

How Is Africa a Neoliberal Utopia?

An analysis of God complexes, Eden, and development

*This paper explores the different ways that Africa is a neoliberal utopia for the Global North. On the one hand, the introduction of neoliberal ideologies into African society was assisted historically by the transatlantic slave trade and by the subsequent period of European colonialization and, on the other hand, these neoliberal ideologies are now the reason that neo-colonialism thrives in Africa. This paper uses both Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972) and William Darity's "Africa, Europe, and the Origins of Uneven Development: The Role of Slavery" (2005) as its theoretical foundations. Within this framework, I analyze the formation of Africa as a neoliberal paradise, from the historical 'original sin' of enslaving people to the political, social, and economic implications, both in historical and contemporary contexts. Most importantly, I offer two primary theoretical interventions to the discussion of neo-colonialism and neoliberalism in Africa today. They are the analogy of 'original sin' and a phenomenon I term 'race to the baton.' These interventions show the distinctions between the overtness of historical processes of colonialism and the contemporary covertness of neo-colonial processes that define the relationship between the Global South and the Global North.*

Keywords: neoliberalism, race to the bottom, race to the baton, Africa, capitalism, structural adjustment

INTRODUCTION

It is apparent that Africa is a neoliberal utopia for the Global North and, most recently, for China, in myriad ways. The groundwork for this ideal neoliberal setting was first laid through the historical exploitation of the African continent and has culminated in the political, social, and economic impacts that persist today. Accordingly, the working definition of neoliberalism used in this analysis is the "[prioritization] of a 'growing economy' ideology over the holistic well-being of people's lives" (Gatwiri et al., 2020, p. 86). This paper uses both Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972) and William Darity's "Africa, Europe,



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and the Origins of Uneven Development: The Role of Slavery” (2005) as its theoretical foundations. Within this framework, the paper analyzes the formation of Africa as a neoliberal paradise, from the historical ‘original sin’ of enslaving people to the political, social, and economic implications, both in historical and contemporary contexts. The first part of the article elaborates on the contents of the theoretical framework and gives a historical background of exploitation-colonialism in the form of the original sin. I use two primary theoretical interventions: namely, ‘original sin’ and ‘race to the baton.’ These interventions outline the difference between the overtness of historical processes of colonialism and the contemporary covertness of neo-colonial processes that illustrate the relationship between the Global South and the Global North. Finally, I explore the negative effects of Western interference on the political, social, and economic structures of the African continent—interference which has resulted in systemic detriments that affect Black people globally.

HISTORY

*In the beginning was the West and the West was with God and the West was God, or was it? It was certainly not by divine right.*¹

To understand how the West continues to pillage and plunder present-day Africa, we need to know the history of the past-day territories that are now known as Africa.² Many European countries, including Portugal, Britain, France, Belgium, Denmark, Spain, and Sweden, have directly benefited from the looting (human and otherwise) of Africa. For instance, in 1471, the Portuguese sailed to the Gold Coast (now known as Ghana), paving the way for other European traders such as the Swedes, Danish, and Norwegians to help themselves to the continent’s wealth (Graham, 2013). The early colonizers met massive resistance from indigenes and ultimately retreated until, beginning in 1872, British monarchs sanctioned unimaginable military violence and British forces seized the entire Gold Coast (Graham, 2013). However, the accumulation of wealth by Europe in its entirety superseded any one nation’s interests. As a result of this coordinated European access to resources, peoples, and territories, the battle lines were drawn. In effect, it was Europe against Africa, and the Partition of Africa³ took place so that European colonizers would not fight among themselves (Talton, 2011). This mercantilist form of accumulation prioritized military

¹ Many colonizers believed that it was ordained by God to reside on their land or claim the land of others.

² Colonial borders, often drawn arbitrarily and by foreign authority, have dictated the formation of nation-states in Africa. See Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972).

³ This is also known as the “Scramble for Africa.” See Southall and Melber’s *A New Scramble For Africa?: Imperialism, Investment and Development* (2009).

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power and economic wealth as major tools for national policy (Darity, 2005). In contemporary times, we have seen all the global economic superpowers⁴ repeat the same pattern. The United States uses more overt neoliberal policies, but nonetheless focuses on the acquisition of military power and economic wealth. Historically, this was achieved for European colonizers through the transatlantic slave trade (15th to 19th centuries), which resulted in huge wealth disparities between the Global South and the Global North and the underdevelopment of Africa by Europe (Darity 2005; Rodney 1972). Alternatively, the main strategy of neo-colonizers is to secure influence over a government and relevant economic and political policies (Brett, 1985).

To use the original sin analogy, the forbidden fruit was the very process of historical colonialism which was overtly detrimental to Africa. During this period, there were no illusions about the cause of Africa's economic and social suffering. A very clear and explicit connection could be made between the processes of colonialism and the exploitation of African resources, people, and societies. However, neo-colonialism and its ideological framework of neoliberalism are more implicit. There is no longer an obvious forbidden fruit, no identifiable apple. Rather, there is the promulgation of the idea that there are few bad apples in a barrel of good ones. The reality is that one bad apple spoils the bunch. Neoliberalism is thus peddled as an ideology where all policies which prioritize the market and foreign capital are presented as being in Africa's own self-interest, for its own good. Or, to continue with the apple metaphor, the good apples can remain good despite the odds. Any rot is the fault of the picker rather than the apple tree. Neoliberal thinking puts the blame on the individual rather than on the political conditions that accentuate the need to make certain decisions. This methodological individualism characteristic of neoliberalism carries significant consequences in the political, economic, and social realms.

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Despite shifts in power and structural changes that have accompanied the transition from the colonial to the post-colonial era in Africa, its climate nonetheless remains inviting for the bourgeoisie—regardless of their country of origin—looking to exploit. Indeed, Africa is a neoliberal utopia for the Global North and for emerging powers such as China, because the vast majority of the African political elite have sought allegiances with their counterparts in the Global North. According to Walter Rodney, political development consisted of the “ruling elements” deciding to “dialogue, trade or fight.” The Global North has succeeded in exploiting these strategies to maintain

⁴ China's recent engagement with various African economies shows that it is employing these same neoliberal strategies (Lee, 2008).

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a certain degree of political control over Africa and ensuring that the economic conditions were in place to make it a neoliberal utopia (1972, p. 3).

First, the pre-colonial political structure in traditional African⁵ society consisted of elites such as chiefs, obas, and queenmothers, so the colonizers sought to use them as a way to control the masses (Bassey, 2011, p. 30). Subsequently in the 1950s, the colonial political structure, especially in sub-Saharan countries like Ghana and Nigeria, involved the British monarchy employing a relatively *laissez-faire* approach and leaving the enforcement of their mandates to white missionaries and to the new Black political elite (Bassey, 2011; Kilson, 1963). This is because “enormous opportunities were created for European-trained Africans who were needed to perform minor administrative duties” (Bassey, 2011, p. 31). To a large extent, this emergent group of African elites had been taught in colonial missionary schools. Coleman argues that Western education was a nationalist tool that made the case for the transfer of political power to Indigenous Africans on the basis of Western libertarian values (as cited in Bassey, 2011, p. 35). It is important to note that the aim of educational indoctrination was not for the colonized people to see themselves as equal to the colonizers, but rather to make it easier for religious indoctrination to take place (Bassey, 2011). Furthermore, the funding and pursuit of the young Africans’ higher education was facilitated by colonial-adjacent countries such as the United States. This process led to “the rise to political power of the early political elites” and the internalization of certain neoliberal ideals that altered post-colonial Africa’s political structure upon their return (pp. 30, 35). As a result, the independence movements in Africa did not bring about a total overhaul of the colonial system. Instead, they provided a sanitized version of the colonial system because Western education served as a mechanism to craft a cult of the elite (p. 36). These returnees harnessed their ability to communicate with a wider audience and appeared to challenge the colonial status quo. Returnees included African nationalists such as Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), Julius Nyerere (Tanzania), Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe), Nnamdi Azikiwe (Nigeria), and so on (Bassey, pp. 36, 37; Rodney, p. 3; Kilson, 1963). The transition of political power in the 1950s and 1960s shifted from the old elites to the new elites. It was not a transfer of power from colonizer to colonized people; colonization had taken on a new approach.

The relative political stability of these newly independent countries created the appearance of equality in the global political sphere, but this political stability was maintained only if these countries prioritized the Global North’s interests through

⁵ Africa is often referred to as a country by the uninformed. Above, I represent it as a monolith due to the singularity of its colonial experience and the power gained from solidarity. Some African scholars suggest that Africa should be a country, a position formed by political education, not by limited geographical understanding. Each country has its traditions; for instance, chiefs and queenmothers are applicable to most of West Africa, while obas are Nigerian.

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mechanisms like the Commonwealth, under the guise of assistance and collaboration (Kilson, 1963, p. 427; Babatola, 2013, p. 8). For instance, presidents who led the transition—such as Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana 1960-66) and Julius Nyerere (Tanzania 1962-64)—faced “internal crises”⁶ (Babatola, 2013, p. 6). These crises were sponsored or encouraged by foreign countries when the African leaders decided that their countries would not be political and economic pawns serving the interests of the Global North. Furthermore, this interference was not limited to democratic regimes as even military coup d’états,⁷ in relation to the supply of weapons and so on, were funded by external influences (p. 12). These invasions of African sovereignty served as deterrents for other new republics that may have wanted to follow suit. In other words, these conflicts were seen as the wages of sin from resisting colonial rule, as opposed to the original sin of perpetuating colonial rule in the first place.

Additionally, little financial and technical capital was available to African countries during this period, resulting in an uneven power dynamic and fewer options to oppose a political structure perpetuating neoliberal ideologies. This led to a division of class interests because the only people benefiting from this system were the elites on both sides. Often the military became a means of political intervention for the poor and for urban workers by ousting either a democratic regime or another military regime (Babatola, 2013, p. 14; Kilson, 1963; Bassey, 2011). The schism between classes was the result of continued oppression in both the colonial and post-colonial time periods, abetted by a flagrantly uneven accumulation of wealth, status differentiation, and the suppression of the rights of the non-ruling class (Babatola, 2013, p. 14; Kilson, 1963; Bassey, 2011; Rodney, 1972). As a result, this political divide has had an impact on social interactions.

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

As an ideology, neoliberalism centres on the individual, and this methodological individualism has substantially altered the nature of social interaction and structures in Africa. There are numerous ways that colonialism ultimately led to neoliberalism’s influence over Africa’s social existence. Here, however, I will primarily focus on family, religion, and education. Pre-colonial African society may have had a hierarchy of sorts, but it was still largely communal (Bassey, 2011). The trading of enslaved people destroyed the familial fabric of African society. In terms of the family, scholars have noted the “deterioration in the status of women owing to colonial rule” as the colonial state intensified the subjugation of women in society (Rodney, 1972, p. 226). It would be intellectually dishonest to assert that pre-colonial

⁶ These internal crises refer to foreign interference in domestic political affairs, similar to the way in which the CIA sponsors rebels who advance American interests in the Global South.

⁷ If the Global North did not like a certain military government, they could overthrow it for another military government.

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Africa was a feminist utopia because exploitative gender power dynamics often existed in polygamous arrangements and disputes (p. 226). However, there was a general tendency to ensure the dignity of women across independent pre-colonial African society (p. 226, 227). For instance, “mother-right” was a common part of African societies and this translated into political and social power, as they were seen as the keys to inheritance (p. 226). The traditional gendered division of labour, where men cleared the land for farming and so on, gave way to men entering the “money sector” and leaving women to retain the home front, in addition to fending for children in some financial capacity (p. 227). There is no term that specifically addresses the systemic way that economically disadvantaged Black women in the Global South are socially excluded; therefore, I will refer to this phenomenon as ‘race to the baton.’

‘Race to the baton’ can be defined in three ways. Firstly, it is a sociological concept that encompasses the feminization of poverty, where the people who benefit the least from the ‘race to the bottom’ phenomenon are poor Black women in the Global South. This is due to the multiple layers of exploitation in the form of womanhood, poverty, Blackness, and geographical location. This means that the social division of labour ensures women are poorer due to being saddled with more obligations, a condition that is exacerbated by additional marginalized identities. Thus, when the race to the bottom happens, they are the most vulnerable group. Secondly, ‘race to the baton’ can be defined as an analogy of the game of life. Herein Black women, particularly poor and in the Global South, play on a more difficult level than their counterparts in the Global North. This involves a race fraught with obstacles to reaching the baton before the relay race even begins. The race both literally and figuratively takes place on an uneven playing field. Indeed, the game is rigged in advance.

Finally, ‘race to the baton’ can exist as a combination of the above definitions. This is a play on the phrase ‘race to the bottom,’ used in economics to indicate the predatory tactics of corporations who seek investment and outsourcing opportunities by pitting countries against one another in order to undercut wages and other costly regulations. This phenomenon has undervalued African women’s work in a Western capitalist framework, and has ethnocentrically labelled it as ‘traditional’ and, by extension, ‘backward’ (Rodney, 1972; Williams, 2013; Garba, 2007). Additionally, communal and familial ties were not conducive to the “ruthless accumulation”⁸ of capital that neoliberalism espouses (Rodney, 1972).

Historically, foreign traders in West Africa felt little social responsibility due to anti-Blackness attitudes that prevented them from seeing citizens as their kin. On the

⁸ From the late 19th century onward, Lebanese traders in Ghana and Nigeria exploited the market more than did African capitalists. See Winder’s article “The Lebanese in West Africa” (1962).

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other hand, African women were cajoled into patriarchal notions of Western religion that minimized their social influence even further, because doctrine dictated that they should be seen and not heard (Rodney, p. 227). This sentiment can be extended to contemporary educational campaigns from the Global North, where girls are perceived to be stifled by 'backward' African traditions, when in fact colonialism did more to stifle the educational advancement of women than did traditional African societies (pp. 228, 251).

As a result of the individualism perpetuated by neoliberalism, women and other African non-elites have had to rely on acquiring social capital and gaining proximity to an elite circle in some form (Fine, 1999). This self-interested form of relation has affected trust within communities, leading to cynicism about development projects and to the regulation of both familial and platonic relationships as they increasingly rely on individualism over community needs (Rodney, 1972). This cultivation of an elite network has led to social stratification where the second and third generation of African elites are again the ruling class (Basse, 2011; Kilson, 1963). As a result, there is an "asymmetrical structure of the middle class as a social class" (Kilson, 1963, p. 437; Rodney, 1972). Even though traditional norms may govern these types of relationships, wealthy people may not cater to their entire social unit (for example, an elderly parent) because neoliberal conditions do not account for an extended family unit. For instance, Esi, the protagonist from *Changes*,⁹ opined that her relationship with *her* mother would never be as potent as her mother's relationship with her mother because neo-colonization had created a different set of social allegiances through the loss of language and culture (Aidoo, 1991; Kilson, 1963). However, due to Esi's perceived social capital (she is a 'career woman'), an element of trickle-down economics seems to be working because the cultural responsibility of the African bourgeoisie translates to the idea that neoliberal society is ultimately beneficial for all people (Kilson, 1963; Rodney, 1972; Babatola, 2013). In contemporary and material terms, folks in the diaspora or children who have managed to attain middle-class status send members of their families the limited remittances they can afford. This shines light on the fact that neoliberalism does not serve the overall social good. In addition to numerous political and social consequences, there are economic repercussions which solidify Africa's position as the global hub of neoliberalism.

ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

It is apparently common knowledge that Africa is a 'poor' continent. But to what extent is that assertion true? Walter Rodney opines that there are "complicated links between the changes in the economic base in the rest of the superstructure of the

⁹ *Changes: A Love Story* (1991) is a popular novel by Ghanaian feminist author Ama Ata Aidoo. The story addresses the generational effects of colonialism in relation to language and religion.

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society—including the sphere of ideology and social beliefs” (p. 6). Rodney’s assertion is an accurate assessment of what economic structures can do to the entire spirit of African sovereign nations and their people. The process of uneven development, where African nations were simultaneously being underdeveloped while European nations were being developed, is a phenomenon that many European economists have disputed. This is despite clear evidence to the contrary from the scholars whom Darity termed the “Caribbean School,” consisting of Eric Williams, C.L.R. James, and Walter Rodney (Rodney, p. 11; Darity, 1972). They argue that societies of different sorts coming into contact for a prolonged period of time will lead to shifts in both ideology and social beliefs. But whether those results are positive or negative depends on the nature of the relationship between the two (Rodney, 1972, p. 11; Darity, 1992). The wealth disparity and income inequality between the Global North and the Global South that reaches back to the Atlantic slave trade is massive. For instance, a former British colony, Ghana, had a per capita income in 1999 of \$2,000, while Britain’s per capita income was \$20,000, and this pattern is consistent many years after, even though overt colonialism has ended (Darity, 2005; Konadu-Agyemang, 2000). This wealth gap is explained by the long-term effects of the Atlantic slave trade—in effect, the pillaging and plundering of the African continent was the foundation of Western industrialisation.

Two sets of nations from the Global North engaged in what can be described as the imperialistic plunder of Africa. The first group comprised the European countries who engaged in the ‘original sin’ of exploitation-colonialism in the Global South, while the second was made up of countries such as Canada, USA, Australia, and New Zealand where Europeans engaged in settler-colonialism (Rodney, 1972; Darity, 1992). I will focus only on exploitation-colonialism¹⁰ here, and will do so through the lens of mercantilism. In the 17th century, mercantilist¹¹ ideology was prioritized by the British in the Gold Coast’s¹² national policy. In effect, this meant that the colonial endeavour was a zero-sum game¹³ (Rodney, 1972; Darity, 1992).

Africa lost 400 years of economic development because of the enslavement of its people. The economic effects are still apparent in the form of neoliberal individualism. Within this framework, Africa is responsible for recovering from her historical and contemporary economic disenfranchisement on her own (Rodney,

¹⁰ Exploitation-colonialism is the process of exploiting the population and/or resources of a country without settling there (as opposed to settler colonialism). Exploitation-colonialism is also referred to as franchise colonialism, but the latter term does not convey the same gravity I am for in this paper.

¹¹ An ideology that holds that military power and economic wealth are best for a country’s growth.

¹² Gold Coast is the colonial name of Ghana.

¹³ This means that all nations are fundamentally in conflict, so that one country’s economic gain means the other’s economic loss.

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1972; Darity, 2005). This is not just a macroeconomic problem; it extends to the microeconomic arena where Black people are frequently told that any disadvantage was based on their individual shortcomings as opposed to structural, labour-market segmentation (Wingfield, 2009; Williams, 2013). Unfortunately, the perceived inferiority of Black people has “outlived slavery,” and this has made Africa ground zero for neoliberal exploitation (Darity, 1992). This is because neoliberalism favours the individual and Black folks were not and are not deemed to be worthy individuals, yet are still supposed to compete through ‘bootstrap’ ideology.

Instead of reparations to compensate for the effects of centuries of colonialism, the economic ‘help’ came in the 1970s and 1980s in the form of both ‘aid’ and ‘management,’ where conditional loans and managerial control of local African companies were used to bolster Western interests (Rodney, 1972, p. 23). Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs)¹⁴ do more to exacerbate development problems than to fix them. Born of international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, SAPs are ostensibly intended to deliver on the Bretton-Woods promise of developmental aid. However, the reality throughout the Global South has been that the World Bank and the IMF diagnose the economic situation of formerly colonized nations and prescribe the neoliberal treatment: open markets, foreign investment, lower social expenditures, favourable legal regimes for transnational capital. This leads to even more detrimental policies later, because the source of the problem—economic exploitation by the Global North—is not tackled (Konadu-Agyemang, 2000; Dooley et al, 2003). There are short-term benefits to the flow of loaned capital: for example, increased currency valuation. The long-term results for the national economies, however, are consistently egregious. As quoted in Konadu-Agyemang’s case study on Ghana, “the effective devaluation of the Ghanaian cedi, from 2.75=US\$1 in 1983 to 2300 = US\$1 in 1998 (approximately 80,000% devaluation)” is just one example of the disastrous implications of economic interference and contributes to Africa being a neoliberal utopia (2000). There is a coercive and uneven sort of development with this form of economic imposition by the Global North, which leads to increased political and economic vulnerability for Global South countries (Brett, 1985).

In the neoliberal era, corporations have, to a large extent, replaced many of the functions of the nation-state. The logic of foreign ‘investment’ promotes the use of Africa as a place of resource extraction and African labour as a means to increase the Global North’s wealth, and frame it as a benevolent endeavour (Brett, p. 23). For instance, there are numerous non-performing loans given to sub-Saharan African countries, which generate little to no income but almost always have exorbitant interest rates (Fofack, 2005; Olawoye, 2018). Accordingly, “these [were] analyzed

¹⁴ Much rigorous scholarly work has been done on the detrimental effects of Structural Adjustment Programs. See, for example, Fonjong (2014) and Sylla (2018).

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with respect to an improvement in quality of life pre- and post-adoption of these funds” (Olawoye, 2018, p. 113). The lack of income generation is generally a precursor to loan non-repayment or default, and the resolution of these problems tends to be resolved by a foreign entity coming in to manage the crisis with the justification of averting future or more severe financial crises (Fofack, 2005).

It is no secret that the economic exploitation of Africa has largely been perpetuated by the capitalist countries of the Global North. Walter Rodney vehemently supports this assertion and states that there is a distinction between capitalist and socialist countries, concluding that (as of the 1970s) socialist countries were uninvolved in the “robbery of Africa” (1972, p. 23). At the time of his writing (1972), this statement was correct; however, in recent times, China has begun to engage in the use of Africa as an extractive economy as well (Lee, 2008; Aning, p. 145).

CONCLUSION

The ‘original sin’ of the European colonization of Africa slowly yet surely laid the groundwork for the conditions of neo-colonialism today. This neo-colonialism has been fundamentally neoliberal in nature, and has continued to perpetuate power and economic imbalances between the Global South and the Global North. Africa is the paradigmatic ‘neoliberal utopia’ because of a long history of underdevelopment and structural adjustment, and still seeks release from the clutches of foreign investment capital coming from nations across the Global North and from emerging powers such as China, in search of valuable mining resources, oil and gas, agricultural commodities, and more. This article has demonstrated that the path from original sin to neoliberal utopia is covered in blood, slavery, injustice, and the continued struggle for economic and political sovereignty. It has explored the ways in which the consequences of a fundamentally individualist and profit-seeking ideology are manifested in the political, economic, and social realms of African society.

But this neoliberal utopia and its colonial history do not weigh upon socio-economic themes alone. There are resonances from this struggle throughout the world, as Black people suffer anti-Black racism fueled by ideas which have their roots in this atrocity. For example, C.L. Williams’ examination of Adrienne Rich’s concept of “white solipsism”¹⁵ is a painful reminder that these neoliberal ideologies are very much present in the Global North’s domestic sphere as well (Rich, 1979, as cited in Williams, 2013, p. 613). The neoliberal ideals that manifest in academic research and in the academy as a whole create a hierarchy whereby the ‘universal’ subject, as defined by the Global North, does not account for complex and overlapping identities and material realities, but insists upon a ‘one size fits all approach’ that ultimately excludes Black-centred research and lines of inquiry

¹⁵ The sentiment that the white experience is universal.

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(Wingfield, 2009; Badgett & Williams, 1994). This is detrimental to continental Africans because it is ahistorical and negates the very histories which, as I have shown throughout this paper, form the conditions of neo-colonialism and inequality today. Overall, the neoliberal ideal of individual self-interest contributes to the white, cis-hetero-capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 2000). As I have argued, the ‘race to the baton’ phenomenon prevails and, as a result, poor Black women in the Global South are the central point of neoliberal exploitation. This exploitation relies upon fundamentally racist, sexist, and exclusionary values that are commonly eclipsed by the purported neutrality of neoliberal individualism—which sees not the systemic problem, but the individual instance. Or as stated previously, ‘the bad apple.’ Until systemic understandings of the relationship between Africa and the Global North are widespread and have a meaningful influence on African economic policies, the continued plunder and exploitation that characterizes this neoliberal utopia is unlikely to come to an end.

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