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Platforming Blackness as an Object of Poverty

Abstract

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) based in the Global North have, for decades, exerted considerable influence over the visual and discursive representations of Black, Brown and Indigenous populations in the Global South. Often perpetuating reductive narratives conflating poverty with racialized bodies, these representations have crafted a racial hierarchy reminiscent of the colonial era. In response, a growing number of African NGOs are challenging this single conflation of poverty and Blackness through mediated performances on TikTok to reframe these narratives. However, this article argues such efforts are marked by a paradox. Whilst seeking to disrupt these reductive narratives, many NGOs are inadvertently reproducing racialized humanitarian discourses to attract visibility and financial support. Through a racial discourse analysis of the comment sections, this study interrogates how racialized discourses are reconstituted through audience engagement. Drawing on literature, centred on Fanon's (1967) concept of 'crushing objecthood', this article explores how the white gaze persists, even among Global South actors, which maintains Blackness as an object of poverty.

Key words: Poverty, Blackness, racial discourse analysis, racial hierarchy, crushing objecthood, TikTok, Africa.

Introduction: Black Skin, White Gaze

> Among your characters you must always include The Starving African, who wanders the refugee camp nearly naked, and waits for the benevolence of the West. Her children have flies on their eyelids and pot bellies, and her breasts are flat and empty. She must look utterly helpless. She can have no past, no history; such diversions ruin the dramatic moment [....] Her children are all delinquent. These characters should buzz around your main hero, making him look good.
>
> (Wainaina, 2005: para 8)

This segment from Binyavanga Wainaina's (2005) well-known satirical piece *How to Write about Africa* provides a poignant reminder of how dominant discourses are used to romanticize and dehumanize Africans and the African continent (hereafter Africa(ns). This neocolonial gaze of Africa(ns) and poverty has fed into 'Western' non-governmental organisational (NGO) imagery and storytelling practices. A gaze that has embodied notions of helplessness, pity and passivity (Boltanski, 1999; Nathanson, 2013; Yeoh & Kim, 2022). Consequently, Africa(ns) have been translated into 'undifferentiated Black-and-Brown masses' (Ademolu, 2019: 1) providing the centrepiece for NGO advertisements and media campaigns. However, increasing number of anti-racism movements such as Black Consciousness (Biko, 1978; Gordon, 2022), Afro-pessimism (Wilderson, 2020) and a greater awareness of the White Saviour Industrial Complex (Cole, 2012) has led to African influencers, for example Nigerian journalist Charity Ekezie (@itssucrepea), and NGOs on the African continent to disrupt this spectacle of poverty that has been attached to their identity. They are attempting this by reclaiming the narrative and producing alternative discourses through mediated performances on social media platforms such as TikTok. By disproving overused stereotypes about Africa(ns), they are utilising this dynamic discursive practice to inform and re-educate those who continue to be influenced by the colonial imagination and White Saviour Industrial Complex. NGOs following in this trend are aware that social media platforms not only offer an online space for disrupting and producing alternative discourses of poverty and Blackness[1] but an opportunity to curtail the traditional donor/recipient dependency model through the lucrative business of producing mediated content. However, given the functionality and emotional architecture of social media (see Papacharissi, 2009; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018), content creators, such as the NGOs studied for the purpose of this article, who use children on social media, are required to 'perform happiness' (Divon *et al.* 2025: 13), represent traditional images of 'hollow shells, bloated stomachs, [and] empty gazes' (Rutherford,

[1] Blackness in this article with be used interchangably with Black bodies - It needs to be pointed out here, that when referring to Blackness as "antithetical to the identity whites have assigned them" (Land, 2005 :56), this power dynamic suggests Blackness has no agency - on the contrary - Blackness, which will be used interchangeability with Black bodies in this article, has been articulated by Black Performance Theory as "honor[ing] the subaltern" (DeFrantz & Gonzalez, 2014: viii) and viewed as a "tool of resistance to white hegemonic forces" (Land, 2005: 56).

2000: 125), or what Fine (1990: 154) described as the 'Starving Baby Appeal' as a form of emotional engagement to increase their commercial currency in this highly competitive space.

Reflecting on Luc Boltanski's (1999) typology of distant suffering, which interrogates the moral and political dimensions of the spectator's gaze[2], this article critically shifts attention from the longstanding visual and discursive representations of poverty and Blackness as constructed by Global North NGOs to the representational practices of Global South NGOs, and the discursive responses by their Social Media Commenters (SMCs). By shifting attention from Global North NGOs, who consistently exercise, what Ademolu (2019: 2) identifies as, 'a locus of control in the social construction over who [and what] is represented and for whom', this study foregrounds these new and emergent agents in the formation, circulation and contestation of racialized humanitarian discourse. A discourse which reflects the contributions of Cultural Discourse Studies (CDS) that has opened up newer pathways on how we must rethink discourse shaping cultural identities and dynamics of power (Shi-xu, 2007). Through this lens, the article explores how these actors function as simultaneous sites of resistance and reiteration, by disrupting reductive tropes while occasionally reproducing the very colonial narratives they seek to dismantle, particularly the conflation of poverty and Blackness due to the racialized expectations of their global followers. To explore this paradox, a literary review combined with a discourse analysis of the comments section of three TikTok accounts held by African NGOs[3]. These NGOs, which have collectively attracted a global audience of over 20 million followers, feature orphaned children engaging in singing, dancing, and humour-driven performances that reflect a growing trend in the global consumption and appetite for the aestheticization of race.

This article opens with a theoretical exploration of the racialization of poverty, grounded in Fanon's (1967) concept of 'crushing objecthood'; a critical framework for understanding how the identity of the Black subject is imposed and constructed through the white gaze. This is followed by a concise yet significant discussion of Black performance as a mode of resistance against the colonial racialization of poverty. These theoretical foundations inform the subsequent analysis, which examines how racist slurs, both explicit and implicit, shape and normalize racialized humanitarian discourses, particularly as they are reconstituted through audience engagement in digital spaces. Thus, offering a valuable contribution to the ongoing reconsideration of discursive power: specifically, who holds authority in shaping dominant imaginaries of Blackness and poverty in the digital age. Moreover, demonstrating a complex representational terrain that exists beneath seemingly benign mediated performances, simultaneously functioning as a site of resistance and a space where Black bodies are reiterated as universal signifiers of poverty.

[2] Spectatators are often caught between being moral agents or advocates by acting upon what they see or become desensitized through moral paralysis to the exposure of repeated suffering.

[3] The names and countries of the NGOs involved in this study have been withheld to preserve organizational autonomy, protect the privacy of individuals featured in the content, and avoid influencing audience perceptions based on geopolitical or cultural biases.

The Racialization of Poverty

The objectification of Africa(ns) into Black bodies has been occurring for centuries. Subsequently, those objectified have been entangled and conflated with discourses of poverty, including uncivilized savagery, tribalism, backwardness, sexual objectification and primitivism (Fanon, 1967; Mudimbe; 1988; Pickering, 2001; Cooper, 2015; Larsen & Jensen, 2019; Yakubu, 2020). These discourses are historically grounded and rooted in colonial narratives that have been popularized by nineteenth-century British explorers. For example, Henry M. Stanley, who referred to Africa as the 'Dark Continent', followed in a wave of writers such as H. Ryder Haggard, Joseph Conrad and Rudyard Kipling: propagandists of this hegemonic discourse glorifying European imperialism and the dehumanization of Africans (see Chinua Achebe's View of Conrad in Watts, 1983). Missionary literature subsequently supported this rhetoric and fashioned the image of the poor Black child begging for a white helping hand. Thus, contributing to the public's imagination of the dehumanized and objectified African subject. This cultural genocide, Eurocentrism and essentialist construction of Africa(ns) hosts several reductive binaries (Kothari, 2005), furthering the discourse of racial difference and hierarchy that has created, what Hall (1992) referred to as, the 'West and the Rest'. From master and slave, core and periphery, to rich and poor, subject and object, invisible to hyper-visible, the public has become preoccupied with a simplistic and singular representation of Blackness: too often associated with poverty. Extracted from systems of coloniality, white supremacy, development and dependency (Escobar, 1995; Rodney 1972; Said, 1978; Mudimbe, 1988; Mohanty, 1988; Hall, 1992, 1997; Bhabha, 1994), this epistemic and normative judgement of Blackness and poverty has not only cemented the process of 'othering' but presents poverty and Blackness as an inherently natural conflation.

The labelling of Black subjects as objects of poverty highlights the power of representations or, what Hall (1997: 249) defined as, the 'racialized regime of representation'. In this schema of racial hierarchies, Hall identifies how stereotypes 'reduce, essentialize, naturalize and fix "difference"' on to certain bodies (Hall, 1997: 258–259). Whilst Blackness can also insist on 'a discourse of difference which enables it to combat the image of the Black as an aberration of Whiteness' (Diawara, 1990 in Land, 2005:56), the perpetuation (and fetishization) of Black bodies as objects of poverty has long been a visual and discursive method of NGO advertisements and media campaigns. Bodies, in the African context, have been routinely reduced 'to hollow shells, bloated stomachs, or empty gazes' (Rutherford, 2000: 125), thereby 'dissolv[ing] human beings into things, objects, and merchandise' (Mbembe, 2017: 11). Escobar (1995:104) referred to these reductive and racialized discourses of poverty as 'symbolic violence'. In his seminal book *Encountering Development,* Escobar argued how 'the body of the malnourished—the starving "African" [....] is the most striking symbol of power of the First World over the Third' (Escobar, 1995:103). Thus, indicating the way in which discourse occurs beyond descriptions of phenotypes to showcase its infusion with power. Escobar questions the omnipresence of this discursive power and argues that it maintains the social order by allowing dominant actors to control the

social construction of the 'Other'. A form of control, which he argues, is managed through a 'whole economy of discourse and unequal power relations [that] is encoded in that body' (Escobar, 1995:103). This powerful critique rooted in post-development theory suggests there is a system of language, knowledge and representation; it defines how poverty and development is discussed, understood and practiced. Often shaped by Western institutions, so-called 'experts' and dominant ideologies, Escobar fails to include other agents in his analysis, who help (re)define and control these narratives that construct certain truths about poverty.

I argue that the receivers of dominant discourses of poverty and Blackness are entangled in these socio-political and economic taxonomies. Whether defined through Fanon's description of the 'white gaze' or Boltanski's (1999) 'spectator gaze', which explores the moral and political implications of this gaze,[2] the inclusion of audiences as co-producers of racialized discourse is essential since audiences are no longer passive recipients of information. Audiences, or what I refer to as in this research as Social Media Commenters (SMCs), are complex, especially when social media has 'present[ed] audience members with the opportunity to act as mass communicators' (Ross, 2012: 173) to influence public discourse. Stamenković (2020: 32) refers to this cohort as a 'participatory audience': ordinary citizens who have become media creators by 'expressing opinions, attitudes and ideas (Stamenković, 2020:29). By constantly shaping, (re)framing and exchanging content, SMCs are 'affective publics' (Papacharissi, 2015) who are often driven by ephemeral emotions that may not be planned, but they still matter politically.

The work of Willoughby Wallace Hooper,[6] a photographer of poverty, entails staged portraits of extremely emaciated men, women and children during the 1876–78 famine in India, epitomizes the importance of studying audiences; his images had a profound impact on how British elites and audiences mobilized and responded to the famine (Twomey, 2015). This mobilization occurred in the shape of financial donations, which Barnett (2011) argues attributed to the popularization of charities using images of starving babies in mainstream media to implore readers to donate. However, these 'Starving Baby Appeal[s]' (Fine, 1992: 154) proved to be financially lucrative in another way. Wallace Hooper's photographs were sold commercially (Chaudhary, 2012), indicating a concerning relationship between audiences and their consumer appetite for the commodification of impoverished racialized bodies. bell hooks' (1992: 366) concept of 'eating the other' explicates this idea: '[i]t is this current trend in producing colorful ethnicity for the White consumer appetite that makes it possible for Blackness to be commodified in unprecedented ways' (hooks, 1992: 154).

The relationship between audience and consumer appetite is demonstrated through the exposure of Black bodies as objects of spectacle on social media. Often essentialized as a source of entertainment, especially through the lens of creative performances online, this objectification highlights how racialized bodies are subject to Fanon's (1967) concept of 'crushing objecthood'. Essentially a process of objectifying Blackness into a single object; the Black body, 'crushing objecthood' speaks to the imposed demoralizing identity of the Black subject created by the

white gaze. Examples throughout history, from Saartjie Baartman and Renty Taylor to Josephine Baker and Jack Johnson,[10] illustrate how objectified corporeality for the external gaze has relied heavily on essentialized notions of Blackness. However, how do we discuss this when Black subjects objectify themselves? Whilst Josephine Baker is an exemplar to this conscious voluntary objectification, by performing wearing very little besides her signature banana skirt to the backdrop of palm trees and Black men beating drums, Baker captures the contradictions and ambiguities of Black self-representations by simultaneously seducing the white gaze and subverting stereotypes. By teasing the imagination of white audiences, she actively encouraged the objectification of her body. Whilst it could be argued that she was reclaiming her racial identity in contrast to Fanon's ideas of the demoralizing judgement delivered by the white gaze, colonial fantasies often stripped her Blackness out of its cultural context and continued to frame her as the exotic 'Other'. Fanon saw this discursive gaze as the lingering poison from the colonial era which has fed into public discourse in a similar way to that when Fanon himself experienced a white child pointing at him and shouting: 'Maman, look, a negro, I'm scared!' (1952[2008]:91). This incident not only had an immobilizing effect on his understanding of his identity, but the fear associated with it showed a racialized authoritative discourse that he was unfamiliar with. This moment reflects several interesting junctures in the spectatorship of racializing 'Others'. First, it signals spectators (especially children's) unselfconscious speech acts but also the towering power imbalance between the two differently racialized subjects. Second, it speaks to the perpetual harmful narratives of inferiority and exoticism transmitted from the past into the contemporary era through a manner of disguises. And lastly, the phenomenological experience of internalizing racist stereotypes into one's own body.

These conventions of displaying and interpreting 'Othered' bodies have become an increasingly ritualized spectacle in the era of social media. Emblematic of the complex interrelations between objectification, commodification and fetishization, Black bodies continue to be either seen and sold as commodities (Smallwood, 2007; Leong, 2013; Njee, 2016), are used to sell commodities (Crocket, 2008) or, as this article alludes to, solicit material 'likes' to garner donations and reframe discourses of poverty and Blackness. However, it is Fanon's (1967) ontology of knowing 'who and what we are' through the history of colonialism and language which offers us a unique insight into the idea of how Blackness is forged and remade through encounters and revisitations with the past. Encounters, whether remade or reimaged, cannot escape from those internalized images of the colonized self. Within this ontology, Fanon speaks of a colonial alienation which goes beyond the internalized inferiority complex to highlight the fractures one has with the self. Thus, the creation of a split between a person's lived experience (see Spillers, 2005; Dei, 2007; Touré, 2011) and an imposed identity, where racialized subjects become sites of meaning imposed by others, which in turn can shape the choices they make.

In this context, Homi Bhabha (1983) and Sara Ahmed (2002) offer useful extensions on imposed identity. Firstly, Bhabha's (1983: 18) concept of 'fixity' provides a nuanced discursive strategy to affirm colonial discourses, portraying Africa(ns) as static, knowable, and predictable, are not only

an ideological function of control but a process of ambivalence where representations oscillate between what is 'always in place, already known and something that must be anxiously repeated' (Bhabha, 1983: 18). For Bhabha, the importance of repetition reflects what Western NGOs have done for decades which is construct and propagate an imagined representation and discourse of the racialized subject, simultaneously reproducing these images to uphold the illusion of their discursive legitimacy. From an audience perspective, this could be seen through priming and cognitive accessibility (Dixon, 2006; Shrum, 2009); viewers or spectators will form a judgment based on repeated exposure to a mediated stereotype. Consequently, the viewer may make a cognitive connection between race and poverty, which would not only impact their judgments but the actions towards donating or spreading certain racialized discourses further.

In Ahmed's (2002) reading of racialised bodies, they not only become fixed but are seen as property of an external gaze. She argues that racialized bodies are not just seen but produced through being seen, suggesting an increasing dependence on visibility. For NGOs, visibility is key for survival, especially in an increasingly digital environment. However, when the body becomes the key visual element to be objectified and legitimized through dominant discourses, visibility becomes a form of regulation. To regulate one's body in this way, is to internalize norms of dominance maintaining the reductive binaries, erasing any form of complexity to the lived experiences of those racialized subjects. Young (2010: 7-8) articulates how dominant discourse tends to fuse differences by privileging similarity over specificity:

> The epithetic nature of the black body does not erase or discount the unique experiences of individuals. It recognizes that each figure lives in a distinct temporal, geographic, and sociopolitical moment. However, it privileges those instances of similarity among these various bodies and collapses them into a singular body within the imagination. The black body becomes a souvenir, a captive, a Negro, the Hottentot Venus, Renty, George, and Frantz. Equally importantly, each becomes the black body. Capable of representing not only the racial fantasies but also the lived realities of people, the black body.

This duality of representation is demonstrated through W.E.B. Du Bois' (1903) concept of 'double consciousness', where Black subjects need to view themselves through both Black and white lenses. According to Du Bois, the Black lens provides a discourse and image of their lived realities, whilst the white lens is attached to those racial fantasies. Describing this as a 'peculiar sensation… of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others' (Du Bois, 1903:2) Du Bois, like Fanon, notes how Black subjects are forced to see themselves not only as they are, but as they are perceived by a society that devalues them. By embodying this double role, racialized subjects are more vulnerable to accepting the dominant discourses assigned to them. In the US, for example, a strong scholarly tradition focuses on the discursive relationship between race and poverty which has adopted the discursive conflation between poverty and Blackness. Scholars, for example Sugrue (2014), have examined how the terms 'Black' and 'poor' have become synonymous to create a discursive schema of racialized poverty. Others such as Clawson (2002),

Gilens (2003), Lei & Bodenhausen (2017) and Brown-Iannuzzi *et al.* (2019) have also researched the disproportional association of Blackness with poverty creating a discourse that typologies poverty as a Black problem. Thus, popularizing and publicly exposing certain subjects as being poor and imagining poverty as a Black problem: exacerbating Fanon's (1967) concept of 'crushing objecthood'.

Black Performance as Resistance

Whist the literature discussed above situates the locus of discursive power in the hands of nineteenth-century writers, missionaries, and twentieth-century Western NGOs, it is crucial to consider Manthia Diawara's (1990) critique. Diawara asks us to challenge the dominant view which positions Blackness as a deviation from, or deficiency in relation to, whiteness. Instead, he argues Blackness must be defined on its own terms rooted in its distinct cultural, historical and aesthetic traditions. Central to his critique is a rejection of spectatorship that reduces Black subjects to mere objects of spectacle, stripping them of complexity, agency and voice. This perspective aligns with DeFrantz and Gonzalez's (2014: foreword) assertion that 'Black performance theory complicates old claims of blackness [by] demanding new vocabularies'. Hence, warranting a nuanced language to describe Black cultural expression because existing vocabularies often fail to capture the complexity that Diawara speaks of. Mediated performances, particularly those emerging from Black communities, have the potential to challenge colonial logics that render Black bodies visible only through stereotypes and exoticism (Diawara, 1990). Furthermore, such mediated performances can also be used to reimagine Blackness by using the body as a site of resistance to supress objectification (Moten, 2003).

Given the locality and corporeal expression of the body in dance videos, the body can resist certain types of spectatorships by foregrounding the act of dance itself, thus allowing the attention to shift from environmental backdrops, evoking stereotypical associations with poverty and reorient the gaze, to a more nuanced representation of Blackness. Dance, in accordance with Black performance theory, not only 'honors the subaltern' (DeFrantz & Gonzalez, 2014: viii) but 'present[s] an opportunity to illuminate black culture, histories, identities and aspirations' (ibid: 160), which is essential for disrupting the colonial and humanitarian narratives that have historically conflated Blackness to poverty.

However, to ensure dance does not replace poverty as another reductive term to conflate with Blackness, it is essential to acknowledge the epistemological foundations of traditional African dance. As Mabingo (2019: 330) asserts, these practices are 'part of a systematic epistemology and ontology with complex meanings' rooted in cultural, historical and spiritual traditions. In contrast to Bhabha's (1983) notion of 'fixity', implying static and essentialist identities, Black identities can be redefined and reimagined through the repetition and circulation of mediated performances. When these performances are encoded with culturally specific knowledge and

interpretations, they offer a means for Black communities to articulate Blackness on their own terms. However, this process of identifying and meaning-making must be carefully mediated for audiences, who often occupy a third-person perspective, external to the lived experience of Black corporeal expression and discourse. This is particularly significant given Diawara's (1990) critique of spectatorship, which highlights how Black bodies are frequently positioned in visual opposition to whiteness. On platforms like TikTok, many of the most-followed performers embody traits that are 'normatively feminine, white and wealthy' (Kennedy, 2020: 1070), reinforcing dominant aesthetic standards and marginalizing alternative expressions of Black identity. In this context, the challenge lies not only in resisting reductive representations but in ensuring that Black performance is understood as a site of epistemological richness and cultural agency. However, Tiktok, which is considered one of the fastest growing video sharing platforms in the world and centred on dance, humour and challenges (Geywer, 2021), rewards attention-grabbing techniques, especially when children are positioned 'as fodder for content monetisation' (Divon *et al.* 2025:17) rather than enabling the epistemological richness of African dance to prevail. Moreover, algorithmic suppression and spectacularization can render certain bodies as hyper-visible and others hidden (Karizat *et al.* 2021), thus controlling the cultural visibility to these complex meanings embodied in Black performance. Therefore, resisting harmful racialized discourses that have colonialized the imaginaries of audiences not only demands new vocabularies, that are contextually shaped and grasp the richness of African narratives and storytelling, but it can overcome the algorithmic tactics which governed the economies of visibility.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, combining discourse analysis and a critical review of relevant literature, to interrogate how Global South NGOs and their SMCs are shaping and propagating racialized humanitarian discourses within digital spaces. The primary dataset comprises publicly available TikTok content from three African-based NGOs. The comments section, accompanying their most widely viewed videos (those with over 1 million views), was selected to reflect significant audience engagement and broad public visibility over the past three years. For linguistic accuracy and interpretive coherence, comments written in English and Spanish were only included; other frequently used languages were disregarded because English and Spanish are languages within the researcher's linguistic competency. Comments using emoji-only responses were excluded due to the inherent challenges in deciphering their semantic and cultural nuances.

To ensure the conducted study complied with the ethical standard intended for this research, approval from the ethics committee at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) was sought. While TikTok users generally agree to data collection via the terms of service (Townsend and Wallace, 2016), all usernames and any information relating to location were removed to protect their anonymity; although comments have been published verbatim, many

were translated or shortened, thus reducing any possible exposure to the identity and profile of usernames through search engine results.

Following data collection, the comments were categorized by thematic relevance: race and poverty and subjected to racial discourse analysis. Key themes were identified by examining racial discourses embedded in the TikTok comments section, which not only focused on 'what is said but also how it is said within the social context in which it is produced, consumed and circulated by others' (Zavala and Back, 2020: 530). Given the increasingly ambivalent intersection of language and race, particular attention was paid to what Anderson (2008) termed 'race talk', which addresses the indirect racial rhetoric that may not be overtly categorized as racialised meaning-making. This approach lends important analytical weight to Cultural Discourse Studies, as racialised meaning-making positions both consumers and reproducers as circulating ideological discourses. Thus, "how individuals talk about race has implications for the creation and maintenance of acceptable ways of reacting to and talking about race and speech in the broader arena" (Anderson, 2015: 781).

These insights were synthesized through an interpretive framework, connecting commentary with established scholarship on race, humanitarian media and postcolonial critique. This approach enabled the data to be situated within broader discursive regimes and socio-historical contexts, revealing the complexities and contradictions at play when race, representation and visibility converge in mediated performances. Given the interpretive nature of this study, the researcher was aware that their positionality as a woman of African descent is instrumental in identifying and decoding cultural signifiers embedded in representations of race, poverty and racism. However, this reflexive standpoint does enhance the depth and nuance of the analysis, allowing for a culturally informed reading of language and imagery that may otherwise be overlooked or misinterpreted.

Analysis and Discussion: 'Look, a poor Negro!'

The duration of an average video produced by these NGOs in Africa is between twenty seconds and two minutes. Often showcasing a group of four-ten young children dancing rhythmically on dusty red soil, sometimes without shoes and exposed torsos against a backdrop of a small mud-brick home with a corrugated iron roof, reflecting several objectifying clichés that signify a universalized discursive image of poverty on the continent. Whilst these visual representations are not untrue, they are undeniably incomplete, and risk reinforcing a singular narrative or, to borrow Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2009) influential discourse about 'The Danger of a Single Story'. This incompleteness is situated within the pervasive discursive power, that Escobar (1995) spoke of, which has been wielded by dominant actors who shape the social construction of the 'Other'. These videos reflect similar narratives, found in the marketing campaigns by Western NGOs, which have consistently positioned Black bodies as spectacles of poverty and in need of

help. Moreover, this is confirmed through various discourses, created by global audiences, which portray the bodies as passive symbols of deprivation:

> Look they have nothing ... But they are smiling.
>
> These kids, they don't have nice clothing, probably not a nice house or car or anything, but their smile shows how happy they are and how pure their heart is.
>
> No clothes, no food, no proper life [...] But they know how to make most out of their life.

Seen through a superficial aesthetic of poverty, where their Black bodies and lives are gazed upon without context or a fuller understanding of their lived experience, this assumed lack of material prosperity facilitates a normative judgement and essentialist construction of these children in a false binary to children who have 'nice' clothing and food. Whilst it could be argued that, 'we are not invited to imagine what their lives, histories or experiences are like, as they are silenced as subjects in their own right, and in a sense sacrificed on the pedestal of an aesthetic ideal' (Hall, 1981: 288), this assumption of food scarcity must be some form of intertextual imaginary where the SMCs are repeatedly exposed to other media content of Black bodies not eating or asking for donations to feed children; there is a plethora of videos on the profile pages of the NGOs representing children fully clothed, eating and drinking. Thus, it becomes apparent their identities are somehow being imagined through a false binary, where their Blackness is 'sacrificed' in the sense that their livelihoods are traded for a curated image that fits dominant cultural narratives. For example, despite videos showing children wearing clothes head-to-toe or going to school in full uniform and eating food, this notion of 'No clothes, no food, no proper life' fails to be demystified. This aesthetic idealization of these Black children and their livelihoods were reflected in another comment where the racialized expectations were not met after viewing a video of the children wearing matching and what could be considered North American branded sport clothing:

> it hits differently with normal clothes.

The notion of 'normal' is culturally constructed. This comment assumes a shared understanding of what constitutes 'normal clothes', reflecting colonial norms around race, class and geographical locality and reducing them to a symbolic attraction, which focuses on *what* they signify rather than for *who* they are. Thus, these African children only seen as poor illustrates a level of 'fixity' (Bhabha, 1983: 18) whereby certain stereotypes are partly driven by a contemporary repetition of colonial fantasies about Black bodies (Hall, 1981). Whilst the NGOs may believe they are offering alternative discourses to challenge the status quo by dressing the children in uniform or branded sport clothing, old vocabularies continue to appear and attach Blackness to a host of intertextual narratives and racial stereotypes:

> they have rhythm in their skin, it's genetic.

I can undoubtedly say that every African people born with outstanding dancing.

...they were born to dance, it's in their blood.

All chocolate children are born dancers.

...so much talent and so much joy, even in the midst of poverty.

Before discussing some of the offensive descriptors used in these comments, two important linguistic strategies are highlighted, which the SMCs have employed to conflate Blackness and poverty. The first is how the SMCs use certain racialized rhetoric to overgeneralize and assume that this practice belongs to, or is intrinsic to, certain ethnic groups. This form of discursive essentializing links back to viewing Black bodies as a source of entertainment, thus reducing them to mere objects in a state of poverty. The second, is the use of these essentialist ideas to camouflage and reframe harmful stereotypes by turning a negative stereotype into a supposedly positive stereotype. Whether seen as positive or negative, it remains a stereotype, which does not dismantle but redecorates racial boundaries. Intentional or not, this discourse that all 'Black people can dance' weaponizes Blackness by normalizing discrimination. Through this process of normalization and acceptance, these NGOs could continue to conform for material likes and monetary rewards, thus making racialized discourses go unnoticed.

Given TikTok's format and cultural trends which reward attention-grabbing techniques, especially when children are positioned 'as fodder for content monetisation' (Divon *et al.* 2025:17), the desire to change the status quo is not financially rewarding. Therefore, they are, as Josephine Baker also advocates, actively encouraged to objectify their bodies and their poverty through performance. Although dance is notably one of TikTok's key trends, 'dance is not just about merry-making' (Mabingo, 2019: 330), it can communicate human stories which 'are deeply entwined with the worldview of African people' (Mabingo, 2019: 159). Therefore, any tendency to see dance as solely entertainment strips it of any possible Afrocentric discourses, worldviews and historical narratives, which could help shift colonial narratives that conflate Blackness and poverty. Instead, the comments by some SMCs suggest their dances are simply entertainment that titillates colonial fantasies of Blackness and poverty rather than an embodied practice with any deeper social and political significance. In another set of comments, dance creates an oversimplified discourse where it can be used as a tool for alleviating poverty and misery:

it seems that the music makes them forget their reality for a moment.

if they keep dancing like this, they can escape a life of poverty and become millionaires.

Much like the camouflaging of negative stereotypes into seemingly positive ones, these comments appear harmless on the surface. However, they are embedded with a reductive poverty alleviation narrative rooted in neoliberal ideology—one that assumes economic prosperity alone can overcome structural inequality. This perspective decontextualizes the root

causes of poverty, overlooking systemic barriers such as racism. Notably, the final comment frames the performers' success as conditional: their ability to escape poverty hinges on their capacity to entertain and please spectators. This framing not only reinforces racial hierarchies but perpetuates the notion that Black bodies must seek external validation from distant, often global, audiences. Such representations are deeply entwined with the 'need for help' discourse. While this discourse no longer relies on overt imagery, such as the stereotypical portrayal of a poor Black child pleading for a white saviour, as seen in missionary narratives, it remains embedded in a neoliberal framework. This framework, shaped by Eurocentric perspectives, continues to promote economic prosperity as the primary solution to poverty, thereby obscuring the complex socio-political realities that underpin racialized inequality:

> 'their little black bodies can move so well [...] please donate to them'
>
> 'These children have to be helped, give them joy and happiness'
>
> 'I wish everyone could escape so much poverty and succeed in life. With their videos, they won over many people and earned the help and support of everyone'.

These comments reaffirm how racialized discourses of poverty continue to reproduce a longstanding racial binary—positioning Black bodies as inherently impoverished and dependent whilst casting those who offer 'help' as non-African, empowered and benevolent. This 'symbolic violence' (Escobar, 1995:104) reinforces the idea that Black bodies exist to be saved, which actively provincializes the historical, structural and racialized causes of poverty. This is furthered by reinforcing the label of poverty naively and exclusively on Africa(ns), thus advancing the long-held discourse that 'Africa is poor' as Wainaina's (2005) satirically illustrates. A discourse which has been extensively used by Western NGOs to legitimize their presence and to project a philanthropic agency on spectators' imaginaries to secure donations. So, a question to be asked is whether these African NGOs, intentionally or not, are feeding the SMC gaze by reproducing certain global audience imaginaries of poverty and Blackness to elicit support? If they do, NGOs would be complicit in commodifying poverty and Blackness by exposing Black bodies as objects of spectacle to satisfy Fanon's (1967) concept of 'crushing objecthood'. Whilst none of the comments entailed a reply that would provide a counternarrative to challenge or resist these reductive discourses, this conflation was extended further with the fusion of these children as 'African children', 'children of Africa' or more offensively 'chocolate children'. This amalgamation of children speaks to Ademolu's (2019: 1) notion of 'undifferentiated Black-and-Brown masses', whereby these children are described as a unified whole, illustrating the public's distorted, reductionist and colonial understanding of these children. This epistemological and ontological violence routinely reducing these children to a single, monolithic entity of 'hollow shells' (Rutherford, 2000: 125) is dissolving them into, what Mbembe (2017: 11) described, 'things, objects, and merchandise' for the consumerist appetite, which enjoys the commodification of racialized bodies (hooks, 1992). Thus, the objectification of African children as nothing more than joyful, impoverished objects by SMCs reduces them to mere subjects of the 'spectator gaze'

(Boltanski, 1999), driven by ephemeral emotions and functioning as symbols of racial difference (Fanon, 1967). Emotions which not only maintain the emotional architecture of social media, but the NGOs visibility. A visibility, which Ahmed (2002) argued, increasingly dependent upon racialized bodies. However, by reducing, or not resisting these externally imposed identities and discourses, the NGOs are, somewhat, complicit in turning these children to emotional, consumable media products whereby poverty and Black bodies remain aestheticized for the SMC gaze. Rather than introducing new vocabularies that politicise poverty, these NGOs are preserving systems of coloniality, perpetuating discourses of Blackness as objects of poverty.

Conclusion: Blackness as an Object of Poverty

Discourses of poverty conflated with Blackness have been historically and culturally mediated over time. Arising from the colonial aesthetic of poverty, which emerged from dominant discourses and ideologies created by nineteenth-century writers to current Western NGOs, this approach has played a significant role in continuing to shape the public's imagination.

Moreover, as this article has explored, NGOs in the Global South are increasingly engaging with these colonial imaginaries to solicit material likes and donations. Their limited resistance suggests they may be constrained by racialized expectations of poverty imposed by global audiences. Given the growing influence of social media as a space for opinion formation and the circulation of racialized discourses, it is essential to recognize these platforms as active agents in the co-production of narratives that conflate Blackness with poverty through reductive binaries. Furthermore, the economic imperatives tied to mediated performances online mean that efforts to reclaim narrative agency and convey lived experiences are often entangled with the need to re-engage colonial tropes. This re-engagement, driven by the pursuit of visibility and financial support, risks reinforcing the very stereotypes these performances seek to challenge. By allowing these subliminal fantasies to position phenotypical and economic factors as the dominant discourses, SMCs are provided a space for form and opinions. Thus, constituting racialized discourses within existing racial hierarchies, that Escobar (1995) argued, maintains the social order by allowing dominant actors to control the social construction of the 'Other'. Therefore, it is important that we do not neglect the role SMCs play as active agents in the co-production and circulation of these discourses which conflate poverty and Blackness through reductive and simplistic binaries.

Whilst the mediated performances of the NGOs have the potential to broaden viewers' understanding of the lived experiences of the Black subjects in this fragmented postmodern world (DeFrantz & Gonzalez, 2014), an irreducible tension between the mediated performances created by these Black subjects and the SMC gaze, where race is constructed, remains intact. Despite the best intentions, the colonial hangover of dominant NGO images and discourses remains firmly ingrained in the public's imagination. As Fanon posits in *Black Skin, White Masks,*

the body is always entangled in history, therefore, a radical shift which can escape the 'fixity' that Bhabha (1983: 18) speaks of, will require these NGOs disrupting and bringing to an end the symbolic, epistemological and ontological violence that came from the ideological project of inscribing poverty on to Black bodies which continues to permeate a racialized discourse of poverty.

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