Necropolitics and Neocolonialism in International Assistance and Bias against People of Color

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My main research focus is ethnographies and the lived experience of people of color, particularly women of color, working in the international assistance sector. As a senior global advisor focusing on decolonization and systemic change, I am driven to explore how to promote theories of change within this sector, which in my view continues to dehumanize the global South and to center the knowledge, "pragmatism," and resilient capacity of the global North. Specifically, I argue that the colonial and current neocolonial approaches by the West contribute to the ongoing subjugation of bodies in the global South. This paper investigates the implications of necropolitics on people of color in the international humanitarian aid sector, analyzing how racial biases shape relations among workers within this sector while curtailing its ability to serve and empower communities within the global South.

I was born in Iran in the 1970s and emigrated to the United States. Our family thrived in Tehran. We lived in a nice house in a good neighborhood. My father worked in the education sector and my mother was trained in England as a nurse. In the late 1970s, my father moved us to a safe, leafy suburb near San Francisco. The environment was beautiful, and the neighborhood was very wealthy. After we moved, an almost decade-long war broke out between my country and Iraq. During this period, The Shah of Iran was ousted in favor of more conservative anti-western leaders, which meant that my father lost his education sector job, and we could no longer return to Iran. We moved into a small apartment. Homelife for us in America was tense, often due to ongoing financial struggles. My father couldn't find long term work, due to rampant Islamophobia, racism, and xenophobia.

The sad events in Iran, with so many young soldiers and innocent families dying due to the war and bombing, compounded by my family's financial challenges, and the xenophobia we faced in America produced emotional turmoil within my family, a sense of disconnection from the country we had left, and alienation within the country we were now supposed to call home. All of this was particularly hard on my father, a soft-spoken, slight man who spoke (and still speaks) with a thick Middle Eastern accent. I recall the white fathers of my friends, red faced from too much drink, leaning into me when I was about seven years old, demanding to know "what my people were doing over there" and

why my father "didn't work," clearly implying he was lazy. My family was often taunted at gatherings. On our way out of a Disney movie, a white man in his truck nearly ran over my sister. When my dad raised his voice urging the man to be careful, he got out of his vehicle with his wife, both yelling at us: "terrorist sand n…… get out of *our* country."[1]

My brother, sister, and I started working early in order to support our family. I began at the age of twelve and worked for over a decade in restaurants, bakeries, and cafes, sweeping, cleaning, and picking up after white, wealthy families. Men used to come in and point to me and my sister: "I want the dark brown one to make my cappuccino, she makes good cappuccinos." They would whisper to their friends in blue suits, "Hey how would you like to roll around with *that* for just fifteen minutes?" Such comments suggested a sense of control over my body, which was effectively leased for the eight hours while I was on shift, sweating and bending, typing at the cashier stand, sweeping and wiping the dishes clean. I remember the rough dry feel of my hands after working all day.

Both my race and class position marked me as other. White friends would often scan my body, reassuring me that I wasn't foreign but looked more like a "tan American." They interpreted my body as they saw fit, in order to fit me into their narratives. I wasn't the "evil terrorist from that bad country"; I was American like them, just tanner. They, on the other hand, had full ownership of their bodies. During the summers that I worked, they vacationed, reclining themselves in their velvety chaise lounge chairs, their faces pink from sun, stretching their legs and arms, long, pale, and sinewy.

I began to think critically about my own experiences only after I went to the University of California at Berkeley and engaged with some of the most prominent feminist women of color scholars. Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* and bell hooks's *Aint't I a Woman* became my touchstones. I began to participate in body identity rallies, mixed race heritage meetings, Middle Eastern student networks, and women of color groups, and slowly began to step proudly into my own brown body. What it meant to be from Iran finally resonated with me, spiritually and ancestrally. I raised my fist at these meetings, shouted in support, and was surprised to hear my deep, strong voice rising from my lungs. I felt like my dry exhausted body was being nourished for the first time.

I moved to New York for graduate school and began focusing my thesis on what it means to live in my skin as an Iranian-American, the experience of split identity, and the dehumanization of my body and those of my fellow Iranians. As I entered my professional life, specializing in the humanitarian and international development sector, I felt a connection to the dehumanized people we were trying to help: the "vulnerable" and "poverty stricken," "resource poor" men and women from the global South, their bodies dusty and dirty, their children begging for water in ripped, stained clothing. It pained me to see that their bodies were the object of the gaze of Western, white donors with neocolonial and greedy intentions; scanning, judging, and telling these black and brown bodies what to do, where to eat, how to grow, how to live.

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[1]The term "sand" is in reference to the Middle Eastern deserts.

Necropolitics

Achille Mbembe's book *Necropolitics* highlights how former colonizers operated from a deeply disturbing and dehumanizing perspective:

> That colonies could be ruled in absolute lawlessness was due to the racial denial of any common bond between the conqueror and the native. In the conqueror's eyes, *savage life* is just another form of *animal life* […]. *Colonial occupation* itself consisted in seizing, delimiting and control over a geographic area—of writing a new set of social and spatial relations on the ground. (77–79; italics in original)

Mbembe uses the term, necropolitics, to refer to a colonially rooted model where western, mostly white, colonial, and neocolonial powers determine the value of black and brown bodies, which are often deemed less valuable than white bodies. He underscores the social and political dynamics perpetuated by colonial and current neocolonial powers as decision-makers in the lives of mostly brown and black bodies. Drawing upon the theories of Frantz Fanon, Mbembe shows how the violence thought to be constitutive of colonial regimes is actually a defining and dangerous feature of modern democracies. Moreover, recent global developments, including the migrant crisis, resurgent nationalism, and new digital technologies that serve to dehumanize populations have brought this violence into the foreground. In recent years, we have seen the real and symbolic neocolonial violence Mbembe describes play out in the current conflict and western media coverage of white Ukrainian bodies as mirrors of our own bodies, compared to dehumanizing representations of Palestinian bodies, with murdered children often treated as potential terrorists rather than as innocent victims.[2]

In the context of international development, necropolitics can also perpetuate marginalization, exclusion, and inequities by determining how resources are allocated, which issues are prioritized, and who gets to participate in and benefit from development processes. A classic example is how the IMF and the World Bank make their loans conditional upon deflationary austerity measures which prevent local governments, mostly in the global South, from delivering necessary services and supporting the needs of their communities while keeping them trapped in a cycle of debt. Confronting colonial and neocolonial systemic issues, necropolitics provides a framework for crucial discussions on how to break down power structures in order to foster inclusive and transformative participation in the international development and aid sector. We must call attention to the intentionality behind white people's self-perceptions as rational and neutral knowledge incubators, dominating over communities of color.

In "Necropolitics and the bodies that do not matter in pandemic times," the authors offer a useful recent example of how neocolonial systems reinforce the hierarchies Mbembe describes, focusing on the excessive and deliberate exclusion and stigmatization of people of color in health organizations' response to the COVID crisis:

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[2]See Naraharisetty for more information about the representation of Ukrainian and Palestinian bodies in western media.

> What we are witnessing is a virus marked by ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, gender related, age related inequalities as well as many others, which expose some more harshly to the contagion and lethality of the disease. The socioeconomic and cultural impact of the pandemic, mortality rates and the valuation of some lives over others, are only a reflection of the historical inequalities that condition us. (Nunez-Parra et al. 194)

Mohit Mookim describes the vaccine apartheid advanced by Bill Gates and the private sector to prevent countries mostly in the global South from accessing and distributing a cost-free, patent-free vaccine. By hoarding intellectual property rights, Gates effectively told the international community that bodies in the global South were not capable, trusted, nor responsible enough to develop their own vaccines. Instead, Gates offered up a textbook neocolonial perspective where the knowledge and rights to the vaccine had to be incubated and held in the west:

> Maintaining his steadfast commitment to intellectual property rights, Gates pushed for a plan that would permit companies to hold exclusive rights to lifesaving medicines, no matter how much they benefited from public funding. Given the enormous influence Gates has in the global public health world, his vision ultimately won out in the Covax program—which enshrines monopoly patent rights and relies on the charitable whims of rich countries and pharmaceutical giants to provide vaccines to most of the world. (Mookim)

The colonial and neocolonial policies and priorities of international development organizations lead to a disconnect between the needs of these communities and the development projects intended to assist them, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion and marginalization, a lack of representation, poor access to resources, and an intergenerational and intersectional knowledge gap.

Significantly, the unspoken feelings of racial superiority that position local communities as powerless and passive recipients of Western aid also shape the dynamics within humanitarian organizations. This in turn silences the very voices that might serve to challenge the neocolonial mindset and the structures of domination it underwrites. This is something that I and many of my colleagues of color have experienced first-hand. The objectification and marginalization of my body assumed many forms at various international organizations where I worked. A medical doctor at the World Health Organization scanning my body from head to toe commented that I looked like "a Singapore airlines flight attendant." A chief of staff from Scandinavia would scold me when I left the office to take care of my young child, but allowed his fellow Scandinavian female colleagues, who also had children, to work from home. My body wasn't allowed the same time with her child as the white women in the office. I was expected to favor white employers over my own child.

After leaving these organizations and with more independence and freedom to write about these issues, I started to explore how other women of color felt and whether they had similar experiences. I surveyed numerous women from different backgrounds who work in the international assistance sector and encountered many stories that resembled my own. These women talked about microaggressions, salary disparities

between local staff and those operating at headquarters, mistreatment by superiors, religious discrimination, and Eurocentric language barriers. Significantly, they also noted that the marginalization of people like them prevented their organizations from getting the input needed to understand the issues confronting the local communities they were aiming to assist. One Palestinian woman who worked for a humanitarian organization in the Middle East reported that she was paid at the local rate, which was roughly one third or one half of an international staff salary, even though she had international experience and an education equivalent to that of her colleagues. Another biracial woman, employed in the international development sector, described a meeting in which a colleague from an African country was having internet issues; a white colleague jokingly remarked that she was calling from "the dark net." When she raised the issue later, her concerns were dismissed. Workers from the global South who confront such attitudes feel, with good reason, like they are not treated as equals or as full participants in crucial discussions about how to address humanitarian needs.

Conclusion

There is a lot that can be done to combat the toxic dynamic at work within the international assistance sector as it confronts climate change, global health and pandemics, and food insecurity. By increasing representation and ensuring equitable access to resources, international development organizations can work to end systemic barriers and create a more inclusive sector. They can prioritize tackling racism, diversify hiring practices and promotions, and provide more training and leadership opportunities to people of color. People of color employed at these agencies can also positively influence organizational priorities and contribute to strategic decision-making that is inclusive and understanding of the communities where aid is being given.

Although Mbembe offers a bleak picture of how necropolitics shapes relations between former colonizers and whose who they formerly colonized, he is not without hope. Indeed, he suggests we must revise our understanding of the human in order to promote reciprocity and recognition across racial and national boundaries (Mbembe 184–189). As communities of color, the global majority, we must be more proactive in advocating for our own communities, in fostering diverse spaces focused on dialogue and understanding, and in building networks for radical empathy and the re-humanization of groups from the global South. Finally, we must recognize our unique capacity as women of color to serve the common good and to be effective advocates for change in all of the arenas where our actions are measured against what we preach.

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