THE PETER PECKARD MEMORIAL PRIZE

Shouldering Bales, Shouldering Burdens:
Unpacking Fashion’s Global Waste Crisis

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Introduction

Kevin the Jeans Bale weighs approximately 160lbs and contains 103 different pairs of second-hand jeans (Dead White Man’s Clothes, 2023). He has travelled from the United States to a sorting facility in Canada, to his final home in Ghana. The jeans that make him up were manufactured in 15 different countries and represent 52 different brands, all now unwanted. Kevin, from start to end of his life, has travelled near 1 million miles. Most retailers that look at Kevin describe him as a ‘bad bale’ meaning poor in quality and impossible to recoup the $100 he costs with. A fraction of Kevin may be purchased by local consumers, but the rest of him will end up atop a landfill or trapped in local waterways (Ricketts, 2022a). Often photographed is this last stage: images of garments ablaze, piled high, wisps of smoke billowing from them and entering the atmosphere, which, in the global North, garners mass outcry.

Running parallel to Kevin’s story is another. One of a kayayo with a bale atop her head and a baby strapped to her back (Ricketts, 2021a). It is her job as kayayo to carry bales, filled with garments castoff by the global North, across distances of every kind (Ricketts, 2022a). She is unable to afford childcare so works, as many kayaye do, carrying her child. One day, despite walking with a firm posture and steadying the bale with her hands, the flight of stairs the clothing demands to be carried up is simply too much. When turning to ascend the stairs, the narrow steps throw her off balance, and her bale falls backwards, fatally crushing her baby boy (Ricketts, 2021a). Sadly, this story is not uncommon. Sustaining injuries to oneself and others, long-term damaged health, and, ultimately, death, are all constituent of the kayaye position (Agyei, Kumi & Yeboah, 2016) - natural consequences of gruelling, exploitative slave labour. Paradoxically, images of kayaye, when rarely seen, are used as decontextualized symbols of female strength. Their reality is rendered unknown and unseen.

Stories of garment makers in recent years have made headlines for flagrant exploitative behaviour, yet deeply understudied is the opposite end of this supply chain: fashion waste management. Whilst the relation between the fashion industry and climate crisis has flagged
more attention in recent years, mainstream narratives have understood the issue as a matter of material, measured in pollution and profit. Yet, this perspective neglects to perceive the human cost of the industry. With a focus on fashion’s waste crisis, I argue that what appears to be a crisis of material waste, is truthfully a crisis of human exploitation. I begin by outlining the intentional ignorance of the global North to the realities of fashion waste, before moving to detail the truth: fashion waste management is a system of exploitation. With reference to a historical analysis via the lens of decolonial scholarship, I argue this exploitation is founded and contingent on colonialism and white supremacy which has set economic, ontological, and epistemic precedents for modern fashion to exploit, particularly in the case of fashion waste which I explore in a study of the kayayei and Kantamanto Market. In recognising this, I establish the necessity of centering solutions to fashion’s waste crisis in addressing human exploitation. Then necessary for the eradication of fashion’s human exploitation is not capitalist, material-based circularity, but rather a more radical justice-led framework that understands circularity not in terms of profit, but people.

How then do we understand the contrasting stories of Kevin and the kayayo? Whilst discussing the end-of-life of Kevin the Jeans Bale may be more ‘comfortable’ for many, the lack of consideration for this kayayo illustrates the fundamental misunderstanding of fashion waste in the global North. Fashion waste is not a mere material issue, but a human one. When we accept and allow the existence of fashion waste, we accept and allow the existence of human exploitation. As was the case with this kayayo and her baby, it is the most vulnerable who carry and then are crushed by the weight of the global North’s excess. If we want to have hope for our growing fashion waste and climate crisis, we ought to move from looking at the shouldered bales, to who is shouldering the burden.
I. Exploiting Ignorance

Before outlining the nature of exploitation fashion waste engenders, it is necessary to understand how ‘fashion waste’ comes to exist, and how this then lays the groundwork for exploitation’s existence. In this section, I argue the global North’s overproduction of garments leads to waste being an inevitability. Yet, waste is not regarded as particularly alarming in the global North. Why? I suggest because ‘out of sight, out of mind’ is the leading principle on which waste in the global North is handled at the expense of the global South.

From 2014 onwards, the fashion industry has consistently produced upwards of 100 billion new garments annually (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2023). Whilst production numbers continue to rise, so too does the rate of disposal. Garments appear to be held for half the time they were in the decade prior, with most garments discarded within a year of their production. The United States reported 11.15 million tons of textile waste in 2017 (Freeman, 2020), with an estimated 85% of textile waste ending up in landfill, close to 9.5 billion kilograms a year (Hunn, 2021). In short, this is the product of the linear fashion model to which the industry subscribes: a take-make-waste process (Sustainable Fashion Forum, 2023). In conjunction with fast fashion, this process is accelerating at unprecedented speeds. Prices continually decline as corporations compete to sell excessive quantities within short time frames. Consumers are indoctrinated into the mindset of this economy with the availability of convenient, cheap garments encouraging ‘here today, gone tomorrow’ thinking, otherwise termed ‘fashion’s ‘disposable culture’ (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). Overproduction of inexpensive clothing from corporations means the consumer treats clothing as disposable, re-engaging brands to produce more, and consumers to buy and dispose at an even faster rate - a series of ‘networked overlapping practice[s]’ (Payne, 2020, p.13) all producing copious amounts of waste.

This dangerous economic model comes with consequence. Berg & Magnus (2020) estimate that textile waste contributed close to 2.1 billion metric tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions in 2018. Near 20% of all global wastewater pollution begins in the fashion industry (Drew &
Yehounme, 2017). As I will come to argue, the human cost is in many ways greater. Within a linear economy, we have arrived at a crisis where waste’s existence is ineluctable.

Nonetheless, there seems to be no immediacy to address the issue in the global North. The United Kingdom delayed the introduction of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) legislation for textiles at the start of this year (Russell, 2023), and it remains uncertain as to when the European Commission will launch their harmonised EPR policy (Williams, 2022). How could it be that, despite such alarming statistics, the global North goes on unconcerned? Fundamentally, I suggest, because the system functions on the ‘out of sight and out of mind’ praxis, where waste is sent both literally and figuratively away.

Out of Sight

Within a linear clothing economy, consumers desiring to dispose of clothing produced with disposability in mind is inevitable. Given, in the global North, the impacts of fashion waste are understood exclusively in environmental terms, the widespread dissemination of information regarding the consequence of sending clothes to landfill or incineration has invoked fear. Though individuals are no less likely to dispose of garments, they are more attentive to how they dispose. Consequently, the second-hand clothing trade has been posited as a viable, even ethical means for pushing garments ‘out of sight’ yet, as I will explore, much of this process is shrouded in myth.

In the United Kingdom, a large proportion of people participate in charity shop donation: WRAP (2020) found that post-COVID around 67 million items, the majority of which were clothing, were donated to charity shops, and Charity Aid Foundation (2022) found that 3 in 10 of us donated clothing to a charity shop. Whilst we may believe our garments find a better home through such methods, the truth is markedly different. In actuality, only a very small portion of this clothing does get purchased within its region of donation; a Brooks (2019) study found that only 10% to 30% of donated clothing is resold in its country of collection. 70% at minimum is
then packaged into bales to be sent overseas. Contradicting the image ‘charitable donation’ insinuates in the global North, none of this clothing is free, nor is it cheap – when sent away, they become commodities in a supply chain (Manieson & Regis, 2022). A lengthy journey between several countries begins, where the ‘cream of the vintage’ is skimmed off within the global North, leaving unwanted garments behind for the country in the global South it is destined to end its journey at (Marshall, 2020). As noted, much of what arrives in these bales will be unsuitable due to climate, sizing, or extremely poor condition. It, in turn, becomes the global South’s waste to dispose of - a process termed ‘waste colonialism’ (Sharma, 2023).

Equally misconstrued is the narrative around ‘recycling’ within the second-hand trade. Advertising around clothing recycling often utilises language such as ‘recirculate’ or ‘circular’ to imply materials of the disposed garment will re-join the production chain to form ‘new’ items. With the rise of ‘recycled ranges’ - note ‘Recycled by Pretty Little Thing’ or H&M’s ‘Close the Loop’ Campaign - many consumers believe that recycling clothing then is another sound means of disposal. Yet, such claims are fundamentally misleading. Clothes which are attempted to be recycled are not done so in the way we might imagine: the effects of fast fashion and the linear economy have resulted in items comprised of a mix of fibres, compositions, or treated with functional finishes, all of which makes the recycling process near impossible, allowing only a fraction of the garment to be reused (Nayak & Patnaik, 2021). H&M’s take-back bins, for instance, purport to be recycling customer donations into new garments yet only 1% of all items collected will be. In fact, only 35% of what’s collected will be recycled at all (Ramaniah, 2019). The rest of their recycled range is the product of plastic PET bottles, extracted from overseas, used to make synthetic polyester which ultimately cannot be re-recycled thus accelerating its path to landfill (Marino, 2022). Surplus donations will then find themselves in the same stream as aforementioned charity donations, compressed into the same bales to enter the global second-hand supply chain.

Out of Mind
Having established how second-hand trade in the global North is used to move garments out of sight, I move now to analyse how this equally licenses treatment of waste as ‘out of mind’. Despite the reality we have established, individuals in the global North are actively encouraged to think that the disposal of their clothing can be a good deed. Ha-Brookshire & Hodges (2009) talk about how consumers ‘felt better’ (p. 11) handing garments over to charities. Many even imagined that the item would be given to ‘the poor or needy’ (Manieson & Regis, 2022, p. 4). This ‘deficit myth’ narrative exploits images and pre-existing racist notions of individuals in the global South as ‘in need’, encouraging those in the North to believe that whilst they may possess an excess of garments, this is remedied by sending items to the global South, where there is not enough (Ricketts, 2022a). This story is a false one; the vast majority of people in the global South are not desperate for a worn sandal or ragged t-shirt from the global North. It is also a deeply artificial consideration of a ‘good deed’ as Ricketts (2021c, 53:20) points out given donors rarely give items away based on assessing their suitability for future owners. When winter outerwear makes up the bulk of what we donate to warmer climates (WRAP, 2020) we can’t claim to be donating based on what we imagine will be ‘needed’ elsewhere. Thus, the deficit myth exists solely to buttress what Norris (2015) calls a ‘redemptive practice’ attitude for those donating in the global North. Further, as mentioned, what is centrally obscured is the fact that the business of the second-hand trade is a supply chain: it has and continues to be a for-profit enterprise which the myth of ‘charitable donation’ altogether obscures. Nonetheless, this entire notion of ‘goodwill’ allows for the consequences of rampant overproduction and overconsumption to be put out of mind in the global North.

Whilst the second-hand clothing trade in the global North appears to offer options of ‘harmlessly’ disposing of clothing, it is more a narrative of comfort than of truth. The reality beneath all of this narrative justification, Ricketts (2021a) suggests, is that within the global North clothing is only donated because there is an infinite abundance of new clothing to replace it. Equally the first-hand trade can only function without consequence when waste is put out of sight and out of mind. We then see how such a mindset bolsters the current linear economy. One must also note that discussions like this occur only in material terms, focusing on garments, where they are moved and where they end up - any suggestion of people behind the process is cursory as the deficit myth demonstrates. This, I suggest, is not accidental, but intentional. If
both the corporation and the consumer can believe in the virtue of jettisoning what is, frankly, their trash, they have no reason to abandon their current practices. Yet, in the next section, I move to tell the part of the story often left to the margins: the realities of exploitation that occur in this ‘away’ and suggest that just as such a mindset has continued to uphold the linear economy, so too has it upheld the deeply exploitative system of waste management.
II. Exploiting Kayayei, Exploiting Kantamanto

Through all metrics of human exploitation - forced labour, insufficient pay, gruelling working conditions, child labour, threats of violence, psychological manipulation, and prejudice - kayayei labour is a textbook case (Hazlewood, 2015). Whilst the role as a whole has increasingly come under fire for its exploitative nature, fashion waste management has come to be seen as a most insidious case of this. As I will explore in this section, the intersection of the kayayei role with the exploitative fashion waste trade produces a particularly distinct branch of egregious exploitation. Unlike typical kayayei exploitation, the women in this particular trade, are not at the behest of a single exploiter. Rather, whilst individual employers may dictate the nature of their work, the ways in which they are exploited are equally systemic. Worst of all, the global North turns a blind eye to them, meaning they labour in the shadows, rendered most invisible despite being most vulnerable (Ricketts, 2020).

Head portering is an ancient practice in Ghana; over time, it has been integral to transporting goods of every kind and supporting all manners of trade. Accordingly, most transportation routes are narrow footpaths through which only people, kayayo, can travel (Baah-Ennumh and Adom-Asamoah, 2012). Each kayayo carries bales of 120lbs to 200lbs, often the same as or more than their entire body weight. Bale dimensions are designed purely to maximise profit, without much thought for the person that will bear them (Ricketts, 2022b).

Naturally, the toll on their bodies is extreme. Work done by The Or Foundation found that most kayayei suffer extreme deterioration of their spinal column, losing the curvature of their neck and significant amounts of bone cartilage (Assam, 2022). One kayayo suffered from the expansion of her neck bones resulting in them pressing into her trachea, inhibiting swallowing, and breathing (Ricketts, 2022b). Dr Dordor, Accra-based chiropractor, stressed the number of kayayo that could die at any moment from a mere wrong tilt of the neck. With almost every visit to the chiropractor, a number of emergency cases are revealed where girls and women are told to stop head-carrying for fear they could die at any moment (Ricketts, 2022b).
It is not just carrying bales that endanger their bodies, but equally treacherous are the perils of being women exacerbated by the conditions of *kayaye* work. Almost all *kayayo* are women - the practice is a gendered one (Ahlvin, 2012). Many *kayayei* risk being victims of theft, rape, and other forms of sexual assault on their journeys whilst they work. Time-off or falling unwell can result in homelessness and sleeping on streets where danger is heightened (Ricketts, 2022b). The Kayayei Youth Association reported a string of gender-based violence attacks, where men sexually assaulted girls as they moved between their outdoor sleeping space to a toilet. One girl was even murdered after reporting what had happened (Ricketts, 2022b). Equally, many recount having to exchange sex for shelter (Ziblim, 2013) where risks of HIV, AIDS, or teenage pregnancy are exacerbated.

Even when ‘home’ exists, it is not necessarily a safe space. Despite the effort of their back-breaking labour, many see the bulk of waste dumped in their own backyard. Informal settlements like Old Fadama have close to 38,000 residents, many of whom work in Kantamanto market or are *kayaye* (Ricketts, 2022a). When clothing is incinerated or dumped in local waterways here, it is those like the *kayayei* who suffer increased risks of malaria and cholera, who inhale toxic fumes that will prove deadly. Sharifā, a *kayayo*, lost her son who was only a few months old to a cough that proved fatal - they lived by a dumpsite where clothes transported by *kayayei* like her ended up incinerated just a few feet away. Tragically then, even if the work of carrying itself is not fatal, many will still suffer the consequences of the environmental degradation of their homes.

Exploitation equally occurs at an ideological level. *Kayaye* bodies are exploited for the purpose they serve; individuals are not recognised beyond that. Assam says, “Kayaye are not seen as human […] You have *trotro*, taxi, bike, and *kayayo*.” (Ricketts, 2022b, para. 22). Further, many in Ghana who deal in the fashion waste trade describe the business as dirty work, adopting blame for the waste flooding in, feeling shameful for being so ‘filthy’ (Lorenz, 2020). *Kayaye* are perceived and perceive themselves in a similar vein. They are spoken of harshly, described as ‘a plague’ or ‘a thorn in the side of development’ (Ricketts, 2022b, para. 23), shunned for migrating to Accra, considered at fault for breaking up families and seen as stepping out of line.
Whilst the psycho-social effects of this work are deeply understudied, we do know that much of the second-hand trade in Ghana is deeply imbued with this internalised shame (Lorenz, 2020).

Despite their labour being integral to the functioning of the second-hand trade as a whole, they are paid pitiful amounts. Most kayayei are migrants from rural environments in Northern Ghana to places like Accra, wanting to earn better wages than local work can provide for them in rural settings. They may hope to do anything from send money back home, raise enough money to start a family, save money for education, or dream generally of upward mobility (Ricketts, 2022a). Yet, for each journey they are paid only within the range of 30 cents to $1 –the World Bank (2022) defines extreme poverty as less than $2.15 a day - barely enough to cover daily expenses (Ricketts, 2022b).

How could it be possible that despite literally carrying the burden of waste management which, as established, is the engine that allows the existence of the first-hand clothing trade, Kayayei are so neglected? Fundamentally because they are as subject to being as out-of-sight and out-of-mind as the garments the global North throws away. Despite being within the clothing supply chain, they are sequestered. Wages cannot be dealt fairly, safer infrastructure for waste management cannot exist, and these women cannot imagine freedom from this exploitation because the global North renders them invisible within fashion’s supply chain. They face a distinct kind of exploitation as kayayei within fashion – they are exploited not merely through action, but through inaction. Having been forced into a blind spot, their exploitation persists in the shadows.

This, I argue, is not exclusive to the kayayei. I turn now to emphasise that the kayayei suffer within the systematic neglect of waste management by the global North. To explore this, one must zoom out and note the wider exploitative context in which these women labour.
Kantamanto Market, located in Accra, Ghana’s capital, is one of the most notorious second-hand markets in the world. It has a retailer side which stretches approximately seven acres, and an importer side which makes up the remaining fifteen acres (Ricketts, 2022a). With around 5000 registered stalls, an estimated 30,000 people working, and thousands of customers every business day, the market is always lively (Ricketts, 2022a). Featured in the market is everything from clothing sales, music, dancing, political activism, cooking, and spaces for socialising. It is a rich and vibrant market, full of cultural practices, socialisation, and joy, though the excessive piles of clothing from the global North loom as a reminder of a weight on the entire market to move often immovable stock.

Ghana saw the dawn of the second-hand clothing trade whilst a British colony and, as I will later expand on, continued exports from the United Kingdom endured as a legacy of colonialism (Manieson & Regis, 2022). However, the real boom in trade began in the 1960s, just after Ghana’s independence in 1957. This period saw the opening of the first American malls, the Fresno Drop and climbing credit card purchasing, and a resulting spike in clothing consumption in the United States and global North as a whole (Ricketts, 2022a). Yet retailers were aware that consumers would be less inclined to purchase new items when they had full wardrobes – thus began the second-hand clothing economy, marketed as charitable, despite being a for-profit enterprise (Marshall, 2020). Consequently, Ghana soon saw an influx of obroni wawu, an Akan expression meaning ‘dead white man’s clothing’ which remarked on the sheer amount of clothing arriving - white people must have died in these clothes, why else would these barely worn garments be arriving at such a disconcerting rate? (Beaton, 2021)

As established, approximately 70% of clothing collected in the global North as part of the second-hand trade enters a global supply chain with a vast majority destined for the global South (Brooks, 2019). Tema, Kantamanto’s local port, receives around 100 containers of clothing bales weekly, each containing 400 bales, nearing approximately 15 million clothing
items unloaded weekly (Ricketts, 2022a). Kayayezi transport these bales to the market, where retailers then have a chance at purchasing them. Depending on the type of garment or country of export, bales are sold for anywhere between $75 to $500 each (Dead White Man’s Clothes, 2023). Retailers gamble on these bales with no idea of the quality, kind, or saleability of the items in these bales. Whilst calling it a ‘gambling business’ (Ricketts, 2022a) many have no option but to buy a bale every Wednesday and Saturday - retailer market days (Ricketts & Skinner, 2019). Retailers then sort their bales, assessing the condition of the items and sorting them into ‘selections’ based on quality: first selection means top quality, second selection are lightly worn, third selection are heavily worn, and fourth selection are trash (Ricketts, 2022a). Retailers hope to sell their first selection early, then their second selection before the next market day, incurring a time pressure given the speed at which new goods are constantly coming in. When these new goods come in, any clothing from old bales becomes undesirable and impossible to sell (Ricketts & Skinner, 2019). Sales are not about profit - survey data finds only 16% of retailers tend to make a profit, whereas nearly 46% don’t even make a return on their bale - so most retailers function hand-to-mouth, making just enough to survive or to keep from plunging further into debt (Ricketts, 2022b).

Clothing items bought by consumers then enter a new process: the tailoring, upcycling, and personalisation of garments. Strikingly different to the disposable culture of the global North, Ghanaians have a relationship with their clothing that Ricketts claims is lost in the global North (Lorenz, 2020), demonstrating a degree of interaction with their clothing from start-to-end. Stylistic remodelling of clothing or tailoring are ways that garments have value added in both a cultural and creative sense (Manieson & Regis, 2022). Clothing is not seen as a fleeting commodity but imbued with value and sentimentality. Individuals are involved in selecting materials and styles, taking measurements, and customising pieces as they wish (Assam, 2022). Such culturally embedded behaviour means these services are incorporated into Kantamanto Market. Yet, the flood of fast fashion entering Kantamanto is starting to threaten this practice: when clothing made to be disposed comes in, thinking about clothing as disposable is not far behind (Ricketts, 2021c, 51:30).
The sheer number of items overflowing into Kantamanto inevitably causes issues. Ultimately, not all of what comes in will be sold. As stated earlier, much of what arrives in Kantamanto will actually become end-of-life waste with nowhere else to go. Statistics point to close to 40% of clothing arriving at the market leaving as waste within a week of arrival (Johnson, 2023). There are a few options for what happens to this clothing, but none are ideal: landfill, incineration, or pushed into waterways that lead into the Korle Lagoon. The Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA) picks up around 70 tonnes of waste a day. Ghana manages this waste with their own money, often risking debt - whilst vast amounts of waste are flooding in, very little money is (Stop Waste Colonialism, 2023). Though formerly dumped in Kpone Landfill, plans by the World Bank failed to account for foreign waste, so it filled up four years ahead of schedule (Ricketts, 2022a). Ultimately, the unprecedented amount of waste led to Kpone going up in flames in 2019, something Solomon Noi, Head of Waste Management in Accra, blames on clothing waste (Lorenz, 2020). Waste pickers work under these conditions, endangered by flames, toxic fumes, hidden sinkholes and more, yet remain pitifully underpaid. As a result of Kpone’s fate, combined with the simple fact that the AMA are unable to transport such high degrees of waste, residual waste is swept into Accra’s gutter system, heightening the risk of water-borne diseases (Lorenz, 2020). With remaining waste, the last resort is to dump it in informal settlements where incineration occurs (Kwan, 2020) short distances away from people’s homes as in the case of Old Fadama. This entire cycle occurs weekly in Accra and, with the volume of garments being shipped in, there is fear the speed could accelerate.

If ever Kantamanto is spoken of in the global North, it is typically only with regard to the relation between material and environment. Accra seems to only garner attention when microfibres and chemicals are leached from dye into oceans (Ahiable & Triki, 2021), and hardly even when things explode in flames as they did in Kpone which made very few headlines. Despite the deep importance of environmental discussions, truthfully what this entire process makes visible is the extent to which individuals in the global South suffer to manage the waste of the global North. Ghana is facing the intertwined exploitation of land and labour. The kayayei are victims of exploitation, trapped within a system of exploitation. Thus, to eradicate individual exploitation, we must dismantle this systemic exploitation.
Whilst the second-hand clothing trade has existed in Ghana for a long time, this new turn prompted by fast fashion and overconsumption means that this process can no longer falsely be labelled ‘trade’ but ought to be recognised for what it really is: waste colonialism. It is not incidental, I argue, that a place like Kantamanto or women like the kayayeis are victims of exploitation. Rather, this landscape was historically forged by white supremacy and colonialism. In the following section I will draw out how historically embedded this exploitative abuse of power is and the economic, ontological, and epistemic legacies that facilitate it, which I suggest are vital to understand in order to approach solutions.
III. Exploiting Colonial Legacies

In 1960, the Declaration on Decolonization was adopted by United Nations General Assembly, stating the necessity of ending all forms and manifestations of colonialism. Yet, as I assert in this section, the assumption that independence necessarily translates to decolonisation is a falsehood. Rather, legacies remain. Decolonising then is active work which demands first recognising where colonial legacies linger in order to begin dismantling them.

Economic

One must note that the colonial project was equally an industrial capitalist project. Particularly following the Scramble for Africa, colonialism within the continent was principled on extracting and exploiting resources for profit, as evidenced through the exploitation of labour on the ground jointly with the physical movement of resources across the globe (Manieson & Regis, 2022). As mentioned, it was in this time, under colonial rule, that the second-hand clothing trade began in Ghana. So too were formed trade routes, markets, and dynamics of economic dependency (Sharma, 2023). Under British colonialism, Ghana was underdeveloped to trade exclusively with the global North, leaving interregional trade unprecedented and forging dependency on trade with the global North. Capitalism’s expansion during this colonial period, Brooks (2019) highlights, allowed colonists to monopolise from the vantage point of the most profitable roles whilst leaving the colonised in poverty, at the bottom of the supply chain. Despite gaining independence in 1957, it would be false to assume this equally entailed a freedom from these established factors. Du Bois (1954) believed we should not be fooled to believe that independence from the colony equated to freedom from the colonial trading structure; rather, former colonies shifted to a new phase of colonial imperialism that aimed to preserve colonial trade and economic dependency.

A view of the development of fashion’s economic structure extends Du Bois’ thought. Barber (2021a) asks us to consider what exactly was being extracted and exported from continents like
Asia and Africa to America and Europe - cotton, silk, gold, polyester, textiles, finished garments – thus highlighting the origins of the fashion industry. This would explain, Barber (2021a) continues, why if one was to trace the colonial trade routes of the past, they would find that the routes map identically with the fashion production and disposal routes of the present. Modern supply chains are then direct products of colonialism, fed by economic dependence on ‘trade’ with the global North, replicating dynamics of hierarchical exploitation. Similarly, as foreign labour was exploited as a means for driving profit growth under colonialism, the same is identifiable in the present as mentioned. Exploiting the labour of individuals in the global South at the post-consumer stage allows the fashion industry to go on maximising profits from the next batch of garments produced without having to expend money on waste-management. In this sense, all economic relations exploited for the colonial project we see equally exploited by fashion’s capitalist project. The global South’s labour and trade are treated as useful only to serve the interests of the global North, a direct reproduction of economic colonial relations.

**Ontological**

Colonial remnants linger also in the psycho-social lives of those in Kantamanto. Maldonado-Torres (2007) discusses the concept of ‘coloniality of being’ as an ontological complexity of colonialism. It, in short, refers to a belief in the ontological inferiority of those in the global South to those in the global North. Such an ideology was crucial to the formation of colonies: democratic imperialism, the precedent that colonialism was a mission of salvation and civilisation for inferior races, allowed colonists to justify and maintain power, both at home and in colonies. Yet, Fanon (2008) highlighted the coloniser’s success in having the colonised internalise their own inferiority, something Fanon (2007) maintains is the bedrock of the colonial system: racial hierarchy. Perhaps this then elucidates why Ghanaians not only manage the waste of the global South, but why they also express internalised disgust and shame for doing so. As Ricketts (2021c, 1:16:28) emphasises, waste does not just harm in material terms, but furthers the disenfranchisement Ghanaians feel towards their homes and themselves, deepening colonial entrenchment and infringing upon progress away from the exploitation.
Further, one ought to note the role of coloniality of being in both establishing the second-hand market in Ghana and fortifying its place post-independence. Assam (2022) highlights how part of the colonial project was to make Ghanaians believe local practices, like their local clothing and textiles, were inferior to that of the white man. Extending Maldonado-Torres’ (2007) argument, one can note how local clothing was inscribed with inferiority and herein formed the stigma of being ‘out of fashion’ where ‘fashion’ is synonymous with being civilised and developed (Manieson & Regis, 2022). Stripping away culture, as Fanon (2008) describes, led to the belief that the culture of the white man was superior, thus imbuing obroni wawu with a degree of value born out of white supremacist dynamics. Post-independence, Western clothing still meant power and development, which kept second-hand clothing imports needful and imports coming in (Assam, 2022). What arrives now may be cheapened in quality, but not in the ontological value it carries from the colonial era.

Epistemic

In understanding narrative tensions around the second-hand trade, I have briefly hinted at an epistemic legacy of colonialism: bifurcation. Decolonial theorists have highlighted how the colonial project inherently required narrative bifurcation, an intentional separation of the global North from the rest in order to uphold democratic imperialist stories and colonial exploitation (Go, 2017). Bhambra (2007), for instance, maintains that in constructions of modernity, transnational relations were intentionally suppressed; she draws in particular on the cotton trade whereby, despite textiles being treated as a success of British industrialisation, all such narratives entirely obscure the African slaves forced to pick cotton, and the labour of Indians in designing, weaving, and dying. The economies of this triangular trade are treated as insular rather than transnational. Colonialism is blatantly interwoven with the existence of modern capitalism, particularly industries like fashion, yet the process of analytically bifurcating two sides of the world persists to obscure this. As mentioned, women like the kayayei suffer because they are severed from the clothing supply chain despite being integral. Kantamanto as a whole appears to be severed from the narrative of the linear economy. Fundamentally, the idea of ‘clothing waste’ is bifurcated as a whole from ‘clothing consumption’ because of the spatial
links that separate the two actions. Such behaviours persist because of historically bifurcated narratives that permit the existence of the modern ‘out of sight, out of mind’ attitude.

It is not coincidental then that clothing waste is dumped from the global North to the global South to be dealt with. Rather, I argue, these power relations are historically forged through decades of colonialism and white supremacy, now exploited by the global North at their convenience to shirk the responsibility of waste management to the global South whilst benefitting from the linear economy in the global North. As established, bifurcation functions as a convenient tool to hide this reality: overlooking connections between parts of the world when discussing the fashion waste crisis or climate crisis as a whole is a convenient way of obscuring how colonialism sits at the underbelly of such industries and pedals exploitation. Fundamentally then, our understanding of waste must be understood as a product of exploitative colonial dynamics. Thus, as I will now explore, solutions to material waste are necessarily connected to solutions to human exploitation.
IV. The Possibility of an Exploitative Future

Having discussed the past and present, the question remains: what of the future? Before proceeding towards solutions, I highlight in this section what fallacies ought to be avoided in frameworks for the future. Namely, the centering of material and profit over people.

A circular fashion economy has been leading the framework for imagined futures out of the waste crisis. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2023), for instance, describes circularity’s central tenets as eliminating waste pollution, circulating products and materials, and regenerating nature. Herein lies the problem: present circular models are not people centric. Those who, as we have explored, suffer exploitation under the linear economy have no amends made under a circular one. Whilst a compelling framework for addressing some deficiencies of the linear economy, as Ricketts argues (Marshall, 2020), it is still fundamentally industry-friendly and capitalist, holding materiality and profit at its core. None of the aforementioned systems of oppression and exploitation we have mentioned are addressed, leaving us bound to reproduce the same exploitations into the future.

Corporations are already committing this fallacy. Greenwashing - a term that describes deceptive advertising of organisations as environmentally friendly or sustainable despite their negligible and ineffective actions (Watson, 2017) - is running rife within big fashion. Brands have started to flood the market with ‘green campaigns’ of which ‘circularity’ is a growing buzzword. However, brand conversations around these purported ‘circularity’ schemes have also explicitly spoken of the waste accumulating in regions like Ghana as a ‘goldmine’ for business (Ricketts, 2021a). This narrative is as disturbing as it is regressive. Seeing waste in Ghana as ‘gold’ again upholds two pillars of exploitation: the extraction of material from the global South to the global North, and exploitative labour in order to get it, direct reproductions of colonialism. Already H&M’s ‘circular’ collection has relied on this extraction and exploitation. Waste pickers work in treacherous conditions and earn derisory wages to gather plastic bottles, for these bottles to be exported and turned to recycled PVC textile garments for
brands like H&M to profit off, be temporarily used in the global North, before returning to Ghana as waste again (Ricketts, 2021c, 1:07:48). Patterns of greed evidently reinforce patterns of exploitation.

Speaking of waste as gold rings eerily similar to the title of ‘Gold Coast Colony’ imparted by colonisers who saw a land rich with resources to extract and export (Ricketts, 2021a). Perhaps then we should be able to identify the inevitability that exploitation will persist if our focus is solely material and money. An industry that has profited in billions from exploiting people will not come to ‘sustainability’ via recycled PET garments or waste-garment fuel (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2023). Whilst material sustainability better suits brand’s interests, it is not enough. Waste, in being treated as purely material, is being depoliticized (Ricketts, 2021a) despite the solution fundamentally existing in recognising waste as political: waste is the sum of exploitation made visible. Replicating the same philosophies, exploiting the same people, and reproducing the same problems, will not yield a solution. Consider again the contrasting stories of Kevin the Jeans Bale and the kayayo - dealing solely with the former will not liberate the latter. Hence, in the following section, I argue for the necessity of a more radical, justice-led circularity which understands that eradicating the crisis of waste is to eradicate the crisis of egregious human exploitation.
V. Approaching Solutions

A number of theorists have produced work on ending *kayaye* exploitation at home and the role local governmental actors can play. However, what remains understudied is the role of the global North which, having argued the intrinsic ties of colonial power dynamics to the present issue, I find to be necessary. As such I approach solutions from a perspective that seeks to decolonise, outlining what the global North can do to end the exploitation they have perpetrated. Conceding the inability to assess all of the vast solutions proposed in the field thus far, I choose to focus on a tripartite solution that interweaves the actions of governments, corporations, and individuals in a justice-led circularity approach. As in Vergès’ (2021) decolonial approach, I suggest the importance of holding past, present and future together by understanding colonial legacies and white supremacy as inherent to present circumstances. From reparations and reparative policies, to established worker rights, to a shift in fashion consumption culture, all solutions I propose are rooted in decolonising and seeking justice for exploitation. Distinct from common circularity frameworks, the aim is not just to manage materials, but seek reparations and reckoning for individuals. I maintain that a successful approach to solutions can only be made if it is centering the victims of exploitation, the cost of people and not profit, and thus is inherently justice-led.

Reparations & Reparative Policies

Whilst there is natural caution around economic policies across borders for fear of reproducing colonial economic dependence further, we nonetheless require economic reparations in order to repair decades long damage and administer immediate change for a growing crisis. How then do we provide the latter whilst avoiding the former? To avoid colonial traps, I suggest looking at reparations and reparative policymaking as acting hand-in-hand.

Reparations are often treated as too radical an option yet, as Roberts (2021) argues, it becomes a wholly more plausible options when we recognise that eco-reparations function as a small and necessary cut from the profits generated as a result of years of ecological damage and exploitation of the global South by the global North. Reparations then are better conceived of
as paying an ‘overdue bill’ to countries that have been continually exploited. In repairing the
damage of past exploitation these funds are essential. Ecological and social wounds are
intrinsically bound and so the business of reparations helps to foster change in both senses.
Ricketts (2021a), for instance, emphasises the need of such reparations to begin regenerating
nature, both for the sake of planet and people, whether recovering soil to support local food
growth or clearing waterways for cleaner drinking water. Equally, upfitting Kantamanto to
uproot structural elements of exploitation could be supported by reparations: anything from
integrating pavers and solar panels to safeguarding against risks of fires and flooding in the
market, to eliminating the need for kayaye bale-carrying by widening aisleways and allowing
other forms of transportation, to then supporting healthcare and alternative jobs for kayaye
(Ricketts, 2023, 30:47). Reparation then is a first step. Whilst it will not undo decades of
exploitation, it can allow the repairing of past damage in order to begin moving towards a better
future.

Having addressed amends for an exploitative past, I argue we must turn to reparative policies
in order to prevent an exploitative future. Policy around both overproduction and localised
waste management is a necessity - no longer can we divorce the impact of waste from its scale
(Barber, 2021c). Thus, policymaking must address both of these factors. Government-enforced
Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) policies are presently seen as one of the most viable
ways to create this shift, addressing both rate of production and waste management
infrastructure. For the former, EPR understands the corporate desire to maximise profit and so
puts the burden of waste on them in terms they understand - financial. Corporations can then
be motivated to do anything from designing without planned obsolescence and producing fewer
garments of higher quality, to encourage repairing items or make them easier to recycle, all to
avoid cutting into profits. As for infrastructure, EPR collection sets aside funds to encourage
governments to create more localised, closed-loop supply chains that manage waste where it is
produced, without exporting it away in excessive amounts. The aim then is to eradicate the
dependency the global North has on the global South’s land and labour to manage their waste,
preventing waste flooding into nations like Ghana at an excessive rate.
Important to note however is such policies are only reparative and effective in congruence with a decolonial, justice-led approach. France, for instance, is one of the few countries to have introduced textile EPR policies, yet all funds amassed seem to remain either within France or elsewhere in Europe where clothes are aggregated (Ricketts, 2023). This is despite the fact that this only covers the very beginning of the waste management process; the waste, as we have established, is primarily dealt with in the global South yet no money appears to be flowing there. This blatant lack of acknowledgement of the exploited land, labour, and individuals within the global South reminds us that EPR is not effective without governments firmly enforcing it as a justice-led initiative.

So, what then remedies this colonial trap? I argue a decolonial, justice-led approach is one that employs cross-border policy partnerships, engaging in dialogue with all affected actors. Contrasting the bifurcation that keeps present exploitation functioning, when EPR and all such policies are looked at beyond borders and considered for the impacts they bear on all parties, we move closer to real justice-led reparative policy. For instance, facilitating responsible trade and the decreasing of waste exports would be conducted mindfully, without abrupt bans put in place that stifle economies like that of Ghana’s and ultimately endanger individual workers more (Haigh & Marsden, 2022). Further, cross-border thinking aligns with plans of eco-reparations and equitable investments for those worst affected via policies like EPR. It is not just about repairing the losses caused by years of exploitation, but also about moving toward a more hopeful, decolonial future for places like Kantamanto with an assurance that money will continue to flow to them for the work they have done and are doing (Stop Waste Colonialism, 2023). For instance, having spoken of the importance of the second-hand clothing trade in Ghana, the use of EPR to develop trade in Kantamanto and the return of regional textile trade and entrepreneurial activity could be a fundamental shift away from dependency on waste management, and a development of a more diverse economy (Circle Economy, 2022). Instead of being obligated to adopt the ‘circularity’ of the global North, Kantamanto could be free to evolve the framework of circularity they have been practicing for decades. Schemes like Rethinking Recycling exemplify effective transnational partnerships that encourage closed-loop supply chains for waste trade in higher-income countries whilst simultaneously supporting improvements in conditions for waste collectors and recyclers (Haigh & Marsden, 2022),
proving the collective benefits of cross-border thinking. Fundamentally, waste management must be enforced as an overtly global issue rather than the burden of the global South alone. In this sense, a crucial step to eradication of exploitation is reparative policymaking via demanding transnational governmental thinking. In looking at the impacts of policies across borders, we start to move away from the systems of hierarchy that have upheld human exploitation.

In sum, reparations and reparative policies address the fashion waste crisis from both directions. It issues reparations to the victims of exploitation which allows them to heal the damage inflicted in the past, whilst formalising out exploitative waste management relations for the future with an emphasis on the people most affected. Adjacently comes reconfiguring the issue of fashion waste as global, seeking to break exploitative patterns of bifurcation, and replacing them with meaningful cross-border policy.

Justice in the Supply Chain

Corporations who overproduce in vast quantities are often able to do so because they are exploiting throughout their production cycle, whether it be poor working conditions, unfair pay, or displacing the cost of waste management. Whilst EPR may aid the regulation of overproduction which certainly has a trickledown effect, corporate action is required to amend the supply chain to create a fairer, less exploitative system that supports those who have been formerly exploited. Movements like #PayUp have thus suggested a number of actions corporations ought to take to participate in the eradicating fashion exploitation.

Perhaps the most integral step corporations can take is to standardise fundamental worker rights. As a necessary first step, corporations must pay fairer living wages. Kayayeis are often encouraged to learn to sew in order to start producing garments as a ‘freedom’ from kayayeis labour, a sentiment which entirely ignores how this is plainly shifting from one exploitative end of the fashion industry to another (Ricketts, 2022b). At present, from garment workers at the start of production to waste-pickers at the very end are paid fractional, exploitative amounts.
Many find themselves on the precipice of starvation and homelessness all for the sake of brands generating greater profit (Pay Up, 2023, para.10). Thus, the demand for a living wage for every individual within a company's supply chain is a necessary first step.

Equally under labour rights comes an improvement to the conditions and terms under which garments are produced. As well as following global standards of human rights, companies ought to sign onto accords and binding agreements. The Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, for instance, has been promoted as a binding agreement on health and safety standards that all brands should be beholden to. Further, to make sure these agreements are fair and effective, corporations cannot infringe upon the worker's right to represent themselves. Worker-led conversations and union representation must be standard within corporations. Such action can even extend into multi-stakeholder governance groups such as Better Cotton Initiative or Ethical Trading Initiative, which then allow global platforming. Brands then need to standardise all of these steps via enforceable contracts. At present, brands get away with flagrant violations of their own codes of conduct as the industry has shirked legally binding contracts vis-a-vis worker rights. The Buyer Code of Conduct, by contrast, is a good example of enforceable code that is legally-binding when placed within contract with a supplier. This code relieves pressure from suppliers through having buyers agree to more responsible purchasing practices from responsible contract exits, to fair goods pricing, to mutually agreed upon payment terms (Pay Up, 2023.). The aforementioned have all been previously neglected by corporations who have delayed payments, made short notice changes to production, and wholly neglected to care for suppliers and workers. With the enforcement of codes like The Buyer Code, we could see this change and vulnerable workers protected from exploitation. In committing to legally binding agreements in the private sector, not only will exploitation of workers be addressed, but equally seen as necessarily the responsibility of corporations. Shifting investing in disposability to investing in individuals does not just ignite diminished production, but equally serves to eradicate exploitation in the long term.

Many of these things can be bolstered in law, nevertheless initiative needs to be taken by corporations. In a move towards justice-led circularity, companies are responsible for providing
higher quality jobs at every step of the supply chain to ensure individuals never have to return to exploitation (Haigh & Marsden, 2022). In the same way corporations have intentionally selected poor working conditions and foreign labour to extract profit, they must now intentionally change the conditions of production to eradicate exploitation within supply chains to serve eradication of exploitation in the industry as a whole.

**Individuals**

In sustainability communities there is often conflict around how much burden individuals should bear. Whilst the actions of corporations and governments are highly effective at a larger scale, I argue that corresponding individual action still plays a significant role in moving towards justice-led circularity. This can manifest in two central ways: individual action and advocacy.

**Looking In: Individual Action**

Whilst I will explore the deficits of assuming individual power lies exclusively in purchasing, it is nonetheless ineluctable to consider the consequences of our consumption. As mentioned, the linear economy has trained the individual to overconsume. Presently problematic is how overconsumption necessitates disposal, particularly in the global North where figures show the typical fast fashion consumer purchases an average of 68 items a year (Barber, 2021a) - as stated, much of this will end up discarded within a year of its production, serving few, if any, wears from the buyer. This perhaps indicates to us that a shift in our purchasing is necessary. Naturally, cutting purchasing quantities is an initial step (Barber, 2021b). Aforementioned figures of the average consumer in the global North highlight that many of us are buying much more than is needed. How though can we begin to understand this phenomenon in order to be able to prevent it? Barber (2021a) suggests first understanding *why* we buy. Stopping to question whether shopping is a self-soothing activity, or a pastime helps to detach the need to see buying as a solution and consuming as the only option. Often, we buy to replace; within a
linear economy where clothing is not durable and there is an abundance of clothing to replace it, many of us shop simply because it is more convenient to dispose and replace items with something new (Barber, 2021a). Equally, pushing toward justice-led circularity can work in tandem with playing attention to where we are buying from, The desire to not interact with exploitative brands and allow them to profit off of exploitation has turned many slow fashion advocates towards moving the bulk of purchasing from the first-hand to the second-hand market where shopping is slower and more intentional. Even from an intersectional approach, (Barber, 2021a) argues, this ‘buy less, buy better’ option seems most appealing and most available. Further, it promotes circularity at a local level – shopping and selling clothing already within rotation as opposed to participating in the production of new garments makes a change toward circularity at the personal level.

Perhaps we can turn to a place like Kantamanto as an example, learning to extend the value of our garments through means of mending, tailoring, upcycling - ultimately treating our relationship with fashion as less transactional and more interactional (Lorenz, 2020). Moving away from the hollow relationship of convenience with fashion and cultivating real interactions with our clothing shifts the narrative around why we buy. Adjusting to thinking of clothing as valuable then serves the collective in the long-term.

Most crucially, just as we demand of corporations and governments, as consumers we must be justice-led in our approach: asking who comes at the cost of this purchase? Abandoning reliance on ideas like the deficit myth, decolonising our thought, and replacing them with inquisitiveness and a desire for brand transparency inherently changes how we shop. Having understood that overconsumption produces the waste and exploitation we have observed, so too comes recognising how convenience supports the linear economy and asking: who is the cost of this convenience? The process of looking at a garment and questioning the integrity at the start and end of its life cycle will fundamentally shift how we view the cost, both literal and metaphorical, of what we buy.
Speaking Out: Collective Action

Whilst there is then importance in adopting new methods of consumption, more compelling is the intrinsic mindset suggested. Under the capitalist system, many of us understand ourselves through the identity of ‘consumer’ (Marshall, 2020). Internalising the capitalist belief that our sole power lies in purchasing amidst a crisis aided by overconsumption, is ineffectual. Perhaps then there is weight to recognising ourselves outside of this label. As established, the fashion waste crisis was not born solely as a result of individual overconsumption but rather lies in an intricate web of governance, power hierarchies, and systemic exploitation. More than consumption then, there is a case to be made for collective action.

Whilst there is a myth that individuals bear no weight in the actions of governments and corporations, evidence in the case of big Fashion seems to be contrary. Brands spend millions on cultivating a desirable public image and threats to this are heeded (Barber, 2021a). Accordingly, we have seen brands increasingly at the behest of consumers in recent years. Following the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013, close to 200 big corporations succumbed to pressure to sign The Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh to improve working conditions, after feeling pressure from individual actors launching petitions and engaging in active protest. All aforementioned steps for governments and corporations to improve behaviour are significantly more likely when paired with pressurising collective action, for fear of profit loss and reputation costs.

Perhaps most crucially, slow fashion centres solidarity with workers just as a justice-led economy would. Garment workers have been exemplar models of this kind of collective action and so with solidarity comes heeding their advice. Many have emphasised the importance of consumer support in making demands of corporations and governments, emphasising the effectiveness of digital campaigns and information dissemination as tools against corporations – when the consumers make noise, it can be heard all the way down the supply chain (Remember Who Made Them, 2020, 44:09).
Ultimately, whether disseminating information online and offline, joining local slow fashion campaigns, building local circularity schemes, joining digital action, protesting, or signing petitions, it is evident that how we consume is just a small fraction of the individual effort. Moving away from ‘consumer’ as an identity not only serves reducing overconsumption, but so too does it encourage individual action toward justice-led circularity.

With all of this, Barber’s (2021c, 12:41) statement on doing what we can at our intersections is important to underscore. When we move too far towards pressure on individual action, we lose sight of the governments and big corporations who are perpetrating this problem on an unfathomable scale and run the risk of ineffectual action. Equally if we move too far in the direction of holding governments and companies to account, we may risk not identifying our own exploitative practices whether that’s excessive purchasing or thoughtless donating. The role of individuals then is to advocate for large-scale change whilst shifting clothing culture at ground level.
Conclusion

Exploitation is a product of greed and, as Ricketts (2021a) argues, greed and waste are two sides of the same coin. The scale of waste in our world, the exploitation it embodies, is a rapidly escalating problem. Chile’s Atacama Desert, for instance, at the start of this year, was reported to have around 39,000 tons of clothing dumped in it (Duong, 2021). Looking at graphic images of burning piles of clothing waste, humans standing around prodding at the fires, endangering themselves to manage the problem, we must be reminded that fashion’s waste crisis is as much about human exploitation as it is the planet.

A parallel can be drawn between the disposable fashion culture we purport and the culture that treats kayayei as disposable bodies, bearers of the weight of what the global North considers trash. Returning to the contrasting stories of Kevin the Jeans bale and the kayayo mother, I emphasise once again the impossibility of trying to treat the issue of the former without treating the issue of the latter. So long as waste is exported away to be dealt with via exploitative labour, this crisis will not end. Having highlighted the ways in which present discussions of fashion waste are fixated on materiality out of convenience, I suggest real solutions lie a long distance away in the more radical justice-led circularity approach. In acknowledging the ‘-isms’ that have and continue to facilitate human exploitation, I suggest solutions that abandon bifurcated accounts of the waste crisis, bestow reparation in financial and environmental terms, and ultimately harness a mindset shift around fashion and waste that recognises waste as a by-product of our disconnect with garments and the people at their expense. Mutually interacting solutions such as these require a collective effort toward a shared aim of justice-led circularity, for the sake of planet and people. Only in choosing the path of a socially responsible future will we achieve one (Haigh & Marsden, 2022). Concluding an open letter to the fashion industry, Ricketts (2021a) remarks that waste will either be “a frontier of colonialism or a path for great reckoning” (para. 35). My hope is that, in choosing the justice-led approach, we find ourselves approaching a great reckoning.


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