

# On 'necrolocutors' in political ecology: A response from Yaoundé

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Dialogues in Human Geography  
2026, Vol. 16(1) 171–175  
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DOI: 10.1177/20438206251335330

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I consider Gibson's notion of the 'necrolocutor': a racialised, gendered subject mediating institutional engagements with power, knowledge, and death, who reveals and embodies the neoliberal academy's reliance on co-opted 'local' voices for legitimacy. I argue that these extractive dynamics of research collaboration echo historical colonial, corporate, and militarised formations, wherein participation functioned as consent, and the 'native informant' was instrumentalised to validate imperial narratives. Extending these critiques, my commentary examines the economic and epistemic inequalities shaping global knowledge production, highlighting 'racialised localwashing', the ongoing commodification of intellectual labour, and the rejections of superficial inclusivity in favour of reciprocal, anti-imperial scholarship. I draw from Marxist and decolonial insights that acknowledge the im/possibilities and transformative potentials of academic collaborations in necropolitical environments.

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Achille Mbembe’s conceptualisation of necropolitics provides inspiration for Lydia Gibson’s (2026) consideration of the multiple limitations and amnesias of ‘ant logic’ within political ecology. From Mbembe’s insights regarding the necropolitical creation of a set of conditions that produce upon entire populations ‘the status of the *living dead*’ (Mbembe, 2019: 92), they propose an active subject responsible for the elucidation and translation of the ‘fleshy experiences’ of death-making on behalf of the university. Gibson describes this ‘necrolocutor’ as a ‘plastic’ (13) and ‘fluid embodiment of a racialised, gendered, ontological, political Other that mediates... engagements with power, knowledge, and death’ (3). The necrolocutor becomes structurally and ideologically necessary in the neoliberal academy continually keen to establish legitimacy through coproduction.

The ideology of participation has a long tradition within colonisation; after all, ‘participation’ is taken as a marker of consent. Thus, the trope of the ‘good native’, the exceptional colonial subject who is eager and involved, and the so-called ‘noble savage’ are all caricatures of people partially fêted in colonial systems, who perform political-ideological work on behalf of the empire by gesturing a version of ‘local’ approval. Postcolonial scholars were among the first to expose the weaponisation of native intellectual labour within colonial and imperial governance strategies, including by interrogating the role of the ‘native informant’ or interlocutor. Edward Said, reflecting on the politics of the interlocutor, argues that no fixed definition is satisfying. For Said, there are three versions of the interlocutor, each emerging from the historical conditions of

colonial violence: the interlocutor is either (a) ‘someone who is compliant and belongs to the category’ (1989: 209); (b) someone who ‘simply refuses to talk, deciding that only a radically antagonistic, perhaps violent riposte is... possible with colonial power’ (Said, 1989: 210); and (c) someone who is a coopted caricature, a ‘kind of scrubbed, disinfected... laboratory creation with suppressed, and therefore falsified, connections to the urgent situation of crisis and conflict that brought him or her to attention in the first place’ (Said, 1989). Spivak mobilised the term ‘native informant’ to deconstruct the native scholar’s willing or unwilling exploitation within the imperial university system, which *requires* their renditions, labour, and stories but realises them through and because of their perpetual structural marginalisation and devaluation – often alongside an awareness on the part of the native informant of their own instrumentalisation within the system (Spivak, 1999). The insights of the ‘native informant’ are generalised in ways that corroborate and authenticate colonial worldviews and logics (Ibid).

Corporations and imperial militaries have long devoted time and resources to obtain access to ‘local’ people and knowledge. There are a multiplicity of means by which the labour, time, energy, knowledge and bodies of the people are compelled to participate, called to participate, and subsumed in ‘conditional inclusion’ (Cusicanqui, 2012) within neo-imperial, neoliberal capitalism. My colleague, Nicholas Jackson, and I have termed some of these patterns and practices ‘racialised localwashing’ (2020). The versions and iterations of ‘local’ people and places coopted and showcased by corporate

entities are often racially coded and ventriloquised in ways that permit actually existing forms of racialised dispossession and extractive violence. This is perhaps the oldest story of imperialism: that collective intellectual, linguistic, technological, and political tools and strategies for freedom and justice are misappropriated by hegemonic institutions within racial capitalism and redeployed to censure, dispossess, delegitimise, and commandeer.

Access to such figures (community leaders, Indigenous intellectuals, diaspora scholars, and more) and the capacity to speak for/with them thus becomes an economic and financial matter. As Patricia McFadden (2023: n.p.), working in the context of black ecofeminist thought in Southern Africa, argues

Imperialism has fabricated claims of ignorance, of nothingness and of silence on our part... Meanwhile... they pillage, and they take everything that we have said and written... They become the speakers, the knowers, the producers of knowledge... when we take these concepts into the Academy... they praise us, and they give us trophies. We enjoy the sound of the chorus and the clapping...

Working in the context of Northern Uganda, David Mwambari (2019) focuses explicitly on the political economy of academic production, arguing that it is (simply) the uneven access to money that maintains the structurally subordinate position of Ugandan ‘research assistants’ to external academics: thus, a ‘black market of academic knowledge’ (see also Moletsane, 2002). If there is indeed ‘death work’ at play in research relationships between political ecologists and interlocutors, any understanding of these divisions of intellectual labour would benefit from the ongoing critiques of inequalities and economic dependencies built into the structure of global higher education. In the inaugural issue of *Feminist Africa*, Amina Mama (2002: 2) observes the products of decades of austerity in African universities: ‘impoverished African campuses have resigned themselves to becoming tourist stops for eager young Western students who can and do pay money in exchange for sweating a little... an

estimated 100,000 African academics are located in the North; ironically, the same number of expatriate experts is imported to advise African governments each year at annual costs of 4 billion dollars’. Reflecting on the impacts of imperial violence and neoliberal dominance in curriculum on radical scholarship in Africa, Adam Mayer (2024: 190) estimates that by 1985 approximately 80% of the world’s leading African Marxist intellectuals had left/been forced to leave the continent and were based in countries of the global North. Some of the vibrant historical and economic debates within postcolonial and anticolonial scholarship seem to be unobserved in Gibson’s account.

Provocatively, Gibson asserts, ‘whatever the cause, academic collaborations are often locked into sets of relations that foreclose rather than produce possibilities. Collaborations are not just knowledge-work, but death work’ (9). Here it might be important to recognise the incitement by scholar-activists to acknowledge the *impossibilities* within intellectual and solidarity work – that the task is neither to celebrate *nor* critique superficial, tangential, unsatisfactory ‘collaboration’ (for thoughtful critique, see Nagar and Ali, 2003), but to recognise and come to terms with what the conditions in and outside of the university render solidarity practice impossible. Rosalba Icaza (2023) has written compellingly about the *impossibilities* of decolonial feminisms in globally troubling contexts; I have been fortunate to be on the receiving end of explicit nudging from Netsanet Gebremichael during our work in Addis Ababa, in which she demanded attention to ongoing military violence and ideological and material barriers (*impossibilities*) for defiant scholarship in Africa. So that part of refusing forms of ‘damage centred’ work (Tuck, 2009) includes building an awareness of the features and pressures rendering academic collaboration impossible – alongside rejections of the neoliberal academic compulsion to disclose all of our intellectual work/ourselves (e.g. the forms of knowledge shielded from public consumption, the *strategic* essentialisms and refusals to engage in forms of community partition in the name of ‘theoretical nuance’, the recognition that the university

does not deserve *all* of our selves in the name of ‘positionality’; Gani and Khan, 2024).

What unites feminist, Marxist, and decolonial political ecologies is an insistence on counterhegemonic action beyond critique and open solidarities with communities of struggle. This entails a rejection of pervasive and seductive illusions of objectivism as a foundation for scientific truth. Said (1989: 211) explains, ‘there is no discipline, no structure of knowledge, no institution or epistemology that can or has ever stood free of the various sociocultural, historical, and political formations that give epochs their peculiar individuality’. A dissatisfaction with ant logic and some of its spinoffs has been, as Gibson notes, an apparent tendency to smoothen political and power differentials, alongside perspectives on vitality or agency as a kind of universal capacity of everything, everyone, and each creature to act upon the world (Mitchell, 2016). For ant work in the university, the focus has been on exorcising thinkers and theorists of a principal focus on powerful, more pronounced forces and actors (including the historical dominance of anthropocentric analyses) – this exorcising project has emerged partially from a rejection of structural examinations as totalising, tautological, and epistemologically imprecise. Ant logic thus moved on to more subtle actants in the world: (im) materials, technologies, animals, practices, moments, and more-than-human agents (the amnesia in this ontological turn was criticised as a Eurocentrically fabricated ‘discovery’ that overlooked decades of prior and sustained engagement by Indigenous scholars; Todd, 2016). Yet, within the tradition of political ecology and African ecofeminist thought, every theoretical and empirical decision is also a politically orienting choice – so that our individual and collective analytical concentration in one area can inadvertently foreclose or throttle conversations on other topics, on other themes, in other geographies.

While the article is theoretically compelling, I was dizzied by its geographical dislocation – by being everywhere but nowhere, the article concerns every ant working in political ecology, and also no one specifically. In the conclusion, we get a bold(er) glimpse of those researchers confronted

by the Gibson: ‘this article is...a critique of the Western logic embedded in local engagement and the white male scholarship with which political ecology scholars frequently, and often must, engage’ (14). It would have been politically expedient and intellectually insightful had some of these scholars been named candidly, so that we could engage in a sustained and targeted engagement with their work in order to interrogate how such superficial or posturing practices of ‘cooperation’ persist and even dominate in some strands of political ecology. (And here I mean *how* logistically and concretely – in whose interests, with which funding bodies, in which institutions, through which methodological approaches.) It says a lot about academia that these figures are perhaps too powerful – too intellectually sacred – to take on directly; perhaps Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) *homo academicus* continues to prohibit certain forms of intra-academic analysis. Gibson’s framing of their work within ant logic creatively challenges these ant trails and routes (logics and worldviews), while it inadvertently reaffirms some of the citational hegemonies as nonetheless coercively necessary for scholars in the field.

In the end, I want to return to the actual world, to locate my knowing where I write my response, in a noisy café in Yaoundé’s neighbourhood of Etoa Meki. I am thinking and writing in a moment of sizeable political uncertainty, and in a country with multiple regions in active, multiyear, protracted conflict. With the next presidential election 8 months away, paid-for public demonstrations are underway on behalf of the sitting political party, amidst an atmosphere of heightened tension, (re)aggravations of colonially driven cultural animosity, and several years of intensified capital flight. What does (or can) intellectual work and solidarity look like in necropolitical environments; what is imaginable *and* what is impossible? I thank Gibson for prodding these sorts of interrogations. In his articulation of scholarly collaboration for transformation, Francis Nyamnjoh takes inspiration from a figure suspended between death/life: Amos Tutuola’s figure of a crafty skull, which ‘though seemingly deactivated, still harbours human desires and ambitions’ (2025: 199). The skull negotiates with others

to borrow ‘the best body parts available’ (2025, 200), thus becoming indebted to others in the realisation of their own contentment and self-realisation. Nyamnjoh (2025: 201) retells the story to demand a recognition of our shared incompleteness, arguing that our scholarship is affected through ‘mobility, encounters, and collaboration’ in which we are beholden to others, engaging in thoughtful reciprocity, as we ‘borrow...[the best] body parts from diverse sources’ (206). Amidst the divisions and aporias of political instability, imperial wounds, and persistent economic inequality, the notion of scholarship as a practice of reciprocal co-borrowing offers routes for reimagining solidarity in otherwise impossible moments and places.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the British Academy, (grant number British Academy/Wolfson Fellowship WF22\220021).

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