

Neoliberal Global Capitalism – Challenges for Postcolonial Studies

Call for Papers

Annual Conference of the German Association for Postcolonial Studies (GAPS)

29-31 May 2025, University of Bielefeld, Germany

Deadline for submissions: 15 December 2024

“Capitalism is back!” announced Nancy Fraser recently, suggesting that now, once more, scholars and commentators were again beginning to name capitalism as the connection and a key cause of the oft-cited “multiple crises” of our age. These crises include advancing climate catastrophe; rapidly growing inequality within many countries *and* globally; ongoing atrocious working conditions, especially in the global South; the profiting of the global North off the indebted South; mass displacement as a result of all these factors made deadly by increasingly fortified borders; widespread social disintegration and the growing influence of authoritarian and fascist politics – to name some of the effects of capitalism and its present structural crisis of overaccumulation and chronic stagnation. These effects are global and planetary yet deeply uneven, reflecting in particular the history of European imperialism. How can and should postcolonial literary and cultural studies respond, anew, in the 21st century? Or is it prevented from formulating an effective analysis of capitalism by its own philosophical commitments?

In recent years, scholars attentive to questions of culture and capitalism have, for example, returned to working-class literatures from both (former) metropolises and (former) colonies in order to recognise the diversity – and globality – of the category (Clarke and Hubble; Lennon and Nilsson; McMillan; Entin; Perera; see also Attfield;). Others have sought to rethink the history of capitalism from the perspective of peripheral literatures (Beckman, Nir, and Sauri); pursued an explicitly postcolonial economic criticism (Kennedy); or developed new theories of world-literature (Warwick Research Collective). Still others have investigated the relationship between culture and neoliberalism (Elliott and Harkins) and have sought to periodise and explore how neoliberalism is experienced in different regions via literature (Deckard and Shapiro; Walonen; see also Al Zayed; Niemi).

Much of this scholarship considers literature from formerly colonised regions of the world, or from the contemporary world-system’s peripheries and semi-peripheries; relatively little of it, however, is by scholars disciplinarily situated in postcolonial studies. This suggests the need for a more specifically postcolonial analysis, addressing the interrelation of cultural texts and phenomena with economic and social structures. It also suggests the ongoing actuality of Lazarus’s call for interrogating and expanding the remit of postcolonial criticism. For example, what can postcolonial studies gain from new theories of class (e.g. Chibber) and power in capitalism (e.g. Mau)?

At this conference, we invite scholars interested in literature, culture, language and capitalism to come together to rethink materialist analysis for the current moment. How should scholarship attentive to postcolonial power imbalances, interdependencies, historical relations respond to a globalised neoliberal capitalism whose cannibalising propensities (Fraser) have become undeniable yet whose “realism” still seems insurmountable (Fisher; see also Shonkwiler and La Berge)? How can a materialist postcolonial studies help explain why capitalism has not collapsed? How can we read literary and cultural productions, in particular from the peripheries of the world-system, in order to understand developments and the myriad excrescences of capitalism and imagine breaking through and moving beyond the (neo)colonial capitalist present? How do we teach literature and culture in relationship to capitalism at university, and where might there be space for it in school curricula?

Questions that interest us include (but are not limited to the following):

Form – Style – Aesthetics – Language, e.g.

- What forms, styles and literary techniques lend themselves to the representation of neoliberal capitalism in contexts around the world?
- What is working-class literature and culture today? What are its aesthetics, ethics, politics?
- What is the relationship of “working-class literature/culture” to “postcolonial”, “global”, “peripheral” or “world literature”?
- How can linguistics contribute to materialist postcolonial studies and/or critiques of capitalism?

Genres: Producing and Circulating Knowledge, e.g.

- What new genres, such as the “new social novel” (Abu-Manneh) have emerged or are emerging in response to the most recent global capitalist crisis?
- What understandings and knowledges of global capitalism are offered by migration literature, refugee literature and other writing by migrant and refugee thinkers and activists, in particular from or in the global South?
- How do new cultural productions concerned with rising inequality, exploitation, extraction, enclosures and related processes refer to or draw upon older cultural and literary traditions?

Writing and Reading Capitalist Developments, e.g.

- How do postcolonial or global South literatures represent historical and ongoing enclosures and expand or challenge our understanding of such processes?
- How can materialist postcolonial studies be made productive for the analysis of capitalist developments past and present?
- What insights can culture and literature lend to particular contexts of and ongoing developments in racial capitalism?
- How do cultural productions from various regions of the world represent “postcolonial capitalism”? What subjectivities are produced, how is community imagined in postcolonial writing that “accepts the terms of capitalism’s uneven structure and works within it” (Naruse 114; see also Naruse, Xiang, and Thandra)?

Futures – Social Change – Activism, e.g.

- What is the relation of cultural production to social movements in the global South?
- How do literary and cultural products envision social change?
- How does postcolonial writing from different periods imagine the future?

Research and Teaching, e.g.

- What can a capitalism-critical education in postcolonial literary and studies look like? Is there room for any such discussion in study programmes and/or in school curricula?
- Where and how can scholars in the humanities make room for debates about capitalism in their ways of conducting research (incl. third-party funding)?

Organisers: Gigi Adair and Ellen Grünkemeier, English Department, University of Bielefeld

Please send abstracts of ca. 300-500 words, plus a short academic biography (ca. 50-100 words), to gaps2025@uni-bielefeld.de by 15 December 2024. Applicants will receive notification of acceptance by the beginning of February 2025.

Panel proposals are also welcome; they should include the abstracts, biographic statements and a brief description of the panel.

All presenters must be GAPS members by the time of the conference.

Work in progress in anglophone postcolonial studies – e.g. M.A./M.Ed., PhD – can be presented in the “Under Construction” section, poster presentations are also welcome. Please submit abstracts specifying the under construction section and indicating your chosen format (paper or poster).

A limited number of travel bursaries (1000€ max.) are available for emerging scholars, part-time, or currently unemployed speakers who are, or will become, members of GAPS. If you wish to apply for a travel bursary, please indicate this when submitting your abstract.

GAPS strives to create a conference in which everyone can participate in critical discussions of all topics. In particular, if a paper contains discussions of and/or representations of violence, presenters are encouraged to consider whether a content note might be warranted in order to prepare audience members. Content notes should be included in submitted abstracts for later inclusion in the conference program. Presenters are also encouraged to think critically about how they might choose to present such content (visually, orally, as text on a slide etc.).

Feel free to contact the organisers if you have any questions or special requirements, including accessibility concerns.

Works cited

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