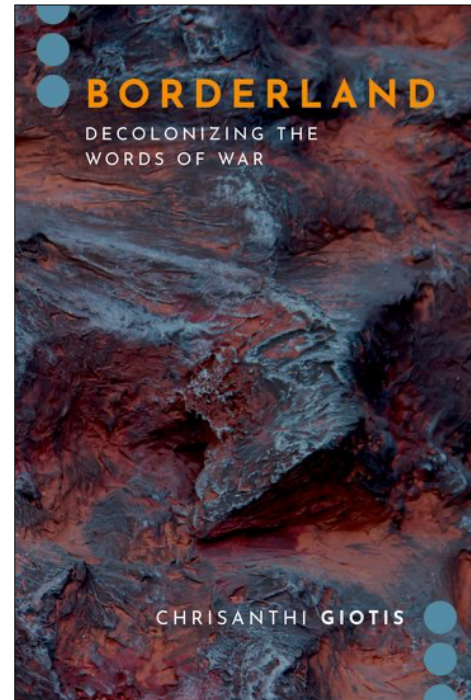


Chrisanthi Giotis, *Borderland: Decolonizing the Words of War*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022, 288 pp., \$29.95 (paperback), \$99.00 (hardcover).

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In *Borderland, Decolonizing the Words of War*, Chrisanthi Giotis exposes the interdependence of international nongovernmental organization (INGO) and journalism and the larger patterns that prevent decolonization focusing on Goma, the capital of the North Kivu province in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and the site of many aid organizations. Giotis critiques colonial tropes and media frames in writing on foreign correspondence, such as the “big-man,” “victim,” or “poverty porn” frames, to decolonize reporting frameworks. She problematizes the malleable descriptors used for Africa as an empty slate, which suggests that what is being studied is an idea of Africa, based on adventure stories, or related to an imperial project that, as Fanon (1963/2004) had described in the context of Algeria, dehumanized Africans into a backdrop, leading to an erasure of refugees, who are replaced by White heroes (p. 29).



Giotis explains how international development policy, journalism, and governance legitimize each other, forging rules of the game. She draws on Foucault’s heterotopias (p. 210), Bourdieu’s doxa (p. 21), as well as her own concept of “space-time” to consider the dominance of class as structuring habitus that forges two worlds based on sudden social mobility. The book is split in two parts based on her shift in socioeconomic status from “ethnic” in Australia, to “White” journalist in the United Kingdom.

In journalism, preconceptions and preexisting story lines are attached to certain places, leading to fixed ideas that hinder new knowledge (p. 169). Often, filmmakers or Western journalists arrived with an idea they had to see come to fruition or proven. As Bunce (2015) explains, correspondent’s stories needed to be sold to a Western audience. This occurs even when basic reporting is done for instance by Iraqis, or by those born in Sierra Leone, in the examples Giotis gives—yet they are remade into stories that disregard context and perpetrate stereotypes (p. 173).

The book contributes overall a useful historical overview for frames and methods to avoid critiquing “development” and terms scholars working in these areas must maneuver. Her method for articulating Goma as a borderland includes semistructured interviews with community leaders and journalists who comment on recycled Africanist media frames and tropes.

The inclusion of women's rights advocates who engage with regional, national, and international politics, and refugees who left the DRC, though sparse, form the most interesting voices in the book. They shed light on the energy refugees invest toward abuse support groups or raising money through harvesting crops, and skills and knowledge that are undermined in refugee groups. Overall, the difficulty of research "overstructured by institutional concerns" suggests the degree to which research methods, conventions, and organizational structures can prevent approaches from new frameworks (p. 90).

The author's hesitations about how to structure and frame a particular article while avoiding tropes is included, along with thinking notes, her research diary, and feedback from colleagues. These methods are helpful for scholars undertaking similar research, though some may see it as disruptive to the flow.

The bulk of the book functions as an insight into Giotis's research journey and critique of frameworks, rather than a focus on the lives of those living in the borderlands, which has the problem of continuing to eclipse the positions and life circumstances, such as hunger, and of information about those for whom humanitarian efforts are allegedly solving. Little of the book is dedicated to the developments on the ground instead showing the problematics that are played out cyclically. This absencing of the same voices privileges the authors own journey, which has the strange effect of making her fall prey to the same frameworks, such as that of a hero. Though Giotis urges a journalistic approach that understands how the present is shaped by history, the sources and paths she uses still draw on many male theorists from a European framework rather than those with local language skills (Mbembe, 2001, p. 9), or "the thoughts and concerns of real, powerful, but English-mute constituencies" (Lederman, 1992, p. 123).

For instance, the second half of the book combines fieldwork and ethnographic observation drawing on Levinas and Fanon's and David Harvey's matrix. "Autoethnographic research" and Giotis's "lived experience" involved INGO communities and expats. Western journalism is enmeshed in aid agencies, hotels, restaurants, and bars that provide affects derived from an "apparatus of security" (p. 133) and cause preset knowledge production. Certain moments leave us with further questions, like when Giotis describes being followed, turning, and confronting the man following her until she goes to a shared taxi van and asks the driver not to let him on (p. 138). What were journalists' choices on the ground? What were *his* "lived conditions"?

The inclusion of Giotis's status—moving guest houses or hotels, or the way that she can attend different dinners or go to a new, busy European-style café—and the extensiveness of the writing dedicated to her own journey distracts from learning about the refugees and borderland itself. Giotis states that many workers "ignore the history of indigenous Nepalese health services" (p. 148)—this elision was something I hoped the book would fill in, yet its main contribution is critique, less forging new knowledge. The book is reflexive of challenges, rather than helping readers understand who the Congolese and Goma residents are, how their hunger is addressed and their relationship to rotations of journalists. We learn about how structural conditions in journalism skew the ability for new stories. The international bakery, as a site of her research interviews, was a place for visiting elites, not the site of friendship that did not exist between development professionals and "host population" (p. 147). Part of this is a result of so few development industry folks having long-term postings—even those with "permanent contracts" cycle through 2-year postings (p. 148; Rajak & Stirrat, 2011, p. 164). The parochial nationalism that Giotis describes leaves journalism outsiders frustrated

with the work being done and the ways that classist and colonial interactions continue as solidarity reinforcing European aristocratic modes, even now.

Giotis includes a good amount of hesitation around her own approach and her choice to use certain examples that can sometimes cause the reader further skepticism toward her intentions, for instance, her camera being forcibly removed after she took a picture of girls at the refugee camp in Kosti without permission from INGOs or fixers, although it becomes her most famous blog post. She cautions: It is “a story I feel I need to tell—and yet the very act of telling that story is something I wish to critique” (p. 157). The structuring aspects of the mobility of her position throughout the book sometimes seem exempt from critique, lacking self-reflexivity, such as the luxuries of switching hotels, private cars, and having friends in Rwanda and Egypt.

The book is eye-opening around the extent of the continued dominance of colonialist discourse and culturally coded dynamics among foreign correspondents that continues racism and devaluing of locals, interventions driven by securing high-value regions rather than peace (p. 183), or where conflict becomes an opportunity for international actors to exploit for their own gain (p. 193; Andersson, 2020, p. 29; Perera, 2018, p. 5).

Journalists and those engaged in correspondence work or in changing the field could build from Giotis’s critique. Chapters are broken into numerous subsections that help reading and teaching. It is informative about specific ways progressive coverage and reporting is limited by practices such as adhering to the same viewpoints, or “desk-bound” coverage (p. 174; Williams, 2019, p. 184) and the reliance on local “fixers” who are massively underappreciated, unacknowledged, and not given opportunities to move up in their careers. “Fixers” data is manipulated by foreign correspondents whose power is maintained through international media partnerships, who are exempt from criticism of the content of their stories. The elevated position of the foreign correspondent to that of celebrity in danger leaves simplified stereotypes of the storytellers. This and other erasure journalism shows the entrenchment of power relations that allow corruption and unfounded arrests.

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