

# ESSAY 2

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Digital  
Colonialism

In a world where control and power are everything, you come to the realisation that we live in an era where colonialism has been transferred from traditional means to digital domains, the power dynamics start to become more apparent. Digital colonialism as articulated by Sareeta Amrute in her keynote talk at EPIC2019, refers to it as “the perpetuation of colonial power dynamics through digital technologies” (Amrute, 2020). This is a modern version of colonialism and by reinforcing hierarchical, exploitative and extractive practices the consequences for lesser powers have never been more prevalent.

In this essay I want to explore the depth and implications of digital colonialism, specifically in the global labour situation in software development, with a particular focus on South Africa. Using Amrute's talk as a framework and other supporting case studies and research articles, I will outline my thoughts and explore this topic in a global and local context.

One of the main points I want to focus on in the Amrute text is how she outlines the extent of which colonial powers have shaped the dynamics of the digital world. It's no secret that the western powers have reinforced their ideologies and structures on the world. The problem lies with the decisions coming primarily from these colonial powers, making it more apparent that countries that are looking to grow their economies are exploited for cheap labour and become an easy market to sell low quality product. Unfortunately, this dynamic that prevents the growth of emerging powers. The economic differences in regions these only serve to prolong the effects of this dependency.

In the case of the Amrute text I want to insert 'digital' in front of colonialism, I feel in this context the 'digital' is an acceptable suffix for it. The labour practices in digital colonialism can only be described as exploitive. A study was conducted and it stated that “Most of these countries suffer from high poverty rates which provides large reserves of workers who would accept low-paying jobs” (Malik, 2022). This in addition with the unsafe conditions and inadequate benefits with limited to no opportunities for advance to higher positions. The values have been integrated into almost every major company out there. This inherently follows the traits of traditional colonialism and economies where wealth was generated for the rich by the local residents of who were suffering from generational poverty.

When looking at the software development communities it becomes more complex and intricate. An article written by Jennifer Elias delves into the latest Google layoffs and the shifting of these positions to countries like India and Mexico (Elias, 2024). This is a clear reflection of digital colonialism but goes to further extent Amrute's analysis on this space. The global labour market is unpredictable in 2024 especially with the rise of AI.

Tech giants like Google force themselves into the market with an absurd amount of control. The predatory practice of cheaper, more extractive labour practices is not new, but as Amrute points out, “the malicious nature of these practices overshadowing companies who wield so much power” (Amrute, 2020). Wherein they make one-sided decisions to benefit their company profit margins without even a second thought of the social and economic ramifications, further solidifies the argument that they lack concern or regard for the people they are exploiting.

In my eyes that’s quite the juxtaposition, the people who earn these companies’ massive amounts of income, don’t get a compensation equal to the amount of work they put in. It has all become about optimization and reallocating resources where they can stay competitive in an ever-changing market. The Google layoffs are a clear example of where efficiency trumps ethical considerations. The unstable nature of employment in the tech sector, where even the most experienced and skilled professionals are not immune to this treatment of being dumped when they are not in the “companies’ best interest” (AKA – not worth paying for) , has led to the shift to a more conditional and contract-based employment has become the new norm.

The higher-cost regions, where job opportunities are more lucrative and beneficial. Jobs in these regions are kept for more 'highly valued' individuals who possess skills that a company needs, and they can afford to splash a little extra on. They cannot have a whole department of these positions, though, as this wouldn't be very profitable. So, when a person has so much to offer in terms of skill to the company, they can negotiate more fiercely with the company for a more reasonable offer in terms of their contract. This is contrasted by the lower end of the spectrum where the regions are densely packed with a large amount of talented people who can do the job, but they have very little opportunity to get the same benefits or offers as the more valued regions.

As seen in Google’s layoffs, they let go of a lot of their workforce in the US and shifted it to Mexico and India where they know people are skilled enough to do the same quality of work but are just desperate enough to take any offer that is shoved down their throats. This further promotes the issue of outsourcing and offshoring initiatives, where the problem doesn’t lie in the company participating, it lies in the fact that they do it just to earn that little bit extra on their quarterly finance report.

Now, this isn’t the first time a company has engaged in this kind of practice. While researching, other companies kept popping up. IBM stood out as a prime example. A company like them leveraging the system of outsourcing to optimize costs (Computerworld, 2022). It has been a decade-long practice of reducing the workforce, which follows a similar pattern to the Google layoffs: reducing the workforce in higher-cost regions, expanding to countries where labour costs are cheaper, and repeating the process. The socioeconomic implications of this practice are vast and affect many people's livelihoods.

The mere possibility of being out of a job the very next day because your company decided that your skills weren't valuable enough is frightening. It comes down to the attitude of them taking advantage of the digital landscape and how fluid it is. The ability for companies to come in and dominate an entire industry in a country for a decade or so until the people start realizing their worth and moving onto the next is, so colonizer coded. One of the biggest issues I have with it personally is that it doesn't only affect the global market but also has significant repercussions on the local market.

Being in the eco-sphere of software development in South Africa, I have become more aware of the challenges and growth within the industry. As the digitalization of our country grows every day and the demand for innovative solutions for everyday problems rises, the importance of highlighting and recognizing local innovation has become all that more important. In recent years, we have become more accustomed to digital adoption across many sectors. This is due to a couple of factors: government policies, local startups, and home-grown talent. This lends the ability for both domestic and international markets to thrive. The pool of developers who not only drive innovation but also open doors for others is strong.

As with everything, the global market presents itself in quite an interesting way for the South African developer community. As seen with companies like Google and IBM, the wide number of opportunities for collaborations with international teams doesn't outweigh the countless challenges we face here. One significant issue is wage differences, where developers here often, if not always, earn less than their counterparts in more developed countries. This wage gap has two negative impacts, first, it leads to a brain drain, where skilled professionals who understand their worth leave for better-paying opportunities abroad. Second, it creates a massive looming shadow of job insecurity, where developers are consistently grappling for secure, reliable work.

Linking it back to the Amrute Text, South African developers, more often than not, become consumers rather than creators. With most profits flowing through foreign companies and investors chasing those same profits, there's little room for anyone outside of these circles to compete, especially from a "3rd World Country" with limited access to these innovations. Even when our developers are allowed into these circles, it is typically as second-grade support rather than first-line innovators. In my opinion, this situation echoes the historical injustices of traditional colonialism.

As a developer honing my skills in a country that is actively contributing to the tech industry while decolonising it in the same breath puts me in a rare position. There are numerous ways I feel like I fit into this sector, although I cannot talk about it without mentioning the devil on my shoulder. It's a bittersweet taste, knowing that I get access to emerging technology that is being developed here, projects that are breaking new

ground and getting opportunities to be a part of it. While having the whispers of the past floating right behind me. Being able to have a firsthand account of how colonization can affect a (my) country and being a young adult in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where technology is king, I can't help but see the segregation it has caused. The disparity between the poor and rich has never been more apparent, and unfortunately your level of access to technology is a measure for this, technology has become the new gold standard.

This isn't new, over the past couple decades, it has been an issue. The western countries are richer, have more power and control. This is solely due to their ability to sell technological aid and resources to countries who don't have access to it. These countries take this despite knowing that they will have to bend their knees to these regions for the foreseeable future (Amrute, 2020). The reason these countries take the aid, is mainly due to it being crucial to the survival of their countries economic sectors such as farming, healthcare, education and government services.

I personally feel as though I can influence and change the way we are viewed and the role I play in decolonizing this space. I have been shaped by the unique historical, social, and economic contexts of this country, with the past leaving scars on so many sectors still seen today. However, technology is the future right now, so as I am part of a system filled with historical injustices, I believe I can leverage technology to help address the inequalities that are so abundantly clear. By promoting inclusivity and keeping it local by taking chances to create startups and creating networks in this country. This will not only show the world that we care about taking care of each other, but we can contribute as well to this space more than we are recognized for now.

In conclusion, colonialism has once again reared its ugly head but has taken on a new form; it has been digitalized, and the nastiness of capitalism has thrown its weight in as well. It can only be described as a new and indestructible plague that controls the world, yet it is socially accepted due to our reliance on 21st-century technology and how it has made life easier for us. Unfortunately, we in South Africa did not pounce on this trend before it got ahead of us, so we are stuck trying to play catch-up, and the developers in our country have one of two choices.

Either stay and fight it out until you secure a safe job, or test your luck in the global community where we are not yet revered and are seen as second-class in the tech space. I personally have no clue which one I would choose, but if there is one thing I want to close out with, it is my hope that one day this industry loosens its ties to this abhorrent greed and opens its doors to everyone.

**Word Count: 1998**

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