
Decolonizing Global Development Theory and Practice through “Centering” the Work of Robtel Neajai Pailey

by Tracy Kuperus

This essay discusses the contributions of Robtel Neajai Pailey, a Liberian scholar and activist, to the decolonization movement within global development. Some of Pailey’s scholarship centers on directly critiquing the “White Gaze” of development. She points to how development practice and scholarship remain beholden to Western, White knowledge and power dynamics. For this reason, Pailey urges both scholars and practitioners to reverse the White gaze of development. Pailey does this with her scholarship on Liberia. She also offers ideas for practitioners. The essay concludes with how Christian scholars and practitioners might engage with the decolonialization movement.

In 1992, my husband and I spent nine months in South Africa, where I was engaged in dissertation field work on the Dutch Reformed Church’s contribution to the theology of apartheid, and my husband taught short courses in engineering at the University of Cape Town. Halfway through our time in South Africa, we felt the need to “give back.” We were living a comfortable life in the southern suburbs of the Cape Peninsula—on graduate student salaries no less—and felt the tug to help those less fortunate. The church where we were worshipping supported a crèche (day care center) in the South African township of Guguletu. Upon arriving at the crèche, the director showed us around the property, introduced us to the staff and the children, and invited us into her office.

“Tell me a little bit about yourselves and why you’re here?” she asked.

We answered: “We’re Americans living in South Africa for about nine months and feeling unsettled about our life in the White suburbs. We’d like to discover how the ‘other side’ lives in South Africa, and we’d like to help out at the crèche in any way we can.”

The director responded, “What do you really know about how the other side lives in South Africa? How can you possibly come in and help, knowing next to nothing about the people we serve and our community?”

This was my blunt introduction to the “White savior complex.” Certainly, I have witnessed it from other angles. The church I attend in Grand Rapids,

Michigan sent a youth group to Guatemala several years ago. The teens painted a home and ran a VBS (Vacation Bible School). They returned with good vibes. The video they shared with the church afterwards showed how much they had helped the community, and they reveled in the happiness of the people they served despite their living in abject poverty. It was unsettling, but I had been in that same place two decades prior.

The White savior complex is a large part of the “White gaze” of development and its colonized hold on the field. Robtel Neajai Pailey, a Liberian scholar and activist, offers some astute reflections on this reality. In her article, “De-centring the ‘White Gaze’ of Development,” she states, “In its crudest form, development has traditionally been about dissecting the political, socio-economic and cultural processes of Black, Brown, and other subjects of colour in the so-called Global South and finding them regressive, particularly in comparison to the so-called progressive Global North” (2020a, 729). She goes on to urge her readers to de-colonize the field and turn “the colonial, ‘White gaze’ on its head” (2020a, 729).

Critiques about development are nothing new. Dependency theory, world systems theory, feminism, and post-developmentalism represent a few of the critical development theories that have centered on mainstream development’s flaws. What, then, makes the decolonization critique unique, and why should Christians pay attention? More importantly, how

should Christian scholars and practitioners working in development respond?

According to Pailey, the decolonization critique is unique because it acknowledges the “proverbial elephant in the room of development: race” (2020a, 729). Readers of this journal are likely aware of the development field’s uncomfortable relationship with religion, and we may even be familiar with Kurt Ver Beek’s (2000) excellent article pointing to the field’s avoidance of the topics of spirituality and religion. Sadly, the situation is similar when it comes to race. Pailey herself searched conference proceedings, journal articles, and non-governmental (NGO) reports, and found that references to race are perfunctory. She then observes that “in its constant negotiation of poverty, power, politics and privilege, development continues to be structured in hierarchies of race and place” (2020a, 730). Pailey’s scholarly and activist work adroitly exposes the problematic White gaze of development within the context of empire and colonization.

Pailey joins other scholars, like Edward Said (1978), Uma Kothari (2006), and Paul Zeleza (2009), who note that the racial hierarchy of colonization—where White Westerners are equated with being civilized, while Black, Brown, and other subjects of color are understood to be uncivilized—is alive and well. In the development field today, the same countries and peoples are still considered developed. They are the standard by which so-called “Third World” countries and peoples are measured and found lacking. “In essence,” Pailey notes, “white is always right, and West is always best” (2020a, 733). Finally, the “White gaze” of development maintains the racial coloniality of power through systemic inequality and injustice while at the same time suggesting that Western agents in the development process are benevolent and altruistic.

Pailey provides plenty of examples of “epistemic colonization” in development. She notes that “the levers of power over development—be it in policy making, practice or scholarship—are still mostly controlled and sustained by White people” (2020a, 735). Certainly, change is happening. More progressive people of color are entering the field of development, but she notes that the majority of institutions that scaffold what we know as development, from international financial institutions like the World Bank and the World Trade Organization, to prominent NGOs like Oxfam, and international development departments at academic institutions like the School of Oriental and African Studies, all continue to reinforce rather than subvert the White gaze of development.

And Pailey gives many more examples (*Ibid.*, 736). International migration patterns show how the White Western world tries to keep out Brown and Black people. World leaders argue that Black and Brown people lack the willpower, intelligence, or character to

contribute positively to the development of Global North countries. Better to keep them out with fortified walls, fences, and executive bans. Or take the charity appeals of many non-governmental organizations—these White savior-based calls for financial contribution rest on the assumption that Whites know best how to guide people of color who lack agency.

Pailey is an academic as well as a public scholar, whose scholarship and writing range from opinion pieces on a variety of topics to personal stories to make her points. For example, her op-eds for outlets like *The Guardian*, *AlJazeera*, and *The Washington Post* dissect how Liberia is still not free of colonialism’s hold. Its existence as a state is rooted in the American Colonisation Society, an organization made up of influential Whites who wanted “to rid the U.S. of free blacks” (Pailey, 2020b). This disturbing origin story contributes to the country’s ongoing racial tensions. Indeed, Liberia’s lingua franca of Liberian English, “a mix of American twang, Caribbean patois, and West African pidgin,” is another pervasive colonial legacy (Pailey, 2020b).

Finally, her scholarship offers personal stories that buttress her points about the White gaze of development. Shortly after graduating from college, Pailey served as Ellen Johnson Sirleaf’s special assistant for communications. Within weeks of working in the offices of the Liberian presidency, Pailey noticed how the advice of three White, male colleagues, deployed to Liberia from Great Britain, was regarded with the highest respect. Their counsel was rarely questioned or dismissed. Indeed, their suggestions were taken as expert advice even though they had no post-war managerial experience. Whiteness, Pailey noted, wielded “structural power and privilege in development corridors” (2020a, 731), and Africans themselves, in kowtowing to this so-called white expertise, “have thoroughly internalized the ‘white gaze’ of development” (2020a, 732).

Pailey’s work is as much a critique of the white gaze of development as it is a call to action. She provides many ways for both scholars and activists to challenge and subvert it. She directs most of her attention to scholars. They can ‘reverse’ the White gaze of development by acknowledging structures of racial domination in colonial and post-colonial contexts. Many academics have already done this. The work of Edward Wilmot Blyden, W.E.B DuBois, and Frantz Fanon exemplifies early epistemic decolonization, while the scholarship of Chandra Mohanty (1988), Kalpana Wilson (2012) and Sylvia Tamale (2020) are more recent contributions. All of us writing in the development field need to read the work of these scholars and take it seriously.

In short, “scholarship that ‘centers’ the perspectives and experiences of Black and Brown

peoples in the Global South help subvert the development field's White gaze. This would include academic work, by way of example, that highlights indigenous knowledge systems, "South-South" migration, or India's role as an upcoming development actor. Pailey herself (2016, 2021) has produced scholarship that explores how Liberia's "socio-economic development is mediated by race and citizenship" (2020a, 741). Liberia is one of only a few countries where Black personhood is centered. A "Negro clause" in its 1986 Constitutions confers citizenship to Blacks only. This challenges the colonial White gaze of development. It also upends the understanding of citizenship as grounded in White liberalism. This development, though, is not without problems. For example, it excludes Brown Southern migrants from citizenship, including Lebanese and Indian migrants who dominate Liberia's service and retail sectors. Still, Pailey's work illustrates the centering of "black and brown people as active subjects rather than passive objects of scholarly inquiry" (2020a, 742).

Pailey has less to say to practitioners, as her world is mainly occupied by the academy, but she does call on everyone in the development field to pay attention to grassroots social movements like *#Black-LivesMatter* or the Senegalese activist movement, *Y'en a Marre* ("Fed Up") that automatically de-center the White gaze of development by asserting Black and Brown personhood as the norm. These movements also expose the structural violence that privileges Whites and undermines people of color.

One way development practitioners can subvert the White racial frame is by recruiting "radical rabble rousers who challenge and dismantle the status quo" (2020a, 742). Pailey cautions against hiring people of color to fill the diversity quota. Only "emancipatory" recruitment efforts can center development offices with the insights and perspectives of people of color. Moreover, White development workers (and scholars) must "confront how they benefit from the racial hierarchies that underpin this field, and actively work to upend their unearned privileges" (2020a, 742).

Finally, development projects can decolonize the field by mainstreaming race into project analysis the same way they do gender, human rights, or class. NGOs could also form "evaluation advisory groups" (EAGs) that decenter the White gaze of development "through the direct involvement of community members as advisors to, and even employees of, the evaluation" (Johnston-Goodstar 2012, 111). EAGs would have a better handle than NGO staff members on whether the needs and desires of the community are being met by the development project. The locally based actors serving on EAGs could also add invaluable insight and historical perspective to the evaluation process.

Should Christian scholars and practitioners pay attention to the decolonization trend? Absolutely. It is an excellent reminder of the reality of race, hierarchy, and hegemony endemic to the field of development. More importantly, it can inspire an even deeper transformation of the development field—helping us decenter the role that White, privileged Christians play within it.

One of the features that distinguishes Christian development scholars and practitioners is a conviction that faith conditions our global service. Our theology tells us to care deeply about the well-being of God's children throughout the world, a commitment rooted in a desire to "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). If our neighbor fails to flourish due to natural disasters, injustice, famines, or government corruption, we feel the call to respond, even if it means reaching across cultural and religious lines to help our neighbors achieve human and community flourishing.

While this theology is sound and the commitments well and good, have we stepped back and acknowledged how much race and colonialism have factored into the ways we engage with relief and development? Bryant Myers' (2011) classic *Walking with the Poor* helpfully explains the ubiquity of the god-complex in the development process. Prompted by Pailey, one cannot help but notice that absent from Myers' definition of "god-complexes" is any mention of how race factors into it. Race does not even appear in the book's index. Too often Christian scholars, like secular scholars, have more or less ignored the proverbial elephant in the room; we too have adopted a "color-blind" outlook.

To avoid the White gaze of development, Christians in the development field must grapple with the following foundational questions: How can we love our neighbor in a development context when Christian White privilege is dependent on the marginalization of others and in which the work of faith-based organizations (FBOs) gives White practitioners additional opportunities and status? How can we love our neighbor in a development context in ways that are gracious, mutual, and helpful while also acknowledging the structures of privilege and power based on race and the legacy of colonialism? Should love of neighbor, if we acknowledge the reality of race and colonialism in development, compel churches and FBOs to directly apologize for development appeals based on "White savior"-based messages? Finally, though churches are seen by many as the central institution of FBO development work (Slimbach 2023), it is important to recognize that there are still churches over which Western missionaries exert significant control. This neo-colonial situation begs the question—should we decenter the hold of churches on the execution of development projects due to the replication of a

“civilizing” mission targeting change for people of color in the Global South? In its place, the faith-based development project must build up local participation and empowerment and partner with organizations that root out systemic injustice, challenge corruption, and undermine the White gaze of development (Ibid.).

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