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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## The Racial Vernaculars of Development: A View from West Africa

Jemima Pierre

**ABSTRACT** This article argues that the vernacular of development, as deployed in and about African communities, is a *racial* vernacular. It is a *racial* vernacular of development because it is deployed within, in this case, the resource extraction industry (as well as within the broader development enterprise) in ways that sustain racial thought, index particular racial meanings, and prescribe social practices. How do we understand the processes through which racial codes are embedded and naturalized in practices ranging from the management and bureaucracy of resource extractions to the power structure of the world system that places African sovereignty below Western nongovernmental organizations and corporations? The development complex incorporates the unequal material relationships and processes that structure engagement between the Global South and the Global North, and its racial vernacular is the primary discursive scaffolding for these relationships. [*development, race, resource extraction, Ghana*]

**RESUMEN** Este ensayo argumenta que la lengua vernácula del desarrollo, como es utilizada en y acerca de comunidades africanas, es una lengua vernácula *racial*. Es una lengua vernácula *racial* del desarrollo porque es utilizada dentro, en este caso, la industria de extracción de recursos (así como dentro de la empresa más amplia del desarrollo) en formas que sostienen un pensamiento racial, cataloga significados raciales particulares, y prescribe prácticas sociales. ¿Cómo entendemos los procesos a través de los cuales códigos raciales están embebidos y naturalizados en prácticas que van desde la gestión y la burocracia de extracciones de recursos hasta la estructura de poder del sistema mundial que coloca la soberanía africana por debajo de organizaciones no gubernamentales y corporaciones occidentales? El complejo del desarrollo incorpora las relaciones materiales desiguales y los procesos que estructuran la interacción entre el Sur Global y el Norte Global, y su lengua vernácula racial es el andamiaje discursivo primario para estas relaciones. [*desarrollo, raza, extracción de recursos, Ghana*]

I begin from a position of extreme distrust of language and do not believe that English—or any European language, for that matter—can truly speak our truths without the language in question being put through some sort of transformative process. A decontaminating process is probably more accurate, since a language as deeply implicated in imperialism as English has been cannot but be contaminated by such a history and experience.

—M. NourbeSe Philip, “Interview with an Empire”<sup>1</sup>

It is reported that one of the first things the government of the Republic of Ghana did after large

quantities of extractable offshore oil deposits were discovered in 2007 was to apply for a five-year Norwegian government Oil for Development (OfD) grant. The objective of the OfD agreement is for the Norwegian government to help the Ghanaian government “reduce poverty by promoting responsible management of petroleum resources.”<sup>2</sup> A promotional video made by the Norwegian Agency for Development and Cooperation (NORAD) touting its “Oil for Development: Cooperation between

Ghana and Norway” program begins with the following statement:

It doesn't follow that the discovery of oil in the country automatically leads to a better life for the people. On the contrary, *corruption*, environmental damage, a heated-up economy and *conflicts* could mean that natural resources become more of a *curse* than a blessing. . . . Norwegian *expertise in the management* of oil resources is in much demand. . . . The Ghanaian authorities were quick to get in touch with Norway for advice and cooperation. (transcribed by author; emphasis added)<sup>3</sup>

In a similar vein, the World Bank in October 2012 launched a proposal to find funding for a new trust fund to “help African countries negotiate the best-possible deals for the oil, gas, and minerals.” The concept paper for this fund states that “evidence suggests that the dependence on extractive industries . . . will increase in the foreseeable future, so there is an even greater urgency to promote *prudent management* of these valuable resources” (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup> It further argues that one of the key reasons benefits of mineral wealth have not materialized for African governments and their populations is “lack of government capacity to manage the [contract] negotiations.” In ways similar to NORAD’s OfD program, the World Bank solutions for Africans would be to help them “build capacity” in the form of ongoing technical, legal, and social scientific assistance.

That postcolonial African states’ projects of resource extraction are framed through “development,” and its current neoliberal orthodoxy of “good governance” points to the ideological and practical entanglements of resource-to-development practices that have emerged over the past three decades. Similar to gold and other mineral resources, oil extraction becomes a project occurring within the framework of development and policy regimes that undermine the Ghanaian state’s sovereignty and encourages dependence on Western agencies. In this sense, whatever the Ghanaian state’s potential for dealing with its own natural resources quickly becomes absorbed within broader claims of postcolonial Africa’s presumably inherent proclivity to turn resource wealth into a “resource curse.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, the claims of the Norwegian OfD program for Ghana depend upon two presumptions: first, that there is something called a “resource curse,” and Norway managed to avoid it; and second, that Ghana cannot handle the management of its resources without outside help, especially from Norway. Indeed, consistent calls for African states, such as Ghana, to pursue “good governance” and to enhance their “capacity” (on a number of fronts) are not controversial among development scholars and practitioners. This is because such tropes of good governance or capacity building are familiar, have become naturalized, and operate within the ideological apparatus that governs the ways that international aid organizations, Western governments, and academics, including anthropologists, engage contemporary resource extraction and the overall idea of development in Africa.

My concern in this article is with the normalization of particular vernaculars of development orthodoxy through

the current resource-to-development schemes. By “development,” I mean the constellation of public and private agencies and Western-funded nongovernmental organizations and institutions that are purportedly set up to bring about economic, cultural, and political change in a given society. “Development” is also the intellectual apparatus that projects a particular ideological framework for producing subjects and objects (Escobar 1995). I focus on some of the terminology of development and the organization and ordering of these terms through what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2012) calls a “racial grammar.” Bonilla-Silva explains racial grammar in this way: “if racial ideology furnishes the material that is spoken, argued, and transacted, racial grammar provides the ‘deep structure,’ the ‘logic’ and ‘rules’ of proper composition of racial statements . . . of what can be seen, understood, and even felt about racial matters” (174). My argument is that the English-language terms utilized in resource-to-development schemes point to a racial vernacular. I am calling this a *racial* vernacular of development because it is deployed within the resource-extraction industry (and within the broader development enterprise) in ways that sustain racial thought, that index particular racial meanings, and that prescribe certain social and political practices.

Anthropologists have demonstrated the interplay of race and language, and the ways “colonial distinctions within and between nation-state borders continue to shape contemporary linguistic and racial frontiers” (Rosa and Flores 2017, 623). In the context of the development apparatus deployed in Africa, I contend that the “co-naturalization of language and race” (623) that constructs Africans as peculiar types of beings is evident through such terms as “capacity building,” “corruption,” “resource curse,” and “(bad) governance,” among others. The terms reinforce patterns of racial (dis)advantage, global inequality, and relations structured in dominance.

There is, of course, a decades-old critique of the discursive practices of the Western development apparatus as a knowledge system that (re)produces colonialist ideas about the “Third World” while marginalizing non-Western forms of knowledge (Escobar 1995). In this article, however, I focus on the *racial* articulations of this development apparatus and its forms of knowledge production. In particular, I argue that the terminology of development thrives on the construction of a notion of fundamental African racial difference (and white Western normativity) while rendering the unequal institutional and material relations of resource extraction, among other things, through terms that sediment cultural narratives of this presumed African inferiority. In a context where race and racism are often ignored or assumed to have little relevance in development, how do we understand the processes through which racial codes are embedded and naturalized in practices ranging from contract negotiations and the management and bureaucracy of resource extractions to the power structure of the world system that places African sovereignty *below* Western nongovernmental organizations and corporations? The effort here, then, is to

demonstrate the deeply racialized nature of the development apparatus and to see its vernaculars as one of the tools of its continuing racialization.

In what follows, I show that the processes of racialization that underpin the idea of development, development scholarship, and resource-to-development practice are based on assumptions around African cultural peculiarity, the exceptionality of African political practice, and what political theorist Siba Grovogui (2001) describes as the belief in “a general African lack.” My objective is to extend the well-known critiques of the development project as one of Othering to stress the *racial* dimension of such Othering—especially in the African context. I then examine three key terms from the racial lexicon of development: “good governance,” “capacity building,” and the descriptor “artisanal.” While this is by no means an exhaustive representation of its racial vernaculars, I want to demonstrate how such terms have been deployed to not only structure the unequal and racialized relationship between Africa and the West but also to obscure the role of colonialism (and postcolonial hierarchies) in producing global inequalities while rendering the structural and epistemological violence of the development industry routine and commonsense. I end by briefly contextualizing how the assumptions undergirding the racial terminology of development continue to be a generalized process reflected in anthropological engagement with Africa. I also want to note that, while my discussion includes specific ethnographically informed analysis from my ongoing research in Ghana, the point is to demonstrate the ways that development’s racial vernaculars implicate “Africa”—as trope and racialized entity (see Pierre 2018). In this sense, the diversity of the economic processes of various African nations is less important than the ways that the racial vernaculars of development continue to implicate the entire continent.

### THE RACIAL LEGACY OF DEVELOPMENT

Anthropologist Uma Kothari (2006) once asked if development can ever be “separated from a history that produced . . . ‘race.’” Race and development have been intimately related since the consolidation of European power over the majority of the world in the late eighteenth century. In other words, it is important to understand development as incorporating the whole complex of unequal historical and material relationships, processes, and related ideological and discursive projects that structure engagement between the West and the rest of the world. The project of development, then, cannot be abstracted from the violent history of European imperialism (conquest, slavery, genocide, and land and resource expropriation) and the naturalization of this violence through the trope of “civilization” claimed by the West. Also built into this project is the racialization of the West and its intellectual, political, and juridical traditions and practices as white (Grovogui 2001).

There has emerged important scholarship that traces the imbrication of race and development to the histories of colonialism and capitalist imperialism (Grovogui 2001;

Kothari 2006; Manji and O’Coill 2002). Firoze Manji and Carl O’Coill (2002) argue, for example, that contemporary Western NGOs have assumed the “missionary position” of early “volunteer associations” tied to colonial rule. When formal colonialism ended, these volunteer associations joined with post–World War II “war charities” and turned their attention to “underdeveloped” postcolonial nations. In the process, they shed their explicit racist discourse of the “white man’s burden” for a new one of underdevelopment. Manji and O’Coill write: “It was no longer that Africans were ‘uncivilised.’ Instead, they were ‘underdeveloped.’ Either way, the ‘civilised’ or ‘developed’ European has a role to play in ‘civilizing’ or ‘developing’ Africa” (Manji and O’Coill 2002, 7). Branwen Jones (2013, 61–62) also demonstrates that the immediate predecessor to contemporary racialized discourse of presumed African ineptitude is the “sanitized language of development and modernization” that emerged in the wake of decolonization. This was a discourse “evacuated of the vocabulary of race” (62). Former colonial states could then legitimize their ongoing hierarchical relations with former colonies through the language of political, economic, and social concern for new independent states, silencing the history of colonialism, which produced these inequalities in the first place.

The new scholarship<sup>6</sup> on race and development, echoing the decades of marginalized anthropological scholarship on racial formation (Allen and Jobson 2016; Harrison 1995), reminds us that the terms of the “technical expert,” “consultant,” “expatriate,” and even “anthropologist” are not race neutral (Kothari 2006). Along with the banality of the racialized images of aid/development recipients versus donors and experts, these terms represent ideologies and practices that obfuscate—even as they reveal and reproduce—the racializing core of the development complex. At base, development sets up a dichotomy of whiteness and nonwhiteness, which, while often implicit, nevertheless marks the legacies of colonial methods of distinction. This occurs in myriad forms, but for our purposes, it does so primarily through the construction and maintenance of “whiteness and the west [as] symbols of authority, expertise and knowledge” and through a terminology that “masks the profound material implications of ‘race’ in terms of its impact upon the unequal distribution of resources that shape dynamics of poverty and social exclusion” (Kothari 2006, 10). My own earlier research in Ghana made clear the connection between whiteness and development—in particular, the authoritative power of whiteness within the context of aid, expertise, and related understandings of civilization and growth (Pierre 2013). This reality is most aptly demonstrated in Nigerian novelist Teju Cole’s (2012) essay “The White Savior Industrial Complex,” where Cole laments the ways that too often “a nobody from America or Europe can go to Africa and become a godlike savior . . . under the banner of ‘making a difference.’”

To acknowledge development’s enunciative context of colonial domination and capitalist imperialism, therefore,

is to understand the ways that development—and all its processes and practices—is always already a racialized and racializing project. Here, I follow the vast scholarship on processes of race and racialization as demarcating structures of power. Structurally, it matters little the intentions of those who participate in the development project, for they, *we*, are all interpellated into the global racial system (Rana 2011) and its white supremacist structures. Indeed, the key funding institutions that maintain the development industry (especially the ways that “Global North”<sup>7</sup> institutions such as the IMF and World Bank have forcefully empowered international NGOs at the expense of receiving nation-states, for example), the compromised role of postcolonial nation-states that are being served, and the rank order and hierarchical power of personnel in development programs (including the anthropologists who often simultaneously work as both researchers and consultants to said programs) are all implicated in this racial project. It is not a surprise, therefore, that “international development” workers are overwhelmingly white, the dominant racialized group from the Global North, whose significance depends largely on the symbolic and material value of whiteness. Significantly, this whiteness is often invoked in the language of development, where the general belief in Africa’s lack comes with the call for outside—and specifically non-African—intervention.

### THE RACIAL LEXICON OF DEVELOPMENT

Compare the following with the quoted dialogue of the Norwegian documentary at the beginning of the article:

The extractives sector provides huge opportunities for *sustainable development* and poverty reduction if *properly managed* with the right mix of policies and enforcement systems in place.

—Lebogang Motlana, director of UNDP’s Addis Ababa-based Regional Service Center for Africa, in 2014 (emphasis added)

[We are trying] to rectify some of the initial problems that have continued to *plague the management* of the continent’s natural resources. At the fore of this endeavor is the *capacity of governments* to get the best deals for their countries during contract negotiations.

—Carlos Lopes, executive secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa (emphasis added)

The “*oil curse*” is a shorthand expression that denotes a *series of dysfunctions*—economic, political, governmental, and security—African oil states are postcolonial states, already fragile, that have been weakened by the *corrupting influences of oil money*, with their leaders reduced to *kleptocrats*, their civilian regimes transformed into *brutal police states*, and aggravating a *regional tendency of military rule* . . . personal *despotisms* and veritable *reigns of terror* . . . Torn by *violent conflicts* . . . and *internalized inferiority complexes*, the people who live in these oil-rich countries are *prone to rebellion, insurrection, and civil war*.

—Douglas Yates (2012; emphasis added)

A cursory review of the vast literature on resource extraction reveals an astonishing consistency in semantic normativity. Scholarly, journalistic, and nongovernmental writing on resource extraction in Africa is replete with these particular descriptions that disparage African states

and African people. Regardless of political orientation, most discussions are framed through the theory of the resource curse, which assumes that the presence of resources alone, not their exploitation, is the problem, and that avoiding this “curse” means robust management of said resources, following certain protocols. That most countries accused of turning resource wealth into a resource curse are former colonies (mostly in Africa and South America) with long histories of foreign resource exploitation does not impact analysis that places the curse solely on “bad” local management. This is where we see what DiMuzio (2010, 95) calls the “latent imperialism” of the resource curse narrative. Indeed, it seems that the true resource curse is that “the Global South is the victim of the fossil fuel fed capitalism of the Global North.” The vast resource curse scholarship and related set of development practices on the ground have not only hidden the devastating structural legacies of colonial exploitation but have also managed to sediment claims of African incompetence (Obi 2010). For, the questions are not even about industrialized nations’ addiction to fossil fuels, about Europeans’ very *right* to secure resources from the African continent, about the structural relationships that maintain capitalist exploitation, or about whether neoliberal capitalism is inevitable. Instead, in a postcolonial context, they are about Africans’ inability to make its resources available for exploitation.

The following analysis will center on the three development terms I described above: “good governance” (and its corollary, “corruption”), “capacity building” (and its corollary, “sustainable development”), and the descriptor “artisanal” for discussing local forms of extraction. While this is a small number within a broad and popular terminology, I demonstrate the ways that these terms reflect politics, ideologies, and epistemologies indexed to what Grovogui (2001, 203) calls a “hermeneutics of race”—a sedimented hierarchy of values organized on the basis of presumed ontologies of racial difference.

### Good Governance

From the World Bank to the United Nations to the African Union to academia, “good governance” is considered necessary for African nations to end poverty, increase democracy, and properly develop. “Countries with strong institutions prosper by creating an environment that facilitates private sector growth, reduces poverty,” claims the World Bank group the International Development Association.<sup>8</sup> This sentiment is repeated by other Western organizations working in Africa. Thus, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa states as its policy focus and advisory services: “to assist member States in improving economic governance and development management including strengthening the rule of law, state legitimacy, trust in governance institutions and reducing corruption.”<sup>9</sup>

South African scholar Thandike Mkandawire (2007, 679) explains that the “belief that lack of ‘good governance’ might be the main hindrance to economic growth



in Africa” actually emerged in 1989 following a World Bank report that declared, “Underlying the litany of Africa’s development problems in a crisis of governance.”<sup>10</sup> But this particular declaration was actually a repurposing—and an outright rejection—of the concerns of African scholars and practitioners associated with the World Bank. According to Mkandawire (2007, 680), the World Bank for the first time consulted African scholars and commissioned background papers for their 1989 report. In their papers, the African scholars insisted “on the importance of local initiatives, political accountability to the citizens, and the need to reconcile African traditions and institutions with ‘modern’ ones.” This was an explicit effort to combat the foreign imposition of policies by unelected institutions (with the hope that it would ultimately provide little need for the World Bank). World Bank technocrats—so wedded to their “macroeconomic fundamentals” that paid very little attention to the cultural and sociopolitical predicaments of postcolonial African states—downplayed the African scholars’ suggestions. But they retained the concept of good governance. The organization’s economists insisted on the soundness of their conservative economic policies. When such policies failed, presumed African institutional weakness—the lack of capacity or will to properly implement orthodox economic policies—was presented as the main culprit. It did not matter, for instance, that these same policies (such as structural adjustment) demanded a minimalist role for the African state. This approach—linking foreign-imposed economic policy to good governance—was radically different from the intervention attempted by African scholars at the World Bank. Nowadays, it would seem that few contemporary scholars link the ubiquitous call for African good governance with the failure of neoliberal policies imposed on these governments by the Bretton Woods Institutions. To do so would challenge good-governance orthodoxy and point to an epistemological problem: when “government failure” in Africa is presented as more insidious than “market failure” (Mkandawire 2001) and when the goodness of Western development aid is taken for granted.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the state is the most demonized institution in contemporary Western representation of African politics. It is castigated for its weak institutions, its size (especially its civil service), its incapacity to discharge normal functions, its inability (and presumed unwillingness) to drive forward development, and its overall illegitimacy. There is much to be said here about the long history of the idea of African “fragile states” (Osaghae 2007),<sup>11</sup> but I want to focus briefly on the ways that the call for good governance and the related castigation of the African state depend on deeply racialized views of Africa and Africans. Scholars should be troubled by the particular language of disdain, disappointment, and dismissal with which African politics is often described, and the continued proliferation of racialized epithets used to describe what has become an essentialized “African state” in the anthropological (and social science) literature: kleptocratic state, failed state, zombie

state, vampire state, predatory state, parasitic state (Mkandawire 2001; Wilson 2012).<sup>12</sup> There is a way that the *terms* of engagement with African phenomena work to mask “the deeper question of Western representations of Africa as a continent of absolute horror, a theatre of primordial savagery” (Amselle 2003, 2), terms that serve to exceptionalize Africa and separate its experiences from the continent’s long history of unequal and exploitative experiences with colonial control, global capitalism, and neocolonialism.

At the heart of this demand for good governance in Africa is the discourse of corruption. “Corruption is endemic to Africa,” a US-based Ghanaian academic told me last year when defending the “anemic revenues” (Panford 2017, 129) that Ghana receives from its new oil exploration venture.<sup>13</sup> The ultimate consensus for many Western donor states, aid workers, and academics is that corruption is a fundamental cultural characteristic of continental Africans. This view of Africa does not diverge much from the centuries-long understanding of African difference as so acute and its phenomena as so exceptional as to set Africans apart from other humans (Mudimbe 1988). In this context, the description of corruption in Africa presents the practice as an almost biological trait, “grounded in the supposed proclivities of its rulers and their acolytes and kin to bring chaos . . . through economic mismanagement and embezzlement” (Grovgui 2001, 428). Indeed, late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century specialists in African politics and culture have so focused on corruption as a fundamental cultural characteristic of the African that it has led some to wonder if corruption “is not the ‘new racial stereotype’ for Africans” (De Figueiredo 2005; cited in Pierre 2006). This characterization works not only to deny the universality of corruption but also to limit corruption to the Global South, and especially Africa, while excluding the West, foreign private corporate interests, donor governments and financial institutions, and international NGOs from its scope (Wilson 2012).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, even when there are numerous reports of Western corporations’ fraudulent behavior, such as renegeing on tax and rent payments to local governments, the development vernaculars of endemic corruption or bad governance are not systematically deployed against the corporations or their sponsoring Western nations (Bracking 2009; Ndikumana and Boyce 2018).

The development language of governance and corruption redeploys well-worn essentialized notions of Africa as a source of corruption, chaos, and indiscipline through a series of racialized binary oppositions. Thus, “corrupt, self-seeking African leaders on the one hand, incorruptible, accountable and compassionate Western institutions on the other; chaos and conflict on the one hand, order and stability on the other; despotism on the one hand, democracy on the other” (Wilson 2012, 136–37). It is significant, then, that claims of unfettered corruption and calls for good governance are directed more often than not toward Africans. Moreover, democratization and good governance are presented as relevant *within* countries, but, importantly, not in the political relations *between* weak and strong countries. Consequently,

calls for good governance work to not only establish non-Africans (usually the structurally white technocrats) as the depository of technical know-how and capacity-producing skills but also the group with the *moral* imperative to determine the social, economic, and political agendas for African people. The relations of “trusteeship” between African nations and institutions such as USAID, the World Bank, and, more recently, the US military mammoth that is AFRICOM are then justified. We might ask, then, what epistemological and theoretical work would it take to deploy the values and assumptions that underpin the good-governance language and apply it instead to the neoliberal and neocolonial imperialist relations between Africans and Western institutions, including Western financial institutions, multinational corporations, and, importantly, the Western intellectual apparatus?

In my ongoing research on the history of resource extraction in Ghana, I have been particularly concerned with the naturalization of both the practices of unequal political and economic arrangements and the differential governance regimes for local communities and Western corporations. Take the following example. In late February 2015, there was an “incident” offshore between a Tullow Oil security vessel, the *Seacor Merchant*, and a fishing boat with three Ghanaian fishermen on board. Tullow Oil Ghana Ltd. is a private Anglo-Irish exploration and production company that is the lead operator of the offshore Jubilee oil field off the western coast of Ghana, near the twin cities Sekondi-Takoradi.<sup>15</sup> With headquarters in London, Tullow holds the largest share of Ghana’s oil output in this field, where production first began in December 2010. Information about this incident came to the Ghanaian news media through a statement from Tullow’s public relations firm that “a canoe had deployed finishing nets very close to the FPSO Kwame Nkrumah posing danger to its occupants, personnel in and around the FPSO as well as sub-sea infrastructure.”<sup>16</sup> In response, Tullow’s security vessel used a long-range acoustic device to demand that the fishermen haul back their nets, purportedly to “avert danger to their lives.” The fishermen apparently refused and continued deploying their nets to fish. Tullow security stated that it was forced to intervene, and it began to forcefully haul back the fishermen’s nets to remove them from the established “security zone.” Tullow’s operatives then said that the Ghanaian fishermen “rammed their canoe” into the extremely large security vessel, damaging the canoe in the process. The report continues: “Subsequently, the crew of the *Seacor Merchant* observed that the canoe was sinking. The fishermen were rescued and taken aboard the *Seacor Merchant*. There were no injuries on either side and both personnel and equipment in and around the Jubilee Field are safe and secure.”

The local fishermen were eventually handed over to Ghana police.

In many ways, this story is not remarkable. Given the ongoing reports of local fishing-community grievances, these “incidents” probably occur more often than we know

(Ackah-Baidoo 2013). In Ghana, Tullow’s offshore operations are a no-go zone, even for most Ghanaian government officials. For its operations, Tullow and other private oil companies renovated the existing structures at the Ghana air and naval bases in Sekondi-Takoradi,<sup>17</sup> tarring roads and repairing buildings. Hence, structures that were originally used for the Ghanaian military are now providing office and logistics space for oil companies—while the Ghanaian air force and navy provide full-time security for both oil management and oil assets (Chalfin 2019). Tullow’s private security trawler that confronted the Ghanaian fishermen also had on board members of the Ghanaian navy.

Thus, there was no question that Tullow’s private security was fully within its rights in intercepting the Ghanaian fishermen—as fully granted both by the quasi-sovereign Ghanaian nation-state under the tutelage of its foreign advisers and consultants, and its structural location as a Western-backed private corporation. In contrast, the Ghanaian fishermen had (and have) no rights—offshore or onshore—that the private corporation has to acknowledge. That this unequal confrontation between the Ghanaian fishing boat and the Tullow security vessel occurred under unequal power relations is understood and accepted to be the consequence (intentional or otherwise) of the resource-extraction system under contemporary neoliberal regimes.

The juridico-political terms and related social structures that uphold Tullow’s extractive efforts (as well as those of other private and multinational corporations) are by now well known, for they follow the general political-economic trends in the offshore oil industry. These companies’ economic investments are ensured through an expansive edifice that entails what Walter Rodney (1972) once called “resource-extraction zones.” These companies import all their equipment, hire very few “locals” among their skilled laborers, and provide their own additional private security. Tullow’s operations “onshore” are curated through two sectors: the Ghanaian military and third-party Western-backed private and multinational logistics corporations, on the one hand, and local, small-scale (Ghanaian-owned) industries that provide basic and usually domestic services (such as catering, housekeeping, and providing drivers) to the “onshore” foreign transient staff of these large firms, on the other hand (Chalfin 2015).<sup>18</sup>

Tullow operations are also read through a different moral-ethical framework that is out of reach for the Ghanaian state and Ghanaian people. For example, when I was in Takoradi between 2012 and 2013, it was rumored among a number of people in the industry that the gauge used to measure the amount of extracted oil on Tullow’s rig had been broken for more than eight months before some members of the Ghanaian government were notified. The truth of the rumor is less important than the reality that, even if it was true, Tullow (and its sponsoring Western nations) was not subject to moral-ethical judgments and essentializing claims of corruption and bad governance. In conducting this research, I have been struck by the ways scholarship

on extraction often bypass these unequal economic and political realities of minimal rents, royalties, and taxation for these corporations to detail instead African states' inability to "manage" these royalties. Many of these analyses inhabit the ideological apparatus that governs the neoliberal tropes of African lack of good governance and that often ratify the calls for capacity building for Africans. The identifiable actors within these tropes (the "corrupt" government official, the local elite, the violent "ethnic" clashes over resources—all racialized tropes) are treated with more ethnographic detail and scrutiny and dispensation than the documented illicit practices of corporate capital flight—and capital flight as a normal practice of neocolonial imperialism.

In addition to the reality that, in the postcolonial moment, corporate rule continues to be an extension of imperialism, there are also the politics that emerge from the development complex's NGO-ization of resource extraction and, along with it, the ideological and practical merging of NGO and corporate ideologies. In their recent article "The Anthropology of Extraction,"<sup>19</sup> Gilberthorpe and Rajak (2017, 197–98) write of the "rapidly emerging regime" that brings together international NGOs with a coalition of corporations to target Global South governments' "mismanagement of resources and revenues." This coalition is said to extend its "collective guardianship . . . aimed at ensuring accountability" for "sustainable development." But this new so-called global ethical regime is actually not new. Over a decade ago, activists from all over the world critiqued the growing "nonprofit industrial complex" as the "institutionalization of a relation of dominance" (Rodríguez 2009, 39). International NGOs, in other words, do not change the prevailing power relations that place African states at the bottom of the global economic order and its populations at the bottom of the global division of labor. Because of the hierarchical relations of international NGOs to the local African populations they serve, it is important to note, there is a way that funding a presumed African "lack" works to reinforce said lack. It is also important to recognize how these hierarchical relationships translate into racial meanings and ethics mapped onto people. Thus, the parallel effects on the ground of the convergence of the ideological precepts of NGOs and corporations are reflected in clear ways: the corporation is read as representatives of the West and, therefore, as developed, guiltless, and white. On the other hand, Africans, representatives of the nation-state and local communities, are seen as underdeveloped, Black, needy, and lacking guidance. As a racial vernacular of development, "good governance" depends on a presumption of state failure that retains the structuring imperial logic of a hierarchy of ontologies. Though without the explicit language of race, this vernacular continues to index African state failure as a process that is "proliferous and dramatic and, like the eighteenth-century discourse of racial anatomy, is 'rife with mechanistic metaphors' . . . with states slipping backwards, sliding toward the abyss of collapse, tottering on the brink, before decaying, collapsing, or imploding" (Jones 2013, 61).

### **Capacity Building**

On a bright summer afternoon in 2013, I went to meet with some of the project leaders of an internationally funded local NGO in Sekondi-Takoradi, in the Western Region of Ghana. We met at the organization's comfortably furnished main office, headquartered in a spacious building in a lush park. I had arrived in Takoradi from Accra only a few days earlier and was staying in the nearby fishing town of Busua. My time in Busua was marked by the seemingly unending conversations about the changes impacting the local fishing industry since offshore oil drilling operations began. There was the complaint by some in the area about the increasing difficulty fishermen faced. In particular, fishermen were having to travel further out for better catches and, therefore, having to be away on the ocean for days at a time.<sup>20</sup>

My conversation that day with representatives of the local NGO centered primarily on their numerous programmatic efforts to combat the potential devastation of oil production on the community. This organization claims as its goal to help local fishing communities participate in the decision-making processes that impact their livelihoods. There is specific concern about the social impacts associated with this new deep-sea oil drilling enterprise—from a rise in housing and commodity prices in Takoradi and government-enabled land grabs by foreign corporations to boating accidents caused by the high traffic on the sea because of the increase in supply vessels to the oil rigs. At the same time, the NGO's programming—mitigating the effects of "illegal" fishing by the *local* population—reflected its limited purview.

Consider some of the organization's projects: "Citizen Petroleum Revenue Management," "Promoting Social Accountability," "Safe Fishing Saves Lives," "Sustainable Fisheries Management," and ensuring that there is "Enforcement of Fisheries Laws to Enhance Governance." These projects deploy the accepted vernacular of development. They also demonstrate the merging of NGO and corporate orientation to the governance of resource extraction. In the context of continuing revision of national laws governing oil production predicated on primary protections for property and investment rights (what Leonard and Grovogui [2017] call a "neoliberal form of the rule of law"), it is clear that governance structures for local inhabitants are different from those of private corporations. Indeed, governance regimes for local populations are enacted on a different moral-ethical register. Local communities in these affected areas of the oil industry are "viewed as less sovereign, less industrious, and thus less deserving of moral consideration than industry, capital, and agreeable state officials" (Grovogui and Leonard 2007, 42). Simultaneously, foreign (non-African) technocrats and corporate executives operate with seemingly much broader moral latitude. Hence, the call for capacity building from the outside.

Capacity building is another of those ubiquitous terms within the racial vernacular of development. It depends on



the assumption that there are local cultural or political obstacles that hinder development. In theory, capacity building can generally apply to a wide variety of groups, from non-profit organizations to businesses that need to enhance their organization's abilities to better achieve results. In practice, however, capacity building is mostly associated with its deployment in reference to aid-receiving (Southern) governments, where it is understood as the core approach to development. Thus, for the more prominent Western foreign-aid organizations and financial agencies working in the Global South, capacity building is one of the key components of development-aid packages and programs.

The focus on building capacity emerged within a similar context of that of good governance. Deborah Eade (1997) contends that before the concept became a leading term within the development terminology, capacity building came in the form of new philosophies of leftist scholars and clergy (particularly liberation theologians and activist feminists in Latin America) that promoted empowerment and participation of local communities. In the early context of Western-based aid and development projects, these groups argued that development needed to be participatory. Yet, in the wake of the economic crisis in Africa engendered by structural-adjustment policies imposed by the Bretton Woods Institutions, technocrats shifted the focus from economics to also include the "social dimensions of life in Africa, how they change, and whether all groups in society participate effectively in the process of economic development" (Jaycox 1991, iii). Again, the enforced neoliberal economic prescriptions on Africa were not often seen as the primary problem for development. The problem was, instead, African social and cultural behavior. Studies and reports were commissioned to understand these societies' vulnerabilities and (in)capacity to properly develop. Capacity building came to refer to "strengthening the skills, competencies and abilities of people and communities in developing societies so they can overcome the cause of their exclusion and suffering."<sup>21</sup> By its very nature, development became the way to increase capacity. In other words, capacity building "transforms *helping* into a technical fix, generating its own entourage of 'experts'" (Corwall 2007, 473). Because the African state was already considered incapable of enabling development and because even political liberals with good intentions generally "hold the west to be latently and teleologically moderate across time and space" (Grovgoui 2001, 440), donor agencies turned to their own (Western) NGOs to lead this move, enabling the structural usurpation of the power of African states and African peoples.

Capacity building is now considered a key form of development assistance, occurring primarily through foreign NGOs, which work as contractors, to help implement the policies of Western donors. The perceived need for technology and skills transfer to an ignorant and less-technology-savvy local population drives most capacity-development agendas (Crewe and Harrison 1999). The logic of capacity building as indirect "aid" is directly related to the presumed

inability of African states to properly govern. Thus, international donors, such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID), provide aid in the form of human "expertise" such that states can develop the proper abilities and skills. As a result, we often hear that capacity building refers to improvements to the governance and institutional capacities of resource-rich poor countries so that they can implement and enforce their laws (as exemplified above with the local NGO's mandate of helping Ghanaian fishermen *manage* the negative effects of neoliberal, corporate-friendly laws and practices).

The concept of capacity building (and its ideologies and practices) is effective and potent because it is cast as technical and rational. Yet, in its mesmerizing repetitions, capacity building also depends on the ideological and political construction of the *incapacity* of African countries—that is, cultural, developmental, and civilizational lack. While there may be some truth to Ghana's need for more skilled workers in the new oil industry, for example, the capacity-building mantra also emerges from within the broader ideological and political construction of a terminology that accompanied the colonizing practices for the production and management of a Third World, of a needy Africa, for capital. As deployed, capacity building indexes "the often unacknowledged . . . assumption of white superiority and expertise" (Kothari 2006, 15) and points to a set of practices where there is clearly a racialized distinction "not only between who is developed and underdeveloped, but who gives assistance and who must be grateful for it" (14). This raises the question, asked by Grovgoui: How is it that "certain people and places (the west) came to exemplify cultural adaptability, political competency and modernity while other people in other places (the third world) became the symbol of cultural inflexibility, political dysfunction and underdevelopment" (cited in Kothari 2006, 11)?

Gustavo Esteva (2010) argues that development has a double function. For those considered already developed, their self-perception depends on a conceit of progress, charity, and the insistence of imposing its systems on those below. But for the majority of the world—the so-called Third World—development requires a self-perception as underdeveloped, "with the whole burden of connotation that this carries" (Esteva 2010, 3; see also Escobar 1995). Because many people in these societies accept the status of underdevelopment, it undermines self-confidence and "clamours for management from the top down" (Esteva 2010, 3). It is not surprising that local communities have also adopted this racialized vernacular of development. At the same time, while the structural conditions underpinning development projects—from funding to staffing—drastically restrict local agency, the adoption of the vernacular of development also reflects a form of local agency. As Omolade Adunbi (2015, 243) demonstrates in his study of activism in the Niger Delta, foreign-funded local NGOs adopt the terms that are necessary for continuing funding. Nevertheless, this local agency is also contradictory because it reinforces—by

adopting development's terms of engagement—the strength of the racialized vernacular of development and its related practices.

### **Artisanal (as Descriptor)**

Within the extractive industries—whether oil or gold—the descriptor “artisanal” seems to have taken a life of its own. According to political scientist Paula Butler (2015), the subject “artisanal miner” or “small-scale miner or fisherman” has been actively produced in the dominant discourse of large international development agencies since the 1990s. Within mining, government, and development discourse, “artisanal mining” usually refers to mining that is carried out informally, often without a mining license or the payment of fees, and, importantly, that bypasses environmental regulations. In places such as Ghana, small-scale gold mining was decriminalized in 1989 (almost one hundred years after Indigenous mining was made illegal by the British colonial government) to combat increasing poverty in the context of structural adjustment and the subsequent growth of corporate mining activities in the country. Of late, however, much focus has turned to such problems associated with artisanal mining. In particular, there is the problem of illegal mining (dubbed *galamsey* in Ghana), which is believed to be the primary cause of environmental degradation and community destabilization. Indeed, environmental concerns and the rise in crime were the reasons given for the Ghanaian government's recent one-and-a-half-year ban on small-scale mining. This is even as some critics have pointed out that the “surface mining” of large corporations contributes much more to environmental degradation (Tsuma 2010). While for Ghana, in particular, the focus is on illegal *foreign* small-scale mining, artisanal mining is one of the general concerns for the development industry.

Notably “artisanal” industries are contrasted to corporate, capital-intensive, foreign, and white-owned companies. For example, within the gold mining industry in Ghana, the fight against *galamsey* has centered on the uncouth but well-connected local businesspeople who promote general lawlessness.<sup>22</sup> The discourse mechanism here is important. It works in two ways. In the first instance, those who participate in *galamsey* are unruly, illegal, and anarchic. But simultaneously, the *galamsey* are considered lacking in the necessary skills (and equipment), are too technologically primitive, and are therefore irresponsible and environmentally disruptive. Indeed, in September 2018, *Ghana Business News* magazine reported that the World Bank had released \$50 million (\$30 million of which are loans, the other \$20 million are grants) to support the government's “fight against illegal mining and the wanton degradation of the environment.”<sup>23</sup> In its justification for disbursing the funds, the World Bank unironically stressed that it would provide capacity-building services to help small-scale miners emulate the corporate social responsibility model of community building and engagement.

Foreign-run, large-scale mining companies, however, are rarely taken to task for practices of environmental

degradation or for corruption. But the choice of contrast is explicitly political and covertly racial. The reality is that so-called artisanal extraction—Indigenous mining or fishing, among other things—pre-dates European extraction, slave trading in Africans, and colonialism, and encompass a wide range of practices (Howard 1978; see also Dummett 1998). Yet the idea of “artisanal” recasts African labor practices as diminutive and backward. In fact, the World Bank uses the word “primitive” to describe the technology used by Indigenous fishermen and miners (Butler 2015). It is important to note that while products deemed “artisan” or “artisanal” in Europe and the United States are celebrated because they tend to reference skilled craftworkers, the term does not have the same connotation in reference to Africans. The “artisanal” miner or fisherman is said to inhabit an ancient world and to only possess rural skills not yet adapted to (or capable of using) modern technology. The naturalizing of “artisanal” mining is an essentializing move that renders the African independent miner or fisherman a different kind of being.

The three terms analyzed above, part of a broader racial vernacular of development, have much in common. First, they depend on the presumption of an African lack, which is depicted as “immutable African cultural dispositions, and distinct regional attributes,” and which account for Africans' “physical, social, and political ills” (Grovoogui 2001, 440). Second, they make an implicit—and at times explicit—call for external (usually Western/white) intervention in African affairs. Because the African lack is understood as immutable, this external intervention has to be indefinite. Third, this terminology represents ideas and practices that are seen as unique to Africans (and, more generally, the Global South). The racialized vernaculars of development are not only based on ideologies and practices that presume the inherent inadequacies of the postcolonial African state and of African peoples, inadequacies that blame African cultural practices *alone* for so-called underdevelopment (Grovoogui 2001). Ultimately, the vernaculars also work within the context of global white supremacy, for it is not possible to compare “African and European agencies and cultural dispositions without conflating them with racial creatures and habits” (Kothari 2006, 13).

### **CONCLUSION**

The ideological precepts and racialized political-economic relations revealed through the contemporary extraction industry in Africa are not new. Indeed, it was under colonialism that “capitalist imperialism” became a permanent stimulus for the racialized “ordering of unequal and exploitative relations production . . . and further demanded justification of these relations” (Magubane 1979, 3). While the development industry emerged from this history of racial capitalism, a history that shapes the routine inequality related to resource appropriation and imperial control (Hudson 2017), this reality and its clear material consequences are often obscured in the scholarship—including the work that critiques the

industry. This is a way that the racialized structural violence of the development industry continues to be rendered rationalized, routine, and commonsense. Anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1989, 714–15) once remarked that, as a discipline “concerned with the left-overs of colonialism,” anthropology inherits part of its “terminological package” but has yet to complete the task of the “systematic historicization of the very categories we use.”

Here is a brief example. In an otherwise interesting article about the uneasy “politics of dependence” emerging among a South African community dealing with late capitalism and where people’s labor is of diminishing value, the author writes that a young scholar’s PhD research “showed that *well-intentioned projects to build norms of democratic citizenship* in KwaZulu-Natal ran afoul of *entrenched local expectations* about hierarchical leadership, and a stubborn (and, to the *emancipatory liberal mind*, scandalous) attachment to *personalistic* and decidedly *undemocratic authority of chiefs*” (Ferguson 2013, 232; emphasis added). Here, we get the sedimentation, however unwittingly, of the same language and tropes that set up the binary structure between Africans and presumably (white) Europeans/Americans. Who is assumed to be leading the “well-intentioned projects to build norms of democratic citizenship”? What do we make of the seemingly innocent reference to “entrenched local expectations”? Why is it not problematic that the author sets himself (and his foreign colleagues) apart as having an “emancipatory liberatory mind”—in direct opposition to the Southern Africans who have a presumably irrational “attachment to personalistic . . . and undemocratic authority of chiefs”? This critique should not be reduced to a personal concern with the scholar. Rather, this example reflects a larger corpus of research papers, dissertations, fellowship applications, and books on development that take for granted presumed African deficit marked against an implicit Western goodness. Here, we see what is assumed to be the moral centrality of the West, what Grovogui refers to as the “texture of abstract moral judgment,” that demonstrates the ways that even “liberal notions of justice and morality have a racial tincture” (Agathangelou 2016, 211).

Within the development terminology (as well as academic discussions of development), notions of racial difference may be submerged, but they are not far from the surface. This racial vernacular—and the practices that it supports—serves as a supplement both to discourses and representations of charity and philanthropy, linked to European and US whiteness and to discussions and “pictures of poor, black tribal . . . wasteland[s] of limited resources” (Kothari 2006, 13). It is often a moral imperative that depends on a consistent *liberal* dehumanization of Africans. What I mean here is the deployment of a system of liberal ideologies through language that assumes the goodness of European liberal configurations (the rule of law, inalienable rights)—configurations that structure postcolonial African states’ unequal relationship to the rest of the world. As Grovogui (1996) demonstrates in *Sovereigns, Quasi-Sovereigns,*

*and Africans*, these liberal principles were actually violated through the colonial project and decolonization, operating as racializing practices for Africans while simultaneously concealing and justifying the violence of white European political and cultural dominance (see also Mills 2017). Thus, if the development terminology is not explicit in its racialization, it structures this racialization in its implications of African difference and the subsequent normalization of such implications.

In the main, the scholarship within the development field continues to demonstrate the ways that, to quote Faye Harrison (1991, 3), “the connotations of a racialized Other . . . have been and, unfortunately, still remain underpinnings of many anthropological assumptions and perspectives.” A cursory review on the output of anthropological research on development or resource-to-development schemes will show that, with exceptions, the starting point for such work actually begins with two interrelated assumptions: (1) the assumption, with caveats, of the overall goodness of Western institutions and aid projects, and how certain Western ideals of democracy are sacrosanct; and (2) the assumption of the cultural, civilization, and racial binary oppositions between Africans and the rest. These assumptions are embedded in the structure of global white supremacy. The racial lexicon of development is its discursive expression. Terms such as “resource curse,” “good governance,” “corruption,” “capacity building”—as well as descriptors like “artisanal”—are “historical products, shaped by the past and present they claim to describe and analyze” (Trouillot 1989, 714).

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## NOTES

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1. See: <https://lemonhound.com/2017/12/12/m-nourbese-philip-interview-with-an-empire/>.
2. The five-year OFD agreements have been signed and renewed over the years, with the latest one set to end in 2019.

3. See: <https://youtu.be/01quNL3VRHI>.
4. See: [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/WBEUROPEEXTN/Resources/268436-1322648428296/8288771-1326107592690/8357099-1349433248176/Concept\\_Note\\_Trust\\_Fund\\_Proposal.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/WBEUROPEEXTN/Resources/268436-1322648428296/8288771-1326107592690/8357099-1349433248176/Concept_Note_Trust_Fund_Proposal.pdf).
5. The popular “resource curse” theory states that a country endowed with natural resources will be cursed to bad economic management and ultimate poverty (Yohannes 2010). I discuss this “curse” later in the article.
6. To be clear, this new scholarship does not come out of anthropology; it comes from critical development studies and mostly from scholars based outside of the United States.
7. I am aware that the distinction of “Global North” and “Global South” are also problematic and set up a binary that continues to reinforce racialized and unequal distinctions. I use the terms here provisionally (and reluctantly).
8. See: <http://ida.worldbank.org/theme/governance-and-institutions>.
9. See: <https://www.uneca.org/pages/about-governance>. See Grovogui (1996) for a discussion on the deployment of “rule of law” as a racializing trope.
10. It must be noted here that these policy statements often refer to “Africa” without specificity. The fact that each nation-state within the continent has its specific economic history and set of policies seems to matter little. This kind of flattening and generalizing about “Africa” or “African States” further demonstrates the ways that this language depends upon particular racial logics.
11. See Kiely (1998) and Mkandawire (2001) for important discussions of the World Bank’s differential deployment of “good governance” discourse for African states versus East Asian ones.
12. See Mkandawire (2001) for a searing critique of the evolving and discriminatory views of the “African state.”
13. Researchers argue that Ghana provides some of the most attractive financial terms for foreign oil companies (see Phillips, Hailwood, and Brooks 2016). See also Panford (2017) for discussions of the extraordinary terms of Ghana’s oil contracts, where operators at Jubilee Field (the name of the site of Ghana’s offshore oil rigs) pay only a 5 percent royalty rate.
14. Compare this to actual occurrences of egregious cases of Western corruption—the capital theft of multination corporations, Enron, banking failure, Donald Trump, and US politics, etc.—and how they are *not* described as “natural” or “essential” tendencies of the people of the West. Each case is read as an exception.
15. Ghana signed a petroleum exploration agreement with Kosmos Energy in 2004, a small oil-exploration company based in Texas. Kosmos had US equity financing and, in 2007, found considerable oil deposits in the offshore Tano Basin. The oil field is named “Jubilee Field,” as it was found in 2007, the year of Ghana’s fiftieth anniversary. Tullow Oil, an Anglo-Irish oil and gas exploration firm, developed the fields. Most recent data shows that the oil companies that operate Jubilee Field are Tullow Oil, with stakes of 35.8 percent; Kosmos energy, 24 percent; Anadarko, 23.4 percent; Ghana National Petroleum Company (GNPC), 10 percent; E & O (a private Ghanaian company), 3.5 percent; and Sabre Oil, 1.85 percent (Panford 2017).
16. FPSO is an acronym for Floating Production Storage and Off-loading. It’s an offshore floating vessel used by the oil and gas industry for the production and storage of oil. This one, ironically named after first president Kwame Nkrumah, operates in Ghana’s first offshore oil fields, the Jubilee.
17. These included the Takoradi Air Force Station, the Sekondi Naval Base, and the Takoradi Port.
18. See Chalfin (2015), for an important discussion of the interdependent relationship between the “offshore” and “onshore” of oil production. It is also important to stress the racial economy of this oil production in Africa and other resource-producing (i.e., “developing”) areas: there is a clear division of labor that maps onto racial distinctions, distinctions that replicate the working of monopolies in Ghana during formal colonialism (Pierre 2013; see also Appel 2012).
19. This is an important review essay that is tellingly—and unfortunately—framed through the trope of the “resource curse.”
20. See: <http://www.reportingoilandgas.org/wp-content/uploads/impact-of-oil-and-gas-exploration-on-fisheries.pdf>.
21. See: <http://www.spadeglobal.org/what-we-do/capacity-building/>.
22. Over the past decade, the *galamsey* phenomenon has implicated Chinese speculators, who are often said to be using Ghanaian front people.
23. See: <https://www.ghanabusinessnews.com/2018/09/05/world-bank-to-support-ghana-with-50million-in-the-fight-against-galamsey-country-director/>.

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