international development agendas. Rendering these dynamics into a 'marginalised' versus 'elites' binary misses out on intricate power dynamics central to forms of representation discussed by Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) for the Accord, specifically, and in transnational capitalism, generally.

Second, for the Subaltern Studies group, omission is misrepresentation only if the cohort in question is the 'subaltern' (Guha, 1984; Spivak, 1999). Within the Bangladeshi garment sector, the most marginalised seem to be the predominantly female garment workers. They are subject to violence and harm and suffer exploitation at the hands of factory owners. This is not synonymous with being subaltern: they have access to political participation, even if incomplete or contingent and have a well-established place in the nation's political and socioeconomic imaginary (Hossain, 2019; Karim, 2014a, 2014b; Siddiqi, 2015). Karim's (2022) masterful ethnography of Bangladeshi garment workers in different life stages accounts for 'betrayals' in both factories and their homes that brought the women into industrial work (2020).

Third, the position of women workers in the RMG sector is the result of socioeconomic and cultural shifts that were widely lauded and nationally transformative for the ways they directly enabled female economic participation—while also creating new forms of exploitation for women to endure, as discussed earlier. Schematising 'good' versus 'bad' research—particularly in the case of Bangladesh—omits recognition of an RMG history that researchers agree is complex: advancements for women have been accompanied by new forms of harm. There is a need to delve into this complex accounting, while recognising the equally well-established point that the rise of the female garment industry workforce has yielded a national transformation for possibilities for poor and/or rural women in Bangladesh.

Lastly, with the nation's foreign exchanges reserves and GDP overwhelmingly reliant on RMG labour, any narratives of foreign rapaciousness and foreign apologists must be in conversation with Bangladeshi agency to determine the best course of national economic growth (Hossain, 2017). Here is where Chibber's intervention is particularly apt: any number of Bangladeshi economists, factory owners, politicians, high-ranking factor workers or Bangladeshis who have seen their wealth grow over the past 30 years would praise the RMG as an overwhelmingly positive national and local economic phenomenon. How those perspectives should be understood against female RMG workers' perspectives is an ongoing question that is as material (and Marxian) as it is discursive.

Shades of Marginalisation: Bangladeshi Unions

Bangladesh consistently features in the list of ten worst countries to be a trade unionist due to physical threats to the lives, freedom and physical health of trade unionists with state collaboration in terms of supressing worker rights (ITUC, 2018). As few as 20 out of 4296 garment factories registered with the BGMEA are estimated to have unions that are independent and fully functional (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2023). Bangladesh's garment unions are not elite institutions, but—and here is where the 'elite versus marginalised' binary breaks down—nor are they voiceless. Unions are party to the Bangladesh Accord along with the multinational corporations driving the process, and shape responses of Bangladeshi factory owners and their elected representatives.

Despite the limitations of Bangladeshi unions, they still provide some platform, however incomplete, for workers to access transnational interfaces and deliver powerful messages that do travel and have ultimately been shown to shape worker representation on international stages. This has also translated into an elevation of local union power in Bangladesh. For example, the well-known Bangladeshi labour leader Kalpona Akter is a former garment factory child labourer, unionist and current Executive Director of the Dhaka-based Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity. Gender Studies scholar Nafisa Tanjeem (2017) shadowed Akter on her US college campus speaking tour to support campaigns for the Accord and for victim compensation. As

Footnote 4 (continued)

may silence certain groups of people. Accounting for the non-represented—the subaltern—was the historiographic, literary and political project of the Subaltern Studies group.

Tanjeem explains, Akter's talks were framed as a labour leader lending an 'authentic' voice to labour rights campaigns in the Global North, which allowed relevant NGOs to present themselves as transmitters of workers' own demands into global discourses to build legitimacy around their claims.

These forms of solidarity and organising are imperfect and laden with inequalities. Worker representation by NGOs is both disproportionately skewed towards certain constituencies, such as business interests, and towards the agendas of activists in the Global North (Siddiqi, 2009; Tanjeem, 2017). Only the labour leaders such as Akter who support the agendas of foreign NGOs and use language that is palatable and appealing to the transnational allies of these NGOs are given resources and global platforms. And yet, if non-engagement with Bangladesh's arguably most internationally well-known workforce, garment workers, is an act of epistemic violence, then what concepts apply to the complete invisibility of actual subaltern communities whose labours collectively contribute to the texture of garment workers lives, inside and outside the RMG factory?

Rana Plaza, the factory whose devastating collapse prompted the Bangladesh Accord, was in Savar, a crowded neighbourhood north of Dhaka, one of the world's most densely populated urban centres. One of this paper's authors, based in Dhaka for before and following the Rana Plaza collapse, commuted from Dhaka via Savar to the northern community of Dhamrai. As in Dhaka, the street commutes and home life of garment workers would have been interlaced with an array of highly local, non-transnational labourers: roadside children sent from rural homes to the city run up to passing pedestrians and three-wheeled taxis, bicycle rickshaws and cars stalled in constant traffic to sell jasmine garlands to be worn around women's wrists and chignons on festive holidays. Many Biharis—a stateless, socially isolated and even arguably reviled underclass of Pakistan sympathisers 'left behind' after Bangladesh's 1971 independence victory from Pakistan—are sweepers and cleaners in Dhaka and environs, managing sewage, sorting waste and cleaning homes and streets. Anonymous labourers who originally constructed Rana Plaza would have included brick-breakers, frequently women with babies tied across their backs as they grind bricks into dust by hand for meagre wages.

The point here is that the labours and lives of garment workers have always been entwined with a truly invisible underclass—none of whom are unionised or visible to international audiences, as their labours are local. Their wages are far less than those of garment workers. They are arguably the subaltern. Use of words encoding power dynamics (leader, marginalised, boss, worker, exploited) are flags to explore dynamics at play. Readers and reviewers should start to expect articles that use such power-encoding words, but without exploring the implied power dynamics, as potentially incomplete.

Shades of Marginalisation: Bangladeshi Garment Manufacturers

Are Bangladeshi garment manufacturers marginalised or elite? In global value chain theory (Gereffi et al., 2005), suppliers are theorised as power-deprived in buyer-driven value chains such as apparel. Vis-à-vis the purchasing power of global brands, they are. Within the Accord negotiations, however, factory owners were deliberately excluded not because they were powerless, but because they were *too* powerful as a political force in Bangladesh and certainly too powerful vis-à-vis garment workers. Given that the collapse of Rana Plaza had already indicated how workers can be vulnerable to factory owners' mismanagement and illegal behaviours, the need to protect workers was used to justify the exclusion of Bangladeshi factory owners. A more refined lens is necessary to understand who is marginalised, who is not and whether parties can have meaningful solidarity with marginalised actors in the complexity of neoliberal capitalism.

These complications point to both the situatedness of power relations between powerful and marginalised actors as well as their fluidity. Anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2002), writing in the wake of postcolonial theory's heyday, identifies a paradox of late twentieth-century multinational and transnational neoliberal capitalism: it produces a drive towards cultural homogeneity, while simultaneously allowing an à la carte approach to difference: one can pick and choose which cultural norms to avail while simultaneously disavowing others. Reinecke and Donaghey (2023) acknowledge the paradox as existing in both the Bangladeshi and foreign negotiators: Bangladeshi owners can disavow parts of Bangladesh garment industry norms from the upscale London neighbourhoods that are their residence (if not legal domicile), align themselves with Bangladeshi compatriots and national interest when inviting foreigners to meet in their Dhaka conference rooms, and demonstrate affinity for a class of global elites, united by shared consumption preferences and upscale norms of self-presentation (an expensive car, a designer handbag).

By moving from a rigid elite-marginalised binary to a layered, relational approach to power at transnational interfaces, we take an important first step towards what Trouillot (1995) describes as rendering the material tensions between these different identifications explicit. These tensions trouble the otherwise tidy, bounded expectations of a Bangladeshi (poor, disadvantaged) versus a European, Brit or American (advantaged, powerful).

Again, the point is that the identifications are not just discursive or cultural, per Chowdhury's read. The categorical distinctions invoked in discursive critiques fail to account for the material complexities of global capitalism, where

power is not only determined by geography or identity but by relationships to the means and modes of production. Recognising these intersecting layers of power and dependency moves us beyond the limitations of binaries and towards a more nuanced, materialist understanding of transnational capitalism that critically engages with how power is structured, contested and negotiated across global supply chains.

Discussion: Invitations to MOS Scholars

Studying issues of responsibility, accountability and justice in transnational capitalist relations spanning the Global North and Global South presents inherent challenges, not least because of the intricacies of power, representation and positionality that shape knowledge production. Power does not only manifest in the economic disparities between Global North and Global South actors but also in the research process itself, where scholars navigate risks of epistemic violence, extractive methodologies and ethical dilemmas of speaking for or about marginalised communities. To be sure, marginalised voices from the Global South need a greater presence in business ethics research. However, collapsing this imperative down to 'representation' alone oversimplifies complexities of power within what we term 'transnational interfaces'—spaces where Global North and Global South actors engage in contested negotiations shaped by capitalist imperatives.

In our attempt to reckon with the ethical responsibilities of researching global economic structures, we build on post-postcolonial debates that centre analysis around material, structural forces driving inequalities. These can be glimpsed and reproduced in discourse, culture and representation—but are not reducible to them. Hence, we have examined how incorporating post-postcolonial theory, and Chibber's Marx-centred contributions, into analyses of transnational neoliberal capitalist interfaces surfaces generative questions and complex, layered power relations beyond tidy binaries of marginalised vs. the elite, or coloniser vs. colonial subject. The emphasis on material analysis and the way this implicates MOS researchers leads to a question, however: how does one move beyond the appealing simplicity of a personal identity-based critique or prescriptive rules regarding who should study whom, and how? We offer three invitations to encourage MOS scholars (ourselves included) to study transnational interfaces, move beyond binaries and incorporate 'noise' into our research accounts.

Studying Transnational Interfaces

We argued that MOS researchers interested in ethical perspectives on transnational labour rights and corporate accountability must pay close attention to the interconnectedness of local, national and global actors in shaping how responsibility is negotiated. The Bangladesh Accord illustrates how labour struggles are not isolated within national boundaries but are instead embedded within broader transnational networks of influence, where global norms intersect with national policies and local practices that can place local elites at odds with local workers. As a result, power is mobilised across North–South divides. Thus, as much as the challenges faced by workers are shaped by global economic interdependencies, it is also through mobilising global economic forces that labour rights gains are achieved via the Accord. These interconnected dynamics challenge scholars to consider how governance mechanisms like the Accord are shaped by multiple layers of influence and not just dependency, but *inter*dependency.

A Marxian approach to capitalist accumulation as a universalism with local cultural specificity offers a means to understand both the structural linkages that sustain exploitation and the potential for resistance: for example, conditions under which transnational governance mechanisms can foster meaningful and sustained labour rights improvements. Chowdhury's reading of classic postcolonial theorists to focus exclusively upon representative, discursive and cultural dimensions forecloses this possibility. One can, of course, critique governance mechanisms like the Accord for complicity in ultimately sustaining exploitative supply chains. Yet, one can also ask how capital can be turned against itself, and how governance mechanisms can be developed within capitalism's own constraints to secure meaningful—even if incremental—improvements in labour conditions. Securing even the most basic labour protections, such as workplace safety in an industry plagued by dangerous conditions, may seem modest. Yet, for the garment worker who can now go to work without fearing for her life due to the radical improvements in factory safety that the Accord secured, this advancement is material and significant.

We are, in other words, back to where postcolonial theory found its initial footing, regarding Marxian approaches to the primitive accumulation of capital. One of Chibber's most debated contentions is that the postcolonial theorists and Subaltern Studies group ultimately lost their way in shifting away from materialist critique and towards cultural and discursive critique. The project of this paper is to not settle that enduring debate. But the debate does help us name our main challenges for MOS scholars engaging with transnational interfaces spanning the Global South and the Global North in the aftermath of postcolonial studies: can discursive analysis of these interfaces ever escape what Chibber refers to the as the universal or totalising explanations offered by Marxian analysis? Can MOS researchers, as individuals with their own relationships to modes of production, ever

truly locate their 'outside' to Marxian analysis as a universal framework for understanding capitalist power? We do not have the answers to these questions; hence our invitation to MOS scholars to explore the complexities surfaced by Marxian material and relational analysis, particularly in transnational contexts.

Moving Beyond Binaries

A central argument of this paper has been the need for a nuanced understanding of power relations in transnational labour governance. To fully grasp the complexities of transnational interfaces, we need to pay attention to the material dimensions of transnational capitalism and move beyond simplistic binaries such as 'elite' versus 'marginalised' or 'insider' versus 'outsider' to understand how global economic structures shape local labour relations as well as avenues for change. As illustrated by the Bangladesh RMG supply chain, the tension between female garment workers' empowerment and exploitation has been a central, enduring theme of analyses over the past 30 years. However, the multi-layered transnational interfaces mean that we cannot frame power solely in terms of local agency versus global domination. What has emerged as a more pronounced evolution over time is a shift from the RMG sector as wholly dominated by foreign investment and buyers to one in which a Bangladeshi RMG-owning class and a political class raised with the expectation of a mature RMG sector participates in the global industry on a very different footing than in the sector's early days. Accordingly, the dynamics of Bangladesh Accord negotiations demonstrate that transnational interfaces are complex, multi-layered spaces where diverse actors—including worker representatives, global unions, NGOs, multinational corporations and local factory owners—negotiate power and contest change. Power in transnational interfaces is fluid, relational and constantly contested, requiring MOS scholars to adopt an analytical approach that examines both structural forces and the dynamic processes that shape transnational labour governance. Moving beyond the elite-marginalised binary certainly does not mean denying oppression. Nor does it mean relying on facile representation as a panacea in transnational governance. Representation is not a straightforward process of amplifying marginalised voices, but a contested terrain shaped by competing interests and power struggles. This calls attention to the different ways actors exercise, negotiate and contest power.

Ethical Reflexivity: Admitting Noise and Deep Context

An ethical perspective onto transnational capitalism, particularly when engaging the Global South, requires researchers to navigate ethical tensions embedded in knowledge production. Ethical reflexivity demands that researchers are aware of how knowledge is produced, the interests it serves and the ways in which research itself is implicated in the very dynamics of power and capital accumulation it seeks to critique. Specifically, going beyond binaries challenges the role of the researcher in studying transnational interfaces because researchers can be implicated in the very systems they are studying. Banerjee and Prasad (2009) invite a decolonial approach by asking MOS researchers to account for the Eurocentric presumptions underlying their research. To accomplish this, MOS scholars need to account for the intersubjective nature of knowledge production in qualitative research and the disparate power dynamics between researchers and their human subjects that holds the potential for epistemic violence.

Yet, scholars at Global North universities, and specifically business schools, seeking to study neoliberal transnational interfaces often find themselves constrained by the impacts of neoliberal logics that shape their methodological and analytic choices. While MOS has become more diverse, pluralist and open to non-Western contexts often through more interpretative qualitative methodologies, we have perhaps forgotten to celebrate alternative ways of writing and theorising that would be more attune to the nuances and complications of blurred boundaries. Analytical templates have become the expectation in many of the high-ranked MOS journals, with university budgets making frequent publishing in these journals a career imperative. The neat boxing of messy qualitative data into clear-cut categories such as the 'Gioia Method' for grounded theory gives qualitative studies the resemblance of rigour and replicability analogous to quantitative pieces. Yet, the emphasis on 'clean' theoretical models and simplified power binaries (elite vs. marginalised) risks flattening the complexities of transnational capitalism.

Instead, a commitment to ethical reflexivity suggests not just embracing the messiness of qualitative research but also explicitly acknowledging competing narratives, historical contingencies and the researcher's own embeddedness in global economic structures they analyse. Indeed, the incorporation of 'noise' back into our intellectual process models would not undercut the schematic traceability from data to theory but provides the supporting analytic context for how the researcher arrived at his or her conclusions. This could take the form of a 'Fieldwork Metadata Acknowledgment' to provide insight into the process from raw data to analysis. This could include additional context of relevant local, national and transnational political dynamics, local power dynamics as well as reflections on the researcher's own positionality in them. What might currently be considered extraneous context is not a disturbance to theory building: it can be a springboard to theory building. The clean lines in intellectual process models have always been

at odds with the interpretative nature of qualitative data collection and analysis. The prioritisation of efficiency in our written outputs has led to less engagement with the complexity of human relations and the material implications of history, rather than the deeper reckoning with these factors that likely drew many MOS scholars to qualitative research in the first place.

Conclusion

Ethical engagement with human and labour rights in global supply chains cannot therefore be reduced to a binary choice between studying capitalism in the Global North or exclusively foregrounding perspectives of the 'marginalised' in the Global South. Instead, we argue that critical insights can emerge at transnational interfaces: spaces where actors from the Global North and South negotiate capitalist relationships, shape governance mechanisms like the Bangladesh Accord and contest power asymmetries. Revisiting postcolonial theory through a Marxian lens, as advanced by Chibber, we argued that while postcolonial perspectives have provided valuable insights into cultural and ideological dimensions of global inequality, they risk underplaying the structural forces of transnational capitalism that drive local exploitation and labour struggles.

To conclude, we want to highlight that MOS scholarship has much to gain from deeper engagement with the Global South. Rather than discouraging scholars from embarking on research that might be personally challenging or ethically complex, we seek to encourage reflexive research taking the relational nature of qualitative fieldwork and transnational capitalism into account. We call for a more pluralistic approach to studying transnational capitalism that brings together materialist analysis, critical reflexivity and a commitment to interrogating the structural conditions that can lead to meaningful improvements in labour governance, supply chain and responsible business.

Appendix: Responses

Quotation from Chowdhury (2022)	Response from Reinecke and Donaghey
'Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) describe how different powerful actors, such as MNCs, participated in the reform of the Bangladeshi supply chain governance through the Accord.'	Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) focussed on how global union federations and international NGOs formed an alliance to pressure MNCs to sign up to the Accord. We did not make any claims as to whether this 'reformed' the Bangladeshi supply chain.
'They emphasize that MNCs came to restore the supply chain in Bangladesh, coordinated through the selected engagement of Western trade unions and NGOs. Consequently, this process reformed the supply chain and the conditions of marginalized workers in Bangladesh.'	Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) argues the reverse. Rather than saying the Accord was coordinated by MNCs, the paper analyses the contested political processes through which NGOs and global union federations combined forces in order to pressure MNCs to sign up to the Accord. As the field research was carried out in the first 18 months of the operation of the Accord, the paper strictly focusses on the creation of the Accord as a governance instrument. It makes no evaluation as to the extent to which the Accord 'reformed' the supply chain. It also makes no assessment as to the extent to which the Accord affected marginalised workers.
'Thus, in their representation of the Accord, they imply that reform is best performed when powerful actors coordinate among their elite circles and act accordingly.'	This is entirely untrue. Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) analyses an actual empirical event (the political process that led to the creation of the Bangladesh Accord), and does not put forward a normative position as to what is 'best.' In subsequent work (Reinecke and Donaghey (2021a, b and 2023), we highlight our political preference as one where workers at the 'coalface' of labour rights violations are in a position to represent their own interests or choose their own representatives to do so. We consistently highlight that elite interests in Bangladesh (Bangladeshi government and factory owners) work against independent forms of worker representation and unionisation.
P.7: 'Neither of these studies engages with prior research or publicly available reports which were critical about Accord or BRAC and their controversial approaches to address issues of marginalized groups.'	No references are provided regarding these critical studies. To our knowledge, Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) was the first article which was published with empirical evidence on the Accord. Thus, we do not believe there was such material with which to engage at the time of writing. In later work (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2023), we engaged withcritical work that subsequently became available, such as Alamgir & Banerjee, 2009; Kabeer et al., 2020; Siddiqi, 2020; Tanjeem, 2017

Quotation from Chowdhury (2022)	Response from Reinecke and Donaghey
'Henceforth, by not engaging with prior research that produced critical views, elite views automatically had influence over marginalized groups' representation For example, the study on Accord (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2015) overlooks (or does not develop a contrasting view of) how MNCs and Western NGOs were involved in the Accord historically and ideologically, and how they claimed to be able to manage marginalized groups in Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2017a).'	See response above. Chowdhury cites his own work as an example of critical research that Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) ignored but this was published two years after our paper. We could not cite work which was not yet published at the time our own work was published.
'Reinecke and Donaghey's (2015) study relies on interviews with powerful actors—such as foreign embassy members in Bangladesh and executive members of the Accord—to represent the fundamental rights and safety issues of Bangladeshi marginalized workers.'	This is factually incorrect. As we explain in the 'methods' section of Reinecke and Donaghey (2015), we did *not* interview foreign embassy members in Bangladesh or executive members of the Accord. The focus of this article was the negotiations of the Accord and our interviewees were with those actors involved with this. It seems Chowdhury is not basing his claim on Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) but is instead cherry-picking from a wider range of interviewees whom we interviewed for Donaghey and Reinecke (2018). The author here not only draws on the methods section from the incorrect paper but picks those who fit his narrative rather than fairly reflecting the actual interviews carried out.
'...nor could I find any critical perspectives on BRAC or the Accord in the studies of Mair et al. (2012) and Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) which was surprising given the controversial discourse around these two dominant institutions (Fernando, 2005; Karim, 2008, 2011; Mannan, 2009; Muhammad, 2015a, 2015b; Rahman, 2001).'	None of the critical work cited of the Accord (Muhammad, 2015a, 2015b), as well as Chowdhury (2017), were not published until after the final version of Reinecke and Donaghey (2015) was submitted.
'If Donaghey and Reinecke (2018) talked with workers in their homes or in other more neutral settings, marginalized workers could have had better representation.'	For Donaghey and Reinecke (2018) we also met workers repeatedly offsite from their factories in different Bangladeshi union offices. In Reinecke and Donaghey (2021a, b) we explain that we met with 'workers offsite in the more trusted environment of union offices.'

Acknowledgements Thank you to Daniel Armanios, Maxim Bolt, Miriam Feuls, Mahreen Khan, Akshay Mangla and Paulo Savaget for their comments on a draft version of the paper.

Author Contributions All authors commented on all versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Data availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no competing financial or non-financial interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Ethical Approval N.A. The production of this paper did not involve human participants.

Consent to Participate N.A. The production of this paper did not involve human participants.

Consent for Publication N.A. The production of this paper did not involve human participants.

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