The Political Economy Crisis of Garifuna Rights in Neoliberal Belize

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Abstract

This article offers a theoretical–historical analysis of the political economy crisis facing Garifuna communities in neoliberal Belize. It argues that contemporary globalisation operates as retooled colonialism, commodifying Garifuna culture while systematically eroding communal land tenure. Drawing on archival records, legal texts, and illustrative community vignettes, the paper traces the longue durée of Garifuna dispossession from their 1797 exile to post-independence development regimes. It advances the concept of "displacement in place" to describe how privatisation, tourism, and selective heritage recognition undermine economic autonomy without necessitating physical removal. While Belizean courts have affirmed Maya customary tenure, Garifuna land claims remain marginalised, revealing a racialised and selective recognition of indigeneity that sits uneasily with constitutional guarantees and international human rights commitments. The article concludes by theorising reparative futures grounded in Garifuna epistemologies, including community-based tourism, Afro-Indigenous trade networks, and the extension of communal tenure protections. In doing so, it foregrounds the paradox of a culture celebrated as national heritage while denied the material conditions of land, sovereignty, and self-determination.

Key Words: Garifuna, Indigenous Rights, Human Rights, Globalisation, Neoliberalism, Land Dispossession, Belize, Reparative Futures.

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Introduction

The Garifuna of Belize live in the shadow of maps drawn for empire; they remain on the land but are displaced from pursuing their full identity. Under the pressures of neoliberal economic policy frameworks, the Garifuna have experienced cultural atrophy and land dislocation. This pervasive attack on indigenous rights has taken a dualistic form, both building on the forerunning legacies of colonial logistics. This encompasses: the ethos of globalisation and its logos, both producing a form of peripheral positioning that is at once, cultural, economic and juridical. Thus, this paper contends that the Garifuna are subjected to a contemporary form of displacement-in-place, a process by which neoliberal development dislocates indigenous identity and agency without physical removal.

To understand this process, it is first imperative to recognise Garifuna culture as the praxis of their ontological reality. Culture matters because it underscores a people's lived experience and foreground how the Garifuna have survived persistent dispossession from exile of St. Vincent in 1797 to present. To lose that is to lose their cultural continuity, but also agency. Simultaneously, land needs to be understood as more than an economic resource. For the Garifuna, land is seen as an ontological ground and centre of Garifuna life. It comprises burial grounds, fishing zones, canoe trees, and drum woods that are all anchors of communal identity. Under neoliberal development however, these practices have been stripped of their relevance. Quijano (2000) suggested, that globalisation did not erase colonialism but retooled it. The ethos of globalisation, a one global village, individualism and Western ideals have recast Garifuna culture into a marginalised heritage and deepened assimilation to Belizean dominant culture, while its logos, market logistics, privatisation and tourism, have commodified Garifuna culture and stripped communal bases.

Human rights frameworks reveal this paradox with clarity. In 2001, international recognition was given to the Garinagu by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), proclaiming the Garifuna culture as a "masterpiece of oral and intangible heritage of humanity," with the recognition of their indigenous struggle (Stone, 2008). Albeit celebrated by the Belize Tourism Board, state policy underfunds the development of Garifuna communities, schools and overlooks communal enterprises. Similarly, in 2015, Belize's own courts acknowledged Maya customary tenure. Yet, formal recognition of Garifuna communal land practices ceases to exist. This reflects Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics* which asserted that sovereign powers determine who may live and who must die, and under what conditions life is allowed to persist. This places Garifuna existence into "zones of precarity" as restrictive laws, exploitation and cultural tokenism allow for culture-as-performance but actively undermine culture-as-life, exposing the community to a slow social death.

This article advances four interlinked arguments that together articulate a political–economic critique of Garifuna dispossession in neoliberal Belize. First, it traces the historical lineage of dispossession from the 1797 exile to post-independence development regimes. Second, it examines how neoliberal development, Westernisation, and tourism function as tripartite enclosures that materially reproduce dispossession while commodifying Garifuna culture as exportable heritage. Third, it argues that the continued denial of communal land ownership constitutes a breach of both Belize's constitutional commitments and international human rights law. Fourth, informed by Garifuna epistemologies of communalism and sustainability as articulated through historical records and contemporary narratives, the article outlines reparative possibilities and alternative futures oriented toward economic and land sovereignty.

Originality Statement

This article, *The Political Economy Crisis of Garifuna Rights in Neoliberal Belize*, is an original piece of scholarship that has not been previously published in whole or in part, nor is it under review or consideration for publication elsewhere. The content of this manuscript has not been presented in any other venue, except as acknowledged herein. All citations and references are duly credited, and the work presented here is the author's own contribution to research on the Garifuna of Belize and Human/Indigenous Rights.

Methodology

This article is structured as a theoretical–historical intervention informed by archival materials, legal texts, and situated community narratives. Its methodological orientation is deliberately non-extractive and interpretive, aligned with decolonial critiques of positivist social science that treat marginalised communities as sources of data rather than sites of knowledge (Smith, 2012; Santos, 2014). Rather than constituting a formal empirical study aimed at producing generalisable findings, the interviews incorporated here function as illustrative vignettes that foreground Garifuna perspectives and lived articulations of political–economic marginalisation, interrupting abstraction and anchoring critique in historically situated experience.

Engagement with community narratives follows the ethical orientation of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), understood not as a technique for data generation but as a framework of relational accountability and epistemic respect (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Within Indigenous and Afro-descendant research traditions, CBPR has been mobilised as a corrective to extractive research practices, emphasising co-presence, reciprocity, and responsibility to community-defined priorities rather than methodological exhaustiveness (Israel et al., 2010; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). In this article, CBPR principles inform how knowledge is approached, contextualised, and represented, rather than serving as a procedural template for empirical claims.

Five semi-structured conversations were conducted between October and November 2024 with Garifuna community leaders in Dangriga and Hopkins. Participants were identified through collaboration with the National Garifuna Council, with subsequent introductions facilitated organically through community networks. This relational mode of engagement reflects CBPR's emphasis on trust-based access and community mediation, particularly within contexts shaped by long histories of dispossession and research fatigue (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, were conducted with informed consent, and are referenced using pseudonyms. Rather than subjecting narratives to formal thematic coding or presenting them as "findings," the article draws selectively on these accounts as situated articulations of how tourism-led development, land privatisation, and cultural commodification are experienced and interpreted within Garifuna communities. These narratives are read alongside archival records and legal documents and placed in dialogue with critical political–economic and decolonial theory, including analyses of racialised capitalism, coloniality, and necropolitics (Quijano, 2000; Mbembe, 2003). This approach reflects a growing body of scholarship that treats narrative not as evidence to be extracted and classified, but as epistemic intervention, knowledge that speaks *with* theory rather than being subordinated to it (Escobar, 2008; Wynter, 2003). Community narratives thus function as sites of theorisation, illuminating how macro-structural forces are lived, contested, and re-imagined at the local level.

The limited number of interviews is intentional and explicitly acknowledged. The aim is neither representativeness nor empirical saturation, but to resist abstraction by grounding political–economic critique in lived articulation. This methodological restraint aligns with decolonial scholarship that cautions against claims of total knowledge, particularly in research involving Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities historically subjected to epistemic extraction (Smith, 2012; Santos, 2014). By positioning Garifuna knowledge not as supplementary evidence but as epistemic grounding, the article seeks to enact rather than merely claim its decolonial commitments. Theory is rendered accountable to history and lived experience, while community narratives are preserved as expressions of sovereignty, memory, and critique rather than reduced to data points within an analytic apparatus.

Table 1. Participants

Pseudonym*	Sex	Occupation
Ms. Fuentes	Female	Educator
Ms. Alvarez	Female	Community leader and educator
Mr. Cortes	Male	Community leader
Ms. Ramirez	Female	Community leader
Mr. Rodriguez	Male	Community leader and drummer

*All participant names are pseudonyms. Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling. Quotations from these participants are used in the paper with a reference to their pseudonyms.

Historical Context and Lineage

The ethnogensis of the Garifuna people begins on the island of Saint Vincent (Gonzalez, 1988). Gonzalez (1988) noted that their origin goes back to the early seventeenth century, with the unapologetic defiance to enslaved labour by Africans who fled the plantations of Saint Vincent, joining the maroon Kalinagos or Karifuna. Curating a novel ethnic disposition, their history stands on the pillars of resilience and resistance. Following their forced exile from Yurumein (St. Vincent) in 1797, the Garifuna were initially deported to Roatán before dispersing along the Central American Caribbean coast in a series of staggered migrations. By the early nineteenth century, Garifuna communities had established coastal settlements in present-day Belize under conditions of British colonial tolerance, while additional movements into Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua unfolded unevenly across the nineteenth century, shaped by labour demands, land access, and regional political transformations. Twentieth-century migrations, particularly to the United States, emerged

later and reflected a distinct phase of Garifuna mobility linked to banana economies, Cold War displacements, and neoliberal restructuring (Palacio, 2005). Nevertheless, Gonzalez noted the gradual atrophy of the Garifuna since their deportation from Saint Vincent, with the fear of "cultural annihilation being imminent" (Gonzalez 1988, p.42).

In historicising the socio-economic context of the Garifuna, the calamities of colonialism have been located as the primary driver of the marginalisation of the Garinagu of Belize. The pervasive tentacles of colonialism created a hazardous ecology of systems, structures, and beliefs that attacked non-Christian ontologies and relied on the suppression of Black autonomy and enfranchisement to uphold white supremacy and plantation economics. González (1988) introduced the theoretical construct of "*the politics of survival",* a dialectical strategy underpinning the contradictions within Garifuna migratory patterns as they sought to evade Spanish colonial extractivism while also adapting to ecological precocity (p. 29). They maintained indigenous methods of life in uncharted territory while in a state of [mental, ancestral, and physical] exile. However, the threat of marginalisation exacerbated upon settlement of the diaspora, as they were forced to comply within a developing North Atlantic economy and ideology of mercantilist capitalism, which the Garifuna call "mihagabuhuleera" [keeping to oneself to amass], that eroded all prior systems of livelihood like the Garifunaduáü [the Garifuna way] or its particular tenant of communalism or "Aü bu, Amürü Nü" [roughly translated to me for you, and you for me"] (Servio-Mariano, 2010).

Land dispossession

Garifuna land dispossession can be traced to their forced exile from St. Vincent; however, this article centres its analysis on how dispossession has been reproduced and reconfigured within Belize. Iyo et al., (2003, p. 5) asserted that "state policy, race, class and ethnicity have, at different historical periods, dictated land ownership in Belize." This included Spanish occupied Belize in the eighteenth century under two primary premises being: the 1765 Location Laws Act, which permitted a [white] settler to claim unoccupied land for logwood work, and the 1785 arrangement where land was ceded to the British by Spanish authorities, and shared amongst 30 settlers (Iyo et al., 2003; Bipolar, 2023). However, legal evidence of land displacement of the Garifuna took fruition under British rule. In 1817, the Superintendent of Belize declared all "unclaimed" land to become Crown Land, requiring settlers to register claims within six months or lose them (Iyo et al., 2003). By 1857, the colonial elites made amendments to the 1854 Land Titles Act so that the Garinagu had no entitlement to their land by law. Consequently, the Garinagu were forced to lease their land from the crown (Servio-Mariano, 2010).

These laws functioned as mechanisms to suppress the economic agency of the Garifuna, marking early institutional formations of economic injustices and inequalities. Moreover, Moberg (1992) delineated the structures of the Alcade System. Extended to Garifuna villages in 1877, the Alcade System was a form of indirect colonial rule that appointed local headmen with limited judicial and administrative powers but inserted colonial authority into the heart of village customs (Moberg, 1992). At first glance, a minor detail of colonial administration, the Act transformed headmen into colonial functionaries, and dismantled land and justice as internal matters within the Garifuna community, but to be adjudicated under colonial law. Consequently, by the late 1800s, a massive concentration of land ownership belonged to the Belize Estate Company, holding over 1 million acres, while 30 other English owners controlled much of the rest of Belize (Iyo et al., 2003; Gough, 2018).The colonial state consolidated authority through laws like the Crown Lands Ordinance (later Crown Lands Act), which vested large areas of land in the Governor and empowered the Crown to grant, lease, or sell at its discretion, sidelining Garifuna customary land practices grounded in communal tenure, ecological reciprocity, and kinship-based governance of territory. Even after independence, measures such as the Aliens Landholding Ordinance of 1973 reinforced the colonial mindset of land as a regulated commodity tied to sovereignty. The National Lands Act of 1992 replaced this framework, introducing reforms like standardised leases and environmental assessments but still privileging formal claimants and entrenching state authority. Taken together, these shifts reveal that land dispossession in Belize has been structured and maintained through law.

In more recent scholarship, Gough's (2023) detailed archival and ethnographic reconstruction of the so-called "Carib" Reserve at Punta Gorda demonstrates that Garifuna land insecurity is not a residual artefact of colonial neglect, but the deliberate product of a legal architecture engineered to keep Indigenous tenure perpetually conditional. His research traces how, although Garifuna settlement at Punta Gorda predates any formal assertion of British sovereignty, their lands were repeatedly subjected to contradictory ordinances, irregular surveys, and shifting administrative interpretations that oscillated between acknowledging Garifuna occupancy and denying their ownership. The creation of "reserves" under the 1872 Crown Lands Ordinance was followed by decades of inconsistent enforcement, bureaucratic confusion, and the eventual erosion of Garifuna control through leases, escheat proceedings, and colonial reclassification. Even the remarkable 1924

return of the 960-acre St. Vincent Block, achieved only after Garifuna leaders mobilised legal representation and navigated a labyrinth of conflicting wills, missing documents, and escheat claims, did not establish permanent security, as the land remained vulnerable to taxation regimes, administrative reinterpretation, and public misunderstanding of its status. Gough's reconstruction therefore reveals a juridical pattern in which Indigenous occupancy is tolerated so long as it does not impede state priorities, yet never elevated to the category of stable, inviolable property, a pattern that persists into the postcolonial era and continues to shape Garifuna territorial precarity today. These conditions underscore that without sustained lobbying, organised leadership, and consistent legal representation, Garifuna land rights remain structurally vulnerable.

Economic marginalisation

While the Garifuna were not enslaved like the English-Creole enslaved persons, it was the ideological and legislative mechanisms of colonialism that created a systemic economic struggle for the Garifuna of Belize. According to Servio-Mariano (2010), the Garinagu emerged as an important and flexible labour source for the British colonial elites who owned the means of production across the emerging New World, and in particular Belize. Thereby, the Garinagu were subjugated to selling their labour to earn a livelihood (Servio-Mariano, 2010). In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, following their deportation and exile, they served as soldiers for wage labour in British Royalist armies. Logging was close second for wage opportunities but was accompanied by seasonal unemployment that corresponded with external demands (Servio-Mariano, 2010). This created a system of structural dependency as the economy of Belize became based on the extraction of labour and resource to facilitate the industrialisation of other nations. Belize was then, interwoven into a global economic system of mercantilist capitalism, wherein the populace and bio-resources served as a peripheral colony, enriching core or metropolitan nations with fluctuating international market demands. Catapulting this experience into the contemporary epoch, Wallerstein (1974) detailed the formation of capitalism as a bounded, historically unique, and economically distinctive world-system that emerged in Europe in the sixteenth century through the projects of colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade, and mercantilist capitalism (Wallerstein, 1974). Thus, globalisation, as argued by Wallerstein (1974) and Quijano (2000), is not a new concept but rather an extension of these economic systems; developing from empires to several sovereign states, categorised by geopolitical divisions of labour. The compounding effect of global forces were exasperated by the implementation of legislation that impeded the economic development of the Garinagu and exasperated poverty. In 1812, British planters were fined by the Crown if they employed Garinagu persons. Servio-Mariano (2010) suggested that this was a mechanism to safeguard the institution of slavery and free labour after the end of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807.

Ontological displacement

Ontological displacement refers to the uprooting of a people's sense of being and belonging. At the corner of the twenty-first century, (Cayetano & Cayetano, 2005; Gough 2018) explored the decreasing political economy among the Garinagu. Cayetano and Cayetano (2005) assessed globalisation as a mechanism of symbolic violence, arguing that Garifuna cultural identity has been increasingly mediated by exogenous actors who redefine their ontological realities and structurally marginalise them. They stated, "their [Garifuna's] vulnerability has extended to allowing others to define them and their rights further widening an alienation from their own roots" (Cayetano & Cayetano 2005, p. 237). This precipitated an existential rupture from the communal praxis, as North Atlantic cultural and economic hegemony overshadowed indigenous customs. A byproduct of colonialism and white supremacy was the systematic psychological conditioning that encouraged a preference for European cultural norms and values. The peripheral state became a market for selling excess of manufactured goods only crafted in the Atlantic North due to the mercantilist policy of no industrialisation in colonies (Cayetano & Cayetano 2005). The result of this was a further deepening of dependency syndrome and a conditioning for a socioeconomic milieu that did not encourage economic prosperity for the Garinagu. Gonzalez (1988) critiqued culinary acculturation, land displacement, and systemic displacement of subsistence diets by imported commodities and manufacturing plants. She purported that globalisation has exported opportunities to indulge in overseas markets, while widening the gap between those who are enriched and those who consume. This has consequently exacerbated the proliferation of commodified consumables like Coca-Cola, which destabilised traditional delicacies, and replaced the communal praxis, local food production, use of existing ecosystems, and subsistence farming (Gonzalez, 1988). The influx of Coca-Cola in Belize, replacing local drinks like cassava beer represents a contemporaneous manifestation of colonial trading customs, by which peripheral states such as Belize consumed manufactured goods while being exploited for biopiracy. Gonzalez (1988) in fact highlighted the evolution, or perhaps erasure, of the Garifuna diet before exile, during colonialism, and in the late twentieth century.

Already, it has become evident that the moribund institutions of British colonialism infringed on the Garifuna's access to markets, trading abilities, and denied certain legal and economic enfranchisements. However,

Bourdieu also signified the concept of cultural capital, loosely defined as formal education, informal everyday cultural habits and experiences that enhance an individual's cultural competence and dictate their level of social stratification (Dillon, 2001). In line with this, Servio-Mariano highlighted that there was a prevailing preference for English creole blacks as they were more "Anglo-postured" in growing economic and administrative sectors, while the Garinagu were left unemployable and racially inferior (2010, p.137). Thus, this cultural marginalisation and institutionalised invalidation, reinforced existing inequalities that contributed to the marginalisation of the Garifuna community.

The outgrowths of colonialism have persisted as a destructive force. Colonisation played both an active and latent role in the decline of Garifuna enfranchisement and culture. Colonial arrangements of land ownership, and judicial practices erased any legitimacy of communal land tenure and indigenous practices, while re-routing ownership into colonial hands. Simultaneously, Gonzalez (1988) posited that colonisation has systematically undermined Garifuna cultural practices and language, leading to gradual cultural annihilation. Her analysis exposed the systematic psychosocial violence and trauma, which fostered an environment conducive to cultural atrophy and a diminishing political economy. Therein, it is imperative to consider the contemporary structural condition of the Garifuna as being produced by the continuum of colonial logistics under the guise of new-aged globalisation.

Globalisation and Neocolonial Land Dispossession

Upon analysis of the narratives, it is evident that the Garifuna people of Belize are often marginalised in the state's development projects, which prioritise foreign investment. The region has long had the world's most unequally distributed income due to the highly unequal distribution of farmland, government development and education policies, and demography, leading to intense land privatisation. Mollet (2014) argued that Belizean government prioritises land privatisation under the assumption that it may help alleviate poverty by allowing individuals to access credit and integrate into the modern economy. However, this approach has conversely disregarded communal land tenure systems that have historically sustained the Garifuna. The Garifuna's economic activities, such as subsistence farming and artisanal fishing, are thus undermined by state policies that favour private land ownership (Mollet, 2014).

The intersections of globalisation, racial and ethnic displacement herein become clear when examining the neoliberal agenda driving Belize's development policies. The push to make the country 'open for business' aligns with global economic trends where land and resources in the Global South are repurposed for foreign investment, often at the expense of marginalised indigenous populations. Belizean law has historically recognised communal land rights for Maya communities, but the Garifuna have struggled to gain similar legal protections. In 2018, Garifuna Barranco villagers marched on Belmopan to protest logging concessions granted to outsiders while their own applications were denied (Gough, 2018). Similarly, the coastal town of Dangriga, the cultural heart of the Garifuna in Belize, has seen increasing gentrification, with beachfront properties being sold to wealthy foreigners for tourism development. This is a process of spatial racialisation, where space is reorganised to reflect racial and economic hierarchies, the beachfronts become sites of elite tourism, while the Garifuna are pushed into informal labour markets with limited rights. For example, Ms. Fuentes, in her October 2024 interview, expressed that government officials, affluent individuals, and international corporations "exploit gaps in documentation to take Garifuna land, which is then used for hotels and other tourism projects…many people in our communities don't have legal proof of land ownership, making them more vulnerable to displacement" (Mrs. Fuentes, transcript). Moreover, as Mr. Cortes shared in a November 2024, in areas like Hopkins Bay, the Garifuna sell their houses to hotels, larger corporations, or Syrian and Chinese business owners, fleeing to urban areas to seek economic opportunities and betterment. Albeit only enhancing temporaneous gain and diminishing their political economy, economic pressures contininue to push communities to retreat and exacerbate Garinagu displacement.

These contemporary dynamics mirror the state, corporate alliances documented by Purvis (2013), who shows that as recently as 2011 to 2013 the Belizean government continued to authorise seismic testing and oil drilling on Maya and Garifuna ancestral lands without free, prior, and informed consent, despite clear Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and Court rulings requiring the protection and titling of communal territory. The state's "drill we will" posture, coupled with last-minute, exclusionary consultation meetings and the distribution of politically charged corporate gifts, demonstrates how development policy functions as a tool of contemporary dispossession. These practices reveal that land alienation is not a relic of colonial history but an active feature of Belize's neoliberal governance, one that continues to destabilise Garifuna tenure and displace communities through legal circumvention rather than overt force. Mollet's paper introduced the concept of "displacement-in-place", where the Garifuna are not physically removed but are structurally and economically marginalised within their own lands. Though focusing on Honduras, (Mollet 2014, p.29) demonstrated how privatised areas, such as the Punta Sal National Park, have restricted Garifuna access to

natural resources, further limiting their ability to sustain traditional livelihoods (Mollet, 2014). Displacement thus becomes racialised, with development narratives suggesting that their cultural and economic survival depends on integration into the state's vision of modernisation. Together with the case narratives presented, these findings also echo Achille Mbembe's (2003) necropolitics, where the state determines which populations have the right to flourish and which are left in conditions of disposability. The Garifuna are not physically exterminated but are systematically stripped of land and rendered quasi-citizens with diminishing rights.

By drawing from these lived experiences, it is evident that Garifuna displacement-in-place is not merely an unfortunate consequence of globalisation but a deliberate racialised economic strategy embedded in colonial histories of dispossession. Their displacement is thus not just economic but epistemic, reflecting a deeper negation of black autonomy and land sovereignty within a global system that privileges whiteness, capitalist logistics, and neoliberal governance (Quijano 2000; Mbembe 2003). The coastal town of Dangriga, the cultural heart of the Garifuna in Belize, has seen increasing gentrification, with beachfront properties being sold to wealthy foreigners for tourism development. In Hopkins Village, a historically Garifuna fishing community, land privatisation and foreign-owned resorts have pushed many Garifuna into low-wage tourism jobs while restricting their access to coastal resources.

Globalisation and Economic Displacement

Globalisation, posed as an inevitable economic trajectory and universal law, has had severe consequences for the Garifuna of Belize. Conventional globalisation writers strongly suggest that export growth and incoming foreign investment for Latin America and the Caribbean have reduced poverty. However, Servio-Mariano (2010) warned of engaging in theories of globalisation that "do not affirm hybridity, resistance, and democratic self-determination against forms of global domination, subordination and the continuities of colonialism" (Servio-Mariano, 2010, p. 184). Globalisation as he noted, has led to western invasion of the periphery, and the free-market economy model has undermined agency and global democracy that is ironically promoted by western society. Similarly, Harrison noted that while many economists predicted that developing countries with great numbers of unskilled workers would benefit from globalisation through increased demand for their unskilled-intensive goods, this view was gravely simple and often inconsistent with the facts (Harrison 2006). Cross-country studies document that globalisation has been accompanied by increasing inequality within developing countries, suggesting an exacerbation of structural poverty. The existence of such contradictions thereby, emerges as a central theme through studies on globalisation in Latin America and the Caribbean, particularly on considerations of poverty and political economy. Globalisation has instead further marginalised the agency of indigenous, subaltern communities from the periphery, in the world-wind of the cemented praxis of neoliberal policy and international networks. Interviewee John Cortes asserted ardently that since their exile, the Garinagu of Belize have experienced a social death that worsens annually. Based on the vignettes presented, this phenomenon requires understanding their positionality, the intersections of race and ethnicity, and how these intersect in the existing neoliberal logistics of Belize, leading to their cultural atrophy and diminishing political economy.

Existing literature on the political economy of the Garifuna remains uneven, with studies such as Mollet (2014) focusing primarily on land struggles, neoliberal development, and ethnic mobilisation in Honduras and Nicaragua, while comparatively marginalising the experiences of smaller Garifuna communities in Belize. Based on the narratives presented, the Garifuna express a lack of economic capital and resources due to their rural disposition and stigmatisation. There seems to be an inability to adapt to a growing industrialised economy, exacerbated by economic challenges such as dependency syndrome and underfunding. This financial instability has forced Garifuna families to prioritise economic survival over cultural preservation. Servio-Mariano (2010) highlighted that economic pressures driven by globalisation compelled younger Garifuna in the twentieth century to prioritise Western education and employment opportunities over traditional cultural practices, resulting in cultural erosion and exodus from their rural communities (Servio-Mariano 2010, 185). This postulation was mirrored by interviewee, Mr. Rodriguez, in his November 2024 interview, elucidated that economic constraints have forced the Garinagu to abandon traditional livelihoods. Canoe-making or drum-making, traditional Garifuna occupations, could not sustain their families. As jobs that reflected a growing neoliberal global market became more financially viable available in urban areas, many people, especially younger generations, have moved away from these cultural crafts in favour of employment that provides economic stability. These findings mirrored the Cayetanos (2005) postulation that migration forces the Garinagu to assimilate into dominant economic and cultural systems such as English Creole and North Atlantic cultures, eroding traditional practices and producing a brain drain that extracts valuable human capital, skill, and knowledge. This assimilation ultimately also weakens Garifuna identity while undermining local continuity. Interviewees echoed these dynamics, stressing that migration is often the only option to avoid destitution in rural and coastal communities of Belize, even as it accelerates cultural erosion.

However, those that remain in traditional Garifuna occupations or are unable to migrate to urban areas face the negative effects of this economic shift. Moreover, Mr. Rodriguez asserted that some of their practices have been disrupted due to legal restrictions and policies that ignore the economic plight of the Garifuna and their use of natural materials. He gave instances of canoe-makers giving up their speciality and facing destitution due to new legal provisions by the Ministry of Agriculture, which now mandate permission from the authority to cut down trees. He explained that due to Belize's large landscape and gas prices, simply commuting to the Ministry of Agriculture to acquire this permit inflates the cost of production, making their goods not competitive with internationally made, mass-produced canoes. This legislation also poses an issue for drum-making. While he understands and endorses the urgency of environmental conservation and sustainability, he also called for a bargain to balance cultural preservation and sustainability for the Garifuna to also prosper. These incidents highlight the challenge of maintaining a livelihood in the face of economic necessity due to Western capitalism and neoliberal policies. Moreover, in her October 2024 interview Ms. Alvarez, noted that these trends have had negative implications for social and economic development of the Garifuna. As development is centralised in urban areas while rural regions are neglected for not fitting neoliberal priorities. Consequently, she expressed the struggle Garifuna persons face as their coastal towns are neglected or not prioritised as it pertains to infrastructural development, the building of schools, proper water flow, and economic development. The Garifuna thus stand at the crossroads of Quijano's enduring colonial matrix and Mbembe's necropolitical order, where globalisation masks old violences in new language, rendering livelihoods precarious and cultural life perpetually at risk.

The paradox of tourism

Tourism projects exemplify the paradox of neoliberal development and Garifuna underdevelopment. Interviewed both in October 2024, both Ms. Fuentes and Ms. Luez shared that there is an inequitable distribution of financial gains from tourism. Conveyed by Ms.Luez, "even when Garifuna culture is showcased, the people performing or participating often receive minimal compensation" (Ms. Luez, transcript). While the Garifuna's cultural identity is commodified for the benefit of the tourism industry, they do not share in the financial gains but their traditions are showcased in advertisements and resort entertainment. Mbembe's notion of necropolitics helps illuminate the paradox of Garifuna tourism. In places like Hopkins Bay, Garifuna culture is showcased as spectacle through dance, cuisine, and claims of "authentic" Afro Indigenous identity, yet this visibility masks deeper erasures. What is preserved for tourism is culture as performance, stripped from its foundation in land, subsistence, and communal practice. Culture as life, meaning the drum woods, fishing grounds, and kinship economies that sustain continuity, is rendered disposable under neoliberal development. In this way, the state and market determine which aspects of Garifuna culture are allowed to survive as heritage and which are left to die, reproducing the logic of dispossession under the guise of preservation. The interviewees all highlighted that the celebration of Garifuna music, dance, and cuisine as a major draw for international visitors, with festivals such as Garifuna Settlement Day on November 19th promoted as key tourist attractions. However, Garifuna performers and artisans often do not benefit economically from the tourism industry, as resorts, tour operators, and foreign investors control much of the market, reinforcing patterns of racial labour exploitation. In Hopkins, Ms. Luez and Ms. Ramirez noted that many Garifuna work as hotel staff, tour guides, or cooks in foreign-owned resorts serving as waiters and janitors in the tourism economy. These jobs offer limited upward mobility and keep the Garifuna in positions of servitude within industries that appropriate their culture, while diverting economic benefits away from Garifuna communities, reinforcing dependency on external markets.

In a similar manner, ecotourism and neoliberal paradigms of sustainable development demonstrate these paradoxes. Mr. Rodriguez for example noted the expansion of ecotourism areas along Belize's coast, such as the South Water Caye Marine Reserve, has had effects like the Punta Sal National Park in Honduras, limiting Garifuna access to traditional fishing grounds. The park, accessed from traditional coastal Garifuna areas such as Dangriga, Hopkins and Placenia, now forbids subsistence fishing by local communities. Mr. Rodriguez further stated that "even within the context of sustainable development, cultural sustainability must be remembered too!" claiming that in an attempt to align Belize with neoliberal sustainability projects and eco-attractions, Garifuna culture is not just ignored but actively destroyed. It further puts into question: what are authentic conceptualisations of sustainability? And sustainability for what and whom? For the Garifuna, this results in a double displacement: their land is privatised, and they also face symbolic and cultural displacement. While their identity is celebrated as part of Belizean tourism brand, they are denied actual ownership over their cultural and economic future. The Garifuna are thus caught in a paradox of globalisation: their cultural distinctiveness makes them valuable as a tourism attraction, but their existence as autonomous landholders is seen as an impediment to modernisation. This dynamic mirrors broader global patterns where indigenous and Afro-descendant communities are simultaneously marginalised and exploited within neoliberal development frameworks. In this way, Garifuna tourism becomes a stage where, beneath the

choreography of "heritage," the deeper architecture of Quijano's coloniality and Mbembe's necropolitics quietly persists, determining which parts of Garifuna life may be displayed and which may be allowed to wither.

The contemporary condition of the Garifuna in Belize can be understood as a form of social and economic death produced through cumulative historical and structural processes. From their forced exile from Yurmein to the present, successive regimes of dispossession have eroded the material foundations of cultural reproduction and economic autonomy. Community narratives, read alongside historical and legal records, illuminate how these processes manifest today through constrained livelihood options, migration pressures, and exclusion from national decision-making. Marginalisation thus operates not as a singular event but as a multidimensional condition that renders Garifuna presence culturally visible yet politically and economically peripheral. This condition reflects what necropolitical frameworks describe as slow social death: the systematic depletion of life chances under racialised capitalism, wherein communities are neither fully expelled nor fully incorporated, but instead maintained in a state of managed precarity.

A Legal Case for the Garifuna

A legal case for the Garifuna rests on both constitutional precedent and historical settlement patterns that reveal the inequities of Belize's recognition frameworks. Unlike Maya land claims grounded in subsistence agriculture and inland occupation, Garifuna claims centre on coastal livelihoods, fishing, canoe-making, and communal settlement, rendering their tenure more vulnerable to tourism and maritime regulation. Yet *both* traditions share the principle of collective stewardship, underscoring the need for constitutional parity. However, the struggle for Garifuna constitutional recognition resonates with broader critiques of the international human rights system. As Biholar (2023) argues, global human rights law remains structurally ill-equipped to address historical injustices such as chattel slavery because its foundations are shaped by a "colonial imagination" that privileges the state over Afro-descendant peoples. Moreover, that reparations for chattel slavery require a reorientation of international human rights law toward the perspectives of Afro-descendant communities traditionally positioned at the margins of legal discourse which was echoed by the interviews in this study. Caribbean demands for reparations therefore emerge not only as moral appeals but as a human rights claim: a demand that the state address the structural conditions, economic and territorial, that generate cultural decay. Integrating this perspective into the Garifuna context reveals how land dispossession, cultural erosion, and constitutional neglect form part of a wider pattern in which Afro-Indigenous rights are recognised rhetorically yet denied substantively within postcolonial legal orders. This call resonates with Garifuna demands for constitutional protection of land tenure, cultural rights, and political inclusion in Belize.

The landmark decision in *Maya Leaders Alliance v Attorney General of Belize* (CCJ, 2015) affirmed that indigenous customary tenure is protected under the Belize Constitution and international human rights law. The CCJ held that "the right to property includes the protection of rights and interests in land whether or not these are registered or otherwise formally recognised" (para. 60) and that Belize is obliged "to respect and protect Maya customary land tenure" (para. 102). Crucially, the CCJ stressed that constitutional provisions, especially those concerning fundamental rights, must be interpreted generously, a principle reaffirmed in *McEwan & Others v Attorney General of Guyana* (CCJ, 2018), where the Court stated that constitutional rights must be read broadly to give them "the full measure of the protections they are intended to confer" (para. 46). Applying this logic to Garifuna communities would be consistent with the regional jurisprudence: a generous interpretation should likewise extend constitutional protection to Garifuna customary tenure. Despite this jurisprudence, Garifuna claims remain unrecognised, even though coastal villages such as Barranco and Punta Gorda have been continuously occupied since the mid-nineteenth century. Archival records note Barranco's first recorded birth in 1862, predating several inland Q'eqchi 'and Mopan Maya communities later central to Maya rights litigation (Gough 2018). This does not negate the ancient continuity of Maya presence in Belize; rather, it exposes the selective application of indigeneity. Garifuna tenure, no less historical, no less communal, has been sidelined within state frameworks of recognition. This selective recognition becomes more troubling when mapped onto Belize's constitutional architecture. By its acts and omissions, Belize has violated customary land tenure rights protected under sections **3(a)** (protection of the law), **3(d)** (the right to property), **16** (non-discrimination), and **17** (freedom from arbitrary deprivation of property). Under these provisions, the Garifuna could claim compensatory damages for impairment of their use and enjoyment of customary property, as well as *moral and vindicatory damages* for violation of their constitutional rights, especially the right to equality and the right to protection of the law. The CCJ's reasoning in *Maya Leaders Alliance* drew on these provisions to affirm that the Constitution applies to "all peoples within Belize's borders" (para. 103). Extending that logic to Garifuna communities would bring consistency to constitutional interpretation. Failure to do so entrenches what Hendrix (2008) calls the "fiction of state sovereignty," whereby indigenous tenure is selectively acknowledged when convenient but denied when inconvenient.

The CCJ itself has emphasised that failure to protect indigenous land rights can amount to extinguishment. In *Belize Sugar Industries Ltd v Attorney General of Belize*, the Court observed that "implicit in the CCJ's analysis is the understanding that the government's failure to act to protect indigenous rights may result in the frustration of those rights to the point of extinguishment." This reinforces the argument that without state intervention, and without robust, continuous implementation, customary tenure cannot survive the pressures of tourism development, privatisation, and neoliberal governance. The outcome of *Maya Leaders Alliance* further demonstrates the gap between judicial recognition and substantive change. The CCJ ordered that the Government of Belize establish a fund of BZ$300,000 as a first step toward fulfilling its obligations under the April 22, 2015 Consent Order to protect Maya customary land tenure. While symbolically important, this amount represents only a modest beginning. For parity to be achieved, similar commitments must be extended to the Garifuna, whose historical tenure and constitutional protections mirror those upheld for the Maya.

This obligation is not solely domestic but rooted in regional and international law. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights in *Awas Tingni v Nicaragua* (2001) held that Article 21 of the American Convention protects collective indigenous land rights even in the absence of formal title. Moreover, *Maya Leaders Alliance* (para. 53) affirms that the rights of indigenous peoples are recognised across major human rights treaties, including:

– the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (inherent dignity clause),
– the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide (Article 2),
– the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 27),
– the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Article 1), and
– the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 30).

As a party to these instruments, Belize is bound by a broad constellation of international norms affirming that indigenous land rights, cultural integrity, and equal protection are not discretionary entitlements, but obligations rooted in customary international law. As para. 53 of *Maya Leaders Alliance* notes, "international law recognizes and protects the rights of indigenous peoples. This is implicit in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which records and protects the inherent dignity of all human beings." Taken together, this legal landscape reveals that the exclusion of Garifuna communal tenure is not simply a bureaucratic oversight; it reflects what Quijano (2000) names the coloniality of power, where certain forms of indigeneity are rendered legible while others are relegated to the margins. And in the persistent vulnerability of Garifuna lands to privatisation, tourism, and state omission, one can observe what Mbembe (2003) terms the management of life at the edge of disposability, a juridical economy where cultural survival depends not on law's promises but on the political will to enact them.

Corrective measures could also honour the 1999 Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of Belize and the National Garifuna Council, which promised recognition of Garifuna contributions and land concerns yet has never been fully implemented (Gough, 2018, pp. 307–308). Internationally, Belize is further bound by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), which affirms in Article 26 that "Indigenous peoples have the right to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired" (United Nations, 2007, art. 26(1)). Recognition of Garifuna communal tenure would therefore not be a novel legal innovation but a necessary act of parity, aligning Belize's constitutional framework with both Inter-American jurisprudence and international obligations. Such recognition would not only address historic marginalisation but also provide a legal bulwark against the ongoing pressures of privatisation, tourism, and gentrification that continue to displace Garifuna communities.

Policy Alternatives and Reparative Futures

In *The Darker Side of Western Modernity,* Walter Mignolo conceptualised the phenomenon of coloniality in tandem with the existing epistemic terrain that is a unilateral Europo-American position (Mignolo 2011, p. 5). Moreover, he posited the need for dewesternisation or decolonial thinking or deconstructing how coloniality appears in the threads that make up our ontological and epistemic fabrics (Mignolo, 2011). Decolonial thinking then can become pivotal in beginning to conceptualise alternative solutions for the crises produced by globalisation. Mignolo discussed the idea of removing the parenthesis of global linear thinking, and engaging what he coined, 'zero point.' Zero-point epistemology is defined as the ultimate grounding of oneself in knowledge, by seeking original and unbiased inquiry or thought, that is dewesternised and thus has the potential to be curated from indigenous perspectives and acknowledges the array of diversity that exists (Mignolo 2011). Thus, indigeneity is conceptualised as a point of ground zero, where one attempts to understand their existing contexts, and method of being rooted in local histories rather than the universalising

gaze of the Global North. Within this context, it represents a bottom-up approach in which one attempts to understand their existence, challenges and solutions, that acknowledges their intricacies.

Cavanagh and Mander (2004) called for a 'bottom up' approach; a process of correction and adjustment to tackle the impact of globalisation, stressing a shift from global to local. This represents a method that promotes indigeneity and indigenous development. Under the current circumstances, globalisation as evidently seen the widening gaps of comparative advantage economics, trade liberalisation, dependency and imports. Within the Garifuna context, globalisation has threatened the existence of small-scale farmers, Garifuna livelihoods based on ecological principles of agricultural subsistence, and thereby food security for the Garinagu. However, the authors suggest fighting the juggernaut of globalised industrial agriculture and the monopoly on food farming (Cavanagh & Mander, 2004). New rules of trade which recognise the high value of food production from local communities should be at the top of considerations. Regional Afro-Indigenous trade is also integral for indigenous Garifuna development. Strengthening trade links between Garifuna communities in Belize, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, can foster self-sustaining trade networks. The expansion of cross-border economic partnerships with indigenous and Afro-descendant groups, further bypassing the exploitative nature of multinational corporations that disregard the environment, and other factors that drive marginalisation of indigenous communities. Alternative financial institutions such as local credit unions have also been integral in Afro-Caribbean development as seen by the efforts of self-determination by newly liberated African peasants in Jamaica (Marshall, 1996). The National Garifuna Council can setup Garifuna-run micro-finance institutions to provide low-interest loans for local business and entrepreneurial development. The state must also be integral in subsidies and incentives to help foster this development.

Cavanagh and Mander (2004) also expressed the salience of living democracy and subsidies. They affirmed that while democracy is associated with elections, civil society organisations and citizens should promote a newer meaning to democracy (Cavanagh & Mander, 2004). The essence of this is to hold governments and key stakeholders accountable to those who will bear the costs when decisions are made. It also means limiting the powers of absentee owners, ensuring that marginalised groups are represented and mobilising their members in advocacy. As the authors expressed, globalisation entails the "delocalisation and disempowerment" of local communities and economies (Cavanagh & Mander, 2004, pp. 79-81). The marginalisation of indigenous communities, subaltern voices and exaltation of absentee populations must be addressed by prioritising the populace that governments represent. In this sense, new democracy respects the notion that sovereignty resides in people. Subsidies are also essential to the development and success of the Garifuna. According to Cavanagh and Mander (2004), local, community-based activities such as small-scale farming, local markets, local production for local consumption have been impacted by the large-scale nature of globalisation. These traditional systems however, had enabled the Garinagu to remain in control of their economic and food security, while maintaining viability of their communities and cultures. Economic globalisation is rapidly dismantling this, favouring instead economies based on export, comparative advantage, and profit maximisation with global corporations in control. For Cavanagh and Mander (2004), it is thereby necessary to create policies that consciously favour the local and follow the principle of subsidiarity, being the decision that activities can be undertaken locally should be and whatever power can reside at the local level should reside there. Only when additional activity is required that cannot be satisfied locally should power and activity move to the next higher level, that of region, nation, and finally the world (Cavanagh & Mander, 2004).

Furthermore, Ian Boxill (2003) put toward a form of alternate tourism for Belize. He purported that Belize is at the appropriate stage in its development to forge an alternative model for tourism. Boxill suggested that Belize would benefit greatly by utilising a tourism development policy which respects people's way of life, and sustains ecological systems for it to be sustainable (Boxill, 2003, p. 147). He noted that there is also the possibility for festival-type tourism such as the Garifuna Festival of November 19th, which draws from the culture of the country. However, measures should be taken to ensure that the festival, organisation, employment opportunities and expression remain in the hands of the Garifuna, or as primary collaborators with civil organisations and government ministries. This is to preclude what already takes place being the commercialisation of sensitive aspects of people's cultures, in addition to exploitation. Expanding on Boxill, community-centred tourism remains a central focus for alleviating issues of exploitation and structural poverty.

Presently, Belize is heavily controlled by foreign investors. Instead of serving as performers of their culture for tourists, the Garifuna must own and control tourism enterprises on their land. There can be collectively owned lodges, boat tours, and eco-friendly stays that provide direct income to the community rather than foreign corporations. Homestays and agro-tourism can also be part of this. Homestay networks can allow tourists to immerse themselves in Garifuna daily life, ensuring that tourism profits remain in the hands of families rather than corporations. The development of farm-to-table tourism is also a possibility where visitors engage in traditional Garifuna farming and fishing, strengthening food sovereignty and cultural continuity. This permits

a switch to community-based and ecological tourism, from present extractive tourism models. The utilisation of Garifuna ecological knowledge is also integral for sustainable fishing, forestry, and herbal medicine tourism, positioning them as experts rather than employees, while also focusing on sustainable, organic, and indigenous food systems that resist dependence on global agribusiness. These sentiments were recurring theme in the interviews, expressing the potential for Garifuna-led tourism as a means of economic sustainability, poverty eradication, and cultural preservation. Mr. Rodriguez stated for instance, "Tourism, if done correctly, can support us. A canoe-maker could create workshops where visitors learn and contribute to the craft…Visitors who engage meaningfully with the culture, such as learning traditional crafts or attending rituals, could help spread awareness and bring financial benefits to us" (Mr. Rodriguez, transcript). These ideas highlight cultural tourism as a form of economic empowerment. Instead of simply entertaining tourists, Garifuna community members could offer immersive experiences, such as language classes, drumming lessons, and guided heritage tours.

Nevertheless, scholar Núñez (2019) underscores the salience of legal support in the re-imagination of Garifuna preservation. Núñez's (2019) study of culture-based intervention programs in Belize makes clear that Garifuna cultural revitalization cannot be decoupled from the structural conditions that determine whether cultural life can endure. While educators and community leaders deploy language, music, spirituality, and heritage as tools of youth empowerment, these initiatives operate within institutions that valorise culture rhetorically yet fail to secure the material foundations that sustain it. Fragmented funding, inconsistent state support, and political ambivalence render cultural programs acts of endurance rather than expressions of flourishing. In this sense, the constraints Núñez identifies echo the legal and epistemic critique advanced by Biholar (2023): that Afro-descendant communities remain constrained by human rights regimes shaped by a colonial imagination that recognises identity without guaranteeing the conditions for its reproduction. Together, these insights reveal that revitalisation alone cannot secure a reparative future; reparations must take the form of stable rights, protected lands, and durable public investment, conditions without which Garifuna cultural labor remains structurally overburdened and perpetually at risk.

Conclusion

Globalisation in Belize has not functioned as the great leveller promised in development rhetoric; it has reproduced and refined the racialised cartographies established under colonial rule. For the Garifuna, the neoliberal project manifests not as opportunity but as an *aggiornamento* of historical dispossession, a tightening of the same structures that once exiled their ancestors from Yurumein. Far from ushering in prosperity, globalisation has deepened structural inequalities through land privatisation, extractive tourism, and the reorganisation of coastal space in accordance with foreign capital rather than Indigenous stewardship. What appears as modernisation becomes, upon closer scrutiny, a continuation of the "coloniality of power" that Quijano identifies as the organising grammar of the modern world.

Within this terrain, Garifuna life is governed through a quiet calculus of tolerable precarity: communities may dance for tourists, but they shall not own the ground beneath their feet; they may perform culture, but not exercise territorial autonomy. Mbembe's insights on necropolitics and zones of precarity help clarify this contradiction. The Garifuna are not annihilated, yet their capacity to flourish is systematically curtailed, confined to narrow economic roles within industries that depend on their cultural labour while eroding the material conditions that sustain that culture. Displacement-in-place thus emerges as a distinctly twenty-first-century mode of Garifuna marginalisation, a form of slow dispossession that disrupts subsistence, reorders cultural space, and restricts communal tenure without the spectacle of forced removal. Yet Garifuna epistemologies persist as living sites of resistance. Articulated through practices of *Garifunaduáü*, cooperative labour, ecological reciprocity, and kinship economies, these worldviews continue to offer alternative visions of autonomy that defy neoliberal metrics of value.

Thus, the Garifuna crisis is neither accidental nor peripheral; it is symptomatic of a deeper global pattern in which Afro-Indigenous communities occupy the fault lines of neoliberal expansion. Addressing this crisis requires more than recognition or inclusion; it requires structural transformation. Constitutional parity for Garifuna communal tenure, legal protections against displacement, state support for community-based tourism, and the creation of Afro-Indigenous trade networks represent necessary steps toward a reparative horizon. These interventions do not constitute charity but justice; they align contemporary governance with Belize's constitutional commitments and international human rights norms. In attending to these epistemic traditions, Belize can move beyond symbolic multiculturalism toward a genuinely decolonial project, one that affirms that development without justice is merely a refined mode of dispossession, and that the future of the nation rests on the flourishing of all its peoples, not only those rendered legible to capital. Such a shift is not only necessary for the survival of the Garifuna; it represents a broader ethical imperative for the Caribbean: to

imagine development not as the continuation of colonial logics, but as the collective labour of building futures rooted in justice, memory, and self-determination.

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