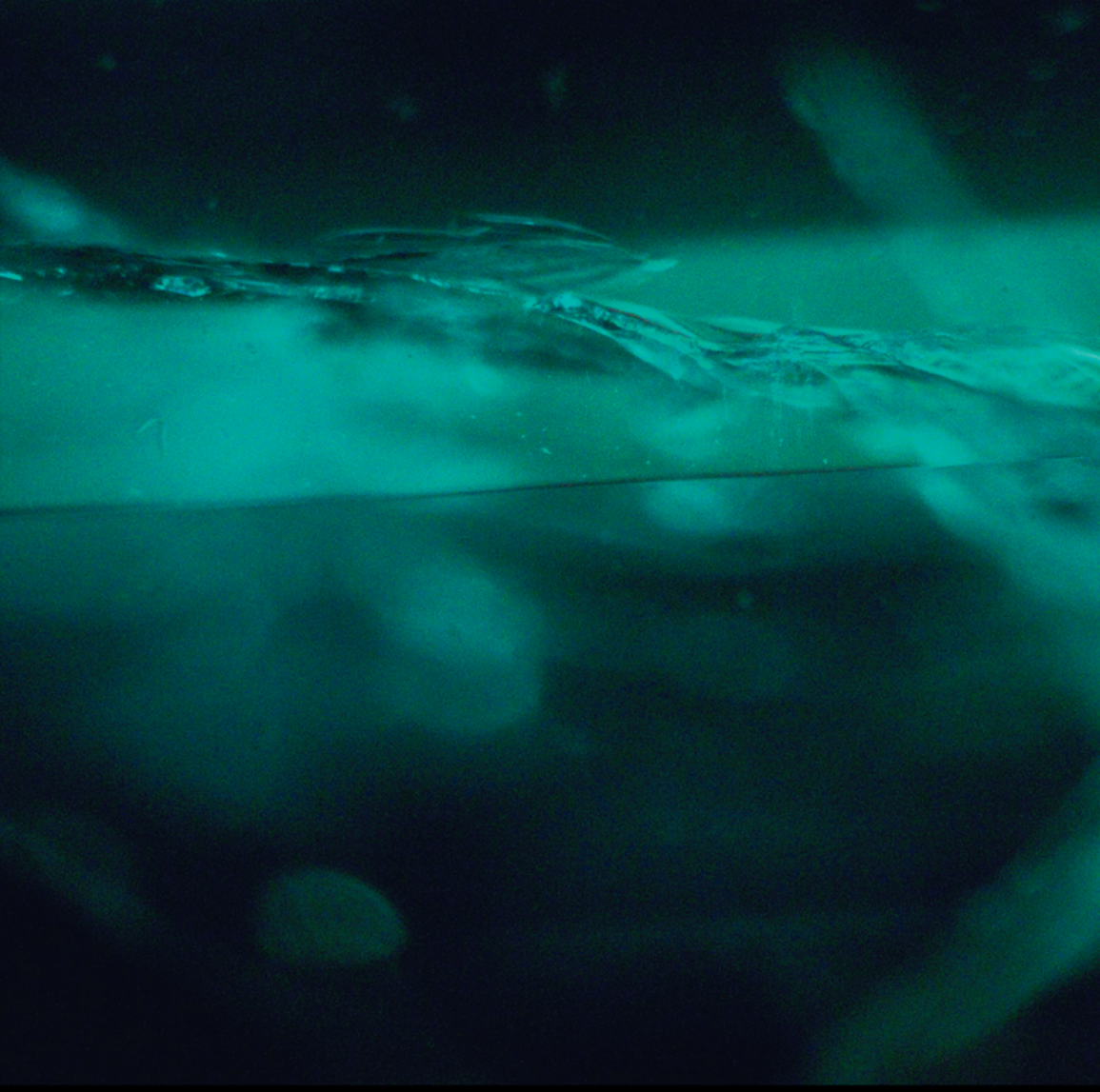

How Transparency Works

Ethnographies of a Global Value

Edited by Filipe Calvão,
Matthieu Bolay and Elizabeth Ferry

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How Transparency Works

Transparency has become a ubiquitous presence in seemingly every sphere of social, economic, and political life. Yet, for all the claims that transparency works, little attention has been paid to *how* it works – even when it fails to achieve its goals. Instead of assuming that transparency is itself transparent, this book questions the technological practices, material qualities, and institutional standards producing transparency in extractive, commodity trading, and agricultural sites. Furthermore, it asks: How is transparency certified and standardized? How is it regimented by "ethical" and "responsible" businesses, or valued by traders and investors, from auction rooms to sustainability reports? The contributions bring nuanced answers to these questions, approaching transparency through four key organizing concepts: disclosure, immediacy, trust, and truth. These are concepts that anchor the making of transparency across the lifespan of global commodities.

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How Transparency Works

Ethnographies of a Global Value

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Introduction

Making Transparency Visible

MATTHIEU BOLAY, FILIPE CALVÃO, ELIZABETH FERRY, AND ALEX GOLUB

Transparency has become ubiquitous in seemingly every sphere of social, economic, and political life. Despite its pervasiveness and presumed efficacy in business and political discourse, transparency remains a theoretically vague and ethnographically elusive category that occludes more than it reveals. Rather than assuming that transparency is itself transparent, or a programmatic tenet to be implemented or executed, this volume turns the question on its head: What are the technological practices, material qualities, and institutional standards producing transparency in extractive, commodity trading, and agricultural sites? How is transparency certified and regimented by "ethical" and "responsible" businesses, or valued by investors, from auction rooms to sustainability reports?

These questions mirror the shift from the post–Cold War project of transparency as anti-corruption, governmental accountability, and legal access to information, to its more recent trajectory in international commodity trade, sustainability, digitalization, and supply chain governance. In its current instantiation, policy demands for transparency have become an indirect tool in the governance of global supply chains. More acutely, transparency has also reverberated precipitously in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing inflationary environment. Price increases and product shortages in the midst of a supply chain crisis have increased demands for transparency from consumers, governments, and regulatory entities alike, going beyond the discursive attribution of moral attributes *of* transparency and toward an action-oriented call *for* transparency. This sudden exposure of longstanding dependencies and newly revealed supply chain fragilities in global markets has repositioned the centrality of transparency in a context of heightened consumer anxieties and the questions surrounding the efficiency of commodity flows in times of crisis. In effect, definitions of supply chain transparency in sustainability governance have been premised on making certain things visible to

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the protagonists of these processes. This would include "a state in which information is made apparent and readily available to certain actors" (Gardner et al. 2019: 164), "the disclosure of information" (Mol 2010: 132), or "openness and reduced secrecy, garnered through greater availability of information" (Gupta and Mason 2014: 5). Yet, for all the claims that transparency *works*, less attention has been paid to *how* it works, even when it fails to achieve its purported goals.

This volume responds to this problem by examining the political instrumentality and social relevance of transparency through an ethnographic focus on the social, legal, and economic regimes that govern the global supply chains of mineral and agricultural products. Calls for transparency in the mining and agricultural sectors emerged along with the rise of global sustainability politics, especially the UN adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, and the pressure on global corporations to adopt more legible compliance and accountability mechanisms. This demand for transparency in extractive and agrobusiness operations has accompanied the heightened production of natural resources – doubling in the last twenty-five years and poised to increase exponentially to keep pace with the demands of energy transition – as well as its increasingly visible deleterious social and environmental impacts (Shapiro and McNeish 2021: 4). Along with the acceleration of extractivism worldwide, anthropologists, geographers, and sociologists working on and with rural communities impacted by the unchecked expansion of supply chains thus increasingly encounter transparency discourses flowing downward from the very same industries causing social and environmental harms. Often, such claims are relegated to legitimization strategies, and thereby neglect to pay attention to how transparency works and what it actually does. In contrast, management and supply chain research has sought to develop and assess transparency technologies, but without considering how new evaluation instruments and standards or quantification processes that are meant to bring transparency to consumers have been interpreted by those subjected to their implementation. Building from ethnographic studies of transparency, the volume articulates the notoriously slippery analytics of "local" and "global" by examining the mediation practices and technological processes that commodities, actors, and institutions undergo to be deemed transparent. In turn, each chapter describes ethnographically processes of valuation charged with making transparency a global value. As a portable concept connecting material

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objects, agents, forms of expertise, and cultural practices across the world, transparency brings together otherwise dispersed fields of value enacted in processes of disclosure, immediacy, trust, and truth-making. Rather than these dimensions being mutually exclusive, we consider them as never-fully-aligned moments in the making of transparency, and as complementary to the value of transparency.

Moving past the liberal *Geist* and development creed behind the concept (Appel 2019), the book situates transparency as a total social fact in the making of commodities. Inspired by Mauss's attempt to observe how persons, objects, knowledge, and techniques were specifically assembled to form the social, the chapters approach the global value of transparency through an ethnography of the makers of transparency across institutions, markets, and technologies, and in the production of scientific and ethical knowledge. The chapters examine how different actors – industry associations and government agencies, corporate managers and traders, auditors and certifiers, farmers and miners – define and produce transparency as a global value in and through natural commodities. Transparency works and is made visible, we suggest, across the four conceptual moments organizing the volume: disclosure, immediacy, trust, and truth. These notions, which together shape understandings of transparency and how power is diffused through it, frame the ethnographic contributions of this book. The next sections conceptualize the socio-material worlds, practices of epistemic authority, and cultural tensions attached to notions of disclosure, immediacy, trust, and truth as these respectively structure the means and ends, the paradox, the ideologies, and the visibility of transparency. This introduction then discusses how these conceptual moments together assemble transparency as a global value in the context of supply chain capitalism. Finally, we provide an overview of the chapters.

The Means and Ends of Transparency

Coupled with the "demonstrative-revelatory" technological advancements of the early 2000s (Lawrence 2020: 510), the dawn of transparency on a global scale had its original momentum as an idealized guarantor of democratic governance, access to information, and anti-corruption movements (Birchall 2014; Fung et al. 2007; Garsten and De Montoya 2008; Hetherington 2011; Mazzarella 2006). As it was

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transformed under the guise of openness and accountability, political power became increasingly cloaked in opacity and conspiratorial thinking as "the raison d'être of transparency claims" (West and Sanders 2003: 12).

This dynamic of openness and opacity was magnified with mining and agricultural products in a new "grammar of responsibility" (Barnett et al. 2010). Increased public scrutiny, consumer awareness, and market pressure toward environmental and social impact disclosure (e.g., Kalkancı et al. 2016; Maloni and Brown 2006) steered corporations in these sectors to adopt "ethics" as a new market orthodoxy (Dolan and Rajak 2016). To its critics, the corporate social responsibility (CSR) movement responded through virtuous discourses and the theatricality of responsibility, sustainability, and accountability (Benson and Kirsch 2010; Coumans 2011; Rajak 2011), as well as corporate technologies of social engineering and co-option (Kirsch 2015; Verweijen and Dunlap 2021). CSR discourses have saturated the vocabulary of corporations, but the meaning and relational content of CSR are obscure even to those who promote its "implementation" (e.g., Van den Brink et al. 2019: 396–397) and to the agents and engineers in charge of negotiating it (J. M. Smith 2021). While these terms often coalesce in CSR reports, responsible standards, sustainability indexes, or certification schemes, we approach them through the common lens of transparency, put to use both as a means – that is, to assess corporate (ir)responsibility, (un)sustainability, and (un)accountability – and an end – to benefit from an unquestioned global value.

As a means, transparency has been mainly approached in sustainability and supply chain research from the perspective of its capacity to deliver "normative" (participation and the right to know) and "substantive" (environmental protection and effective governance) criteria (Gupta and Mason 2014; Mol 2010: 132). Reasserting the absence of a common definition, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development broadly considers that transparency characterizes a situation of "comprehensive and timely access to information and data that are necessary to hold policymakers, institutions and enterprises accountable for their actions," insisting that "transparency is not an end in itself but rather a precondition for accountability" (UNCTAD 2020: 2). According to this logic, once implemented, transparency is turned into a de facto instrument for governing supply chains and drives transformative expectations in global sustainability.

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And yet, such expectations must also acknowledge that transparency is itself a subject of political and normative conflict rather than a neutral disclosure device deployed to increase accountability, democracy, and participation (Gupta et al. 2020: 85). As a result, transparency is often pluralized to reflect its various orientations to sustainability governance, be it inward (firms' internal management), outward (their impacts), or downward and upward (a view toward its employees or the firm as seen by its subordinates) (Heald 2006).

As an end, transparency has been operationalized through rankings, benchmarks, due diligence procedures, and compliance with standards, all of which are increasingly demanded by investors and firms' shareholders. Various types of transparency are also distinguished by their presumed beneficiaries (citizens, experts, market actors) or their underlying aims (less corruption, increased legitimacy, efficient governance, capital accumulation, abolition of hierarchy) (Tienhaara 2020). Nonetheless, concerns about how these various artifacts of transparency should be implemented tell us little about what transparency means to various publics and actors, how it is constructed, or how it ultimately works, or fails to do so. Although definitions of transparency go relatively unquestioned in supply chain governance, transparency projects are thus necessarily parceled (i.e., what is disclosed to whom) and intermediated (i.e., through acts and artifacts of disclosure).

This dual approach to the means and ends of transparency opens up space for reflection on how the concept structures and is structured by relations of power – that is, how such projects are developed, for and by whom, and with what effects. If transparency can be charged with value in trade relations, it is critical that we understand what is meant by claims to unmediated access to valuable information in attempts to re-embed transparency projects: If our world is one of mediation, then what forms of mediation do we want and need?

Mediation and the Paradox of Transparency

As Koivisto rightly notes, the language of transparency is one of metaphors. With its roots in the Enlightenment, "the very optical feature of seeing through" (Koivisto 2022: 21) allows the metaphorical use of transparency as a manifestation of immediacy. As a metaphor, she argues, transparency can be considered a medium between an

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object and a viewing subject, whose ideal is paradoxically one of immediacy, or an idealized proximity and intimacy. This paradox is further stated by Alloa, who defines transparency as "mediated immediacy" (2018), or Birchall, who considers it an "invisible medium through which content is brought … into the visible realm" (2014: 81–82).

Taking seriously the mediated character of transparency, we depart from a slightly different epistemological tradition to approach the paradox of transparency. Already in his 1881 PhD dissertation, Franz Boas, the "father" of American anthropology, noted that perception was necessarily shaped by the situation of the observer. From this general statement, according to George Stocking (1965: 57), Boas questioned "the very possibility of a general measure of all perceptions or of a general law governing the relationship of stimulus and perception" – that is, the existence of unmediated perception. In his famous article "On Alternating Sounds" (1889), Boas described how "a new sensation is apperceived by means of similar sensations that form part of our knowledge," or, in other words, that experience is mediated by the culture in which someone is socialized. Therefore, immediacy – such as that promised in enlightenment sciences, or now in transparency discourses – is by definition impossible.[1]

The claim that transparency is a process of mediation which incorrectly understands itself to be a process of *disintermediation* – the "paradox of transparency" – is a central idea of this volume, following what Andrea Ballestero describes as the "literal impossibility" of unmediated perception (2012). The challenge here is that moments of disclosure presuppose a process of enclosure (Kockelman 2016) in which the thing revealed is eventually captured and reified. Questioning what Koivisto coins as "the metaphorical authority of transparency" (2022: 5), the ethnographies in this volume attempt to show that it is possible to do the work that transparency projects often seek to do but in a more reflexive way.[2] Each chapter demonstrates

[1] The Boasian genealogy of the paradox of transparency in anthropological literature was suggested by Alex Golub at a workshop held in Geneva in 2019 with all the authors of this volume.

[2] In a collection of anthropological essays, Vaughn and Fisher (2021) bring the question of the specific "witnessing" practices and apparatuses that may reinforce or challenge fundamental understandings of environments, and call into question what they call the mediatization of environmental matters. Such insights

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that more robust claims to epistemic authority imply moving past the self-evidence of the transparency metaphor and building upon ethnographic engagement and longstanding reflections on reflexivity as a condition of anthropological knowledge production, with ethnographic attention paid to the medium of transparency, on the one hand, and acknowledgment of the researcher as a positioned medium, on the other.

As this volume suggests, the paradox of transparency offers a fruitful entry point to investigate transparency beyond the normative and substantive assessment of its implementation. Indeed, any kind of transparency project implies the mediation of numerous actors, institutions, standards, laws, and documents in order to produce the unmediated visibility that transparency proposes. At the same time, ethnographic approaches to transparency have tended to reproduce epistemological frameworks that also have their limits. First, in line with Simmel's sociology of secrecy (1906), transparency has often been construed as the second term of an interactional equation with opacity, implicating a social process of boundary-making. A major issue in such approaches is that dyadic conceptualizations of transparency and opacity, publicity and privacy, disclosure and concealment often result in being both the *explanans* and the *explanandum*. Anthropologists, sociologists, and geographers interested in natural resources and global supply chains have tended to take transparency as an *explanans* of specific forms of production and related cultural practices, and to criticize it as a depoliticizing machine mainly through governmentality thinking. As an *explanandum*, this approach has oriented efforts to reveal and disclose what transparency conceals in binary terms, simultaneously hindering the possibility of analyzing transparency as an emerging value between and beyond predefined boundaries; and, more insidiously for researchers, to reproduce these binaries themselves through the illusion of revealing undisclosed truths.

contribute to highlight the variety of sights and the attuned role of human and nonhuman mediations in producing fragmented, and often contested, views on environmental interventions. Similar concerns are taken up by different contributors to this edited volume. Our approach to transparency is further inspired by Sarah Besky and Alex Blanchette's (2019) expanded conceptualization of both human and more-than-human labor in an attempt to denaturalize the politics of work in its relation to nature.

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Second, in line with Foucault's work on total institutions inspired by Bentham's panopticon, transparency ideologies are often seen as manifestations of discipline and governmentality. They legitimize aspirations to "control at a distance" (Foucault 2008), just as labeling something a "conspiracy" tends to delegitimize it as an inappropriate and inferior form of knowledge. Transparency, in this view, is seen as the counterpart of regime complexity and as an instrument of power, notably shaping lives through big data and algorithms (Besteman and Gusterson 2019) that are increasingly contested by privacy demands, or what Birchall (2021) calls a "right to opacity." Yet, transparency-as-governmentality also potentially reproduces the utopia of disintermediation it seeks to criticize. For example, digital transparency, Flyverbom argues (2016), entails at the same time secrecy and transparency, hiddenness and openness, and is better approached as a "management of visibilities" through digital intermediaries, such as those put forth in blockchain projects, traceability tags, or smart contracts that increasingly populate supply chains (e.g., Bolay 2021; Calvão and Archer 2021). Similarly, calls for making algorithmic systems accountable have grown in response to their perceived opacity and discriminatory practices, despite the limitations and inadequacies of this idealized view of transparency (Ananny and Crawford 2016). This algorithmic transparency is often premised on the desirable idea of understanding how a system works by cracking open its black box, an idea of "complete transparency" that is by itself an "impossible goal" (Crawford 2021: 12). This is in part the effect of the technologically mediated work of transparency, as seen in the case of predictive policing and surveillance (Brayne 2021). These systems hinge at once on artificial intelligence and automated decision-making processes with built-in accountability procedures, while at the same time relying on external third parties that skirt these transparency obligations in collecting and storing data.

The critical point here is that we should not mistake the aspiration of unmediated access to a given object for its mediating technologies; rather, to understand what is transparent requires "attention to the technological foundations and mediations of transparency, such as the techniques and devices used to manufacture transparency" (Flyverbom 2016: 111). Transparency is thus a product of the age of globalization, and a catalyst for organizing, valuing, and (de)legitimizing different forms of knowledge. More than looking at transparency as inherent in

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an object or system, we follow calls to "show instead how these limitations can be starting points for reconstructing accountability for systems that cannot be seen into, held still, or fully traced" (Ananny and Crawford 2016: 13). This collection of ethnographic studies of mining and agricultural commodity production and circulation extends this line of questioning. The chapters examine how miners, farmers, buyers, and sellers of natural commodities create their own theories of knowledge and enactments of sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff and Kim 2009: 120) about transparency in the broader world. How are such practices and knowledges made transparent – that is, how are they made into interpretable representations while appearing immediate to the knower?

Ideologies of Transparency

If the lens of mediation offers suitable conceptual affordances to approach transparency-in-the-making, the broader aim of this volume is to expand this approach to understand how transparency emerged as a global social value. This requires bringing back the ideologies capable of building trust in sociotechnical mediations of transparency. Andrea Ballestero (2012) suggests the notion of transparency ideology, which can be used analogously with "language ideology" and "semiotic ideology," to highlight the ironic imperative of transparency in disavowing the artifice required to create immediacy. Such disavowal can be interpreted in line with what Mazzarella (2006: 489) calls "politics of immediation," whereby the denial of mediation, albeit a constitutive process of social life to make society imaginable and representable, manifests the intensification of a bureaucratic ethos and occurs because it implies distance, intervention, and displacement. Similarly, an account of transparency as a semiotic ideology (cf. Keane 2018) would suggest the need to reveal interiority in a world in which mediation is a constitutive fact of life.

Anthropologists have productively engaged with this contradiction, generating a powerful critique of any claim to "see through" ideologies in order to understand "what's really going on." These ideologies can be considered as a theory of representation which holds that something which is not visible can be made visible to a knower. This often involves bringing something that is distant in time or in space into the contemporary space-time and lifeworld of the knower – something

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that the "free market" is often believed to realize. In other words, transparency promises direct knowledge despite spatial and temporal distance, conveying conspecifics into different sorts of social roles and stereotypes which are differently empowered.[3] In this view, anthropologists of transparency "problematize taken-for-granted ideas about who is observing and who is observed, about the materiality of documents as vessels of knowledge, and, ultimately, about the desirability of transparent arrangements" (Ballestero 2012: 160). In doing so, they hope to examine how transparency is a "political technology" and thus "a form of intervention into a world constituted by relations that can be molded, corrected, and regimented" (160). And like all political technologies meant to build trust, transparency can be used by a variety of actors and in different ways. In contrast with its assumed neutrality in bringing the sight of a subject onto an object, transparency necessarily occurs across antagonistic social fields. Anthropology has fruitfully engaged with some of these dimensions of transparency. For instance, Marilyn Strathern (2000a) opened a vast field of research on audit cultures. Strathern brought attention to processes of "second-order description" in representing the academic field and the growing opposition within it. Beyond education, the concept of audit cultures became central in critical analyses of other social fields, such as CSR, development, or international organizations. Likewise, others contributed to an understanding of the epistemological violence of quantification (Merry 2016) and the instrumental uses of transparency as a tool of neoliberalism (e.g., Rajak 2011; Shore 2008), as well as the undergirding ideologies of secrecy and conspiracy (West and Sanders 2003), in what we might call, after Joseph Masco (2021), an "anthropology of opacity."

If semiotic ideologies speak to the reflexive discourses people have about language and the assumptions they carry about how signs work in the world (Keane 2003), we pluralize transparency ideologies to reveal these contradictions of interiority and distance. This move paves the way for an anthropological approach to transparency that can ultimately reconcile the aspiration for a global value with a desire for

[3] To take an example from a study of diamond trading in Angola, claims of knowledge about "the market" and what "it" is charging for the commodity play a critical role in setting prices (Calvão 2015). Similarly, the ethnic affiliation of gem traders can be analyzed in terms of the trust created by biographic entanglements across space and time (Brazeal 2019).

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an "ethics of invisibility," as in the case of "digital miners" in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, for whom "seeing and transparent visibility were extensions of the colonial gaze and a form of predation" (J. H. Smith 2021: 27).

Seeing Transparency

These reflections should not be limited to subsuming transparency under discursive and visual metaphors of cultural mediation. Transparency projects are also materialized and enacted in documents and procedures, as well as technical – and increasingly digital – devices, whose ordinariness makes them largely invisible, all while being infused with institutional considerations structured upon dyadic oppositions such as transparency/opacity or visibility/invisibility (see Brenneis 2006). Semantics of transparency as they are upheld in sustainability governance can be traced to other governmental practices and have their epistemological roots in modern science's institu tionalization and in the Enlightenment's aspirations for universal truth. Stemming from the optical revolution, dynamics of mediating transparency in science went hand in hand with the development of instruments, documents, and material experiments to expand visibility, whereby the world could be made legible provided that one looked at it correctly (Levitt 2009: 2) – that is, with the right tools and prior knowledge. Similar dynamics unfold in the practice of government, whereby the state is assumed to be able to "see" as long as it deploys adequate subjectifying techniques such as censuses or mapping (Scott 1998). While most "professional visions" (Goodwin 1994; see also Pentimalli and Rémery 2020) explicitly code the world and highlight some of its features at the expense of others, few would claim that their vision should be aimed at transparency.

The premises of the optical revolution established an ocular-centric view that still drives many of the processes examined in this volume, including the capacity to digitally track and trace raw materials, to produce documents for certification and verification, often at the expense of more direct, though less visible, forms of accountability and trust embedded in social relations. The literature on how documents work as objectivity machines (Hoag 2011) and mediators of knowledge (Hull 2012; Riles 2006) provides striking illustrations of how "transparent" access to information is embedded in objects and

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sociotechnical networks. Not unlike Latour's (1991) reading of Shapin and Schaffer's *Leviathan and the Air-Pump* (Shapin and Shaffer 1985), truths – scientific, but also legal – are experimentally produced in processes of mediation, whereby cuts are made in hybrid networks of humans and nonhumans whose stabilized forms work as evidence for scientific or legal truth claims upon which representations of transparency are grounded.

When applied to the making and circulation of natural commodities, transparency is geared in particular to spatial representations defined as "supply chains" or "production networks," as well as "sustainability networks" (Ponte and Cheyns 2013). Across these "chains" and "networks," raw materials traverse what can be called, after Mazzarella, "nodes of mediations" to designate "sites at which the compulsions of institutional determination . . . come into always provisional alignment in the service of different [transparency] projects from the grass roots to corporate boardrooms" (Mazzarella 2004: 352).

Earlier, we suggested that transparency is a total social fact in the making of global commodities. To grasp this holistic perspective, the chapters in this volume examine a variety of dispersed yet interlinked sites, including banks, laboratories, trading houses, centers of expertise, courts of law, government offices, NGOs, and corporations. Empirically building upon such siloed sites, the temporal and spatial dispersion of the total social fact of transparency is also susceptible to a Latourian analysis. Transparency can be decomposed as a series of mediations between a distant location and "oligoptica" – sites in which "narrow but precise views" are manufactured and are represented in transparent "panoramas" (Latour 2005: 173–190). Building upon the spatialities that constitute actor–network theory, Oppenheim (2007: 478) adds that "oligoptica" and "panoramas" describe mediations "in a summation of other places, times, and agencies through which a local site [oligopticon] is made to do something." This something, in the case of this volume, includes the production of ontological truth claims toward a broader representation (or panorama) of transparency. This has methodological benefits since oligoptica are the exact opposite of (utopian) panoptica, as they exist concretely as investigable sites (a laboratory, an NGO, a government office, a trading house). Seeing transparency as it is traced across these sites offers an alternative to the individual contextualization of different transparency projects within their own institutional and political agendas. In other words, an

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ethnographic focus on processes of transparency-in-the-making rather than transparency-as-something-else (e.g., as governmentality or disclosure) allows us to analytically overcome the fragmented nature of transparency in its already institutionalized forms.[4] These are representations that illustrate on a wider scale the inevitable status of "secondary-order description" of transparency projects that has already been pointed out by Strathern (2000b).

As different scholars of so-called algorithmic transparency have reminded us, the problem may not lie with the perceived or assumed opacity or inscrutability of these systems, to which transparency would serve as a panacea (Amoore 2020: 5). Instead, focusing on sites of mediation (or oligoptica) opens up the possibility of understanding the shared or contested practices and semiotic processes occurring across dispersed endeavors, sites, and frameworks, connected nonetheless by material flows, semantic repertoires, or forms of expertise. Much like digital algorithms become "ethicopolitical" entities increasingly "implicated in new regimes of verification, new forms of identifying a wrong or of truth telling in the world" (Amoore 2020: 6), we need to go beyond seeing transparency *in* transparency; instead, we should "look across" these assemblages as complex "sociotechnical systems" to understand not how they contain but how they enact what makes them accountable (Ananny and Crawford 2016: 2).

Toward a Global Ethnography of Transparent Commodities

Acknowledging that transparency is a global value suggests paying attention to how transparency projects materially organize and semiotically regiment the global production and circulation of commodities across local settings. The field of sustainability governance in particular has seen a proliferation of transparency initiatives to monitor increasingly complex global supply chains, ushering in the promise of an era of unmediated visibility, increased participation and inclusion, and enhanced efficiency (Gardner et al. 2019; Grimard et al.

[4] This is manifest, for instance, in assessments of the degree of its implementation against stabilized versions of transparency standards, codes, procedures, and definitions of the visible and the invisible. These would come closer to transparency as "panorama" in Latour's phrasing, which is the claim to see everything while at the same time seeing nothing, since panoramas are essentially displayed grand pictures of what they claim to see (Latour 2005: 273).

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2017; Sarfaty 2015; Sauer and Hiete 2020). The recent spread of transparency in international trade and corporate management illustrates the enmeshment of supply chain capitalism in most spheres of life (Tsing 2009) along with the growing use of extractivism to describe processes of harvesting the earth's surface and its subsoil (Gudynas 2009; Ye et al. 2019) and the "social wealth" of everyday human interactions and cooperation (Mezzadra and Neilson 2017). Agriculture and mining – that is, food and mineral supply chains procuring natural commodities – are the focus of this book because they share the extractivist process that has precipitated sustainability concerns in recent years. The violent logics of extractivism, understood as "taking resources without reciprocity nor stewardship" (Shapiro and McNeish 2021: 20; see also Dunlap and Jakobsen 2020), are increasingly noticed and denounced in scientific scholarship and by the wider public. Indeed, while extractivism expands and intensifies globally, so does its contestation (Kröger 2015; Willow 2018) and the greater visibility of its social and environmental impacts (Esty 2004; Gupta and Mason 2014).

The chapters draw primarily from mining or farming as social processes, sharing a focus on "raw" materials to assess the ambiguous valuation of these objects and their qualities.[5] Complementing an already rich literature on the momentum of extraction, the book's contributions are interested in how natural commodities are interpreted and valued as they move away from the site where they were first harvested. Our concern is less with the circulation of commodities themselves (Appadurai 1986) than with the way transparency regimes structure this circulation. By focusing on moments and processes of mediation toward disclosure, immediacy, trust, and truth in the making of transparent commodities, we render transparency observable, allowing researchers to identify the connections and power relations between specific sites, actors, institutions, and technologies across global supply chains.

Often dubbed with positive connotations of ethicality, responsibility, and sustainability, the huge number of initiatives that are meant to

[5] This is not to suggest that these qualities are valued solely at their initial stage of production or harvesting. As Alex Blanchette (2020) demonstrates for the US factory farm, it is at the initial stages of the industrialized pork complex that a standardized pig – and life itself – emerges. It is to these contested but defining processes of valuation that this volume seeks to contribute.

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bring more transparency to agriculture and mining supply chains vary greatly in scope, focus, and mechanisms of enforcement. Initiatives such as the voluntary principles on security and human rights in mining merely provide guiding standards to companies, while a regulation such as the US Dodd–Frank Act seeks to tackle the risk of conflict financing through mandatory due diligence. Certification schemes such as the Kimberley Process have become mandatory to trade diamonds, while fair trade and organic certifications operate on a voluntary basis. Traceability mechanisms are increasingly requested by accrediting bodies to access licit markets, while the conduct of traceability is mainly outsourced to contractors specialized in giving credence to corporate claims of "responsibility." Despite the heterogeneous natures of these initiatives, they share the premise that "supply chain transparency" is considered a *sine qua non* to reach their purported accountability aims (Gardner et al. 2019), to prove the authenticity of their sustainability claims, and to further value them on the markets. In relative contradiction to discourses on advances in sustainability governance, contemporary analyses of global supply chains demonstrate heightened marginalization (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019), invisibility (Sassen 2014), and precarity (Tsing 2015). Rather than dismissing transparency as a smokescreen for neoliberal capitalism, the essays in this volume engage head-on with notions of transparency in order to better understand its status as a global value that numerous actors construct, negotiate, mobilize, and contest in their daily lives.

Taking stock of the inevitably mediated and parceled out character of transparency projects and their shared connection to a global value, the essays in this volume collectively propose a theory of transparency as a quality being worked through series of mediations toward *disclosure*, *immediacy*, *trust*, and *truth*. Each of these concepts manifests successive moments as well as various – and sometimes contradictory – practices in the making of transparent commodities.

Disclosure refers to the processes of making certain things, actors, and processes visible in trading processes. *Immediacy* entails the discourses and practices of expertise used to perform unmediated access to what is being disclosed. *Trust* points to the relational and technological aspects of mediating immediacy and the distributed credence of accountability claims in politics and bureaucracies. *Truth*, finally, addresses the ways in which transparency projects seek to make ontological claims on

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nature and sustainability incontestable by (re)ordering socio-material worlds through legal frameworks and sociotechnical devices.

By offering a holistic view of the making of transparent commodities through the lens of these structuring concepts, the volume hypothesizes that transparency is construed in the linkages between valuation practices, technical expertise, bureaucratic legibility, and narratives of truth and ignorance. Accordingly, the contributors' efforts to interrogate the making of transparency as moments of *disclosure*, *immediacy*, *trust*, and *truth* facilitate a comparative ethnography of how transparency works, not through the lens of predefined, isolated variables, but from the perspective of transparency as a total social fact that both produces and is produced by various actors and institutions. These concepts relate to four complementary dimensions of the production of transparency, which enable the comparative establishment of transparency within a broader system of value (see Graeber 2001: 13–15). The value of transparency, in other words, can be made perceptible only in relation to other terms in a system of meaningful distinction.

Overview of Themes and Chapters

The volume seeks to answer the following questions: How is transparency regimented, standardized, or institutionalized by traders, international regulators, evaluators, and managers? What are the technical, aesthetic-sensory, and material conditions that enable the discourse and practice of transparency? What power relations sustain, or undermine, the emergence of transparency as a global social and economic value? What political projects, forms of violence, and practices of inclusion and exclusion do such endeavors establish and legitimate across production and consumption? What makes specific commodities transparent and ethical – or, by the same token, opaque and unethical? Rather than describing how transparency is implemented, the chapters in this book scrutinize the different ways in which it is constructed in moments of disclosure, immediacy, trust, and truth, thereby illuminating its various, sometimes contentious, and often unintended effects along with the pervasive appropriation of nature by expanding supply chains.

Disclosure

The first part of the book examines how ideas, technologies, and materials about transparency are strategically appropriated, valued,

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and actively integrated as semiotic repertoires in trading processes. For an object to be understood and valorized as transparent, and possibly ethical, in economic exchange, we suggest that it must pass through frameworks of semiotic engagement that make certain qualities visible to interested publics (buyers, governments, citizens). For instance, trade secrets require a demonstrable commercial value to be qualified as secrets. Similarly, acts of disclosure legally convert social values into commercial ones. As the chapters show, disclosure is not necessarily opposed to secrecy; rather, it works alongside opaque exchanges in ambivalent trade relations. We grapple with conventional studies of face-to-face exchanges in so-called "traditional" local markets alongside studies of global market institutions and the bodily, performative, and semiotic elements of financial practices. Therefore, we conceptualize the production and consumption of transparency in practices and discourses of disclosure as they unfold in the regulation of trade, to highlight the power dynamics undergirding competing definitions of transparency.

In a historical account of the state-led reform of the tea industry in postcolonial India, Sarah Besky analyzes how the emergence of Indian auction centers established by the state contributed to make visible the workings and infrastructures of the tea trade. The reform brought competing definitions of transparency and practices of disclosure to a context of competition on global markets between the UK and its former colony. While market transparency was upheld as a guarantor of the free market by British regulatory institutions, notwithstanding opacity in the trade itself, Indian auction centers contested this view of transparency. Transparency, as construed by Indian regulators, allowed the state – through its intermediary position between producers and consumers – to better control and govern the trade. Reminiscent of more recent initiatives promoting ethical certifications, auction centers worked as a technology allowing potential buyers to look inside the sensory qualities of tea offers. Competing and changing views of transparency, according to Besky, manifest a hidden tension between the quality of tea as a product and the quality of the market itself, which recent attempts to re-spatialize the trade through digital platforms seek to merge.

Matthew Archer explores the relationship between transparency and sustainability in discourses around corporate sustainability and sustainable finance, in which transparency is understood as the disclosure of information about companies' social and environmental performance. Understood as such, Archer asks who determines what

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counts as relevant enough to be measured and reported, and who decides that the information disclosed is sufficiently detailed to be trusted as evidence of transparency. And, in turn, which actors are trusted to connect an assessment of transparency to a claim of sustainability? The chapter argues that the reliance on transparency as a means to achieve sustainability has created an approach to sustainability where transparency is taken as evidence of sustainability itself – that is, transparency is no longer a means to an end, but an end in and of itself.

Nethra Samarawickrema examines the role of secrets in the Indian Ocean sapphire trade, where exchange is based on arbitrage. What are the ethical frames within which certain forms of secrecy are permissible and expected? From emic notions of what it means to conceal and reveal knowledge, Samarawickrema illuminates gem traders' conceptions of ethical conduct in relation to secrecy. The chapter asks how transparency is conceptualized in relation to a trade where concealment and disclosure are folded into the embodied practices that make up everyday modalities of negotiation, brokerage, and arbitrage. Reading trading secrets as a part of the craft of trade, the chapter reframes the assumption that a lack of transparency amounts to deception and examines instead how concealment may be imbued with ethical concerns too.

Immediacy

The second part of the book takes inspiration from studies of audit cultures that render transparency legible. This allows us, in turn, to conceptualize the production of transparency across the realms of technical expertise and epistemic authority, including their contestation through strategic ignorance. This approach to transparency addresses the paradoxes of immediacy claims and offers an alternative to the all-pervasive thinking about governmentality. In so doing, the authors present an ethnographic instantiation of the instabilities and the predatory dimensions implicated in projects of disintermediation.

Brian Brazeal points out one recurring paradox of responsible sourcing projects whereby people may do honest and ethical business that is illegal while transparency is weaponized against them by powerful actors seeking more direct access to natural commodities. Drawing upon multisided research on the extraction and trade of rubies, Brazeal empirically reminds us that transparency is a technical claim that is

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often mistaken for an ethical one. This ambiguity is particularly salient in Brazeal's depiction of responsible sourcing experts such as consultants, compliance officers, and CSR managers, who mediate access to artisanal ruby miners' knowledge and production. The expert knowledge they produce, while infused with "good-faith" ethical concerns, enters companies as intel to further expand coercive strategies, whose outcomes may sometimes be dramatic.

The emergence of digital transparency is the focus of Filipe Calvão and Emanuel Hermann's chapter. What happens when the promise of unmediated transparency meets the impossibility of disclosure? Faced with the growth in digital technologies for tracking and tracing mineral commodities, the chapter assesses the value of technologies modeled after the blockchain ledger and the role of organizations promoting digital-based certification technologies for mineral supply chain management. Based on research in the Democratic Republic of Congo's cobalt mines of Kolwezi and in mining sites partnered with De Beers's GemFair program in Sierra Leone, the chapter examines first how transparency permeates both resources – cobalt, a critical component that enhances the performance of lithium batteries, and diamonds, an icon of hyper-consumption – in the broader digital turn in the extractive industries. Second, the chapter looks at this digital turn as an attempt to introduce disintermediated trust in certification mechanisms formerly reliant on third-party verification. It suggests that digital transparency operates through practices of concealment, even as it is represented as the technological pinnacle of accountability.

Finally, Sam Shuman explores the precarious position of diamond brokers in the context of an emerging transparency regime enabled by standardized diamond certificates, pricing lists, and e-commerce platforms. The ethnography challenges dominant conceptualizations of disintermediation in global supply chains, the so-called tendency to "cut out the middlemen." Rising transparency infrastructures in the diamond trade do not render diamond brokers obsolete, Shuman argues, but inform the constitutive role of strategic ignorance as a form of expertise both in brokerage and in transparency.

Trust

In the third part, the chapters address the political projects and competing understandings of sovereignty, democracy, and accountability

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that the fabrication of transparent commodities enables. They examine the relational and technological structures mobilized to build trust and distribute credence to accountability claims in politics and bureaucracies. As Corsín Jiménez puts it (2011: 178), trust figures as an engine of epistemic distance compression, collapsing knowledge, responsibility, and relationships into one single social form. Unraveling the politics and technologies conflated in representations of trust helps the chapters move beyond normative dichotomies of transparency and secrecy, publicity and privacy, ethics and corruption. While transparency is often presented as a remedy to so-called trust crises, especially in markets and states, or in value and sovereignty, the contributions ethnographically describe the changing meanings, beliefs, and instrumental uses of these terms in political projects of trust-making at various scales.

Elizabeth Ferry examines three institutional endeavors to produce trust about the value of gold and transparency in market and state. This ethnography investigates three specific clusters of transparency – certification schemes, blockchain technologies, and verification performances by central banks – and seeks to produce trust about the possible commensuration of gold and transparency. Ferry considers gold and transparency as global values that actors in different markets seek to align. This process is necessarily unstable, Ferry shows, for both gold and transparency are engaged in competitive processes of value-making in which each term of the equation should stand as a stable and uncontested referent to the other.

Proposing a reflexive approach to sight-dominated cultures in research and politics, Les Field's chapter offers an alternative approach to the transparency–sovereignty nexus through an analysis of Greenland's nation-building project in the context of climate change and a future extraction-based economy. Transparency, Field proposes, is a multifold political project to look through varying lenses not only at the past and present, as is often presumed, but also at the future. Extractivist prospects in agriculture, rare earth elements, aluminum, uranium, and ruby mining convey competing lenses, and attuned transparencies, that are derived as much from the materiality of those materials as from the political futures they support.

Andrew Walsh, moving away from the Malagasy sapphire mines on which he long worked, shifts our attention to the emerging aid projects that crop up in their vicinity. These aid projects are based on do-it-

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yourself (DIY) principles, offering a side perspective on transparency and accountability initiatives (TAIs) through their permeation throughout the development and aid industry. Drawing upon the seeming incompatibility of TAIs and DIY aid, Walsh's contribution questions the fetishized calculative rationalities of transparency from the perspective of those who are supposed to benefit from it. While DIY aid projects may be looked upon suspiciously by dominant players and large donors as they are not subject to TAIs, the ethnography points out that they are nevertheless embedded in social relationships of trust and mutual accountability, which may indeed discourage the sort of transparency promoted by TAIs.

Truth

The last section of the volume frames transparency in between ethical discourses of truth and the materiality of the commodity itself. Drawing from sociological and anthropological work on materiality and qualities, as well as science and technology studies, contributions examine the network of actors defining and negotiating through sociotechnical devices and legal frameworks the "true" qualities of commodities. (For a discussion of the expert appraisal and meanings of qualities, see Besky [2020].) Thinking about truth, as Mulla recalls (2021), cannot be separated from thinking about responsibility – that is, asking "to which collectivities we belong, and to whom we owe our responsibility." This dimension is made increasingly salient by the consumption of extractivist products of which "ethical" diamonds are an iconic example (Bell 2023). By scrutinizing how transparency projects reorder socio-material worlds and hierarchically organize normative frameworks to make ontological claims on nature and sustainability incontestable, this last set of contributions questions the assumed relation between ethicality, sustainability, and transparency in the regulation and distribution of responsibilities attached to the extraction of rents from nature.

In an ethnography of the instruments and aspirations of Indian rice organic certification, Shaila Seshia Galvin questions how transparency works as a semiotic technology in the active production of "organic" as a quality endowed with a particular truth. Key parts of the "game of revelation" Seshia Galvin describes are the sociotechnical devices of digital compliance systems and tagged traceability. In performing the

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fantasy of immediation, such devices obscure their own crucial role of mediator in the certification process. The resulting truth regime of organic certification, the chapter argues, connects not only with practices of truth-telling, but with the actual making of truth backed with new forms of evidence and inspection that sustain and explain the power of transparency both as a value and as a form of action.

Drawing on ethnographic research among social activists and corporate managers, Matthieu Bolay's chapter investigates the contentious role of Swiss gold refineries in conflating material, social, and legal procedures against responsibility standards that permit the licit trade of bullion on international markets. Looking at the work of entangling and disentangling legal frameworks together with the socio-material purification of gold, Bolay's contribution analyzes how different veridictions on transparency are produced, contested, and valued. In particular, notions of ownership and provenance that are central to the authorization of accountability claims are given different meanings by shifting the situation of importing gold in different normative frameworks, such as industry "responsible sourcing" standards and certifications, financial surveillance and customs regulations, and freedom of information laws. Accordingly, these legal entanglements frame gold as a material commodity, as a liquid monetary asset, or as a digital dataset. As a veridiction project, Bolay argues, transparency does not necessarily reveal undisclosed truths but rather establishes new truths.

Sarah Osterhoudt, finally, analyzes some of the paradoxes of organic certification. Building upon an ethnography of vanilla organic certification in Madagascar, the chapter addresses how multiple knowledges, scales, and epistemologies of transparency come into play in the certification process. While seeking to bring transparency to the farming process and trade intermediaries to make organic products morally desirable in markets, certification itself operates largely outside the scope of transparency – at least from the perspective of the vanilla producers it certifies. The emphasis on written knowledge to enact transparency and traceability, while deemed more capable to cross scales, inevitably undermines other forms of transparency. Numerically correct counting does not align with socially correct counting, just like written trade agreements weaken the local accountability of verbal contracts. In organic certification, framing

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transparency as exclusively morally driven forms part of the power apparatus of these projects. It obscures the underlying forms of economic, social, and political work that certification does, as well as the role of these programs as intermediaries themselves, extracting profits from the vanilla supply chain.

* * *

Through these conceptual moments, the book explores the social, material, political, and technological conditions underpinning the production of transparency as a total social fact. In doing so, the contributions do not seek to connect disparate geographic points in supply chains; rather, they describe emerging forms of mediation charged with enacting transparency across a commodity's lifespan. As a traveling concept, transparency connects distinct networks of material objects, agents, and forms of expertise in nonlinear paths. The movement, and impasses, between them are as vital as the sites themselves. This approach conceptually renews our understanding of transparency in a context where supply chain capitalism encounters digitization and ecological emergency. If each chapter examines how transparency is defined and produced, taken together they offer a nuanced and situated approach to this process by introducing a plethora of relevant actors whose daily activities actually make transparency.

By framing moments of disclosure, immediacy, trust, and truth as inherent in the making of transparency as a total social fact, this volume identifies the construction of a global value, moving beyond its conventional opposition to secrecy or opacity. Through the eyes, practices, and perspectives of the makers of transparency, the chapters mobilize the networks of production, trade, and verification as a rejoinder to studies of consumption. Importantly, this volume does this at a moment when new technologies of production (e.g., synthetic) and verification (e.g., blockchain, digitally mediated traceability) are transforming imaginaries of nature and consumers' expectations of transparency, as well as producers', traders', and regulators' practices. Asking *How Transparency Works* beyond its development creed allows for a better understanding of the social and political relevance of transparency and its contradictory effects in the politics and practices of actors unevenly positioned across global supply chains.

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PART I

Disclosure

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1 *Indian Tea, Postcolonial Governance, and the Uses of Transparency*

SARAH BESKY

"*Jaago re*! *Wake up*!" This is the slogan at the center of the marketing of Tata Tea's signature middle-class beverage, Tata Gold. In the run-up to the Indian general elections in 2014, Tata Gold was relaunched as the official beverage of Indian women's empowerment. "Tata Gold has 15 percent long leaves," Tata product marketing proclaimed. These leaves "open up and release a superior aroma. Just like the leaves that open, the campaign … seeks to open minds to the power that the women of India have, to bring about the change they desire."[1]

A 2013–2014 Tata Gold advertising campaign, entitled the "Power of 49," featured a series of videos "giving a voice to the women of India to be heard in the political discourse of our country."[2] One video was of a conversation between a young politician and his wife. She says that, with the elections around the corner, he will be busy. He nods in agreement, without really listening, and continues working. She gets visibly frustrated and tells him to go and make her a cup of tea. He rips open a plastic packet of Tata Gold. We cut to a detailed shot of the tea leaves unfurling as the water comes to a boil.

"Look at the tea leaves opening," she tells him. There is a dramatic pause, then she asks: "Has your mind also opened?" She explains that, while he might ignore her, he cannot afford to ignore India's women, who account for 49 percent of the voter base. The politician takes a whiff of the tea and visibly awakens from his indifference. Thanks to Tata Gold, his mind *has* opened. This public figure now sees the public differently.

The tea cup the politician sips from – a delicate, transparent, glass one – is a deliberate juxtaposition to the heavy, Tata-branded, green ceramic mug that viewers normally see in Tata Tea ads. That mug is

[1] Taken from the Tata Tea website (text no longer available).

[2] www.tataconsumer.com/news/tata-global-beverages-and-tata-group-release-10-point-womens-manifesto-voice-49-ahead-general (accessed September 12, 2024).

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itself juxtaposed with the earthenware or stainless steel cups associated with lower-class Indian tea drinkers. The material appearance and sensory qualities of Tata Gold, with its long tea leaves and light color, signal ideas about middle-class refinement as well as political and economic transparency.

Transparency, or the ability to see what might otherwise be obfuscated or taken as the normative order of things, as many scholars working in India have argued, is often deployed as both conceptual foil and antidote to corruption (Mathur 2012; Mazzarella 2006; Sharma 2013; see also Gupta 2005). At the time of writing, three general elections have passed since the rollout of Tata's ad. The political landscape has changed, especially in India's tea-producing regions. An appeal to anti-corruption and anti-establishment politics undergirded the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) rise to power in 2014. The rhetoric of transparency and unveiling continues to animate Hindutva populism across the subcontinent. Transparency, then, is anything but a marketing ploy.

The story of "Jaago Re" is just one of many moments since India's independence in 1947 in which the tea industry has been questioned, reaffirmed, and recalibrated, along with tea's place in the country's agricultural and economic future. Once an elite beverage reserved primarily for export, tea is now firmly part of the Indian national imaginary. The humble, affordable cup of *chai* is a central feature of both private and public spaces – from village homes to fancy urban hotels – across the subcontinent (Lutgendorf 2012). At some symbolic level, tea unites Indians of all classes and regions. It is drunk out of clay cups in dusty bazaars, in shiny office buildings, and in newfangled urban corporate café chains aimed at the upper-middle class.

As a testament to the creep of tea into the national imaginary as commodified patrimony, India's current prime minister from the Hindu-right BJP party, Narendra Modi, explicitly portrays himself as the son of a railway station *chai-walla* (tea seller). Tea in the current political zeitgeist in India has even become somewhat sacrosanct. Modi's tea shop in the state of Gujarat is being turned into a monument. In the run-up to the 2021 elections in India, Modi even publicly disparaged Greta Thunberg's commentary on and promotion of the Indian farmers' protest toolkit. Thunberg called for a "disrupt[ion of] the yoga and chai image of India" as a means of drawing attention to the plight of the country's farmers. Modi responded by decrying her

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comments as part of a larger "conspiracy to malign Indian tea." Activists such as Thunberg, Modi lamented, have "stooped so low that they are not sparing even Indian tea."[3]

But tea's symbolic place in Indian life is relatively new. Certainly, tea has been produced in India since the 1830s. Tea's conversion from an exploitative colonial export crop to a national symbol came thanks to a series of efforts by the postcolonial Indian state to make tea and the industry around it more visible and accessible to political and bureaucratic scrutiny. When India gained independence in 1947, government officials sought to exert regulatory control over the tea industry. For decades, British plantation owners, brokerage firms, and other private industry actors had largely governed themselves. They had actively sought to ensure autonomy from colonial agriculture and land bureaucracies. Ensuring a successful transition to independence required making the Indian tea industry's previously opaque operations visible. It required bringing tea production more firmly into state practice.

Tea as a national beverage, of course, comes from somewhere. The tea that Modi and his father sold on a railway platform in rural India and the tea offered in high-end urban retailers all originate from colonially rooted plantations in India's northeast and southern regions.

In this chapter, I suggest that to understand programs to make colonial crops such as tea sit comfortably with state practice – and particularly with calls for "transparency" (market, political, or otherwise), ethical production, or even Hindu nationalism – it is necessary to situate them in longer, often state-led, regulatory histories. This story of a state's attempt to "see" – and govern – what was happening within its borders differs from the well-known picture of mid twentieth-century state optics painted by James Scott (1999) in his *Seeing Like a State*. Independent India's early attempts to make visible the workings of a colonially rooted tea industry were not undertaken in the name of managing and improving the lives of newly enfranchised Indian citizens through heavy-handed socio-ecological transformation. Rather, regulation through visibility – an aim for a kind of transparency on the part of the state – unfolded as part of the project of decolonization and independent nation-building. Since Indians had been systematically excluded from the workings of the tea industry

[3] https://theprint.in/india/conspiracy-to-malign-indian-tea-modi-takes-dig-at-greta-toolkit-in-assam-speech/600633/ (accessed July 22, 2023).

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throughout colonial rule, Indian regulators saw it as essential to open what had until 1947 been an economic black box. Since India's independence from Britain in 1947, ideas of openness have dominated the state's attempts to regulate the tea trade.

Despite the rise of right-wing political populism in India and beyond, talk of transparency in contemporary capitalism and democratic political life has tended to foreground the efforts of *non*governmental actors to bear witness to the processes of commodity circulation and governance. Such actors push to make the actions of capital and the state not just visible, but *immediately* visible, anywhere and at any time. Transparency projects aim to make spatial and temporal distance less of an obstacle to efficient trade and equitable governance. Nongovernmental agricultural certification schemes are one prominent institutional instrument for achieving transparency. The term of art in commodity circulation programs oriented toward transparency, such as fair trade, is "direct trade." These third-party certifiers act as independent auditors who evaluate production practices against a set of standards abstracted from geographic, ecological, or cultural specificities (see Strathern 2000). In addition to auditing, agricultural certification programs like fair trade or organic, along with supply chain integrity projects such as the UTZ or Ethical Tea Partnership, frequently focus on promoting direct trading relations. They herald the elimination of intermediaries between plantations and buyers as means of hedging against corruption, price-fixing, and labor abuses. As a concept, non-state-fostered transparency in trade gestures to an *opening* to greater, more democratic participation; to greater public visibility; and to more abundant and accessible information.

These nongovernmental actors set themselves up against states and their byzantine regulations, tendency toward corruption, or supposed disinterest in the qualities of trade and governance. But the history of India's experience with tea complicates this neat distinction. Whereas transparency amounts to a push for immediacy and a compression of spatial and temporal distance, the postcolonial project of industrial opening of Indian tea aspired to maintain the state's regulatory position as spatially and temporally *between* consumers and producers.

I first discuss post-independence reforms to the tea industry in the early to mid 1950s, led by a newly formed government regulatory agency, the Tea Board of India (TBI). To assert sovereignty over an industry still dominated by British capital, TBI regulators set out to

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study and make visible the material infrastructure of tea warehousing, shipping, and sales. By exerting state oversight over this infrastructure, regulators believed, India could stake a stronger claim to tea's profits. The TBI's Auctions Enquiry Commission set into motion several reforms that vastly expanded trade infrastructure in India. Importantly, the Commission created seven auction centers in India's tea-growing regions. The TBI's regulatory aspirations were met with what can best be described as paternalistic resistance by the Indian Tea Association (ITA), the trade association that represented British tea interests after independence and was the pre-independence regulator of the industry. ITA members still operated the most lucrative tea plantations in the country. The ITA insisted that the TBI's plan to move more auctions to cities such as Calcutta and Cochin would hamper "free trade." Visibility – the ability to see tea and trace its movement – was central to the ITA's conception of free trade. If auctions were moved to India, this would limit the ability of Indian tea's primary customers – buyers and blenders in the UK – to see, touch, taste, and smell tea before they purchased it.

In the second part of the chapter, I describe the state's efforts, which came to fruition in 2016, to convert the seven auction centers established in the decades after independence into a single, pan-India tea auction. By the early 2000s, the TBI was concerned about the stagnation – and potential corruption – of the market for Indian tea. The TBI blamed the decentralized auction system that Indian regulators had established in the 1950s for this corruption. By the 2000s, regulators had come to believe that a single, digitally mediated auction would allow wider participation and ensure transparent, free trade.

Post-Independence Reform

Ideas about transparency and opacity, as both material and metaphor, can be traced to the Enlightenment, when refined instruments allowed scientists not only to know nature, but also to represent that knowledge to others in new ways. Historian of science Theresa Levitt (2009) describes the scientific work and political engagement of scientists in post-Enlightenment France. Describing the preceding years, she writes, "The Enlightenment project of the eighteenth century had in large part been built around the project of expanding visibility. The world was seen as eminently legible, if only one were looking correctly" (Levitt

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2009: 2). Telescopes and microscopes were tools for looking correctly. Things that appeared unknowable or impenetrable were disaggregated. This was a period of "optical revolution," but in the late 1700s and early 1800s, a new instrument came into use: the polarimeter. Capable of measuring the polarization of light, the polarimeter shifted the terrain of scientific inquiry. As Levitt explains, "Instead of rendering visible things that were too far away or too small to be seen, it gave form precisely to what the naked eye could not see" (ibid.). But scientists disagreed about what was actually being seen. Transparency, it turned out, was an open conceptual and material field. Scientific instruments – as well as the print media that circulated news of the effects of these instruments – revealed the inner workings and composition of things to a greater public, but they also raised new questions about what might (still) remain unseen. The work of transparency, then, can thus bring about a kind of rupture, a recalibration of thought about everyday materials and even thought itself.

In the years after Indian independence in 1947, the Indian government created multiple commissions composed of bureaucratic and techno-scientific experts to look inside the tea industry – to unmask its hidden economic structure. Enacted under the Nehruvian socialist vision for the independent nation, these commissions resulted in some clear social reforms, including new labor and housing standards as well as the encouragement of Indian "rupee companies" to join the tea trade and compete with British "sterling companies" (see Besky 2017; 2020). At no point, however, did the government consider eliminating, nationalizing, or otherwise radically reforming the plantation-based tea industry. Its strategy from the start was to make tea and the infrastructure that brought it to market more Indian, not to undo them. As a first step, in the early 1950s, the government of India rolled out a large-scale grassroots marketing campaign to persuade Indian consumers – rich and poor alike – to drink Indian tea (see Bhadra 2005). The consumption of Indian tea would benefit the nation by stimulating agricultural production, providing employment for independent retailers, and ensuring greater productivity in mills, factories, and fields across the country. The government sought to transform the drink of colonial occupation into a "swadeshi" drink (Lutgendorf 2012).[4]

[4] Swadeshi, meaning "of our country," was a concept linked with the Indian independence movement.

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The TBI launched the Auctions Enquiry Commission at the end of 1954. The purpose of the Commission was to understand why, although some Indian tea was auctioned in Calcutta and Cochin, the bulk of Indian tea, even eight years after independence, was still auctioned in London. The Commission's remit was simple: to enact changes to reverse the relative distribution of sales between India and the UK.

Tea auctioning began in London under the auspices of the East India Company in the late 1600s. In these auctions, traders bought tea acquired from China. With the expansion of colonial control in India and the development of tea plantations there, beginning in Assam in the 1830s and moving to what is now West Bengal by the 1850s, the tea auction infrastructure expanded to include Calcutta, where the first sales were held in 1861. Just before independence, in 1943, an auction center was established for the south Indian market at Cochin (Kochi). The Auctions Enquiry Commission was chaired by U. K. Ghoshal, chairman of the TBI, and it included British sterling company and Indian rupee company representation from across India's tea-growing regions. The Commission interviewed and surveyed buyers, brokers, retailers, warehouse managers, and wharf and port representatives. Its members spent weeks traveling from Calcutta to Cochin, to Ceylon, and to London, investigating the infrastructure for Indian tea auctioning, storage, and circulation. True to the Indian government's commitment to subtly Indianize the plantation system, rather than radically nationalize or abolish it, the Commission sought input from different stakeholders about its plans to move more and more of the auction trade from London to India.

Throughout the inquiry, the ITA (the guild of mainly British sterling tea companies) maintained that auction reform was "not . . . economically wise."[5] The ITA argued that if auctions were shifted from London to India, tea buyers would simply buy teas grown in other places. In a pro-free trade move, the UK had abolished its tea duty, meaning that Indonesian, Portuguese East African, Chinese, and Formosan teas, all of which would still be for sale in London, could be acquired at lower prices. The discourse of free trade became a way of discouraging repatriation of auctioning to India.

Visibility was central to the free trade logic. In an interview with Ghoshal and the other study team members, Mr. Crossle, a

[5] British Library (BL) Mss Eur F174/1251: "Expansion of Calcutta Tea Auctions."

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representative of the London Tea Buyers' Association, whose firm purchased tea at auction in London, Calcutta, Cochin, and Ceylon, explained: "I think that it must be said that any tea that is not available in London we tend to lose interest in. We appreciate tea that we can see at hand more than tea that is remote."[6] A tea auction was not just a place for buying and selling. To put it in Levitt's (2009) terms, it was a technology that allowed potential buyers to *look inside* particular lots of tea on offer. Crossle continued:

> [W]e look first of all to London because the tea is at hand and it meets what are frequently changing conditions so much better than tea which is 8 or 9 weeks away, which is subject to hold up, to damage en route, does not frequently come up to the standard of the tea we hoped we had bought and so forth.[7]

At auction sites, tasting, smelling, and other organoleptic forms of valuation were as important as pricing (see Besky 2020; 2016). As Crossle put it, poetically invoking the language of visibility and transparency:

> I think we would be doing you a disservice and ourselves a disservice if we let the issue be *fogged entirely* by questions of finance and that type of thing. We do not, of course, buy poor tea in place of good tea just because it happens to be nearest to us, but other things being equal, we lean very strongly to teas that we can *see*.[8]

Visibility and tactility were important because each tea's aroma, flavor, and color changed depending on the season, the time spent in warehouses, and packaging. Tea buyers purchased tea at auction with a view to their potential to serve not as stand-alone items but as parts of complex tea blends, packaged in loose-leaf containers or – as was increasingly the case over the course of the twentieth century – in tea bags. Whereas the contents of those bags were largely a mystery to consumers, buyers, brokers, and blenders needed to be able to see inside them. Storage and warehousing were thus key concerns for the Commission.

A few days after the visit of Ghoshal and the other commissioners, the ITA sent a circular to its members updating them on the

[6] BL Mss Eur F174/1251: "Discussions with Representatives of the Tea Buyers Association (including Dealers) on 12.1.55 at 11-15am."
[7] Ibid. [8] Ibid., emphasis added.

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Commission's inquiry.[9] It warned that a shift in auctioning from London to India would result in "the concentration of buying into a few strong hands and the elimination of the UK small buyers." The ITA emphasized that, in any reform, "the blending aspect must be considered." It pointed out "that apart from Darjeeling and Assam Second flush teas and uncertain Autumnals, Northern India produces tea of no pronounced flavor and these teas can be replaced by teas from other parts of the world." Blenders needed access to these low-cost teas. The ITA even expressed worry over the implications of the proposed shift for "the Indian producer's position." "Generally speaking," the ITA stated, Indian companies' standards of quality were, "as yet . . . not so high as the Sterling [companies' standards]." If rupee companies were able to sell their lower-quality tea only in India, brokers would simply buy similar teas from other countries in London, making it difficult for the rupee companies to succeed and improve.

Despite these warnings, the Auctions Enquiry Commission insisted that more auctioning should take place at the already established centers in Calcutta (for the north Indian trade from Assam and Bengal) and Cochin (for the south Indian trade). Its report mandated the expansion of these auction sites and proposed limiting the amount of tea that could be sold outside the auction system.[10] Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the TBI set up additional auction centers in tea-growing regions across the country, at Coonoor (1963), Guwahati (1970), Siliguri (1976), and Coimbatore (1981). These auction centers were located in cities that were geographically close to key tea-growing regions. This geographical proximity gave potential buyers the ability to have the tactile, visual experience of tea that they saw as essential to making informed purchases. It also added a layer of regulatory control to the process. Each buyer had to be registered at a regional auction center. Every registered buyer was given access to samples of every lot of tea on offer in a given week. (If they bought a significant amount of tea at auction, these samples were free of charge; if not, they could be purchased for a nominal amount.) As a result, UK-based tea companies increasingly had to work through proxy buyers who were registered to

[9] BL Mss Eur F174/1251: "ITA on the Government of India Tea Auctions Committee dated 13 January 1955 Circular C.6 (To the members of the General Committee only)."

[10] BL Mss Eur F174/2107: "Report of the Committee on Tea Auctions, 1955," pp. 13–15.

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buy at Indian auctions. Over time, tea retailers in the US and Europe started to buy from large-scale tea dealers in a global secondary market.

The TBI's investigations brought the trade under the purview of India's government, but they also revealed a hidden tension in the tea trade, between the quality of tea as a material product and the quality of the market itself. As a material product, tea was variable, susceptible to seasonal changes in weather and regional differences in growing climates, but as the TBI's investigations were taking place, tea was being recast as a tactile, material symbol of India itself – a "swadeshi" commodity. Whereas "free trade" advocates measured the quality of the market in terms of the relative barriers to circulation (e.g., the lack of regulation, the reduction or elimination of duties), government regulators saw the quality of the market in terms of its geographical location and association with the nation. For them, an Indian tea auction was superior to a London tea auction because it could be regulated, taxed, and permitted by India's government.

The Pan-India Auction

The establishment of the seven distinct auction centers across India between the 1950s and the 1970s had the effect of strengthening government oversight of the industry. In its first iteration in 1953, a regulatory act, the Tea Marketing Control Order (TMCO), mandated that 75 percent of all tea grown in India be sold at one of the auction centers.[11] The creation of the auction centers also created seven discrete trading communities. In each site, brokers and buyers who were dedicated to a particular regional trade became intimately familiar not only with the seasonal and yearly variations in crop qualities but also with one another. As in London, the world of Indian tea brokerage was by and large one of well-educated middle-class men. Tea brokers attended the same schools, were members of the same clubs, and enjoyed the same sport and leisure activities. For brokers, "quality tea" could best be discerned by individuals with "quality" tastes, habits, and associations beyond the auction and tasting room floors.

[11] The TMCO was part of the Tea Act of 1953, which also established the TBI and its regulatory power over the industry.

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By the 1990s, however, the landscape had begun to change. First, the Indian tea industry faced a major market crisis. For three decades, it had enjoyed a steady market in the Soviet Union, but after the fall of the USSR, that market began to dwindle. Even before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the government had begun steadily modifying the TMCO, allowing more and more tea to be sold outside the auction system, in "direct trading" relationships. As the market crisis deepened, tea companies began exploiting this opening, selling their most lucrative, highest-quality teas to buyers in the US and Europe.

It was in this period that new and old forms of transparency began to blend. The reductions in auction quotas under the TMCO were pushed by Indian leaders who favored a liberalization of the country's economy – an opening up to international markets that had largely been stifled in the first three decades of postcolonial government. By the end of the 1990s, thanks in part to this liberalization, the global ethical trade movement had begun to find a niche in India's tea industry. Plantations in Darjeeling, Assam, and other famed tea-growing regions began seeking fair trade certification, which offered not only an imprimatur of ethicality but also a direct market. Fair trade tea, by definition, must be sold directly to certified buyers. In fair trade discourse, intermediaries such as auction brokers (and governments) are held up as obstacles to ethical agriculture (Besky 2014). By the 2000s, the fair trade movement was being joined by a host of other "partnerships" and start-up schemes that aimed to use e-commerce and the narrative power of web-based storytelling to fuse direct trade to market quality.

But back in auction centers, seasoned brokers saw in the push for direct trade relationships an abandonment of the longstanding emphasis on quality and variability that had long shaped the trade. Fair trade and other direct schemes included no mechanism for ensuring that the product consumers received was actually good, in terms of taste, aroma, color, or any of the other parameters valued by industry insiders. At Nilhat House, the imposing home of the Kolkata tea auction built at the height of the Nehruvian push to recast tea as a national beverage (the building was inaugurated by Nehru himself in 1961), brokers I interviewed between 2008 and 2016 insisted that fair trade could not guarantee quality in this sense.

But during the period of my fieldwork, the auction itself was starting to look anachronistic and corrupt. And bureaucrats at the TBI

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described it as such. Brokers' and buyers' esoteric valuation of tea and the manner in which they sold it in regional auction centers threatened efficiency. To the TBI, it was alarming (but not necessarily surprising) that more and more of the country's tea was being sold outside the auctions. The system that the TBI had established – regional auction centers, registered buyers, strong government oversight – had been put in place in order to ensure that tea's material qualities would not be forgotten in the effort to make a quality market that would benefit the Indian nation. But that same system had created its own kind of elitism, opacity, and potential corruption. The gentlemanly, face-to-face auction, bureaucrats claimed, allowed brokers to collude with one another to fix prices. Along the way, of course, the TBI was losing control of these relationships – and, along with them, the industry it was established to regulate. The only way to convince more producers to sell at auction would be to promote transparency.

To be clear, the TBI was adamant that it was not the auction itself that was the problem, just the social relations within it. The auction could be reformed and redeemed through technical intervention. A digital tea auction system was introduced – albeit with a great deal of resistance – between 2008 and 2016 (see Besky 2016; 2020), but digitization was only an intermediate step. The next step was to further open up the space of the auction center itself – to roll out what regulators called a "*pan*-India e-auction." In the pan-India e-auction, launched in June 2016 after several years of repeated delays and false starts, buyers were no longer required to limit their bidding to the auction center (e.g., Kolkata, Cochin, Siliguri) in which they were registered. They could, in the words of TBI proponents of the system, "log-on and buy tea" from any center through an internet-based platform.

The explicit aim of the pan-India auction, as it had been with the electronic platform that preceded it, was to facilitate better "price discovery" and to push higher volumes of tea through the auction. Speaking about the rollout of the pan-India auction, Rita Teaotia, Union Commerce Secretary, told *The Hindu*, "The new system could prove to be a turning point for tea auctioning in India, which began in 1861 in this city." Prior to June 2016, each of the auction centers ran according to its own – albeit different – rules mandating schedules for payment, timing of lots, warehousing practices, and other issues. The pan-India auction created one set of auction rules for all the centers. Bureaucrats described this as a means of "bringing uniformity to non-standardized trade."

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The emphasis on standardization is noteworthy here. In the 1950s, TBI investigators responded to British brokers' concerns about the importance of organoleptically experiencing tea before bidding on it at auction by establishing the seven auction centers. The auction was a sociotechnical means for the broker to "see inside" the lots that were listed in the auction catalog, but it was also a means for the Indian state to better "see" the industry it had inherited from its colonial forebears (Levitt 2009; Scott 1999). By the 2000s, however, messages about the importance of ensuring tea's material quality were being drowned out by messages about the importance of ensuring the quality of the market. As India's economy was opened up to global competition in a variety of sectors, a market dominated by an insular group of experts who had to be registered with a vast government agency seemed anathema to growth and efficiency. If the TBI had any hope of maintaining its regulatory authority, the space of auctioning had to be expanded from the regional scale of the seven centers to the national scale. The site of the auction could no longer be "Kolkata" or "Kochi" or "Siliguri," but "India." If the pan-India auction was successful, then the TBI would be justified in its parallel plan to alter the TMCO to increase the amount of tea plantations were required to sell through the auction. In the wake of the 2016 rollout of the pan-India auction, the TBI tried to raise the quota to 70 percent, but, facing resistance from plantation owners and managers, it eventually dropped the requirement to 50 percent, still 10 percent higher than the post-liberalization low of 40 percent.

Conclusion

The television ad for Tata Gold tea with which I opened this chapter may seem epiphenomenal to the history of regulation and trade. But I would argue that it captures tensions that emerge as the circulation of commodities becomes wrapped up in the language of transparency, or when commodity circulation is reformed through a desire to make visible social relations that have heretofore been occluded. Unfurling along with those long cylindrical twists of tea are tensions of material transparency and market transparency.

Tata Gold distinguishes itself through its materiality. Some 15 percent of its contents are what the company's marketing material describes as "long leaves." Most of the tea sold within India is not

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"long-leaf" but "cut-tear-curl" (CTC) tea, which takes the form of tiny, dark kernels – more reminiscent of instant coffee than a dried leaf. If any tea has become India's "national beverage" since 1947, then it is CTC tea, which mixes perfectly with milk and spices and withstands harsh boiling much better than the delicate long-leaf variety. Tata Gold highlights the enduring aesthetic forms of colonial production.

Tata's advertising is also about the market. Since the end of the colonial era, those long leaves have been tasted, priced, and valued for a foreign market. The inclusion of 15 percent, then, represents a kind of quota. The figure of the unfurling leaf signals the emergence of an educated, empowered middle-class consumer. That the consumer is also a voter makes sense in the context of a neoliberalizing India in which political and economic participation are so closely linked.

Yet the advertisement – not surprisingly – oversimplifies things. The material and market forms of transparency are more difficult to reconcile. Although the Tata Gold ad campaign rather firmly juxtaposes the empowered voter–consumer with the lethargic, corrupt state, I have tried to show in this chapter that much can be learned about the limits and possibilities of transparency if we situate it within a longer history of state regulation. Seen from the point of view of TBI bureaucrats, the Indian government's role in the tea industry has always been to unmask the operations of a large, powerful economic institution. Postcolonial governments – often associated with opacity and corruption – are perhaps unfairly measured against governments in the Global North by their relative willingness to do such unmasking. Whether in the immediate aftermath of decolonization in the 1950s or in the wake of liberalization in the 1990s and 2000s, free trade as a regulatory priority clashes with national-level growth. At the same time, tea's value and distinction on the market – seen in the juxtaposition between the "quality" of a long-leaf tea versus the abundance and coarseness of a CTC – clash with tea's value as a symbol of national awakening and development.

My intervention here is to include stories like that of the TBI's contradictory efforts at regulation within the longer history of transparency. After all, these efforts have been carried out on behalf of the same citizen–consumers that advocates of free trade, fair trade, and direct trade claim to be representing. Considering how many non-state efforts at material and market transparency tend to use the postcolonial state as an ethical or moral foil, it is worth understanding in more

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precise terms what role the state has played in creating or mitigating material and market opacity.

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2 *Transparency and the Meaning of Sustainability*

MATTHEW ARCHER

Introduction

In the late 2010s, the British NGO Traidcraft Exchange ran a campaign targeting the UK's biggest tea brands with the goal of convincing them to disclose information about the estates and farms from which they source their tea. The campaign was initially focused on Assam, where labor conditions, especially for women, are notoriously poor (Mishra et al. 2014; see also Besky 2014), and it encouraged consumers to send pre-written postcards to the headquarters of corporations like Unilever and Tata Global Beverages, which own popular brands such as Tetley, PG Tips, and Lipton. The idea was that consumer pressure would force these companies to be more transparent by disclosing information about their sourcing practices, and that through these disclosures, certain social sustainability goals would be achieved.

Indeed, Traidcraft Exchange put a lot of faith in its approach to transparency. One section of its report on the campaign, *The Estate They're In: How the Tea Industry Traps Women in Poverty in Assam*, was titled "Why transparency could be a game-changer" and listed four reasons why "publishing a list of suppliers," which seemed to be synonymous with transparency, "has the potential to be a game-changer for women working in Assam." These reasons were: (1) empowering workers and local organizations, (2) treating consumers with respect, (3) rewarding and recognizing improving practice, and (4) falling into line with global trends (Sharman 2018: 17). By the time the campaign finished in 2019, the large companies that were targeted had disclosed lists of suppliers not only in Assam, but around the world, which Traidcraft Exchange viewed as a huge success. One

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section of the now defunct campaign website, Knowledge is Power, offered a very positive evaluation of the campaign's impact:

> The "Who picked my tea?" campaign has turned the UK's tea industry from secrecy to one of the most transparent supply chains.
>
> Thanks to actions by people like you, Yorkshire Tea, Twinings, Tetley, Clipper, PG Tips and Typhoo have now published their supplier lists.
>
> This information is power.
>
> For the consumers, who can find out where their tea comes from. But most importantly, for the tea workers who will know who buys their tea.

As I show below, Traidcraft Exchange's campaign and the organization's subsequent assessment of the campaign's purported success point to the ways in which contemporary sustainability efforts often rely on an exceedingly opaque causal relationship between the disclosure of information and the generation of various sustainability impacts. Opening this black box helps illuminate the extent to which contemporary sustainability relies on "the market" to achieve its objectives (Archer and Elliott 2021), but also the extent to which the market's purported ability to transform transparency into sustainability is uncritically reproduced as the only context in which information is useful. In what follows, I take Traidcraft Exchange's understanding of the relationship between transparency as the disclosure of information, on the one hand, and the generation of positive social and environmental impacts, on the other, as emblematic of a larger sociotechnical imaginary of what I have described elsewhere as neoliberal sustainability (Archer 2024). Within this imaginary, the proliferation of data *about* sustainability is taken as synonymous with sustainability per se, a correspondence that makes sense only if the market is understood as mediating the causal relationship between more transparency and more sustainability. The growing obsession with data-driven transparency initiatives, which is a defining characteristic of contemporary sustainability initiatives and sustainability governance more broadly (see Gupta and Mason 2016), limits the scope of sustainability action to a narrow suite of business-friendly reporting protocols that ultimately undermine attempts to address various socio-ecological crises.

In this chapter, I reflect on Traidcraft Exchange's campaign, the disclosures it prompted, and various assessments of these disclosures' (potential) impact, from both Traidcraft Exchange and targeted

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companies, particularly Unilever, which I situate in a broader discourse of transparency and its relationship to sustainability in a diverse range of contemporary organizations and institutions. I argue that the correspondence between transparency and sustainability – the widespread belief that more transparency leads to more sustainability – depends, at least in part, on the implicit but fundamental assumption that the market (and perhaps the market alone) is able to transform disclosed information into sustainability outcomes. A critical analysis of the politics of transparency should attend to the processes through which "the market" has become the ubiquitous context in which more information means more sustainability, more accountability, better governance, and so on. To understand how transparency works, in other words, requires an understanding of how – and according to whom – transparency is *supposed* to work.

Transparent, Sustainable Supply Chains

For Traidcraft Exchange, there is clearly a causal link between the kinds of disclosures that constitute transparency and the kinds of sustainability outcomes they are hoping to promote: namely, improving the working conditions of women in the Assam tea industry. Of the four reasons that such disclosures could be a "game-changer" for women working on Assam tea estates, the idea that transparency is a way to reward and recognize social and environmental improvements offers the clearest insight into how, exactly, such disclosures are supposed to lead to sustainable outcomes. What Traidcraft Exchange is suggesting is that companies that disclose their sources and are therefore more transparent will be able to enjoy the financial benefits of more sustainable operations. Such disclosures will allow actors including supermarkets and consumers to see the improvements tea brands have made in, for instance, their suppliers' treatment of workers or an estate's contribution to deforestation. They are, in corporate sustainability jargon, suggesting that there is indeed a "business case" for transparency. In this implicit causal ontology, it is the market that mediates the relationship between consumers and farmworkers (via supermarkets, tea brands, brokers, producers, estate managers, and a host of other actors that constitute global tea supply chains), and it is the market that allows consumers to express their preference for ethically sourced tea over unethically sourced tea through a process often

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glossed as "voting with one's wallet." In this worldview, if it is transparency as the disclosure of information that affords recognition, it is the market that affords the reward.

Traidcraft Exchange goes on to claim that, by pressuring companies to disclose supplier lists, its campaign transformed the supply chains that facilitate the movement of tea from farms spread across the Global South to British kitchens and cafés into exemplars of transparency, empowering both consumers and workers. It is an astonishing statement, one that helps illuminate both the relative ease with which supply chains seem to be able to be rendered transparent through the disclosure of this kind of information and the grandiose claims that are causally attached to such disclosures. How is it that the simple publication of a few Excel spreadsheets and PDF lists containing basic information about suppliers – farm names, and in some cases the location, which tea brands would have already had on hand – can be justifiably framed as leading to the empowerment of both consumers and workers? How, in other words, is transparency causally related to sustainability?

Answering this question requires an examination of the causal ontology that structures the sociotechnical imaginary of neoliberal sustainability, which is characterized by a "techno-fideistic" belief in the ability of enhanced measurement and reporting infrastructures to provide the (big) data necessary for the market to solve climate change and other socio-ecological crises for us (Archer 2024; see also Jarrige 2016; Van Dijck 2014). Put differently, we have to open the black box of transparency initiatives and try to map out the mechanisms that connect the disclosure of information about various sustainability concerns – in this case, where tea is coming from – with some desired sustainability outcome – in this case, improved treatment of women farmworkers in Assam. In doing so, it becomes clearer that "the market" mediates the relationship between transparency and sustainability because it is the market that is supposed to make sense of – and act on – the information disclosed as a result of these transparency initiatives.

Traidcraft Exchange's assessment of the impact of its campaign – its claim that the relatively banal disclosure of vague sourcing information marked a radical transformation of the tea supply chain in terms of its transparency and that this led (somehow) to the empowerment of producers and consumers alike – reflects a broader imaginary in which practices of transparency or what Sampson (2019) calls "transparenting"

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are framed as ethically and politically fundamental to a wide array of desirable outcomes, chief among them sustainability. For sustainability standards developers, in particular, more than fifty of whom I observed and interviewed as part of a project on the role of voluntary certification schemes in the governance of the Kenyan tea supply chain between 2018 and 2021, transparency presents different opportunities as well as different challenges. In an interview with Robert, who works in the London office of a standards development organization, it becomes clear just how much a driving force the pursuit of transparency is for market-based sustainability organizations. He tells me that it is impossible to achieve sustainability without accountability, and that accountability is impossible without transparency. That, he explains, is why there is such a strong focus on auditing and why audit reports are always public. The effectiveness of the standards his organization designs and constantly revises is premised on the idea that they are trustworthy – that is, that the certificate or label awarded to compliant producers indicates that the standard was actually followed; such trustworthiness is necessary to take advantage of the purported (but empirically suspect) consumer willingness to pay more for sustainable products. But it is not only the global tea value chain that has to be rendered legible through standardization; standards developers themselves face pressure to be transparent about their budgets and salaries, and they try to obviate criticisms leveled at organizations like the Red Cross by publishing detailed information about their finances.

Transparency is also the motivation behind the resources these organizations commit to measuring and reporting the impacts of their standards. Susanna, who works on the measurement and evaluation team for a different standards developer in London, tells me that both consumers and companies expect to be able to see the value of a standard, and, just as importantly, to see how that value was derived. It is not enough, she argues, for people who have invested in sustainability – whether it is a consumer who paid a "sustainability premium" for a certified product or a company that has gone through the motions of procuring ingredients and other inputs from certified sustainable upstream producers – to trust that the standard has done what is promised; they also expect evidence that such actions are impactful. In this sense, transparency becomes one of the easiest things to evince, since a standards development organization can easily demonstrate that a producer followed the rules regarding the disclosure of

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information as stipulated in a particular standard, which is itself evidence of enhanced transparency. In other words, the disclosure of specified information in a specified form can be taken as evidence both that producers complied with the standard and that the standards development organization has enhanced the transparency of the supply chain.

Critics of mainstream sustainability standards such as Fairtrade and Rainforest Alliance also focus on what they see as various failures to be sufficiently transparent within these organizations, especially regarding the way their standards are developed. At a trade show for tea and coffee in Hamburg, a Madrid-based coffee importer was critical of the "secrecy" surrounding Fairtrade and Rainforest Alliance. She works instead with the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO), which she regards as open and democratic in its reliance on a set of general principles, the second of which is "Transparency and Accountability":

> The organisation is transparent in its management and commercial relations. It is accountable to all its stakeholders and respects the sensitivity and confidentiality of commercial information.
>
> The organisation finds appropriate, participatory ways to involve Workers, Producers and members in its decision-making processes. It ensures that relevant information is provided to all its trading partners. The communication channels are good and open at all levels of the supply chain. (WFTO 2023: 17)

A tea trader in London was critical of Fairtrade from a similar perspective, arguing that although Rainforest Alliance does not guarantee a much-needed price premium for certified tea, it is still better than Fairtrade because the latter is not transparent about the way the premiums are spent. She tells me that there is no oversight once the premiums get back to the farmers, no accountability that they will invest them as they should. Rainforest Alliance and Fairtrade respond to these kinds of criticisms by aligning themselves closely with the ISEAL Alliance, an organization that provides standards and guidelines on how standards developers should go about developing standards and engaging with stakeholders, focusing in particular on the transparency of those processes. An auditor expressed similar concerns about the difference between NEPCon (since relaunched as Preferred by Nature), a popular Copenhagen-based certifier, and Africert, which has offices in Kenya, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire. In particular, he was

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worried about Africert's "lack of transparency" and its effects on the integrity of the audits they conduct, although he never specified how this lack of transparency manifested or what evidence he had to suspect that Africert's operations were in some way untrustworthy.

Transparency is a buzzword in negotiations about sustainability more generally. When I attended several business-focused and corporate-sponsored events surrounding COP 21 in Paris in 2015 as part of my dissertation fieldwork, it was all anyone seemed to be talking about. Much of my work as a participant observer in Geneva between August 2015 and August 2016 focused on sustainability professionals working in a number of organizations who were trying to figure out ways to measure, report, and evaluate their social and environmental impacts in a way that was relatively easily commensurable with their financial performance. They looked for ideally quantitative indicators of sustainability that could be correlated with corporate financial performance metrics. This was especially important for publicly traded corporations and their investors. All of this work was motivated by the recognition – sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit – that disclosing information about social and environmental impacts made a company or organization more transparent, and being more transparent was correlated with being more sustainable. The goal was to make sustainability reporting as standard and standardized as financial reporting.

Recently, the European Union has attempted to codify this by requiring companies above a certain size and in certain industries to disclose sustainability data alongside their annual financial reports. Both the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) are framed explicitly around their capacity to enable investors to make more sustainable decisions as a result of increased corporate transparency. Under the banner of the Global Compact, the United Nations has been promoting the normalization of sustainability reporting for more than a decade. Laws such as the CSRD and the CSDDD often refer to these voluntary reporting standards frameworks.

Transparency has even filtered into design choices. The World Business Council for Sustainable Development, an influential organization whose membership includes some of the world's biggest corporations, rents office space for its Geneva headquarters from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, which

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is located in a building made almost entirely out of glass in the shape of flower petals, a design meant to evoke, as one of the building's junior architects told me, both transparency (with its glass walls) and sustainability (with its petal-shaped towers).

From seemingly every angle, then, transparency is a hot topic among sustainability professionals, especially those who are interested in the more social and environmentally sustainable governance of global supply chains. This reflects what Birchall (2011; see also Birchall 2014) observes as a seemingly universal assumption that more transparency is better: that is, that more transparency is desirable, especially in the area of both public and private governance (Fung et al. 2007) of sustainability issues (Gupta and Mason 2016). Hansen et al. distill three themes in critical research on transparency that complicate this narrative. First, transparency is paradoxical, as the pursuit of transparency "itself produces new dimensions of opacity and obscurity" (2015: 119). Second, transparency is mediated in the sense that it is "ephemeral and always in the making," relying on various "devices, operations and proxies" in order to emerge (ibid.: 121). Finally, transparency is "part and parcel of the emergence of 'procedural' and 'flexible' modes of governance" (ibid.: 124), inextricably linked to the rapid growth of, among other things, sustainability standards (see Busch 2011; Loconto 2014). More generally, transparency is premised on a model of linear communication, one in which, proponents claim, information disclosure will produce an informed and engaged public that can hold people in positions of power to account. The technological mediation that is necessarily involved in the provision of information appears as a neutral transmission belt, obscuring the power that is involved in the selection and coding of what is made visible to us and what is not (Hansen and Flyverbom 2015: 874).

What is clear here is that transparency is about information. Indeed, most definitions of transparency see it as the disclosure of information (or some variation on that theme, such as the reporting of information), a tendency that is as true among business-friendly definitions as it is among anthropologists and other critical scholars of transparency (Albu and Flyverbom 2019; Corsín Jiménez 2011; Gupta 2023; MacLean 2014). According to UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD 2004: 3), for example, "transparency denotes a state of affairs in which the participants in the investment process are able to obtain sufficient information from each other in order to make

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informed decisions and meet obligations and commitments." Tarus and Omandi (2013), drawing on case studies from Kenya in an attempt to make a "business case for corporate transparency," refer to transparency several times as the "disclosure of information" about, among other things, investment decision processes, governance strategies, risk-return profiles, and social impacts.

Even critical scholars such as Hess (2007) conceptually reinforce the idea that there is a relatively straightforward cause-and-effect relationship between transparency, accountability, and sustainability. What they focus their critique on instead is improving the reliability of information through, for example, the structural integration of ostensibly independent, third-party intermediaries in the disclosure process, reflecting a view of uncertainty and ambiguity as merely technical problems with technical solutions (see Best 2007). Similarly, the WFTO approach preferred by the Madrid-based coffee importer we met above falls short of questioning the idea that the proliferation of relevant information by and among various supply chain actors and other stakeholders is an inherent driver of enhanced accountability. No criticism is leveled against this causal ontology; what critics take issue with instead is simply the quality of information provided, as well as the communicative and regulatory infrastructures that facilitate the flow of information, but rarely what people are supposed to do with that information to effect any meaningful change in terms of social or environmental concerns. Gold and Heikkurinen (2018) refer to this as the transparency fallacy, which rests on the overly optimistic (and, in their view, wholly unwarranted) assumption that "corporate disclosure on environmental, social, and economic performance will lead to more responsible business practices as corporations are exposed to public scrutiny, and can thus be held accountable for their actions." What they find instead is in line with much of the critical literature on transparency, which emphasizes that calls for greater transparency often facilitate business-as-usual and pre-empt challenges to the status quo through the post-political language of win–win partnerships (Garsten and Jacobsson 2011; Mason 2008; Moors 2019; Sharma 2013).

Information as Enclosure

If transparency is the disclosure of information, it is important to think about what information is and, crucially, what it does. For the

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linguistic anthropologist Paul Kockelman, "any meaningful process relates [signs, objects, and interpretants] in the following way: a sign stands for its object on the one hand, and its interpretant on the other, in such a way as to make the interpretant stand in relation to the object corresponding to its own relation to the object" (Kockelman 2013: 120). What this means is that meaning is less about the relationship between a sign and an object (or between a signifier and a signified in the classic Saussurean sense) and is more about the correspondence between the relationship between a sign and an object, on the one hand, and an interpretant and an object, on the other hand; Kockelman refers to this as a relation between relations. Information, then, according to Kockelman, can be understood as the "enclosure of meaning"; this means, among other things, that the meaning of a certain piece of information becomes "relatively portable: not so much independent of context, as *dependent on contexts which have been engineered so as to be relatively ubiquitous, and hence seemingly context-free*" (Kockelman 2013: 115, emphasis added), a semiotic anti-politics machine.

Kockelman's theory of information strikes at the heart of neoliberal sustainability in the sense that it gives us a provocative, critical vocabulary for thinking about what transparency initiatives actually do. Rather than merely prompting the disclosure of information that corporations and other actors might have otherwise preferred not to publish, these transparency initiatives force us to reckon with the causal mechanisms that link such disclosures to their purported social and environmental objectives. It pushes us, in other words, to think about the context in which such causal ontologies make sense – in which claims about the disclosure of this kind of information as meaningfully related to some sustainability outcome seems legitimate – and, crucially, about the ways in which such a context is engineered and tacitly reproduced so that sustainability can be meaningfully linked to something as trivial as publishing a list of suppliers.

When Unilever decided to release a list of farms and estates supplying tea for its brands in the UK and Ireland, it was disclosing information in a relatively specific, quantitative sense. Although there are no data about the amount of tea sourced from each location, the document includes the names of producers, the selling marks (the actual farm, estate, and/or factory where the tea is produced), and the country where the producers are located. But through the

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publication of this document, Unilever was also disclosing information in a more general, qualitative sense, signifying through the act of releasing a list in the first place that the company is transparent about its production while at the same time defining what actions (e.g., releasing a list of suppliers) constitute transparency. Discursively binding assessments of a company's sustainability or social responsibility to whether or not they disclose this kind of information – that is, whether or not they are transparent – reinforces this definition of transparency while at the same time establishing sustainability as (merely) the willingness to be transparent. What Unilever hoped to signify through the disclosure of its sourcing information was that it was committed to transparency – that it was, in other words, a transparent company (or at the very least that it managed a transparent supply chain) – and it hoped that such a signification would be interpreted as evidence that it was committed to sustainability in its tea supply chain.

Traidcraft Exchange's glowing assessment of the success of its program helped establish and reinforce this correspondence between disclosure and transparency, on the one hand, and between sustainability and transparency, on the other. By late 2020, the organization felt confident enough to publish a "principles-to-practice guide for ethical businesses." Throughout the report, market forces offer a dynamic background against which the social and environmental impactfulness of disclosures is established. The report opens with an appeal to sustainability before immediately relating this to the private financial benefits of transparency:

> As those who are working hard to build and maintain ethical businesses know, it takes time to do business in ways that benefit people and the planet. Finding out and publicly reporting on who is in your supply chain has a lot of benefits. It can build brand reputation, enhance consumer trust, lead to better business relationships, help win contracts, minimize a range of risks and support compliance. (Traidcraft Exchange 2020: 1)

The report goes on to provide details about the different business benefits of transparency, followed by a list of nine steps companies can take to improve their supply chain transparency, most of which relate to information. These steps focus, among other things, on determining why a company wants to disclose certain information and what information will be included in its disclosure; what information a company already has available and what information it needs to

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actively collect; and, finally, how the information should ultimately be disclosed and the kinds of reflections that should take place before starting the process over again. Such an approach to transparency suggests an obvious correspondence between transparency and sustainability, but is ambiguous regarding the causal mechanisms through which the disclosure of the kind of information the report identifies as a bare minimum is meant to lead to different sustainability outcomes, leaving implicit its advice's fundamental reliance on the market to generate social and environmental impacts.

Transparency for the Market

Efforts to make supply chains more transparent through the disclosure of information about sourcing locations are motivated by different goals, but not, as the above suggests, by different impact imaginaries. The people working at organizations such as Traidcraft Exchange and the WFTO are working with the primary goal of improving the living and working conditions of farmers and farmworkers, and transparency is supposed to facilitate this by increasing accountability. The people working at Unilever, on the other hand, while they would certainly agree that improved working and living conditions are a worthy goal, are motivated primarily by a desire to enhance the company's financial performance. This is clear in Unilever's 2020 annual report, where transparency is framed variously as a way to strengthen the management team's "dialogue" with its shareholders, as contributing to employee loyalty and retention, improving risk management, and increasing consumer confidence in the company's products (Unilever 2021a).

How is it that transparency, understood here as the disclosure of information about sourcing, can be wielded in service of objectives as different as increasing the share price of a multinational corporation and improving the lives of marginalized farmworkers? As Michael Mason (2008: 12) has argued, "any analytic examination of disclosure measures in global environmental governance that fails to grasp the broader politico-economic context of transparency practices and norms is likely to lose sight of the regimes of power in play." Reflecting on the prerogative of civil society organizations (like Traidcraft Exchange) to speak on behalf of victims (like the marginalized workers on Assam tea plantations), he urges scholars of

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transparency to pay attention to "the question of political representation: for whom is transparency intended? And by which standards of accountability are disclosure-based governance mechanisms to be judged?" (Mason 2008: 11).

In trying to answer this question for the various actors discussed so far – Traidcraft Exchange and the WFTO, Unilever and the Rainforest Alliance, the European Commission, and so on – we encounter a lot of ambiguity. On the one hand, such ambiguity can be constructive, as Jacqueline Best (2007) has shown in her critique of analyses of uncertainty that frame it as a technical problem that more and better transparency solves. What Best argues, instead, is that such "technical ambiguities" are only one kind of ambiguity, and that a focus on contested and intersubjective ambiguities highlights the inherently political nature of transparency and opacity. These latter ambiguities arise as a result of political and conceptual differences, the recognition of which, Best argues, is essential to effective governance. This seems to be what organizations like the Rainforest Alliance and Traidcraft Exchange, as well as scholars such as Tarus and Omandi (2013), are trying to do when they appeal to the economic incentives of the actors whose activities they want to govern: by making a "business case" for transparency – by, for instance, arguing that transparency increases consumer confidence and brand loyalty – they are trying to create a space in which the social and environmental goals of NGOs can be aligned with the financial goals of large, multinational corporations.

On the other hand, organization theorists have long emphasized the extent to which ambiguity can be strategically wielded (Eisenberg 1984), particularly to the extent that transparency in one area often creates useful opacities elsewhere (Birchall 2011; Flyverbom 2019; Schade 2023; Stohl et al. 2016). As Schumann (2007: 839) argues in an analysis of the Welsh parliament's vocal embrace of transparency in the late 1990s and early 2000s, "transparency practices are a strategic resource utilized by institutional actors to advance the individual and party goals of elected officials." Thus, in asking for whom transparency is intended, it is important to examine both the divergences and the overlaps between the motivations behind a transparency initiative and, crucially, the shared assumptions underlying assessments of its (potential) impactfulness. NGOs promote data-driven transparency with consumers, investors, and activists in mind, hoping that these various actors, equipped with better information about corporate

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activities, will be able to hold companies accountable for their negative social and environmental impacts. Companies, on the other hand, target a similar audience of consumers and investors but in service of a very different group of people: shareholders. Despite this, the assumptions underlying the effectiveness of such initiatives are similar. It is through the dynamics of the market that the disclosure of information is supposed to lead to sustainability outcomes. The market subsumes the diverse audiences of these transparency initiatives and becomes the primary target of disclosures, the thing that is supposed to make sense of the disclosed data and improve social, environmental, *and* financial performance.

Conclusion

In their Introduction, the editors of this volume identify what they call the paradox of transparency, "[t]he claim that transparency is a process of mediation which incorrectly understands itself to be a process of *disintermediation*." Such a paradox speaks to Kockelman's contention that information is the enclosure of meaning to the extent that the meaning of a piece of information may appear relatively context independent but only because certain contexts have been "engineered" to be ubiquitous. From this perspective, the paradox of transparency raises several interesting questions: What information is actually disclosed through a disclosure? What does such information mean, and on what context does such meaning depend? How was such a context engineered, and which actors were involved in its construction and reproduction?

Unilever disclosed a list of its suppliers in response to Traidcraft Exchange's "Who picked my tea?" campaign, information that was supposed to empower workers and consumers alike. For Traidcraft Exchange, the disclosure of this information rendered the tea supply chain transparent, while for Unilever these disclosures were framed as a key element in their sustainability strategy, which at the time was called the Sustainable Living Plan (Unilever 2021b). But in disclosing this information, Unilever also disclosed another type of information, information about its willingness to be "transparent," on the one hand, and information about what kind of information it would disclose as evidence of its transparency, on the other hand. This seems like the information that really matters if we want to understand the

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politics of transparency, its relationship to sustainability, and the role of the market in mediating that relationship.

Paying attention to the market's opaque but fundamental role in the causal ontologies linking transparenting practices to sustainability outcomes highlights the role of organizations like Traidcraft Exchange and the Rainforest Alliance in reinforcing the correspondence between the disclosure of relatively low-stakes information and the lofty sustainability goals such organizations claim to be pursuing. In diverse contexts – from these kinds of organizations, to the European Commission and various UN agencies, to multinational corporations and their investors – reports, guidelines, and other documents about the importance of transparency reproduce the idea that the disclosure of information about production practices leads to more sustainable outcomes, a claim that increasingly relies on the assumption that it is "the market" that causally links transparency to sustainability. As new technologies emerge that enable and mediate the rapid proliferation of information in the form of so-called big data, Aarti Gupta has called for a "radical" approach to transparency "that shines a light on the still largely hidden (from governance) *drivers* of unsustainability and climate harm; a transparency that *pinpoints where greatest responsibility for climate action lies*" (Gupta 2023: 3, emphasis in the original). Among other things, such an approach should include a critical focus on the organizations that are responsible for proliferating an imaginary in which the market and its corporate–financial avatars are presumed to constitute the causal mechanism through which transparency leads to sustainability, as well as the ways in which such an imaginary gets reproduced as a seemingly ubiquitous, contextualizing background against which sustainability discourses take place.

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3 *Opaque Exchange*

Concealment, Disclosure, and Asymmetric Transactions in the Indian Ocean Sapphire Trade

NETHRA SAMARAWICKREMA

Introduction

In 1913, the journal of the Royal Society of Arts published an article by an unnamed author on the pearl fisheries of Ceylon. Noting that a good deal of mystery had enshrouded Ceylon's pearl banks, the author described a process of valuation that relied on secrecy, on concealing transactions from view. "The valuation," the author wrote, "is done by native Moormen jewellers by secret handclasps under a cloth. After sifting and weighing the gems on brass sieves and on delicate scales, the value is fixed upon in Portuguese and Dutch coinage." "The valuation so determined," the author continued, "has very little relation to the real market value of the pearls." The document moves on, making no further mention of the secret handclasps under a cloth, leaving many questions open: What were these hand gestures? Why were they concealed? What kinds of transactions did they facilitate?

Over a hundred years later, in 2016, I sat inside a sparse office on the seventeenth floor of a high-rise building near Hong Kong's Kowloon mosque with two older Indian gem dealers whose families had traded both pearls and sapphires. One of them, Nawaz Hajiar, reached into

I thank Filipe Calvão, Elizabeth Ferry, and Matthieu Bolay for inviting me to share my work. I also express my gratitude to Sri Lankan and South Indian gemstone traders who took me into their fold and invited me to accompany them to markets across the Indian Ocean. This research was funded by grants from the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the Stanford Seed Foundation, the Stanford Graduate Research Fellowship, and the Stanford Diversity Dissertation Research Opportunity Grant. I also wish to thank the Stanford Humanities Center for supporting my writing through the Mellon Dissertation Fellowship, and the Stanford Seed Foundation for the PhD Dissertation Writing Fellowship.

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his pockets, pulled out a crisp white handkerchief, and unfurled it in the air. "I will show you how it is done," he said, extending a hand toward Rizwan Hajiar. The latter began tracing lines along his hand. I watched, transfixed. "This is one," Rizwan Hajiar said, grasping Nawaz Hajiar's index finger. "This is two, and three, and four," he continued, touching each subsequent finger. Nawaz Hajiar interjected, "Depending upon the stone, a tap translates to one hundred, one thousand, and so on." Rizwan Hajiar picked up the handkerchief, threw it over their hands, and repeated the gestures under the cloth. As I watched, he described an intricate system of trading where gem brokers negotiated prices between buyers and sellers, employing a series of codes wordlessly tapped along the palms of each other's hands. "If a seller wants twenty thousand," he explained, "the broker will tap fifty thousand onto the buyer's hand and say: '*Ithukku mele than pohanom*' [the price must be upwards of this]." In this way, the broker would inflate or deflate the numbers originally named by the buyer and seller, bargaining with both. Tracing and tapping, he would work with his hands in silence, watching each party intently, using the ruse of concealment to negotiate with them until they came to a consensus on a price. All of this had changed now, the two men said. Yet that was how their fathers brokered deals.

Watching them, the work of their hands, their minute gestures under the handkerchief, I recognized the interplay of moves to conceal and to reveal, to occlude and to disclose, as gestures and practices that are folded into the everyday work of gem trading. As evidenced by the account of the early twentieth-century observer of pearl valuation, these practices extend across the trade of different precious commodities and have deep histories in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. Pearl- and gem-trading networks extend much further back in time from when the Royal Society of Arts author made his observations. Archaeological findings show evidence of Indian, Arab, and Chinese networks of trade active in the Palk Strait from the early part of the first millennium (Carswell et al. 2013). Today, sapphire-trading networks extend from hinterland mining towns to coastal markets in Sri Lanka and across the Indian Ocean, to Hong Kong in the east and Madagascar in the west. Gem mining remains artisanal to this day, and the expansive trading networks continue to be run by collectives of traders, brokers, and commission agents who originate from a few small towns in Sri Lanka and South India. Each node of the

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network is segmented across lines of religion, ethnicity, and place of origin. Difference is critical for trade.

Given these histories, what does it mean to think about transparency in trading networks that reach back across centuries, far before gem mining and trading became industrialized and streamlined into global supply chains? Transparency as an analytic category, discourse, and regulatory framework developed more recently than these historical networks of trade, and so my chapter seeks to explore traders' emic understandings of what it means to conceal and reveal information in the Indian Ocean sapphire trade and to explore their own understanding of ethical conduct. What is the work of secrecy, occlusion, and withholding in exchange, in practice, and in the craft of trade? How do such forms of withholding contribute to making gems move? How do we understand transparency in relation to a trade where intimate practices of concealment and disclosure are folded into the gestural, embodied, and affective landscapes that make up everyday modalities of negotiation, brokerage, and arbitrage? What are the ethics that traders operate under? My chapter seeks to explore these questions. Furthermore, I ask: From the perspective of sapphire traders, what kinds of secrets are permissible to keep and how much concealment is allowed? When does it go too far? How do traders hold each other accountable? And how do they do the work of repair when trust is breached, when credit fails, and when secrets rupture relationships?

In exploring these questions, I shall make some provisional claims. The initial queries that guided this research were not centered around transparency, but focused on difference. As I worked with wholesale traders who exchanged gems across ethnic lines in the context of contemporary Sri Lanka, where ethnic relations had become fraught over the course of its three-decade-long civil war and its postwar anti-minority violence, I tried to understand the work of difference in facilitating trade. Yet my focus on understanding what was most obvious – why trading took place across lines of social difference – prevented me from initially seeing what was less evident but just as important. This was the fact that traders from different places of origin also shared among themselves a set of skills, expertise, and practices, and a vocabulary of trade, that shaped their engagements with each other.

In this chapter, I look more closely at these practices, exploring the idea of treating trade as a form of craft, drawing on Richard Sennett's

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(2008) notion of craftsmanship, broadly construed.[1] Craftsmanship, according to Sennett, is founded on skills developed to a high degree of mastery and relies on a set of practices, techniques, and understandings that shape the contours of work. This work also requires negotiating ethical conundrums that appear on a regular basis, which need to be addressed and dealt with. This framework fits with my understanding of how traders themselves view their work – many see it as a vocation and a way of life, one that is passed down through generations, where relationships are forged and cultivated with trading partners, where credit lines are intergenerational, and the speculative dreams of families are built around the exchange of these small objects that garner immense interest and attraction.

Building on Sennett (2008), I experiment with the idea that the interplay of concealment and selective disclosure is part of a repertoire of practices that wholesale gem traders within the Indian Ocean sapphire-trading network employ. Here, I wish to suspend the assumption that a lack of transparency amounts to deception. I ask, instead, "What do practices of occlusion do for trade?" My first proposition is that traders have a shared understanding and set of expectations about what kind of information is permissible to withhold from view, and that this affords them great flexibility to negotiate the prices of a commodity whose value is not standardized across the network. Second, I suggest that a certain degree of opacity is built into the valorization process within circulation in a way that is distinct from the occlusion of labor's exploitation that takes place as the stones move from mines to markets. To understand how valorization works in the circulation of sapphires, I draw on Jane Guyer's theory of asymmetric exchange. Dealing with infractions, I argue, is a normal component of trade. Traders, like Sennett's (2008) craftsmen, see both making and mending as parts of the everyday life of trade.

Concealing, Revealing, and the Craft of Trading

The first day I joined Ismail Hajiar at the street-side market, he was in the thick of trading. When I arrived, he was cradling a large yellow

[1] I thank Liisa Malkki for several conversations where she helped me think through this idea, and for introducing me to Sennett's notion of craftsmanship.

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sapphire, turning it around and around in his hand. The supplier who was selling it stood to his right. They were arguing about the price.

Ismail Hajiar dropped the stone into my hand: "Look at this. They are asking for 150 [150,000 rupees]," he said.

"How many carats?" I asked, peering at it. The color was good, yet one side had a number of inclusions. Still, the stone was large enough that if the *wakkuwa* (optic axis) was favorably oriented, they could still obtain a good price after cutting it.

He fished the stone from my palm and sent his nephew to check its weight: 27.5 carats.

"I'll give you 115," Ismail Hajiar offered.

"No, Hajiar!" the man replied. "Only above 150."

"*Aiyya* [brother]," Ismail Hajiar said, placing his hand on the man's shoulder. "Come, look at this stone with me." He held the stone up toward the sun and began pointing out its flaws – a crack here, an inclusion there, an uneven distribution of color.

I looked on, amused. By now, I had come to understand that there was more to the discussion than an assessment of the stone. Buyers performed their distaste for a stone as a way to retain their bargaining power. Suppliers, in turn, quoted as high as they possibly could: "If you want to sell for 10,000," a group of Sinhalese suppliers had once told me, "you have to ask for 200,000."

Ismail Hajiar lowered the stone and looked expectantly at the man. "With all these flaws, brother, how can I pay 150?"

The supplier had his own cards to play. "Rizwan Hajiar offered me 150. He would leave it in the sun for three days and pay right away." He looked on earnestly: "I'm not lying, Hajiar. There he is. Go and ask him."

Ismail Hajiar seemed to take his word for it. Yet he held the man's gaze, and waited. The supplier tried a different tack. He put his arm around Ismail Hajiar, and lowered his voice: "I'm only showing this to you. Because it is *you*, I'll give it for 150."

"How about 120?" Ismail Hajiar offered, placing his arm around the man in turn.

"No, Haji! I told you. I have an offer for 150," he said, breaking away.

Ismail Hajiar turned to the other suppliers lining up to show him their stones. The man walked away, feigning exasperation. I sensed he wasn't actually upset, as Ismail Hajiar had closed his hand around the

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stone rather than returning it. To hold onto the stone was to signal that the negotiation remained open.

Market relations, I was beginning to grasp, were a form of theater. There is a dramatic quality to these exchanges. As suppliers quote wildly high prices and buyers make unacceptably low offers, performances of outrage ensue – arms fly, voices are raised, people storm away. Often they come back and cajole. Folded into the drama is a kind of playfulness, where everyone is in on the game. Other traders stand around, teasing, making running commentaries, watching in anticipation to see how transactions unfold. Sometimes it seems, as Anna Tsing (2015) describes in the Matsutake markets, that the point is the performance.

Yet it is a performance of a particular kind, a kind that draws in the front stage and backstage of social life (Goffman 1959). While the words exchanged between traders expressed the sentiments each person wanted the other to see, each one was also trying to discern what was not being said – the thoughts and feelings unfolding in the interior of the other's mind. Standing there, it turned out that I was not the only one at the market who was trying to decipher the meanings of people's winks and blinks. While the two men were debating the qualities of the stone and the prices, they were also scrutinizing each other, scanning each other's faces, gestures, and expressions. They were attempting to discern the degree to which their counterpart had been captivated by the gem. They were constantly asking, in market parlance, how much the buyer was "hit by the stone" (*gala wedunada*). The notion that one is hit by a stone encapsulates the sense that the stone has taken hold of a person, has drawn him or her in. While traders scrutinize stones with exacting discernment, grading, assessing, and evaluating them for their color, clarity, and luster, they also speak of an ineffable quality of attraction. As Rafeek, a fourth-generation gem trader once told me, "When you see a beautiful stone, you feel something. You can't quite describe it."

Trading stones requires skill and expertise acquired over time by men who begin to go to the markets with their fathers as teenagers. It is an expertise they say can be gained only from experience, a form of knowledge they describe as distinct from "book learning." It is a skill acquired from examining hundreds of stones a day. In the mornings I spent with Ismail Hajiar in the market, as the sun reached its peak, making the streets unbearably hot, he would teach me some of these

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skills, showing me how to handle the stone, how to detect the inclusions, holding it up to the sun, how to find its *wakkuwa* (optic axis). Alongside this, he would also tell me about the gem business.

Trading, he once said to me, is not only about knowing how to grade and select stones, but also about *knowing how to trade*. One part of this knowledge is to develop an eye for the stones, to assess them, and to sense this ineffable quality to captivate. Another part, it seems, is to acquire skills in observing people, in reading, situating those who buy and sell the stones, their gestures, their expressions, and, most importantly, their social locations within the gem-trading network. Deciphering these locations is critical, particularly for credit relations: the number of days over which credit is extended tends to mark social distance.[2] Yet another skill I began to detect was a skill in mastering the art of concealing and uncovering intents and desires, one's own and those of one's trading partner.

In a gemology class that I took at the beginning of fieldwork, Sudath, a Sinhalese instructor, told his students, mostly young Muslim men aspiring to join the trade:

> When you go to buy stones in the market, don't look like you are a rookie. Never take a new torch. If you have a new one, roll it in the dirt. Scratch it up. Make sure you hold the stone correctly so that they see that you know what you are doing. And remember this: if you are interested in a stone, don't show it. Never name your price. It is better to ask them what *their* price is first. If you tell your price, that means you agree to buy the stone for it. If someone shows you a stone and asks for 100,000 [rupees] and your price is 75,000, you should say under 75,000. If they ask for 100,000, offer 10,000. Cut the last zero out. Give the stone back. Don't say why. Say "*hari yanne na*" [it won't work]. This is how you trade.

To learn the social codes of the market, then, is to learn to play with what one conceals and reveals. It is woven into the sociality of street-side trading. I remembered Sudath's words as I waited to see what happened with the yellow sapphire in Ismail Hajiar's hand.

[2] Sinhalese traders will generally extend ten days of credit to Muslims from Beruwala. Beruwala traders may extend credit to each other for much longer, sometimes forty-five days. The actual time of payment often varies and those who delay payments are given the epithet of acting like a rubber band – someone who stretches his debt and the relationship to its limits.

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Later that morning, the supplier returned. The two men continued to negotiate, going back and forth for over twenty minutes until Ismail Hajiar finally caved in. "Okay, 150,000," he consented, "but ten days' credit." Shaking his head, feigning exasperation, the supplier agreed. Ismail Hajiar kept the stone. No money was exchanged. No receipt of the transaction was made. The man walked down the road and disappeared from view. Ismail Hajiar, I knew, would keep the stone in the sun for three days to see if the color would fade – an agreement between the two groups of traders to ensure that stones had not been treated. If the color remained unchanged, he would confirm his purchase of the stone. Given all his protestations about the flaws in the stone, I asked Ismail Hajiar how he felt about the price he paid. "It's okay," he told me, nonplussed by the fact that the supplier did not reduce the price. Lowering his voice just a fraction, he said, "It's fine because it is a good stone. If I cut it right, I can get a higher price in Beruwala."

Why did Ismail Hajiar point to the inclusions in the stone as a reason why the supplier should lower the price when he was actually willing to give him the amount he asked for? As I see it, this was not about deception, because what *was* transparent in the exchange was their shared understanding of a set of practices, tactics, and codes of conduct that included concealing their real interest in a stone and the amount at which each was willing to settle. This shared understanding of a repertoire of gestures, intimations of interest, and trading practices afforded them enormous flexibility to negotiate the prices of stones. What caught my attention about the exchange was not their bargaining tactics but the insights they revealed about the relationship between knowledge and its concealment among the traders. As the sapphire trade is credit-based, most traders sell to those whom they already know. They cultivate these relationships across various lines of social difference, sometimes across generations. If the buyer or seller is unknown, they will carry out the transaction through a broker known to both parties or ask someone within their network to vouch for the newcomer. Therefore, there is a great degree of familiarity, and in some cases a significant amount of closeness. Yet, it is a kind of intimacy that doesn't require full transparency about one's thoughts, perceptions, and interests. Secrets have their place. Trading relations are made and remade in daily interactions through what is concealed and revealed, and through when and how things are disclosed. The secret, like the gift, binds the teller and the person told into a relationship.

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Sorting Stones, Grading Traders: Modalities of Asymmetric Exchange

While bargaining within the street-side market takes place within a shared set of meanings, to circulate the stones transnationally, traders also seek out those with whom they do not share the same ascriptions of meaning. This became most apparent to me one afternoon as I sat in a gem office in Beruwala, which a young trader named Aftab shared with his cousins. As suppliers streamed into the office, traders who were looking to replenish their stock were keeping an eye out for specific kinds of stones that were currently in high demand: unheated royal blue sapphires of two or three carats, without inclusions. "Royal blue *mattum* [only]. Natural *venum* [want]," Imtiaz, Aftab's cousin, kept saying to the suppliers who came to him, underscoring that he wanted to see only unheated royal blue stones. Aftab, on the other hand, looked at everything. As he sorted the stones he was shown, he nonchalantly "passed" all the royal blue sapphires and selected blue stones with a greenish tint, many of which had inclusions. These were stones that I knew most traders would not buy. They were considered to be flawed and ascribed less value.

Imtiaz leaned over to me and said, "Can you see what he is doing? He is letting all these good stones go." Noticing my confusion, he grinned, "There's a reason for this. He has a customer in Shanghai who likes the green tint and doesn't care about the inclusions. Don't ask me why. But he can buy them here for nothing because no one else wants them and make a profit because the buyer in China is willing to pay the price he quotes. If you find a buyer like that, you are set." Imtiaz shook his head at his cousin's luck and ingenuity. Aftab made frequent visits to China, sourcing new customers who were further removed from Sri Lankan markets. He was able to take a stone that was devalued in Beruwala and engender a process of valorization by selling it to a buyer whose registers of value were different to those appraising stones in Sri Lanka.

The lack of shared meaning is significant here. Aftab was relying on a mismatch between the meaning and ascriptions of value to the stone between the suppliers in Beruwala and his buyer in China. Traders seek out such discrepancies when they travel to local and international markets, as they meet new customers, suppliers, and buyers. In these encounters, I noticed that while traders examine the stones, appraising

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them for their color, quality, and cut, parsing sapphires into low-grade "fancy" stones, valuable cornflower blues, high-end royal blues, and collectors' quality stones, other kinds of scanning, grading, and sorting were also taking place. These entailed a reading of persons. With deep ethnographic curiosity, traders would ask each other who they were, where they were from, what kinds of places they traveled to, and what markets they had access to. If the work of assessment and sorting creates commodity value (Tsing 2013), in these markets, in addition to the stones, traders were also grading and sorting each other, evaluating differentials in status and access to networks. Like anthropologists, the traders I worked with were skilled in the "arts of noticing" (Tsing 2015).

This art of noticing was a particularly valuable skill in the colored stone trade. This came home to me one afternoon while I was having tea with a retired South Indian trader named Nawaz Hajiar. He had been impossibly difficult to reach. To arrange a visit with him I had to have multiple meetings with his family members, including two of his sons and three of his younger brothers, who, I learned later, had been asked to screen me before he agreed to make time. When I met him, he wanted to know about my family background, what I had learned about the gem trade, and whom I knew in the trading network before he was willing to speak. Halfway through our conversation, he told me, "Sapphires are not like diamonds, you know. The price of diamonds is standardized. If a robber finds a diamond, he can go anywhere in the world and sell it for a similar price. But if he finds a sapphire, he is out of luck. He won't be able to sell it for what it is worth."

"Why is that, Hajiar?" I asked.

Nawaz Hajiar leaned back in his chair, with a cryptic smile. "He doesn't have the contacts," he said. "With sapphires, it is whom you know that matters."

I asked him to elaborate.

"The gem itself is invaluable. You can't measure its worth. Valuation is in the hands of the men who trade; it depends on their capacities. I'll give you an example. My family sourced a Sri Lankan stone decades ago. It was a rare blue sapphire. They sold it to a buyer in Geneva for $125,000. This buyer then sold it to an American trader in the United States for $300,000. The American trader finally sold it to the husband of a famous American actress for $1 million. Each time it

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changed hands, it doubled and tripled in price. But it was the same stone. So, here's the thing you need to know – the price of the stone depends on the status of the buyer and the seller."

I looked at Nawaz Hajiar, surprised to hear him speak so candidly about how valuation could be viewed as an index of differential status within an exchange. It struck me further that this insight, which for many of us requires conceptual analysis, was an unremarkable fact for him. What could be made of this? I suggest that Nawaz Hajiar's theory of valuation requires explanation because it runs against the common sense assumption that the value of a commodity is a property of the commodity, as well as scholarly ideas that exchange requires equivalence. As Jane Guyer has argued, while the idea of equivalence has been fundamental to theories of exchange, asymmetrical exchange has long been a central feature of trade (2004: 27). Guyer shows that, unlike the notion of equivalence, asymmetric exchange is shaped by the idea of comparative advantage, which rests on the assumption of difference among trading partners (2004: 4). Asymmetry, she notes, enables people to gain through conversions that take place at distinct thresholds or moments in an exchange (Guyer 2004: 58).[3] In the sapphire trade, where the speculative qualities of exchange are not masked by price standardization, traders both acknowledge the social relations of asymmetric exchange and play with them to secure what Guyer describes as "marginal gains."

Building on Guyer (2004), I ask: Could it be that asymmetric exchange relies not only on a lack of equivalence but also on a lack of transparency? Does it require a certain kind of opacity that involves a lack of clarity and a lack of shared meaning? Does this opacity also enable particular kinds of circulation? I suggest that it does and propose that we think of asymmetric exchange as a process of moving gems across different registers of meaning. I see this most clearly when it comes to the exchange of stones that are purchased for their astrological value. For instance, yellow sapphires mined in Sri Lanka are traded between Sinhalese traders in hinterland towns and coastal Muslims who sell them to South Indian Muslim traders with whom they have shared ties of language and religion. Indian Muslims then

[3] Such conversions, she contends, are not limited to historical trading practices but "are part of the repertoire of monetary techniques of capitalism, in particular of merchant and financial capitalism" (Guyer 2004: 47).

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circulate these stones in North Indian markets, where they are bought by Hindu buyers who wear them for astrological purposes. Neither the Sinhalese nor the Muslim traders share a belief in the astrological power of these stones. Yet they describe how Hindu customers who buy them believe that wearing them during "bad periods" could provide them with protection from harm. While hundreds of stones move weekly through this circuit, the traders who buy and sell them operate with a rough idea of why they are valued by those who ultimately buy them. Yet these gaps in shared value, I argue, are critical for circulation. Traders seek out those with whom they do not share notions of value, for this is what enables men such as Ismail Hajiar and Aftab to buy low in one market and sell high in another. Their actions reveal how speculative value is generated not only through the sorting of commodities but also through the sorting of persons.

Conclusion

Gem networks in the Indian Ocean region are segmented transnational networks – each node is run by collectives of traders who are distinct from each other in ethnicity, religion, language, and place of origin. As traders seek out partners who are different from them and have access to different markets, these differences become critical in determining negotiations about price, for each group has access to buyers with differing notions about the aesthetic, astrological, and investment value of the stones. Trading in gems, then, is about transacting in differences, for these differences enable gem dealers to make gains by engaging in arbitrage. Asymmetric exchange enables arbitrage through what Miyazaki (2013), translating the Japanese word *sayatori*, describes as the "grabbing of a difference." For Ismail Hajiar and Aftab, this practice is not only what makes circulation – and their livelihoods – possible; it is also a vital part of the craft of trade.

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PART II

Immediacy

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4 *Coercive Expertise and the Paradox of Responsible Extraction in the Ruby Trade in Mozambique*

BRIAN BRAZEAL

Dry grass burns more easily.

Mozambican proverb (Hanlon 2020: 4)

Introduction

In February 2017, Mozambican state security forces in coordination with a mining company launched a major effort to expel informal ruby miners from a mining area in Montepuez, Northern Mozambique. On October 5, 2017, a group of mostly young men attacked the city of Mocímboa da Praia, about 300 kilometers away. They targeted police stations and killed police and civilians alike. They have come to be known as *al Shabab* and claim to fight in the name of a purified Islam. Some of the miners expelled in February made their way to Mocímboa da Praia, where they swelled the ranks of young men with no hope for formal employment or anything but a very bleak future (Habibe et al. 2019). This occurred in the context of a mining boom in rubies and natural gas in the country.

The prosperity of Mozambican elites and their foreign partners threw the poverty of these young men into stark relief. They became receptive to the ideas that the state was their enemy, that their Muslim brothers who collaborated with it were nonbelievers, and that they should establish a new social order based on what they believed to be a purified form of Islam (Habibe et al. 2019). They mounted an insurgency that their government and its military have been unable to contain.

The new insurgent movement expanded its territorial control across much of northern Cabo Delgado, killing thousands, displacing hundreds of thousands, and forcing thousands more to live in fear of their raids.[1]

[1] Cabo Ligado, a collaborative effort to track the conflict and disseminate data, reports that 5,776 people had been killed including 2,399 civilians as of September 2024.

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Efforts by Mozambican military forces as well as by foreign military and mercenary services have not succeeded in displacing them. The situation has stabilized since the occupation of Cabo Delgado by a multinational force composed mostly of Rwandan soldiers. By now, military personnel from more than twenty-four countries have fought in Mozambique (Hanlon 2022). There are still hundreds of violent confrontations between Mozambican security forces, foreign forces, insurgents, and citizens every month (Cabo Ligado 2024).

The seeds of this insurgency were apparently being sown as I was conducting interviews in the mining area as well as in the Mozambican capital of Maputo, some 2,000 kilometers to the south. This was my first trip to Mozambique, as I was looking into the intertwined dynamics of the legal and the illegal trade in rubies. The conditions in the mining area that I will describe in the pages that follow, and the economic and political processes that brought those conditions into existence, likely contributed to the current turmoil in Northern Mozambique (GI-TOC 2021). An overlooked dimension of this insurgency, and the political processes that brought it into existence, stems from the effects of an ethical project mounted by the ruby-mining company operating in the region. Efforts to implement transparency and responsible mining seem to have created the conditions of possibility for violence and dispossession.

This chapter provides an ethnographic examination of how rubies extracted by a multinational mining company in Northern Mozambique are constructed as ethical, responsible, and transparent. At the same time, rubies extracted by small-scale miners working with screens and shovels around the company concession become unethical, illicit, and opaque. My contention is that transparency is a technical claim, willfully mistaken as an ethical claim, and that it is weaponized against very poor people trying to extract a living from the ground beneath their feet. As I will suggest, ethical mining – a cornerstone of the mining company's efforts to market its products – became the handmaiden to this international conflict. As such, it may be instructive to reflect on how (mostly) good-faith efforts to conduct ethical mining and ensure the responsible sourcing of precious minerals can push people to such desperate straits that they take up arms to kill. Dry grass burns more easily.

This chapter is based on research conducted in Europe during the summer of 2018 and in Mozambique in the summer of 2016. I left

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Mozambique a little more than a year before what one researcher has called the "first shot of the new civil war" (Hanlon 2020: 8). In Switzerland, England, and Ireland, I interviewed people associated with the mining company as well as the human rights lawyers who were suing them. I spoke to consultants to the mining industry and consultants to the World Bank on mining issues. I interviewed officers of the certification company that was trying to add rubies to its purview and academics who study precious mineral extraction in Africa. I spoke with gemstone wholesalers, jewelry dealers, and gemologists in their labs, as well as with founders and officers of consulting firms who are trying to help their clients make claims about traceable supply chains for colored gemstones. In Mozambique, I interviewed government officials charged with regulating the mining industry. I toured the corporate mine and spoke to their operational staff. I made a few visits to informal mining and trading sites, where I spoke with local government officials, traditional chiefs, and miners at work. I spent the most time with expatriate traders from West Africa who were facilitating the work of Mozambican and Tanzanian diggers and bringing their stones to buyers from Asia.

The empirical part of the argument unfolds as follows. A multinational mining company working with Mozambican political and military elites built the world's largest and most productive ruby mine in the Montepuez region of Cabo Delgado in Northern Mozambique. They had a good indication that the mine would be productive because it was already being worked by a large contingent of artisanal miners. A new mining code in the country effectively criminalized unlicensed mining. A newer set of regulations for implementing the mining code legalized artisanal mining but imposed a series of requirements that no artisanal miner in Northern Mozambique could ever hope to achieve. These regulations were based on research funded by the World Bank and conducted by consultants to the mining industry. They were designed to eradicate child labor, empower women, and mitigate the environmental impacts of small-scale mining.

Informal ruby mining sustained a vibrant illegal but not necessarily illicit international economy that competed with the company's near monopoly on Mozambican ruby production. Miners were subject to violent expropriation by state and company security forces. The mining company has always perceived and presented itself as ethical and transparent. It has ample incentive to do so. In the wake of the

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"blood diamond" scandals of the 2000s and in the context of a worldwide profusion of sourcing certification schemes (Arnold 2014), major jewelry retailers have begun to demand that their suppliers certify their products as having been "responsibly sourced." The company describes its merchandise in this fashion and in good faith.

Contrasting Visions of Ethics and Transparency

This volume asks how transparency works. In the case of ruby mining in Northern Mozambique, transparency is bundled with broader concerns of ethics and responsibility in mining and trading. Indeed, as Van Bockstael (2018: 53) points out, these terms are often used interchangeably. Ethical and responsible mining is supposed to benefit the people in the places where resources are extracted. It is supposed to abide by local laws and international standards, contribute tax revenue, and avoid things such as child labor, unsafe working conditions, and the sexual exploitation of women in mining areas. But companies have responsibilities to their investors as well. They must disclose relevant financial information. They must also make predictions about their future profitability and disclose potential reputational and even physical risks to those profits.

These forms of responsibility, ethics, and transparency, which I call a regime of "coercive expertise," are produced far from the Montepuez region of Cabo Delgado where people actually dig for rubies. A certification authority in London audits materials provided by mining companies and deems them responsible in order to assuage the consciences of retail jewelers and their wealthy clients. A law firm in another part of London dispatches investigators to Mozambique to contest these claims. A consultant in Dublin writes the regulations by which the mining code of Mozambique should be implemented to the supposed benefit of small-scale miners. Competent persons in Wales evaluate the extent of the resource to be mined and the profits that it might yield. Consultants based in Britain collect information about communities around mines and furnish it to mining companies in order that the companies can benefit those people through their corporate social responsibility programs, but also in order that they can prevent locals from infringing on their concession. At the same time, they map illegal networks of ruby mining and trading that might compete with the corporate miners.

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These experts from across northwestern Europe have profound impacts on the lives of people in Northern Mozambique. They seem to have even contributed to creating the conditions of possibility for an armed insurgency. Their expertise allowed the mining company to violently displace local artisanal miners, while continuing to claim that its operations are responsible, ethical, and transparent.

Although in the Introduction to this volume the editors remind us that "transparency has become ubiquitous," it is not so ubiquitous in the colored gemstone industry. I immediately alienated a high-end gem trader in Geneva whom I was trying to interview by telling him that I had come to his country to study transparency. Like many other members of traditional gem-trading families, he believed that efforts to impose transparency on the gem industry were led by corporate miners and corporate retail jewelry companies to subvert the international relationships of kinship, faith, and trust that have structured the gem trade for centuries. We see in both Samarawickrema's and Shuman's contributions to this volume (Chapters 3 and 6) that secrecy, and opacity, and even ignorance and deception can be ethical action in the gem trade. A perfectly traceable, transparent supply chain would make it impossible for people to do business. Rubies touch too many hands, pass through too many borders (and even the occasional colon), to make their journey completely legible. That is what makes artisan-mined gemstones capable of sustaining so many communities around the world. The ethics of the gem trade are refractory to the audit-based ethics of transparency.

The Most Precious Substance on Earth

Gem-quality ruby may be the most precious substance on earth. The traditional heartland of ruby mining is the Mogok Valley of Burma (Scalisi and Cook 1983). Some retailers consider Burmese rubies to be tainted by the human rights violations of the Myanmar military junta and refuse to sell them (National Jeweler 2008). Even so, supplies are scant. When rubies were discovered in Mozambique in 2009, this seemed to promise a large and relatively untainted supply of the red stones for the global market.

From 2009 to 2012, there was a ruby rush. Perhaps 10,000 people migrated to a remote area near the town of Montepuez in the Cabo Delgado province of Northern Mozambique. A local political and

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military figure formed a company and secured the legal right to extract rubies on a vast concession. He went looking for an international partner to do the actual mining. A UK-based gemstone-mining corporation paid him $3 million for a majority stake in his company and began operations.

This was difficult because the company was trying to open a large, mechanized mining operation in an area where thousands of people were already working. That work is illegal because the miners did not have licenses and because mining rights to that area had been conceded to a company. But the concession is vast, comprising hundreds of hectares; it was not fenced or signed; and there were six villages of people who had previously been subsistence farmers located inside of it.

The process of establishing the mining operation entailed the use of violence. That violence did not end when formal mining operations had begun. Allegations have been documented in painful and painstaking detail by a human rights law firm that sued the mining company in the UK.[2] Videos have appeared on social media and subsequently in the French press.[3] They seem to show company security personnel directing Mozambican military and vigilante groups in the torture and sexual humiliation of miners working on their concession. The allegations and the videos are consistent with what miners and traders told me about their treatment at the hands of multiple security forces when I was in Mozambique.

This process took place in the context of a larger mining boom in Mozambique. The World Bank funded a technical assistance program for the extractive sector. This brought about a series of regulatory reforms that allowed foreign companies to extract mineral resources. They came in droves. My notes from a conversation with a World Bank consultant involved in this initiative say that, for a while, you couldn't get a room in a hotel. You couldn't get a table at a restaurant. And everyone wanted licenses. It was during this time that the political and military leader in Cabo Delgado secured his concession.

The UK-based mining company with which he partnered has been at the forefront of marketing responsible minerals. It used to bill itself as

[2] That lawsuit was settled for £5.8 million without the company admitting fault.
[3] This chapter does not cite documents that would reveal the identities of the people with whom I have worked. It also does not provide links to videos of people being tortured.

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"The World's Most Ethical Mining Company" in its advertisements. Eventually, it realized that this grandiose claim could carry some liabilities. Now it has a somewhat less snappy tagline, but ethics and responsibility are still central to how the company presents itself to the public.

The chief executive officer of the company, when I talked to him, was eager to ensure that they not be portrayed as "light saber-wielding Darth Vaders." Indeed they are not. The executives of the company almost certainly did not direct their security forces to employ vigilantes to sexually humiliate informal miners. The company seems to have taken steps (including human rights training) to prevent its security personnel from doing such things again. The alleged abuses, disturbing as they are, pale in comparison to some of the enormities committed by mining companies and their allies elsewhere. It implements corporate social responsibility programs with more vigor than many other companies in the sector.

One of the ways in which it demonstrates its responsibility is by hiring consultants to speak with people in the surrounding community about how the mine can help them. There is one consultancy in particular that has staked itself out as the specialists in artisanal and small-scale mining. They work for the World Bank and national development agencies to help legitimize artisanal mining. But they also hire their services out to corporate clients.

For corporate clients, they use the techniques of social science research to conduct what they term "social terrain mapping." (A phrase with disturbing echoes of the United States Army's Human Terrain Systems program.) They look at the functioning of the economy built on illegal artisanal mining and try to find "leverage points" that the company can use to disrupt it.

You would be hard-pressed to find a group of people more knowledgeable and sympathetic toward artisanal miners. When they work for the World Bank or development agencies, they work with the miners' best interests in mind. Even when they work for corporate clients, they try to help them see artisanal mining as a sociological problem rather than a law enforcement problem to be solved by the police or the army. This is good for the artisanal miners themselves.

But when you talk to their corporate clients, they describe the information they get from their consultants as "intel." They highlight the fact that consultants can get better information because they are not

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seen as being associated with the company. The consultants tend to depict the artisanal miners as foreigners (and therefore not worthy of legal protection) or else as pawns in the hands of networks of traders that they describe as "international criminal organizations."

The Ethics of Informality

The mining company holds rough ruby auctions several times per year in Singapore. These are silent auctions where a small number of companies are invited to present sealed bids for sorted and graded lots of rough ruby, which they then treat, cut, and polish, mostly in Thailand.

These auctions generate significant revenue, perhaps $50 million to $75 million each. Twenty-four percent of that revenue is paid back to the government of Mozambique as taxes and royalties. This is a significant source of cash for a government that is plagued by political instability and financial crisis. The company is scrupulous in its accounting and evidently proud to be one of the largest taxpayers in the region. This is one of the grounds for its claims to transparency.

In contrast, the people who mine rubies illegally in Mozambique do not have access to jewelry retailers. There is a long, informal supply chain connecting the two. In 2016, a corps of expatriate African traders – mostly West African Muslims, but also people from all over the continent – converged in Montepuez. They would "grubstake" Mozambican and Tanzanian diggers, providing them with food and tools to look for rubies for the traders to purchase. The expatriate African traders then sold the stones to a group of Thai gemstone buyers who had taken up residence in Montepuez. A smaller contingent of Sri Lankan traders also bought in the area. When I was in Mozambique in 2016, this commerce occurred quite openly. Since then, there has been a crackdown on the Asian community in Montepuez and an outbreak of hostilities across northern Cabo Delgado. The logic of the informal trade has changed, but West Africans still mediate between people who extract stones informally and the buyers who will cut and polish them abroad.

Asian buyers export the stones informally to Thailand and Sri Lanka. There, the rough gemstones are treated, cut, and polished. They pass from hand to hand among a number of traders as they find their way to Bangkok and Colombo. From there they journey to

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jewelry markets in the United States, China, India, and Europe. This is how the informal market seemed to work when I observed it in Mozambique in 2016 and in Thailand and Sri Lanka after that.

The informal ruby trade does not generate tax revenue. It is taxed informally as law enforcement personnel, customs authorities, local politicians, and others extract payments from miners and traders. It does, however, provide employment for large numbers of people, primarily young men, in an area where traditional subsistence agriculture may not be desirable or even viable and where there are few other economic opportunities.

The Cabo Delgado province has the highest level of inequality and the worst economic indicators of anywhere in Mozambique (Hanlon 2020). Most people are subsistence farmers, but rights to the subsoil supersede rights to farm on the surface. Hundreds of thousands of hectares of arable land have been conceded to mining companies.

Mining rubies on the company's concession is illegal, but it offers a flash of hope to hungry and impoverished young men (and a few women as well). They might not leave a life of poverty and toil, but they might get a cell phone or a motorcycle or a few nights of revelry with money in their pockets. When I was in Montepuez, illegal mining and trading happened openly. There were occasional spasms of state violence but for the most part it was clear that the authorities were receiving their share of revenue from this illegal, but not illicit, activity.

Janet Roitman is at pains to point out the limitations of the idea of an "informal economy." Illegal activities are quite formalized. State functionaries and elites are important participants. The illegal is embedded in everyday sociability, in governance, and in economic life (cf. Blundo et al. 2008: 8, 87). Illegal activities, like those of Mozambique's ruby miners, are thus licit and ethical (Roitman 2005: 182). Roitman shows how regulatory regimes can summon new categories of people into existence in order to subject them to taxation and regulation. This seems to have occurred in Mozambique as well. A group of young men with shovels and screens digging for gem-bearing gravel are transformed by legislative fiat into trespassers and criminals. Visitors from neighboring African countries with enough capital to buy them food while they dig become part of an international organized criminal network. When a state relinquishes its revenue to foreign capital through privatization, it renders itself unable to provide basic services for its citizens. This pushes economic activity to the

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untaxable frontier. This in turn means that civil servants, including the police, military, and customs officials, cannot be paid by the state. So they tax the illegal activity through bribery. Thus, the illegal economies become the main source for the creation of wealth. But these activities could never be certified as ethical or transparent.

Who Shall Certify the Certifier?

When I conducted this research in 2017, rubies and other colored gemstones had never been included within the purview of any certification organization. Their supply chains were deemed to be too complex, fragmented, and opaque. Early attempts to impose due diligence requirements on the colored gemstone sector were met with fierce opposition from the trade (Schorr 2015). This project unfolded in the midst of a concerted push by a jewelry certification organization to expand its standards to include colored gemstones. This push seems to have been led by the same UK-based mining company that extracts rubies from Mozambique. Its success has been mixed.

If the jewelry certification authority gains a firmer foothold in the fractious colored gemstone business, this would be to the advantage of the UK mining company. If membership in the certification organization became a prerequisite for access to jewelry markets, then suppliers who used the informal markets would be excluded (or would have to invent and document new origin stories for their material). Larger companies that work in the formal economy would have less competition.

This process, which is designed to bring responsibility and transparency to gemstone supply chains, may well end up benefiting a company that is alleged to have been responsible for egregious acts of violence against informal miners. It enhances the value of the rubies sold by the company and devalues the rubies sold by its competitors in global informal markets.

Where the Elephants Are

The techniques of transparent and responsible mining create a regime of coercive expertise. There is a tendency in the literature produced by international consultants and development agencies to depict people who mine gems illegally as the victims of unscrupulous middlemen

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who buy their goods cheaply and sell them for astronomical prices. It is true that cut and polished rubies sell for much higher prices in Bangkok than uncut stones do in informal transactions at night in a tea shop in Montepuez. It is equally true that a group of informal miners who manage to unearth a tiny chip of purplish stone can sell it for more than they would earn in a year of selling peanuts in the streets of Mocímboa da Praia.

The notion that you can hoodwink gemstone miners because they do not know the value of their own stones has been convincingly debunked by the gemologist Richard Hughes (2014), but it continues to appear in the literature on responsible mining. It serves as a justification for the displacement of artisanal miners (for example) into the corporate social responsibility projects of multinational mining companies. Ignorance is selectively mobilized by those who have the most to gain from it. Michael Dove pointed to a similar trend in the studies of swidden agriculture in the tropics, where regulations that were purported to benefit shifting cultivators actually shifted the land they cultivated into the hands of large-scale plantations and timber extraction projects. He called this the "political economy of ignorance" (Dove 1983: 85).

This criminalization begs another question: Why is digging for rubies illegal? Why should a government prohibit the practice of taking a shovel and digging a hole in the ground, hoping it will intersect with a channel of ruby-rich gravel? In fact, this was not illegal until 2014, when a new mining code came into force in Mozambique. That law made it explicitly illegal to conduct any artisanal or small-scale mining without a "*senha mineira*" or mining pass. Those passes are not impossible to obtain. It takes a couple of years and a lot of paperwork. But it would be functionally impossible for itinerant miners, illiterate in Portuguese, to get one. And even if you do have a "mining pass" or, say, legal title to farmland, those titles can be superseded by concessions granted to large-scale mines operated by foreign companies.

When I set out to understand who wrote the 2014 mining code for Mozambique, I learned something that made me feel hopelessly naïve. I thought that countries' legislatures wrote their own laws. This is not the case. The World Bank funds a technical assistance project for the natural resources sector with a focus on oil and gas development. Ruby mining fell under its ambit. This project put out a tender for a company to write a new mining code for the country. That tender was bid on by

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a law firm that looked at what it deemed to be the best practices in mining law around the continent and elsewhere. It wrote a mining code that was subsequently adopted by the Mozambican legislature. This code created the mining pass system and thereby criminalized unlicensed mining.

I felt even more hopelessly naïve when I realized that similar processes had unfolded across Africa in the first decades of the twenty-first century. A World Bank push to formalize artisanal and small-scale mining led to the criminalization, illegalization, and informalization of miners across the continent and beyond (cf. Hilson 2017; Tschakert 2009; Verbrugge 2015). Indeed, Africa seems to be entering into a "fourth generation" of mining codes. Rather than solely liberalizing and deregulating the mining sector to attract foreign direct investment, new codes focus on transparency and ecological protection (Besada and Martin 2015). These goals seem laudable, but they enmesh small producers in a web of illegality. Perhaps this is part of their intention (Verbrugge 2015).

The World Bank project issued a second tender for a separate international consultancy to write the regulations to implement the new law as it relates to artisanal and small-scale mining. I met with the consultant who led the team that wrote those regulations. She has worked alongside artisanal miners over the course of a twenty-five-year career as a consultant in Africa. But even she acknowledged that the regulations she had developed could not work for artisanal miners. There was half a page of regulations about what kind of clothing you are supposed to wear. This is called PPE or personal protective equipment. These guys, she said, can barely afford their flip-flops. So they are stuck in a situation of illegality.

Laws crafted in conference rooms in the capital city of Maputo, or thousands of miles away in Europe, are implemented in frontier areas like Nampula or Cabo Delgado where they enter into a field of multiple overlapping and conflicting legal regimes.[4] Codes regulating people's ability to dig into the ground under their feet attempt to replace simple systems with complex ones. They attempt to replace fluid structures with stable ones. But they can never quite work when rubies are a scant six meters from the surface. In this context, informal

[4] Obarrio (2014: 86) has shown how public and private interests are difficult to distinguish when transnational agencies merge with nation states.

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mining can be an important form of wealth creation and a dangerous activity to be violently extirpated at the same time.

Another group of consultants works on behalf of investors. The company in question was seeking to be listed on the London Stock Exchange. In order for a mining company to be listed, it needs to provide a "competent persons report." This means that a company that is qualified as a "competent person" has assessed its operation and determined that there is a mineral resource where it intends to mine and that it is possible from a geological and regulatory perspective to mine it profitably. There have been many stock market scams in the mining business (see Tsing 2005: 56–71). The competent persons report is a mechanism to prevent them.

The competent persons report for the Montepuez ruby mine highlighted the presence of artisanal miners in two different sections. One was the section devoted to social and environmental risks. It pointed to the presence of artisanal miners as one of the biggest risks the company would face in its attempt to profit from the rubies on its concession. This has proven true.

The other section of the report that highlighted the presence of artisanal miners dealt with the size and richness of the mineral deposit that they were trying to exploit and the ease of access to it. The presence of people working illegally on the company's concession was used as evidence that the deposit was large and easy to exploit.

There are no good geological indicators for gemstone deposits like this one. The stones occur here and there in beds of gravel under a few meters of alluvial soil. In a situation like this, the presence of people on a mining concession extracting the stones illegally is incontrovertible evidence of the presence of the stones themselves. As one consultant said to me, "You hunt elephants where the elephants are." So miners working illegally are both the best indicator that you have an economically viable deposit and the biggest risk to your ability to exploit it.

The use of local miners as geological indicators for foreign industrial mining companies is nothing new. D'Avignon (2018) showed how French army officers did the same thing in Afrique-Occidentale Française (French West Africa) at the beginning of the twentieth century. Colonial authorities would grant licenses to private companies that effectively excluded Africans from the mines that they had discovered and worked (D'Avignon 2018: 182). Sabine Luning (2014) describes a similar process in the goldfields of Burkina Faso. "Junior"

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mining companies look to attract funding from "major" mining companies by demonstrating the scale of the resource they hope to extract. The strongest indicator of scale is the number of "illegals" working it (Luning 2014: 67). Through these processes, folk knowledge is transformed into corporate profit and the folks who generated it are recategorized as criminals. People have been hunting elephants where the elephants are for a long time.

The author of the social sections of these competent persons reports explained their methodology to me in an interview. I highlighted the fact that the report was written in 2015 when the company and state security forces were alleged to have been perpetrating some egregious acts of violence against these miners.

The person I spoke to holds a PhD in a social science discipline. But the report in question had been written by "the biodiversity person." According to this logic, the adverse impacts on the people were equivalent to the impacts on the plants and animals in the mining area. I asked about where they get their data. It turns out that they get it from stakeholder engagement reports. These reports are written by the corporate social responsibility or community engagement staff, employed by the mine itself.

"Do you talk to anybody working around the mine?" She explained what the process of a site visit was like. You may have up to two days. One day is spent touring the mine and having it explained to you by the engineers. On the second day the mining community engagement people might drive you out to a village, in a mine vehicle, to talk to the villagers. Does someone speak Macua?[5] Portuguese? No. Who does the translation? Mining company staff. So your sociological information is collected by a biologist, who does not speak a local language, in the course of an hour-long visit to a community that has been selected and supervised by the mining company? I asked the questions as gently as I could.

She pointed out to me, just a bit tartly, "Mining companies don't want to make the world a better place. They won't do anything more than they have to do, but if they have to do it, they will."

It is not the job of competent persons to make the world a better place either. They are doing due diligence for investors and banks or

[5] Macua, also spelled Makhuwa, is a Bantu language spoken in Northern Mozambique.

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for the company itself. They ask if it is compliant with what it said it will do. This is based on the environmental and social management plan that they have entered into with the government. She told me that this is based on the EIA (environmental impact assessment), the ESIA (environmental and social impact assessment), or the ESHIA (environmental, social, and health impact assessment). Those assessments are the basis of the company's agreement with the government. "Look," she said. "I have a conscience. In terms of due diligence, it's not about conscience, but obligation." If a company can produce an ESHIA, then competent persons can certify their operations as ethical and profitable investments, regardless of what may be happening at the mine itself.

Conclusion

To sum up, a company that bills itself as the world's leading supplier of responsibly sourced colored gemstones leads a process to force suppliers of colored gemstones to be certified as responsible at the same time as it is being accused of gross human rights violations at its most profitable mine. A consultancy that works on behalf of artisanal miners in development projects also provides intel to corporate clients looking to break up illegal artisanal mining operations around their concessions. The mining code of Mozambique, a document that explicitly underlines the importance of artisanal and small-scale mining to the development of the country, criminalizes artisanal mining and renders it impossible to do legally under the regulatory framework it imposes.

Digging for gems with a shovel and a sieve generally does not hurt anyone, except occasionally the people doing it. It may benefit the poor people who mine. But it is criminalized in the name of transparency, responsibility, and ethical mining. Artisanal mining connects miners to networks based on trust, debt, and kinship across the globe, linking them to gemstone hubs in India, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Hong Kong, and New York. These networks have functioned, more or less smoothly, for centuries. They do not, however, fit the newly emerging and ever-shifting criteria of transparency or traceability. The economic activities of some of the poorest people in the world are subject to violent repression in order to assuage the consciences of consumers who must be among the richest people in the world if they can afford to buy fine rubies.

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Transparency is a technical claim that has been mistaken for an ethical claim.[6] Transparency is a way of knowing.[7] It is a way of producing documents that are legible to auditors. It is a technique for accounting. It is not about justice. Illegally mined rubies are enmeshed in intensely local and intensely global networks of debt and repayment, kinship and reciprocity, trust and mistrust across linguistic, religious, and national boundaries, from the moment they come out of the ground. They cannot be accounted for within the accounting regimes that constitute the technologies of transparency.

Transparency is an epistemology. It is not a metaphysic. People do honest and ethical business that is illegal and opaque, even when transparency is weaponized against them. This is similar to the relationship between relational accountability and audit-based accountability discussed by Walsh in this volume (Chapter 9). A set of mutually understood expectations govern the relations among diggers and their patrons, African buyers and Asian buyers, Asian buyers and their customers around the world. If these expectations are upheld then that international web of relationships can be maintained. It is mostly beneficial to all parties, even if it is not legible to the techniques of transparency.

Ballestero asks "if the more transparency one intends to create, the more obscure things become" (2012: 160). I'm not sure. But I think there is some ethnographic value in teasing out how these processes unfold, how the actions of multinational corporations, Bretton Woods institutions, and the consultancies they employ impinge on the lives of the kinds of people anthropologists traditionally study. As Rolph Trouillot wrote: "[P]ower itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots" (Trouillot 2015: xix).

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[6] I thank Alex Golub and Stuart Kirsch for helping me understand this.
[7] It can also be a way of not knowing (see also Chapter 6 in this volume).

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5 *The Social Life of Digital Transparency*

FILIPE CALVÃOAND EMANUEL HERMANN

In *Sweetness and Power* (1985), anthropologist Sidney Mintz attempted to solve a perennial challenge in the study of commodity circulation: the ability to trace meaningful connections between global and local actors across different scales of production and consumption. In between slave labor in the colonies and proletarian consumption, Mintz suggested, the tastes, ideas, and material processes associated with sugar were rooted in productive processes taking place elsewhere. Where meaning and power intersect, it would be possible to reconstruct the political, ideological, and aesthetic force of sweetness within an industrially driven version of capitalist modernity. Sugar was, after all, the missing link between the colonial plantation system and the industrial factory, generating new forms of mercantile wealth, industrial work and consumption habits, and bureaucratic practices.

Mintz's work was soon accompanied by a vibrant literature on the "social life of things" (Appadurai 1986), detailing how certain objects and commodities become active constituents of social relations. The study of chains and networks connecting producers and consumers – either in lateral or vertical frameworks, respectively contextualizing interactions with the object or in sequential stages of its circulation – was met with growing business concerns over more ethical and less harmful production processes. One response led to the introduction of instruments such as certification schemes, "chains of custody" devices, and traceability mechanisms to make the trajectories of material objects more transparent by uncovering the physical imprint of commodity networks. And yet, the transformative value of tracing things in motion – and the more recent promise of unmediated transparency brought to the fore through digital means – remains to be assessed. What does the world look like from the perspective of a traceability initiative?

This chapter examines the challenges of implementing traceability to ensure that certain minerals and metals are deemed conflict-free. Based on research of responsible sourcing initiatives in the cobalt and

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diamond industries, and the hopes pinned to the project of digital transparency, we consider how local producers respond to, or end up being excluded from, the growing adoption of monitoring and transparency devices in mineral supply chains. Attempts to make production legible and visible to consumers through digital technologies, we suggest, require attention to the "political geography of materials … associated with the production of information" (Barry 2013: 5). We document the ideological and material underpinnings of transparency supported by the adoption of digital instruments for tracing the extraction and circulation of minerals and metals. If these technologies of digital transparency primarily target downstream actors in an "unidirectional" (Mantz 2018: 34) account of commodity chains, they fail to deliver on the promise of addressing the gap between producers and consumers or trouble the underlying inequities and exclusionary practices of extractive production, when not reinforcing them.

Based on research in the Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC's) cobalt mines of Kolwezi and in mining sites partnered with De Beers's GemFair program in Sierra Leone, the chapter examines each resource in turn to understand how digital transparency permeates the "ethicality" of diamonds, an icon of hyper-consumption, and "conflict-free" cobalt, a critical component in the electrification and decarbonization of the global economy. Second, the chapter considers the implications of this digital turn in traceability mechanisms formerly reliant on third-party verification. We take stock of digital alternatives to paper-based certification, monitoring, and traceability by looking at the intersection of power and meaning in the social life of digital transparency, to follow Mintz (1985). Depending on what is made visible, to whom, and through what acts and artifacts of disclosure and calculation, these instruments – in their presumed rationality, objectivity, and neutrality – create the conditions for masking power relations and heightening the gap between different actors in this supply chain. If digital transparency operates through practices of concealment and suppression, even as it is represented as the technological pinnacle of accountability, these digital-based techno-regimes are increasingly confronted with the complex realities of the everyday life and labor of artisanal miners, who make up a significant share of global production. Artisanal mining pits in the DRC or Sierra Leone, one could say, reveal the pitfalls of "techno-fix" solutions to the problem of transparent supply chains.

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Data were gathered between 2016 and 2020 in a variety of settings, including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) Responsible Mineral Supply Chains Forum, the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme (KPCS), and, between 2019 and 2020, in mining sites in the DRC (Kolwezi) and Sierra Leone. To develop a comparative framework between digital traceability solutions operationalized under the banner of responsible and ethical sourcing in the cobalt and diamond supply chain, interviews and field visits took place with actors in mining companies, NGOs, certification bodies, and standards development organizations. Against the backdrop of fragmented and siloed approaches to transparency mechanisms in increasingly complex supply chains, this critical examination of the workings of digital traceability reveals the deep and shared inequalities underpinning the extractive regime and the limits of a regime of techno-based transparency operated from afar.

From Paper to Digital: The Promise of Unmediated Transparency

Most of the world's rough diamond production – upwards of 80 percent, according to some estimates – arrives in Antwerp, Belgium, in 500 high-security shipments per day. The majority of these shipments end up in the Diamond Office at Hoveniersstraat 22, next to the old Sephardic synagogue, where on any given day hundreds of sealed bags containing paper certificates issued by a Kimberley Process-recognized entity are processed. Once screened individually and before being sent out for export again, a new certificate is reproduced by a single copying machine on the ground floor, which prints out 30,000 out of the 60,000 certificates issued by the KPCS every year. As we peeked at the copying machine across the room in the Diamond Office, the chair of the KPCS's Working Group of Diamond Experts conveyed his exasperation to the group of visitors attending the KPCS meeting in Antwerp in 2018: NGOs, he suggested, often mistake the KPCS's work of documenting diamonds for a certificate of origin. "It is not; it's a conflict-free certificate."

The group visiting the Diamond Office on that occasion was eventually chaperoned to a local tender company two buildings down the road. This tender house is used by an elite and very exclusive group of buyers working for some of the largest diamond-mining companies in

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the world: Alrosa, De Beers, Dominion, and Rio Tinto. It is one of 1,600 diamond businesses registered in Antwerp where diamonds are mixed and sorted before being sold again for clients expecting specific qualities and quantities. After going through security, a diamond trader received the group, spreading open bag after bag of rough diamonds of different sizes, colors, and qualities, some emblazoned with the supplying company's logo and weighing more than a kilo. As this expert trader described it, mines produce a typical "footprint" of stones. On the basis of a statistical probability, experts produce assessments on the source of diamonds before they are mixed with stones of other origins. In some cases, conflict-free compliance is ensured at a distance. As discussed in the KPCS meeting at the time, local producers in the Central African Republic had to submit rudimentary images to identify the footprint of the so-called "run of mine" over a given period of time, as it was impossible to ensure on-the-ground monitoring due to ongoing conflict. As seen in the images, the piled-up stones and overlaying date stamps precluded proper visual assessment from afar, even if the biggest technical hurdle was poor internet connectivity for uploading images, as the experts in the plenary session admitted.

This visit to the world's diamond capital is instructive in various ways. First, the KPCS is arguably the most successful arbiter and insurance standard against conflict-laden diamonds. Despite the KPCS's relative success in stemming the flow of conflict diamonds, it did not impede the flow of Russian diamond production in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine. Second, the elephant in the room continues to be artisanal mining, which lurks menacingly in the background of these initiatives. These miners are at once the target of ethical initiatives while being cast as a dangerous threat or a problem to be addressed. As one diplomat responsible for Switzerland's Sanctions Unit confided, as if letting us in on a secret, artisanal mining is the "Achilles' heel" of the KPCS. This inescapability is similar to the plight of artisanal miners in other sectors, including cobalt: as we were told by a local NGO staff member in Kolwezi, DRC – home to the richest high-ore cobalt grade surface veins in the world – "There is no future where there is no ASM [artisanal mining]." Lastly, the technical challenges of implementing the certificate – from the photocopying machine in Antwerp to limited internet connectivity – become artifacts legitimizing the commitment to overcome paper-based obsolescence or human error through new

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digital technologies. Echoing the broader proliferation of traceability programs for minerals and metals, according to the 2016 mid-term KPCS report, state and corporate stakeholders began exploring the adoption of blockchain technology in its certification process to "eradicate false KPCS certificates and reduce the impact of human error while uploading data."

This techno-optimistic belief in the perfectibility of digital transparency exists in the wake of more than two decades of transparency work. In the early 1990s, transparency emerged as a new concept to address development failures that were linked to corruption. Through transparency, it was argued, the public would be able to hold government bodies and companies accountable for their actions, hindering corruption and the embezzlement of public funds (Gaventa and McGee 2013: 4; Garsten and Jacobsson 2011). With the establishment of Transparency International in 1994, transparency manifested itself as an important international norm (David-Barrett and Okamura 2016: 228–229). The concept has also become part of the construction of ethical commodities since it offers consumers and network participants the chance to "'see' along the commodity chain" as well as assurance that the commodity was produced under ethical conditions (Mutersbaugh and Lyon 2010: 30).

Since the mid 2010s, the mining industry began rolling out digital-based traceability technologies across mineral supply chains, adding to a wide array of regulatory instruments and responsible sourcing initiatives. A UN report defines traceability as "the ability to identify and trace the history, distribution, location and application of products, parts and materials, to ensure the reliability of sustainability claims, in the areas of human rights, labour (including health and safety), the environment and anti-corruption" (UNGC and BSR 2014: 6). Tarnished by human rights violations, child labor, and minerals used to fund conflicts, these new digital solutions were meant to reassure consumers and produce accountability by removing the need for intermediaries or trusted partners to verify, audit, or certify supply chain information. Traceability schemes have been developed using QR codes and other technological devices to trace where and by whom the purchased commodity was produced as a marker of ethicality (e.g., Carrier 2012: 14; UNGC and BSR 2014: 15–18). If traceability has become the new ethical norm in the natural resource sector (Calvão and Gronwald 2019: 3), the emergence of blockchains – an advanced

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version of distributed ledger technologies – effectively expands the scope and socioeconomic impact of existing traceability initiatives.

In what follows, we examine two competing approaches for digital transparency developed in the diamond and cobalt sector. Though differently designed to ethically engage with the artisanal mining sector – in the case of GemFair – and develop responsible sourcing practices *despite* artisanal mining – in the case of cobalt – they both share a concern with the transition from material to digital technologies of traceability and provenance. In common, they ultimately confer legitimacy to the corporate actors implementing them, rather than fundamentally address the key issues in both supply chains. But each in turn reveals distinct features of the growing economy of digital transparency.

Making Diamonds Ethical

In 2018, De Beers declared its return to Sierra Leone with an ethical initiative for the artisanal diamond-mining sector called GemFair. For De Beers's CEO Bruce Cleaver, the artisanal mining sector was crucial for many poverty-affected communities struggling for survival, but "informal" and "unregulated" practices had hindered miners from accessing "established international markets" and their "ability to derive fair value" (Mining Journal 2018). The De Beers initiative builds on the previous model of the Diamond Development Initiative (DDI), founded in 2005 by industry members, NGOs, and national governments to specifically address development challenges in the artisanal diamond-mining sector through a certification system for ethically sourced diamonds in Sierra Leone (Smillie 2014: 151).[1] A decade later, in 2016, DDI introduced the so-called "Maendeleo Diamond Standards" (MDS),[2] with a similar aim of shifting artisan-mined diamonds into the formal economy where they could be traced and taxed by the local government. In response, GemFair was

[1] These standards are often mentioned as a pioneering effort in making artisanal diamond mining more ethical (see, e.g., Blackmore and Holzman 2013: 12, 30; Engwicht and Grabek 2019: 192–193; Hilson et al. 2016: 238; IGF 2017: 45–6; McQuilken 2018; Van Bockstael 2018: 53–54). In this case, "ethical" refers to diamonds being mined conflict-free, the adherence to basic workers' rights in the extraction process, and compliance with some environmental standards.

[2] *Maendeleo* is the Swahili for "development."

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established in 2018 with the twin goals of ensuring fair prices and introducing a "digital solution" for traceability. The project was initially implemented in sixteen mining sites that complied with DDI's MDS standards; by the time of this research, it had expanded to ninety-four mines. Though similar to MDS standards, GemFair included provisions regarding environmental regulations, the absence of serious human rights abuses, basic workers' rights, and conflict- and violence-free extraction, as well as traceability (GemFair 2019a).

According to text on its website in 2019, GemFair is designed to "connect artisanal and small-scale miners to the global market through digital technology and assurance of ethical working standards," based on three core principles of traceability, empowerment, and fair value. De Beers's initiative explicitly mobilizes transparency and traceability as part of its efforts to render the ethical qualities of its diamonds visible to consumers – and, by extension, the ethical qualities of the company itself. The irony of describing De Beers as transparent should not escape us: De Beers has historically been notorious about its secretive operations (Epstein 1982; Hart 2001), and the company is extremely cautious over this pilot program for fears of it being replicated elsewhere and for potentially disclosing a return to its historical role of buyer of artisan-mined diamonds on a broader scale. Unsurprisingly, a local NGO representative described GemFair staff as shrouded in an aura of "secrecy".

One of the central tenets of GemFair's ethical approach to artisanal mining is provision for fair wages and revenues. Almost all mines visited, including those that were part of GemFair, employed a mix of "permanent" and daily wage laborers, the latter commonly referred to as "kosovo."[3] The daily wage of permanent workers was usually between $0.50 - $1.00 based on the exchange rate during the research; in mines participating in a financial scheme led by GemFair, these miners could receive the minimum wage of 600,000 leones per month.

[3] At most, one mining site enrolled up to twenty permanent workers. These were usually divided into gangs of about three workers. Different supporters can support different gangs of workers employed in one pit. Permanent workers are employed for almost the entire year, working during the extraction as well as the washing process (see GoSL 2018: 25). These "full-time" workers are often experienced diggers who work with license holders or supporters over several years. In theory, they are officially employed by the miner or supporter via a contract that details the percentage-sharing arrangement.

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In addition, provided certain conditions were met, miners were also entitled to a share of the sale price.[4] More broadly, GemFair justifies its ethical initiative by granting privileged access to markets and more transparent rough diamond evaluations.[5] Interviews and observations during fieldwork seem to support this claim, particularly a general satisfaction with prices paid by GemFair and clear evaluation procedures.

The initiative is not without its challenges. For one, GemFair aimed to tackle the tributor–supporter system prevalent in the country, and the latter's dependence on the former. It did so by providing direct access to diamond markets and acting as both dealer and exporter for miners associated with the initiative. Commonly, in well-established tributor–supporter relationships (D'Angelo 2015; Zack-Williams 1995), supporters finance a mining operation through the provision of materials, wages, food, and, in some cases, medical treatment as well as accommodation for miners, who in turn receive a daily payment of around 7,000–10,000 leones and one or two cups of rice per day (Maconachie and Hilson 2011: 295). However, miners enrolled in the GemFair program in many cases still had to procure outside supporters and were themselves financed by established dealers or exporters (e.g., GemFair 2019b: 8). The maintenance of the tributor–supporter arrangement under the GemFair initiative raised questions about who would ultimately stand to benefit from the higher prices offered by GemFair and the initiative's ability to channel diamond production to its sales office. Thus, to be able to control the extractive process and the sale of diamonds, GemFair soon realized that it needed to provide direct monetary support for miners, and it selected around twenty member sites to be part of the pilot project.

Access to this pilot finance program works as a loan agreement, and mining sites supported financially by GemFair need to channel their diamond production to GemFair. Prior to this program, GemFair did not directly fund mining license holders, leveraging instead their direct

[4] In some cases, miners were also given two meals a day, while in other mines the daily payment rate was meant to cover food, which meant that no additional money was paid.

[5] Rough diamonds are evaluated based on their potential to produce polished diamonds. This includes an assessment of several key characteristics, including shape, size, carat weight, clarity, and color.

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access to the market to recruit members and capture more rough diamonds.

As in tributor–supporter arrangements, GemFair has risk assurance built into the scheme, whereby half of the amount invested by GemFair needs to be paid back with interest or "risk assurance."[6] GemFair states that this risk premium is to mitigate potential setbacks in the event that some sites are not economically viable and to cover the capital invested. Until this loan is paid back in full, GemFair adopts the same percentage-sharing model prevalent in tributor–supporter arrangements (GemFair keeps 70 percent of the sale price while the miner gets the remaining 30 percent). It is only once miners finish paying back the entire loan, including the "risk assurance," that they are allowed to keep the profits from the sale. While presumably paying higher prices for diamonds, GemFair risks becoming just another supporter in the eyes of miners enrolled in the GemFair program, whose practices are often labeled as exploitative and opportunistic. By the time of our research, GemFair had managed to capture a significant part of the rough diamond production in the country, successfully re-establishing De Beers in the Sierra Leonean diamond market twenty years after its involvement in the trade of "conflict diamonds." This return to the country follows the effective assumption of control over sites previously under the purview of DDI's standards program.

Working Transparently

In theory, the project operates as follows: "certified" miners are provided with a toolkit, which includes a tablet with the GemFair app, a ruler, tamper-proof bags with QR codes, and a scale to measure the weight of diamonds. Once a diamond is found, miners take two pictures with the tablet: one of themselves with the diamond and one of the diamond against the ruler. They then weigh the diamond on the scale, record information on weight, color, shape, and quality of the diamond in the GemFair app, then seal the stone in the bag with a unique QR code for each site. No internet access is needed for "logging" the stone in the GemFair app. Only diamonds logged in the app

[6] For instance, if GemFair invests $5,000 in a mining site, the license holder needs to pay back $7,500.

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and sealed in the bags can be taken to and sold in GemFair's office in Koidu (GemFair n.d.). Only once miners "have achieved certain milestones in their progress" are they provided with the toolkit. Others who have yet to reach these milestones and who work without the toolkit need to call the GemFair office for each diamond they find, regardless of size and quality. GemFair staff then come to the mining site and log the diamond for them (GemFair 2019c: 14). Before being exported, the diamonds need to be valued by the Precious Mineral Trading Unit (PMTU) of the National Minerals Agency. The PMTU removes the stones from the bag to better sort and value them. The work of transparently logging, geotagging, and photographing the stones through the app is rendered as emotional value through the individual portrait of the miner.

Publicly, GemFair argues that it is open to all mining sites as long as they are licensed and meet the OECD requirements. The GemFair Manual (2019b: 10) explains how members can apply and how their application is assessed. Despite this public transparency, GemFair relies on other data sources such as gravel samples to assess mining sites' potential productivity before enrollment in the program.[7] By calculating the potential productivity of sites, GemFair maximizes the chance of profit while minimizing the risk of an unproductive site being included in the program. This pre-selection process is rather opaque, and miners do not take part in it. While miners continue to rely on "guesswork," GemFair bases its operations on geological data in order to minimize risk and ensure a good return of diamonds. Already marginalized miners who might not have close links to the chiefdom authorities and are allocated potentially less productive sites are likely not reached by GemFair. Being able to participate in and profit from this ethical mineral scheme is hence predetermined by access to potentially productive sites, rendering the power imbalance between buyers and producers more visible.

Since its inception, GemFair has "developed a digital solution to enable traceability and source artisanal diamonds responsibly" (GemFair n.d.), and the use of digital technologies is central to this initiative. Technically speaking, GemFair does not provide stone-by-

[7] There has not been a systematic geophysical survey of Sierra Leone's resources or alluvial diamond deposits in the Kono district since the 1970s (BGS 2018: 4), and reliable data are scarce.

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stone traceability back to the mine but ensures that the stones leaving the country through its channels originate from mines enrolled in the program (GemFair 2019c: 18).[8] Thus, "traceability" ends at the point when the stones enter De Beers's marketing channels, where they are sold to the company's sightholders.[9] And yet only a handful of toolkits, including tablets, had been handed out to miners at the time of research, and not all of the sixteen sites included in the project from its inception in 2018 had access to tablets. One miner who had been working with GemFair for two years stated that GemFair staff come to the sites to log the diamonds and seal them in bags, given the high levels of illiteracy of miners. Although he was literate and had completed all the training offered by GemFair, he was unsure if he would ever receive the toolkit. This is true of most sites currently enrolled in the GemFair initiative and most miners have yet to complete all the required training.

Miners commonly hold more than one mining license and operate several mining sites at the same time. This is also the case with miners operating under GemFair. Thus, there is a possibility that stones from a mining site operating outside the program's purview find their way into the GemFair supply chain, threatening one of the underlying principles of the ethical initiative. Different stories circulated in the field that some miners would take stones home instead of logging them on site, mixing them with stones from other mining sites. Once an audit highlighted this possibility, GemFair promised to increase its risk management system by conducting due diligence on "all key individuals involved on the site" and the "extent to which they may be involved in or have access to other mining sites" (GemFair 2019d: 3), although the risk remains of mixing diamonds from different sources if the bags are not sealed on the spot. For miners, once a

[8] An obligation to show that the diamond was mined in the country is not unique to GemFair's initiative; it is required under the KPCS for any diamond that is exported. GemFair also seeks to ensure transparency by making its standards, progress reports, and audit results publicly available as a window into its operations, providing an evidence checklist and procedures to monitor conformity with its standards (GemFair 2019b: 14). Transparency can be applied selectively, highlighting certain aspects while not reporting on others.

[9] Around 90 percent of De Beers Group's rough diamonds are sold to customers known as sightholders. These customers are among the world's leading diamantaires and are active in the major diamond centers (see www.debeersgroup.com/our-business/diamond-trading).

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diamond is logged in the app, they are effectively locked in with GemFair; GemFair thus extends a form of control through digital means.

It should be mentioned that GemFair staff were aware of some of these limitations and demonstrated a genuine intention to "do good." Despite this awareness, "ethically mined" initiatives are part of a highly unequal system of extraction and may, inadvertently, contribute to it while seeking to redress its underlying unfairness. Ultimately, digital transparency has a social life of its own, adapted to local contexts, often in contradiction to the implementation envisioned by its designers, in ways similar to the localization of foreign norms described by Engwicht (2018) for the implementation of the KPCS in Sierra Leone. What is more, and despite plans announced in 2019 (GemFair 2019c: 18) and a recent media statement opening up to the entire industry De Beers's "first fully distributed diamond blockchain platform that starts at the source and operates at scale,"[10] the GemFair model has not been integrated into "Tracr," a blockchain project developed by De Beers to ensure stone-by-stone traceability back to the mine. As we will see with the case of digital traceability and blockchain-based solutions for cobalt, this exclusion is not a problem of design but is built into the very logic driving these initiatives.

Conflict-Free Cobalt

In the frenzy to feed the electric-powered green transition and to power "clean" renewable energy infrastructures, the DRC has become the world's largest supplier of cobalt, most of which comes from the provinces of Lualaba and Haut Katanga. If cobalt was once considered a by-product metal in the extraction of copper or nickel, it has now been elevated to a strategic mineral in its own right (Olivetti et al. 2017: 229) and a key component of lithium-ion battery cell chemistries.[11] Cobalt extraction is planned to increase exponentially over the next decades to satisfy growing demands for electronic products and electric batteries, putting immense pressure on cobalt supplies. Unlike

[10] Quoted from a press release dated June 1, 2023.

[11] Other components are nickel, manganese, and lithium. Aside from the less-used cathodes built out of lithium titanium oxide (LTO) and lithium iron phosphate (LFP), anywhere between 10 and 15 kilograms of cobalt are required to produce most electric vehicle batteries.

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other critical minerals and metals necessary for "clean" energy technologies, cobalt stands apart due to the conditions under which it is sourced – a significant share by artisanal miners, easily accessible without industrial or mechanized methods – and the attention it has received in policy, industry, advocacy, and investment circles in the aftermath of accounts of child labor exploitation and human rights abuses.

As has been amply documented, the implementation of the OECD guidelines (2016), the Dodd–Frank Act (2010), or the European Union's more recent Conflict Minerals Regulation (2021) represented a watershed moment in the effort to ensure safer and conflict-free supply chains. These regulations and guidelines, coupled with the lobbying support of the International Council on Mining and Metals (ICMM), opened up new avenues for formalizing artisanal mining by promoting new forms of corporate engagement with the sector at risk of "outsourcing" responsibility by shifting the burden of extraction onto miners themselves through unwaged labor regimes in mixed or hybrid extractive spaces (Calvão et al. 2021). The release of an Amnesty International report and a subsequent lawsuit against tech companies over instances of child labor in cobalt mines brought further attention to the cobalt industry's supply chain, highlighting forced labor, human rights abuses, and inadequate working conditions. Downstream companies were pressured to investigate their suppliers in the hope of avoiding any further reputational risks; this led to the creation of "model mines" where artisanal miners were given the opportunity to mine within corporate concessions.

For the cobalt industry, the opportunity to develop new models of engagement with artisanal mining turned the DRC into the poster child for the promotion of conflict-free minerals schemes. Although cobalt is not classified as a conflict mineral according to most regulations and standards, it is taken up pre-emptively in broader initiatives aiming to improve human rights and avoid conflict, child labor, and labor exploitation. These efforts build upon a decade of concerted efforts across the extractive industry toward the formalization of artisanal mining and sustainable sourcing, including the standards developed by the umbrella organization of the Responsible Minerals Initiative (RMI), to differentiate legitimate and illegitimate, "risk-prone" and "safe," "clean" and "contaminated" cobalt sources, and, inherently, the legitimacy of the companies mining it. This technocratic model for

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human rights due diligence, in Raphael Deberdt's study of responsible cobalt sourcing (2023), is turned into a tool of corporate legitimacy, rather than one of accountability.

These attempts to make everything "transparently visible" (Smith 2021: 42) can have dire consequences, including effectively rendering invisible miners of the so-called 3Ts (tin, tungsten, and tantalum), which happen to fall outside the limited scope of monitoring and certification programs. In James Smith's account, not having the coveted barcoded tag often entails new forms of violence, confiscation, and restrictions on movement. It mattered little that talk of "blood" minerals in the postwar context seemed anachronistic to those directly involved in mining, or that the miners' own "ethics of invisibility" – escaping the predatory gaze and exclusionary rule of authorities – was not taken into consideration by the advocates of this transparency apparatus (Smith 2021: 42). For Le Billon and Spiegel (2022), certification and transparency "fixes" to promote conflict-free mineral supply chains come with "hidden costs," including human rights abuses, devaluation of livelihoods and non-certified minerals, and other forms of petty criminality and corruption.

In Kolwezi, these initiatives also face quiet opposition from local elected representatives who perceive the burden of transparency as an added cost for state authorities, as it was relayed to us by an agent working for a responsible sourcing initiative. Paradoxically, given their position as a key protagonist of a traceability-based program for supply chain transparency, they suggested that cobalt "is not a conflict mineral, so there's no need to do it." Similarly, a minister in Lualaba Province complained to us that the costs of reporting and third-party auditing would entail a loss in competitiveness.[12] In the case of digital monitoring and certification, these costs are often displaced to the miners themselves as prices are established by mining companies and their trading offices; as seen in the case of GemFair, these digital technologies may also lock miners into a corporate-run sourcing system.

[12] The minister's observation was made at the point when the Congolese state was preparing the creation of the Entreprise Générale du Cobalt (EGC), a monopolizing buffer between artisanal cooperatives and foreign companies that builds on the previous experience of state-led cooperatives EMAK and NOUCO (Bolay and Calvão 2022; Deberdt 2021), although it still awaits full implementation.

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Digital Traceability: Cobalt on the Block

The commitment to digital transparency, alongside or as an alternative to third-party certification and audit practices, represents an important transformation in ethical standards. As cobalt is a critical component of electronic products and is sourced from a conflict-prone region, there has been an accelerated adoption of new technologies capable of reassuring consumers, investors, and regulators. As we have argued elsewhere (Calvão and Archer 2021), digital technologies of traceability are not neutral instruments for managing natural resource extraction; they have the capacity to actively impact livelihoods, mobility, and spatial practices through new forms of control and intermediation. Here, we examine two of the most prominent digital technologies for monitoring and end-to-end traceability in mineral supply chains: digital auditing and blockchain-based solutions.

Digital auditing techniques are part of a plethora of new responsible sourcing services aiming to comprehensively offer transparency solutions for different multinational companies. This coterie of new service providers has mushroomed in recent years along the supply chain to instill a semblance of "responsible" governance and by forcefully competing over who is better positioned to engage with artisanal cobalt miners. By "governing at a distance" in a regime of "technocratic morality," Deberdt suggests (2023), these initiatives and their protagonists end up peripheralizing the agency of artisanal miners and selectively bracket their activities between moral and immoral narratives, with the miners made disposable by the conditions of their own erasure.

Despite the multiplication of digital solutions and blockchain-ready initiatives in the cobalt sector, these programs are limited in scope and implementation. One key initiative for responsible cobalt sourcing, meant to ensure due diligence for mining companies engaging with the artisanal sector in the Kolwezi region, operates under a subscription service contracted by mining companies and other "downstream" corporations requiring cobalt. It is meant to audit and monitor participating mining sites, and to offer "digital product traceability" services primarily for the benefit of an international audience. And yet, as we were told locally, the responsible sourcing initiative "doesn't officially do traceability" as much as "documentary traceability." In other words, field agents in each participating mine conducted a "mining

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site assessment" to verify and report data on incidents, potential violations, and general demographic data on the composition of the artisanal workforce. Despite the promised immediacy of digital solutions, human input is unavoidable – as was the case in Sierra Leone's GemFair program. A field agent is required to upload information in an app, attribute a score on the basis of a predefined standard developed by the service provider, and have it eventually reviewed by an external regional officer. Once the reported information is checked for potential inconsistencies and inaccuracies, a country manager based outside the country gives it a final screening. Although this service provider does not effectively trace the extracted ore or avoid the risk of unmonitored cobalt entering the supply chain, the final report is made available on a platform where it can be freely utilized to legitimize its funding and supporting partners – including automakers, electronics manufacturers, mining companies, and development agencies. And yet, these attempts to digitally track and record cobalt transactions have failed to convincingly persuade the main targets of these interventions, not *in spite of* but *because of* their own conditions of possibility for design and implementation.[13]

Blockchain-based solutions, on the other hand, have gained prominence more recently as the definitive technological "fix" to certify that cobalt is "free" of conflict and child labor violations, and in every other way responsibly mined. For its proponents, this technology increases efficiency, prevents fraud, and ensures that ethical certification processes are more credible by practically removing all semblance of human mediation. In coming up with a technology-based solution for enforcing due diligence mechanisms, blockchains would address the limitations and inconsistencies of other digital-based solutions by embracing the principle of decentralized consensus-based protocols capable of avoiding record tampering, such as those defined by the RMI's *Blockchain Guidelines* (2020). These guidelines flout common practice in industry-led blockchain initiatives operated through privately run and permissioned self-standing platforms where

[13] Artisanal miners surveyed in 2019 demonstrated widespread skepticism and suspicion regarding the use of instruments to measure the grade quality and quantity of cobalt ore. The survey was conducted among miners operating in so-called "hybrid mines," with only 2.47 percent claiming to trust these instruments (see Calvão and Archer 2021).

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data is stored centrally. The technological rhetoric associated with blockchains creates an illusion of disintermediation and the purported absence of institutional mediation, as blockchains end up creating new intermediations (Çalışkan 2020).

Despite the hype and promise surrounding the adoption of blockchain solutions for traceability purposes, they rest upon a principle of "asset" management and not on the transformative potential of responsible and embedded extractive practices. As we were told rather candidly by a monitoring agent working for an organization exploring blockchain-enabled solutions in the cobalt sector, such solutions do not solve the problem: if "corruption at the base remains," or until the information is "100 percent reliable," the problem of upstream traceability will remain. In other words, without third-party assessment, or if blockchain solutions are not developed alongside "reasonable" due diligence, once the tracked stone moves up the supply chain, its origins are disentangled from the extractive site and no longer recorded. As is the case with other digital transparency solutions, these initiatives work on the basis of formalized settings and exclude those who fall outside them, thus perpetuating existing logics of value extraction.

Most pilot projects are in testing and exploration stages, with few examples of actual implementation. One of the first companies to offer a distributed ledger for ensuring ethically sourced cobalt, Canada-based Cobalt Blockchain Inc., had been developing two joint supply agreements in the Kolwezi and Lubumbashi region since 2018. Despite these agreements and pending license approvals, the company announced a name change in 2021 along with a broader range of action to include other digital minerals, including tin, tantalum, and tungsten. It seems that "blockchain" worked in this instance to lure in investors in successive fundraising rounds, harnessing the clout of sustainable development and ethical sourcing for consumer-centered performances of social responsibility.

The Responsible Sourcing Blockchain Network (RSBN) is perhaps the most anticipated blockchain solution currently being developed on IBM's blockchain platform in collaboration with audit and responsible sourcing service provider RCS Global. Promising to deliver "sustainability through responsible sourcing," IBM's blockchain solution counts automakers, battery manufacturers, and cobalt suppliers among its founding members. "Companies that take sustainability and social justice seriously," according to its mission statement online,

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"work to keep cobalt mined by hand out of their supply chains," putting to rest any doubts regarding the inclusionary goals of artisanal mining. As in other similar blockchain projects, its distributed ledger is meant to "track production from mine to battery to end product," draping in technical language the usual truisms of transparency, trust, and security. Here again, the benefit of responsible sourcing accrues primarily to corporate shareholders and the audit providers who verify the quality of the data and the implementation of regulatory frameworks, despite the promise of the "digitization of a paper process."

ReSource is the other leading blockchain provider in the cobalt sector, offering a digital platform for the traceability of minerals and metals required for electric batteries on the basis of standards provided by the RMI and the ICMM. Designed "by the industry for the industry," it has tentatively enrolled mining companies in partnership with the RMI and car companies. As a joint consortium with leading companies in the sector, it is still pending anti-trust approvals before its platform is implemented. Offering a technical solution for traceability and due diligence compliance that cannot easily be manipulated, this solution again benefits those who can monitor, report, and make use of provenance and sustainability data.

For all the "unprecedented" and "revolutionary" potential with which these solutions are presented, blockchain-based traceability initiatives still rest on a principle of unequal access that fosters new forms of exclusion and control, or is otherwise limited by the everyday reality of social life. The foundational principles of a digital ledger – openness, transparency, security – fall short of delivering on their promise, driven as they are by the economic and moralizing impetus to "clean" supply chains of potentially nefarious evidence. What is more, data collection is limited to areas with ongoing formalized artisanal mining, often under the auspices of large-scale industrial mines. As a corporate-sponsored digital program for traceability, it seeks to avoid the reputational risks of unregulated mining, de facto rendering the underlying objective of responsible sourcing increasingly moot and creating new exclusionary boundaries through the self-ascribed limits of its own program. Toward that end, mining companies, due diligence entities, and digital traceability providers enter a symbiotic business relationship based on competing subcontracting services in the name of transparency.

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Conclusion

The promotion of more transparent and ethical initiatives to mitigate the environmental and reputational risks associated with mining has become an integral part of a broader turn toward responsible sourcing. It is not uncommon to come across industry publications and consumer ads featuring glossy images of artisanal producers and the social and environmental benefits of improved traceability. The recent adoption of digital transparency tools and advanced blockchain-based traceability promise a techno-optimistic and digitally enabled future rooted in the idea that more data is an end in and of itself toward more transparency. Ultimately, the immediacy of digital transparency – as a project of disintermediation – fails to grapple with the concrete challenges of its social life, where it takes shape, is contested, and is given new meaning.

As we have shown, these solutions are also fragmented and siloed, and potentially foster new forms of exclusion and dispossession. The digital project of making everything transparent can be applied selectively, leaving some things unreported or unsaid (e.g., Babidge 2015: 79–80), or can produce so much data that it creates what the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative board member Daniel Kaufmann calls "zombie transparency," or data that is hard to understand, irrelevant, or hard to access. As AI scholar Kate Crawford put it, "complete transparency . . . is an impossible goal" (2021: 12) and more attention should be given to how these models engage "with its material architectures, contextual environments, and prevailing politics and by tracing how they are connected." Until then, the project of digital transparency may end up replicating what Milton Mueller (2015: 1) calls the "fallacy of displaced control" of hyper-transparency, where revelations of "aberrant behavior" generate "pressures to regulate the intermediaries, instead of identifying and punishing the individuals responsible for the bad acts."

In other words, the digital instruments designed to optimize supply chain management and address consumer anxieties about "contamination" may implicitly reproduce neocolonial narratives that seek to shed light on the darker corners of the world's supply of raw materials. Some of these initiatives, as in the case of De Beers's return to Sierra Leone, may inadvertently evoke the bygone era of corporate paternalism, where the instruments for producing transparency – and

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empowerment, by extension – are supplied only sparingly, if ever, to the miners themselves. Unlike De Beers's dominant position in Sierra Leone, the scramble for control over cobalt sources in the DRC and the reputational risks of mining a key resource for "clean" energy in the region have led to a complex subcontracting economy. Competitively bidding for the most transparent and responsible services, mining companies, due diligence agents, and digital traceability providers enter a symbiotic and mutually beneficial relationship.

Be it with diamonds from Sierra Leone or cobalt from the DRC, as in many other sites across the world, the work of collecting data to ensure transparent and responsible sources is limited by design to areas with ongoing formalized artisanal mining or similar standards mechanisms, often under the auspices of large-scale industrial mines. Corporate-sponsored digital programs for traceability are meant to allow companies to pivot away from the reputational risks of unregulated mining. However, this renders moot the underlying objective of responsible sourcing programs, while potentially generating new exclusionary boundaries due to those programs' self-ascribed limits. Making the world digitally transparent may grant legitimacy to the various extractive actors, but it does not fundamentally change the world around us or improve the circumstances in which others experience the world.

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6 *"I Never Looked into a Diamond"*

The Transparent Ignorance of the Diamond Broker

SAM SHUMAN

"You're an archaeologist," observed Shloimy, a Hasidic diamond broker with a graying beard and a Borsalino hat, as his eyes pierced me through his tortoiseshell-framed glasses.

"No," I instinctively corrected him, coiling the black, lavaliere microphone back into its case, after first turning my Zoom H5 hand recorder off. It was a common mistake, even in the United States. Archaeology just happened to be a different subfield.

"I'm an ANTHROPOLOGIST."

"No," the expression on his face told me, "you are the one confused." He knew the difference. "You're studying an extinct species," Shloimy declared, without a hint of irony. The diamond broker had already died out. I was just studying the aftermath. I had been led for the first time into the *Beurs Voor Diamanthandel*, one of the four trading halls of Antwerp's diamond industry. What I had misread for an interview was a guided tour of the ruins. This was an excavation site. The necks of the daylight UV lamps, affixed to the end of each long wooden table, all bent into darkness. Save an aging trader seated a few tables over, the trading hall lay empty.

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My entry into the trading hall happened so spontaneously, so unceremoniously. Our scheduled chat had started at Sam's, the adjacent kosher restaurant. But the restaurant had closed now, too. And suddenly, our scheduled chat had to be relocated. Diamond brokers, unlike traders, are peripatetic. Without an office, Shloimy had nowhere to host me. I certainly had nowhere to host him. So he asked the guard at the desk in front of the trading hall if I could be granted entry under his supervision. The guard agreed. The inner sanctum, which I had long peered through with a sense of wonder and curiosity, was now before me. But as I learned, no one had traded here in earnest for many years. If the space had actually been operational, Shloimy explained to me, the guard would have refused me entry. Diamonds worth millions of dollars once circulated through these halls.[1] My very ability to access it testified to its disuse. Antwerp's diamond trade had migrated from its home at Café Petit Duc on the neighboring Pelikaanstraat to this diamond bourse in 1904. Over 115 years later, whatever trade lingered took place in the offices on the floors above, in the virtual world of WhatsApp and Telegram groups, on secure online wholesale platforms like IDEX or RapNet, and on retail platforms such as Amazon and BlueNile. The trading halls had become a de facto club for old men in the industry – to sip coffee and tea, play an occasional game of backgammon, watch the news, or read the newspaper.[2]

We continued our chat. Shloimy nostalgically guided me through the space. There, he pointed to the side of the room, were the closed stalls

[1] Although the diamond industry in Belgium currently operates on American dollars, transactions throughout much of the twentieth century operated through its own currency, the "diamond guilder." Prior to 1936, Belgian diamond merchants typically traded in Dutch guilders, each one "equivalent to 20 Belgian francs, 1/12th £, or approximately $.40 in American money" (Kaplan 1954–1955: 123). In 1936, however, nearly all European currencies abandoned the gold standard. This created fluctuating exchange rates between the Dutch guilder and the Belgian franc. In response, Belgian diamond merchants created a standardized "diamond guilder," which maintained the exchange rate from the years of the gold standard (ibid.).

[2] The only time I did witness this trading hall in use was during an industry-wide "town hall" in July 2018. Chief executives from De Beers, the very corporation that in 1947 launched the iconic advertising campaign "A Diamond Is Forever," announced details about its latest venture: Lightbox, a line of synthetic, lab-grown diamond (LGD) jewelry. These executives explained that Lightbox jewelry was not intended to last forever. "An LGD is not 'forever,' but it's perfect for right now . . . one should not buy LGD for important moments in life" (Antwerp World Diamond Centre 2018).

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where brokers would be given the goods from the vault. As Shloimy recreated the scene, conjuring images from the storehouse of his memory, I felt transported back to a different time, as one might imagine in a flashback scene when the dust and detritus of accumulated time lifts into a past more alive than the present. Shloimy reminisced how the brokers would then line up with their goods as the traders sat at the table. No chair was uninhabited. "Each day there was sitting next to the window, there was sitting a customer. And the brokers used to sit in the line to show goods. My grandfather was involved in the diamond industry, he was also a broker," Shloimy told me. "But Antwerp is a small town. So everyone's involved." By "everyone," Shloimy meant nearly all of the Jewish men:

> Ninety percent of the people in that time, even more than 90 percent, 90 to 95 percent of the people went into diamonds. There wasn't much choice of doing other things. So, it was an easy work to get into. We see only now how spoiled we were. Then in the times – I'm talking about my coming into the business. It was in 1983, '84. We saw, now that we look back, we saw what a *gan eden*[3] we were in that time.

I had heard about the good old days of the diamond industry before. It was a favorite pastime of the men I met. To trade in the diamond bourse trading hall once required a suit and tie. Now, most of the Hasidic men in the Jewish community had to learn skills elsewhere in the types of jobs that make your clothes dirty, as plumbers, electricians, and tilers, whereas Hasidic women often work as homemakers, bookkeepers, secretaries, and teachers.

But then something utterly unexpected occurred. Shloimy made a startling confession. "Because the broker is not necessary to understand. I'm already a broker, I was a broker for thirty years, I don't understand yet a diamond. I never looked into a diamond. The opposite," he continued, as if unfurling an oral argument in the dialectical logic of a Talmudic passage, where one first begins with an initial assumption (*hava amina*) only to later disprove it in the conclusion (*maskana*). "The bosses used to be angry at the brokers who looked at the diamonds because they said they didn't want you to value their diamonds or something. You ask the price and you bring me a price.

[3] Lit. "Garden of Eden" or "paradise."

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It's none of your business if it's 'yes worth,' if it's 'not worth.' It's worth 10 percent more, 5 percent less."

Despite this brief, one-off encounter, his words stayed with me. They puzzled me. "I never looked into a diamond"? As I continued fieldwork to study the value of the human diamond broker at this protracted moment of his "vanishing,"[4] this claim continued to reappear. Over 4,000 miles away, in a Starbucks nestled within the fortressed Bandra Kurla Complex in Mumbai, a Gujarati Indian broker made a similar claim over a cup of coffee. He explained, much to my bewilderment, that he refuses to even open diamond parcels before brokering them. It was better to stay ignorant of the goods he brokered.

What does one do with such a claim? Were these brokers lying? Was this an act of redirection or subterfuge?[5] If this was a lie, however, it was a social lie – that is, something that circulated, that they told to others, and not just to themselves, that they collectively internalized and interiorized. A question stood before me: Taking ignorance as endowed with its own characteristics, "as much a social construct as

[4] In the particular case of the diamond industry, nearly all of the brokers I encountered were men (bar one woman, who refused to speak with me). The gendered language used throughout the article reflects the male homosociality of brokerage and of the diamond industry more broadly.

[5] Acts of deceit and dissimulation have storied histories within the annals of anthropology (Bailey 1991; Basso 1987). Lying is, of course, not the exclusive prerogative of the informant. Tricksters can be positioned on both sides of the ethnographic exchange and lies taken up by informants and ethnographers alike (Metcalf 2002). As observed in a provocative introduction to a volume on ignorance in anthropology, "anthropologists have often set out to defend the people they study – showing that far from being ignorant, they are actually very knowledgeable indeed" (Mair et al 2012). This recuperative epistemic thread runs from musings on witchcraft among the Azande (Evans-Pritchard 1937) to methadone addiction among heroin addicts (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009) to soda consumption in a country with rampant obesity (Roberts 2017) to an Islamic women's piety movement in Egypt (Mahmood 2011). It lays bare the logics, constrained by social structures and economic conditions, that drive the actions and strategies of people who would otherwise be branded as irrational and irresponsible or charged with false consciousness.

Showcasing the indigenous and local knowledge of informants has served as a necessary antidote to the claims of colonial science that represented colonized peoples as cognitively inferior, to justify the dispossession and rule over them. This impulse, however, has also obscured the ways in which ignorance shapes everyday interaction. Overplaying the knowledge of those we encounter in the field transforms our informants into omniscient deities.

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knowing" (Gershon and Raj 2000), why might claiming ignorance be productive or strategic (Gershon 2000; McGoey 2012)?

I use this play of knowledge/ignorance between traders and brokers in the diamond transaction not only to understand the situated case of brokerage in the diamond industry, but also to challenge dominant frameworks for understanding the future of work and the cutting out of the middleman (or "disintermediation") in supply chains (or "ignorance chains"[6]) and global industries across the globe. Standard accounts of disintermediation often flatly assume a narrative of technological determinism (and dystopianism), in which intermediaries are simply replaced by virtual technologies and platforms. As eloquently summarized by two anthropologists, "as money and payment forms are increasingly digitized, the future of financial transactions is imagined to be one in which intermediaries are no longer necessary, and where older material forms of value will decline in importance" (Tankha and Dalinghaus 2020: 345). Yet such promises of "*direct and unmediated access*" are illusory, for "no economic system can be fully disembedded from social relations and the concrete semiotic practices that mediate them" (Keane 2008: 37).

This chapter builds upon these trenchant critiques of mediation to rethink the precarious position of the broker in today's diamond industry. It does so by examining the rise of a "transparency" regime, enabled by the standardization of diamond certificates, pricing lists, and e-commerce trading platforms. Upending an assumed nexus between power and knowledge (Foucault 1980; Matthews 2005), I argue that the broker's power paradoxically lies within his professed ignorance of the goods he brokers and his studied indifference to his role within the transaction. This regime of transparency is, in effect, disrupting the strategic and necessary self-presentation of the broker *as*

[6] I take this colorful term from linguistic anthropologist Janet McIntosh, who served as a discussant for a panel on "The Cultural Production of Ignorance at 20" at the 2019 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. In her response to my paper, McIntosh noted: "Anyhow, one could keep going on the varieties of ignorance required by capitalism, and could perhaps argue that a commodity chain is an ignorance chain. The diamond broker's collusion in this ignorance chain helps the whole operation keep going. Even if the brokers 'die out,' there will still be plenty of ignorance left in that chain" (McIntosh 2019). For McIntosh's own work on (elite) ignorance, which she terms "structural oblivion," see: *Unsettled: Denial and Belonging Among White Kenyans* (McIntosh 2016).

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an ignorant and dispassionate actor, one divested of interests and sentiments. In so doing, it is not simply replacing or rendering the broker into obsolescence; rather, it is revealing the very ideological contradictions at the heart of brokerage itself.

Policing Ignorance

On the one hand, this delicate dialectic between knowledge and ignorance is not altogether specific to the position of the broker; one finds similar expressions in the policing of knowledge and the maintenance of ignorance on the manufacturing side of the diamond industry. Yekhezkel, an elderly Jewish owner of a former atelier in Antwerp, who now owns workshops in India, recounted how he would withhold the value of a rough diamond from his polishers. Here is how he reasoned it. If a polisher knew that a particular stone was valuable (i.e., worth $1 million or $0.5 million), he would become jittery and would be more likely to break it. Even when a polisher did break a stone, Yekhezkel would never disclose its value; he would simply tell the polisher to go home and rest for two days. If he disclosed the value of the stone, he reasoned, the polisher would never be able to return to work and polish with a steady hand.

In other instances, withholding information has functioned as an alibi for managerial control and the deskilling of workers (Braverman 1974). As early as 1970, a founder of French urban anthropology, Jacques Gutwirth, observed in an ethnography about Hasidic life and the diamond industry in Antwerp that:

> homework has practically disappeared, with employers preferring to group their cleavers together, not in large factory rooms but in bright rooms or offices where they work at most three or four. On the other hand, the bosses try to institute a certain division of labor by "specializing" the cleavers in certain partial phases of operations, some practicing for example the initial fragmentations, and others the finishes. Belz Hasidic cleavers[7] do not appreciate the process which, contrary to what the term "specialization" implies, actually restricts the experience and knowledge of the material and the trade,

[7] This refers to diamond cleavers from the Belz Hasidic dynasty, which has historically represented the largest Hasidic sect in Antwerp. The Belz Hasidic dynasty was originally founded by Rabbi Shalom Rokheakh in approximately 1817 in Belz, a town in eastern Galicia (Assaf 2010).

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which remain essential if they want to then work on their own. (Gutwirth 1970: 94)[8]

On the one hand, this claim of ignorance, at closer inspection, struck me as odd and unconvincing. On the other hand stood the most glaring problem: the unlikelihood of working in an industry and accruing no technical knowledge about the very commodities one brokered on a daily basis. By all accounts, diamond brokers should resemble tea brokers, whose value becomes defined precisely by their intimate relationship to or connoisseurship of a single commodity (Besky 2016). Instead, however, they represented themselves as if they worked within the financialized world of future traders in Chicago and London, where they could altogether forget which commodity they brokered (Zaloom 2006). The type of abstracted substitution that drives the world of financialized commodity future markets, however, could not be further from the world of diamond trading. While there have long been various attempts to financialize diamonds for investment schemes, the diamond commodity market has not undergone financialization; this is because, unlike nearly all other mined commodities (Ferry 2016), diamonds lack fungibility. Whereas gold's properties afford it good fitness for purposes of investment, as each bar of gold can be traded for another, one diamond can never be interchangeable for another. Each natural diamond is unique and is graded by a myriad of qualities or parameters (color, carat, cut, and clarity). Unlike other commodities, where brokers can be indifferent to distinction, diamonds are all about distinction, and yet brokers claim indifference. They claim *indifference to difference*.

The Contradictions of the Broker

Several ethnographers and historians have noted the devaluation of brokers in the trade, often citing the broker's lack of capital, of risk, or even of knowledge about diamonds as explanations for their inferiority in the industry (Laureys 2005: 32). Renee Rose Shield rehearses these familiar explanations in an ethnography of the diamond district on 47th Street in New York:

[8] Translated from French by the author.

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Brokers occupy a dubious status as they flit uncertainly between dealers who own the goods. They are essentially liminal, neither here nor there, but in between. Not only do they not own the goods, they often lack completely information about diamonds in general. Filling an essential role between two sides, these individuals are somewhat stigmatized. Like a marriage broker, they are useful in linking people together, but they are perhaps not completely necessary. (Shield 2002: 99)

On one level, Shield voices a perennial tension in the study of brokerage: Are brokers foundational to creating markets or an impediment to their functioning (Vidal 2000)? Within the anti-Semitic discourse of European economic history, Jewish brokers have been treated as unproductive "parasites" on the Christian (body) politic (Raffles 2007). Both Shield and Laureys accept a dominant historiographic account that treats brokers as ignorant or superfluous. They misrecognize how ignorance may operate as a strategy that the broker uses to maintain his role as the impartial or disinterested "third" within the transaction (Simmel 1908). This stance must constantly be maintained in their *affective* role as seemingly impartial mediators in negotiating disputes between traders. In reality, they may operate as *tertius gaudens* ("a rejoicing third"), who pit trader against trader. Gutwirth astutely observes this in his ethnography:

In order for the deal to go through, the broker strives to exploit the subjective part of the judgment of the two parties between whom he mediates, and therefore to influence this judgment. If he is clever, he uses, both towards his "boss" and towards the client, ratiocinations, flattery, various arguments relating to applied social psychology. The methods vary, but cunning and invention always have a large place. Seller and buyer are not unaware of this; however, they feel the need to hear the argumentation despite all information which will allow them in particular to determine how far the concessions of the opposing party will go. The broker must have a lot of patience, endure objections and recriminations from both parties. His professional practice is usually accompanied by a submissive attitude, and even a certain obsequiousness. (Gutwirth 1970: 87)

What nearly all of these scholars have curiously failed to theorize are the particular *gendered* qualities associated with the work of brokerage and how this relates to their devaluation in the industry. It is not altogether surprising that those actors who perform the most "feminized" affective work in a sector dominated by men, who are tasked with managing the egos of traders, who are meant to display "a lot of

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patience," "a submissive attitude, and even a certain obsequiousness" (Gutwirth 1970: 87), are those who are devalued in the industry's hierarchy.

The claim, moreover, contradicted the very interests of the broker: to accumulate the highest commission possible. In the diamond industry, the broker receives a commission. Commissions typically hover across the industry between 0.5 percent and 1 percent of the total transaction. To not seek the highest price, when presented with the opportunity, would be tantamount to self-sabotage. When I raised my suspicions about the broker's "ignorance" across my field sites, however, brokers often offered logical responses about their own ignorance and why one would desire it. If it was revealed that you had cheated a trader or played one trader against another, it could tarnish your reputation. Unlike my interaction with Shloimy, *their* interactions were not one-off transactions; to sustain their livelihoods required ongoing maintenance of their reputations within the industry. And because diamond-trading networks are often built upon dynasties of intergenerational family firms, a broker would often work across multiple generations of a trading company.

Over croissants and coffee in his apartment overlooking one of Antwerp's parks, Marcel, a middle-aged, secular Jewish ex-broker with a business degree, distilled the strategies for how to broker ignorantly. Marcel no longer worked as a broker. He would reveal, he claimed, what others would rather not share. He had no skin in the game.

There are two schools. One says the more you know, the better:

> [The more credible you] look like in front of clients. Others say the least you know, the easiest it will be for you to sell. Because if you know too much about the stone, every detail of the stone, it's hard sometimes to sell it. You don't need to know everything. If you have a parcel and it says, or a stone and it says, it's this and that, and so forth. And that's the asking price and your boss says, "This is the minimum price you can sell it for," then it's easier to work than [if] you will analyze and know everything yourself about the stone. Or maybe say you're going to lose faith in the stone if you don't agree with what your boss said about it.

What Marcel articulated can be captured through a cliché: ignorance is bliss. Conversely, knowledge could become a source of liability. Curiously enough, Marcel did *not* refer to the most obvious form of

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"liability" that we might assume: the *legal* liability of defrauding a buyer (an explanation that *was* offered to me on at least one occasion – by an internationally recognized expert in the global diamond industry).[9] This other type of liability would be the type of "willful blindness" associated with criminal law: "'the deliberate avoidance of knowledge of the facts' – that is, a person avoids gaining knowledge as a means of avoiding self-incrimination" (Bovensiepen and Pelkmans 2020: 388). But there are many varieties of "willful blindness," and we need not think about this term in such strictly legalistic terms.[10] Marcel focuses rather on the challenges that this knowledge presents to selling the stone and to the broker's confidence, and on the undue friction in this delicate arrangement between broker, boss, and diamond. The assumption in Marcel's account is that the broker could accurately assess the diamond's value. In that sense, ignorance does not reference the broker's (in)capacity to value the goods. To an extent, the question

[9] This subject is admittedly complicated by the fact that the diamond industry prefers to handle disputes "internally" (rather than relying upon state courts), a system that legal economists call "private ordering" (defined as the "development of extralegal forums and forms of dispute processing by nonhierarchical groups" [Sagy 2011: 923]). In this system of "stateless commerce" (Richman 2017), the industry resolves disputes through its own system of arbitration and relies upon the communal, nonlegal, and customary norms of the respective communities that work within the industry (Bernstein 1992). These forms of communal enforcement can only be achieved, as these legal scholars argue, in a situation of tight-knit, insular trade diasporas, or what one scholar calls an "ethnically homogenous middlemen group (EHMG)" (Landa 1981). Tehila Sagy provides a trenchant critique of the "private ordering" literature by focusing on three prototypical cases – the New York Diamond Dealers Club (DDC), Shasta County ranch owners (Ellickson 1991), and the Israeli kibbutz (Shapiro 1976) – and explains the various political-economic ideologies that drive legal scholars to focus on (and promote) "nonstate mechanisms for dispute processing" (Sagy 2011).

While merchants may not be charged in state courts (although this has certainly happened in recent years), the broker could certainly be held liable for his actions by a *bestuur* ("governing council" in Dutch) that arbitrates these disputes within the industry. A fictionalized *bestuur* case can be seen in the 2023 Netflix TV series "Rough Diamonds."

[10] In their provocative article on this subject, Judith Bovensiepen and Mathijs Pelkmans examine willful blindness across a "spectrum of intentionality – with strategic ignorance on one extreme and ignorance as embodied disposition on the other" (Bovensiepen and Pelkmans 2020: 390). On the other hand, they upset a foundational assumption in the literature – that intentionality is ever stable. Arguing from this premise, they assert "that intentionality is itself unstable, and that this instability shapes the dynamics of wilful blindness in individuals, institutions and groups" (ibid.).

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of the broker's capacity is held in abeyance (or bracketed). It is, rather, the danger of misalignment, of veering too far from the instructions of the "boss" and creating undue friction within the transaction that propels this desire for ignorance. Ignorance should not be misconstrued as a measure of (in)capacity, but rather as a measure of desire, will, and strategy. Quite to the contrary, one must have the intellectual wherewithal to know when not to know – that is, when to strategically become or remain ignorant.

Dominant scholarly accounts focus on the broker's structural position in bridging scales and translating between polities: the colonizer and the colonized (Geertz 1960), empire and its subjects (Rothman 2011), and formal and informal economies (Bailey 1963). While largely neglected by anthropologists after the decline of patron–client studies in the 1970s, and often reduced to an immoral or amoral social actor (Lindquist 2015), the figure of the broker is re-emerging in academic debates (Björkman 2021; Dua 2022; James 2011). In the most functional sense, the broker's ignorance is paramount, to perpetuate the edifice or infrastructure of the transaction. As Georg Simmel observed in an essay on "The Triad": "after all that has been said, it is clear that from an over-all viewpoint, the existence of the impartial third element serves the perpetuation of the group" (Simmel 1908: 152). In that sense, brokerage operates as a form of what I call *agnotological ideology*: the *belief* in the broker's ignorance is instrumental to the smooth operation of the transaction.[11] The public secret (Taussig 1999) is that the broker presents himself as the impartial third, when he may very well be a *tertius gaudens*, who pits trader against trader (Simmel 1908). Their (claim to) ignorance is, in a manner of speaking, itself transparent to all parties in the transaction. Their transparent ignorance is not simply productive for the transaction; the transaction *depends* upon it.

[11] I thank David Berliner for calling my attention to the fact that I am essentially describing what Pierre Bourdieu formulates as misrecognition or "miscognition." As Bourdieu argues in a section on the gift (and counter-gift) in *Pascalian Meditations*: "no one is really unaware of the logic (it constantly surfaces in explicit form, when for example someone wonders whether a present will be judged sufficient), but no one fails to comply with the rule of the game, which is to act as if one did not know the rule. We might coin the term "common miscognition" to designate the game in which everyone knows – and does not want to know – the true nature of the exchange" (Bourdieu 2000).

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The Rise of the Transparency Regime

Yet this has become more complicated in recent years, as industry actors must leave a "transparent" paper trail. Up until the late 1990s, Antwerp's diamond industry infamously operated through *zwart geld* (unreported taxable income). Diamantaires did not generate invoices for their transactions and rarely left a paper trail. Across the industry, contracts are sealed orally by uttering *mazal u'brakha* ("luck and blessing"). Indeed, Belgian authorities sought to attract diamantaires from other trading hubs (particularly Amsterdam, to which many of Antwerp's own diamantaires had migrated) throughout the first half of the twentieth century by deliberately overlooking illicit practices (Vanden Daelen 2018: 67). When the center of the diamond industry shifted to Amsterdam in the early twentieth century, for example, Belgium attracted its "Diamond Jews" to return through "incentives," including "turning a blind eye towards monitoring the industry's bookkeeping, workplace conditions, and adherence to employment laws" (67). After World War II, moreover, these incentives included "wage rises, return bonuses, practical and financial help in repatriation, and granting of citizenship" (67).

Beginning in the 1950s, the Belgian government enabled money laundering and the circulation of *zwart geld* by creating the "Don Pedro" system. At this historical moment, countries including Spain, Greece, and Italy (and several North African countries) banned the importing of diamonds. As explained by Eddy Vleeschdrager, a prominent leader in the diamond industry:

> [A]s there were no export licenses, [these] buyers usually came to Antwerp carrying cash and returned unnoticed to their countries with the stones, avoiding any sort of billing. Antwerp diamond dealers found themselves in situations where large sales went unrecorded. The Belgian Government proposed that the industry create "artificial bills" for such sales, bills that would be referred to as "Don Pedro." (Goldstein 1999)

In the 1980s, however, the European Union began to introduce legislation combating money laundering and tax evasion. In 1986, Belgian authorities raided Roger Kirschen & Company for engaging in tax fraud on behalf of their clients in the diamond industry (Casert 1986). In 1991, Phillipe Maystadt, the Belgian finance minister, announced the end of the Don Pedro system. Although the diamond industry in

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Antwerp managed to find workarounds to this increased scrutiny for a time, Belgian lawmakers passed increasingly strict legislation in 1995 that required banks to disclose the true identities of parties involved in their clients' transactions. The Belgian government, keen to capture a vast reserve of unreported income from the diamond industry, raided diamond offices, froze bank accounts, seized diamonds, and arrested those charged with tax evasion. It also investigated the banks that facilitated tax evasion, notably including Bank Max Fischer (Du Bois 1997). International anti-money laundering and legislation countering the financing of terrorism only intensified after 9/11, as the United States Congress passed the International Money Laundering Abatement and Anti-Terrorist Financing Act of 2001. The diamond industry became directly implicated, as smuggled diamonds became associated with the financing of global terrorist networks (e.g., Al-Qaeda). With the collapse of diamond banks, international banks that historically serviced the diamond industry (e.g., ABN AMRO) now offer far fewer lines of credit and bank loans to the midstream pipeline of the diamond industry. Between 2013 and 2019 alone, the diamond industry witnessed a $5 billion decrease in financing from banks (marking a 30 percent decline) (Bain & Company 2019).

In this epistemic regime, transparency becomes tethered to knowledge through the due diligence of "Know Your Customer" measures, which require that traders submit invoices (among other measures) to the Belgian government. This indirectly poses a threat to brokers. Through the Don Pedro system, brokers could historically shield both parties from knowledge of the other's existence altogether. In that sense, the brokers not only benignly serve a search function, but may be enlisted to perform an *anonymizing* function within the industry, connecting parties who would otherwise refuse to conduct business. The broker could connect those who either do not know one another or wish not to know one another. Invoices now reveal each party's identity, making transparent or, more precisely, de-anonymizing the identities of the parties involved. Traders can now more easily disintermediate brokers, transacting directly with the other party once they learn their identity – thereby cutting out the broker and the commission owed to him.

Moreover, the standardization of diamond certification now mediates nearly all transactions, alongside transparent price lists revealed to

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industry actors through downloadable Rapaport pricing reports and listings on e-commerce platforms such as RapNet. A "modernized" regime of diamond certificates and pricing lists has replaced the craft of valuation with a lab-certified document, thereby disrupting a sociality of salescraft (Cross and Heslop 2019) marked by contingency and contestation, improvisation and haggling. While diamond certification emerged in the 1970s, the technology was largely reserved for larger stones – that is, above a certain weight or carat. In a move toward greater standardization (in the name of transparency), traders increasingly certified even smaller stones. For the broker, this disrupted the necessary and *desired* asymmetry of information needed to conduct business. There needed to be a proper balance between those knowing and those "not-caring-to-know" (Last 1981) – whether it be the identity of a trader, which invoices now revealed, or the value of the diamond itself, which diamond certificates revealed by objectifying seemingly arbitrary characteristics of color and clarity into "scientifically" transparent, self-evident facts. Susan Falls distills the process in her ethnography of diamond branding and consumption:

> GIA [diamond lab] creates meaningful discriminations through a highly contrived grading system that is then mapped onto a grading sheet called a "certificate." Control over grading is assured by the use of specialized jargon, tools, and knowledge, all carefully leaked to the public in an effort to guide perceptions. What grading does, then, is maneuver the seemingly similar into a hierarchy of value. (Falls 2014: 57)

Although accurate in her assessment, for purposes of analyzing the diamond "certificate" in relationship to the retail sector of the industry, Falls fails to realize how the diamond certificate has also radically reshaped the nature of trade and salescraft on the wholesale side of the supply chain. Parameters that could once be debated and haggled over between traders *through* a broker are now non-negotiable. They have been codified as law through the materiality of the standardized diamond certificate.

Disintermediation and Racialized Nostalgia

Yet it would be equally inaccurate to suggest that diamond traders and brokers explain the precarity of the diamond broker's position as the consequence of a faceless abstraction (although many *do* frequently opine about the "transparency" of the industry). Baked into narratives

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about the crisis or "extinction" of the diamond broker (to borrow Shloimy's language) are racialized accusations. The culprits of disintermediation are often (unsurprisingly) foreigners and strangers. Gujarati Indian traders entered the market and disrupted the delicate ecosystem of trust between Jewish "familiars."

Before guiding me around the trading hall, Shloimy admitted to me that "there was always people who wanted to cut the brokerage out. The brokers were the easiest target to get rid of it." He described the process by which this often occurs:

> The main thing where it happens a lot – you bring up a customer, a big customer, into an office. And the first two times, the trade goes through you. Now – as you bring him up – you brought him up, he knows the address. He knows on his invoice the address. He would go behind your back, just plainly go to the office. Then you see him once. "*Shalom Aleikhem*, what are you doing here without me?"

While acknowledging that Jewish traders also engaged in this behavior, Shloimy attributed it as a unique attribute of "the Indians":

> It sometimes – the Indians, especially the Indians – they used to cut the brokers once they knew [who] the customer [was]. They cut the brokers. They went behind your back.

Indeed, Shloimy connected another major site of disintermediation, internet e-commerce, to the "nature" of Indian traders: "The internet is for sure, especially the Indians who have a *tayve*, a tendency, to go behind his back. This internet was for them . . . the Indians looked for every opportunity to cut out." Shloimy locates this transformation within a particular historical development: the rise of internet e-commerce sales and the broader trend toward "transparency" within the diamond industry. In reality, however, even before the implementation of formal invoicing procedures and far before the emergence of internet e-commerce, as one trader recounted, traders had often tasked their female secretaries with surreptitiously trailing brokers around diamond traders' offices to discover the other party's identity.

Conclusion

There is a curious similarity between the way diamond brokers talk about their own relationship to the diamond industry and the way many of Antwerp's Jews talk about their relationship to the Belgian

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government. Both often articulated their subject position as the "collateral damage" of a bureaucratic apparatus that intends to harm others, but always exceeds its target. Many of the Jews I met in Antwerp referred to themselves as the "collateral damage" of state policies targeted at their Muslim neighbors, like austerity measures targeted at harming "strangers" (*allochtonen*) by manipulating child allowances (*kindergeld*), anti-slaughtering legislation passed to ban *halal* meat, and investigations into the "secular" education taught at religious schools. Each of these measures inevitably threatened the religious Jewish community. And yet, often anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim themselves, they voted for the very politicians who passed these measures.

And while the analogy does not completely hold, brokers often positioned themselves as the collateral damage of transparency measures within the industry or the "unintended consequences, what might be called the side effects … or spill overs … produced by legal and bureaucratic processes" (Tuckett 2018). Indeed, many expressed a sense of the inevitability of their own erasure from the supply chain. Most brokers asked why I chose to study *them*, rather than a host of other workers being cut from supply chains across the globe. And yet, perhaps with an equal sense of obstinance, I have sought to outline a more complex and less totalizing account of "disintermediation" than the narrative often given to us about the future of work and technology.

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PART III

Trust

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7 *Worth Its Weight*

Value-Making with Gold and Transparency

ELIZABETH FERRY

In December 2017, Carl-Ludwig Thiele, at the time a member of the German central bank (Deutsche Bundesbank) executive board, wrote an article for the online publication of the World Gold Council (WGC) *Gold Investor*, entitled "Transparency – At Least as Valuable as Gold."[1] The article focuses on policy changes and public relations moves undertaken by the Bundesbank in response to fears among the public that German gold was at risk by being stored outside the country or even that it was "not really there." One such response to these types of public concern was the transfer of 674 tonnes of gold from vaults in London and New York to Frankfurt. He outlines four "steps to increasing transparency": the disclosure of the amount of gold in the bank's possession and of the transfer of gold from Paris and New York to Frankfurt, the commissioning of a film to document the transfer, and the publication of "all German gold bars, totalling around 270,000 in number" (Thiele 2017). The year after this article was published, to mark the completion of the gold transfer program, the Bundesbank also produced a striking coffee-table book, *Germany's Gold*.

In framing these changes in this way, the article links the gold transfer program to broader trends toward "transparency" within gold markets. These transparency projects have expanded tremendously in the last three decades as a particular iteration of "audit culture" (Power 1994; Strathern 2000). In this chapter, I consider how transparency and gold are established and maintained as "global values" and how actors differently positioned within gold markets seek to align them, with greater and lesser degrees of success. I trace how this happens in three clusters of transparency projects: certification schemes and voluntary frameworks for mining companies; efforts to use

[1] I do not know whether this title was supplied by the author or, as frequently happens, by the editors of the magazine.

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blockchain technologies to increase transparency in the supply chain; and efforts to verify (and perform the verification of) gold's presence in European central banks, especially the Deutsche Bundesbank. Exploring these specific sites where transparency and gold convene, both supporting and tugging against each other, illuminates a critical moment in gold's history and also allows us to consider transparency from an angle that, unlike many other discussions, does not only operate "within the limits of the very ideology of the phenomenon under examination" (Ballestero 2012a: 161). In particular, I view gold and transparency as engaged in competitive processes of value-making (and unmaking).

As part of this volume's attention to "the comparative establishment of the position of transparency in a broader system [or systems] of value" (see the Introduction), this chapter assesses transparency as a global value in relation to the seemingly more self-evident (perhaps, or perhaps not) global value of gold. This approach must first take account of the dynamic and processual nature of transparency as a value – and, indeed, of value (or, more precisely, value-making) itself. Elsewhere (Ferry 2013) I have argued for seeing value-making as a two-part process, consisting both of "making meaningful difference" and also, critically, of "making difference meaningful." By this last phrase, I mean the often messy process through which it is established that it is worth distinguishing between two or more given values. One can say that one bar of gold is finer (has a higher percentage of gold) than another, or that one policy for informing the public about central bank holdings is more transparent than another, and that can be taken as an important and relevant comparison. And this comparison can be the subject of contention or consensus.

However, for there to be any point to that comparison, at least some people must recognize that it is worth making distinctions between gold and transparency. The historical, political nature of this aspect of value often escapes notice, and yet it is arguably the site of most politics around value. We can frame the emergence of transparency in the past few decades in these terms, as the relative stabilization of value-making acts such that transparency becomes something for which differences are meaningful – that is, something valuable.

Indeed, this is what efforts at ethical marketing aim to do: to establish some chosen characteristic as worth making distinctions between – organic or shade-grown coffee, Malagasy vanilla, conflict-free

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diamonds (Bell 2017; Osterhoudt 2017; Roseberry 1996).[2] Getting people to buy these ethical products is one kind of value-making act (and each successful or uncontested value-making act helps to make the next one more successful), but so are actions such as the establishment of metrics and certification systems, press conferences, or, as in this case, alignment with another value that seems to be secure or uncontested. Hence the headline "transparency – at least as valuable as gold" or the familiar phrase that something is "worth its weight in gold" (even when that something is not a tangible, weighable object, as in the case of transparency). In these phrases, gold is taken as the stable and self-evident form of value. and whatever is being aligned with it is claimed as also (like gold) worth making distinctions between.

But wait. It appears from the title of the *Gold Investor* article (which is, as you may be able to tell, aimed primarily at investors in gold) that *transparency* is the thing that needs to be argued for, whose value must be shored up by reference to the self-evident value of gold. But in a broader context, gold as a global value is not as stable as you might think. Thiele is arguing for the value of transparency to the immediate audience of gold investors (who are likely to be among gold's staunchest allies, one may presume), but on a broader scale the article and the actions it describes can be read as an attempt to shore up gold's shaky status as a global value by linking it to transparency.

A Brief and Imperfect History of Gold as Global Value

In order to understand what is happening with gold now, we need some sense of how it has been established as valuable, especially in European and Euro-descended contexts.[3] For centuries, gold has been viewed as a substance with distinctive and impressive material semiotic force (Green 2007; Maurer 2005; Vilar 2011) that is linked to value and sovereignty and thus to market and state (Hart 1986).

[2] See also Chapter 12 in this volume.

[3] Of course, Europe is not the only part of the world where gold is and has been a valuable substance. There are also long histories in Africa, Asia, and South America, some more intertwined with Europe and some less so. These fall outside the purview of this chapter. At the same time, we should recognize that gold's power and value are not universal, inevitable, or intrinsic (although part of its historically sedimented mystique is to create an affective glow of universality, inevitability, and intrinsic-ness) (Field 2019).

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In particular, gold's close association with money is both a consequence and a driver of its tremendous cultural power over the course of many centuries. During these centuries, gold functioned primarily as a method for large payments and as a reserve currency (with silver and copper much more commonly in circulation), as well as a means of adornment and of the display of power and transcendence (Bernstein 2012).

While Britain moved to a single gold standard in the early nineteenth century, most other countries operated on either a silver or a bimetallic standard. Only after 1870, because of Britain's dominance as an industrial and financial power, did most European and American countries, and others outside these zones, move to a gold standard (Eichengreen 2019: chapter 2). The gold standard as an international system lasted until 1931 (barring an interruption from World War I to the mid 1920s) (Green 2007), though not without continual adjustments and coordinated action between countries to maintain its efficacy in times of crisis. The system depended on an "overriding commitment on the part of central banks to external convertibility" (Eichengreen 2019: 32) and was ultimately challenged by the rise of fractional reserve banking, since this form of banking depends on a central bank as backstop or "lender of last resort," leading to a structural tension between external convertibility and domestic financial stability.

Obviously critical to gold's value, and equally obviously beyond the capacity of this chapter to capture adequately, are gold's uses as a sign of power, luxury, and transcendence. From the gold halos of saints in Byzantine art, to the crowns on the crowned heads of Europe, to John Donne's lines in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,"

> Our two souls therefore, which are one,
> Though I must go, endure not yet
> A breach, but an expansion,
> Like gold to airy thinness beat

to the gold plates of aristocracies, to the gold toilet on display at the Guggenheim museum (titled *America*), to the Yellow Brick Road leading to the Emerald City where trickery and illusion reign (Graeber 2011: 53), to the gold-induced madness in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* – we could go on and on – gold signifies a bewildering range of things: power, transcendence, truth, falsity, idolatry, shit, and so on. Many of these meanings come from (or are perceived as coming

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from) its material qualities of malleability, mass, luster, nobility (non-reactivity), and color. And these ways in which gold acts as a global value endure, even as its value as a reserve currency has been displaced.

Gold's status as reserve currency came to an end over the course of the twentieth century, first in the 1930s and again in 1971 when Richard Nixon ended the convertibility of gold with the dollar at a rate of $35 per ounce. As we will see below, although much of the world's gold is still held in central banks (especially in the US, Germany, UK, France, and China), it no longer plays any significant functional role in national economies,[4] although it may serve to project confidence and security (as Thiele suggests in his article).

In the years following this decoupling of gold and the dollar (and therefore much of the world's money supply), gold's price rose precipitously, culminating in the early 1980s at a price of $850 per ounce (London Fix Price).[5] The price then declined through the 1980s and was driven yet further down when the Bank of England sold off over half its reserves (395 tonnes) (Ash 2019). This began to reverse as the prices for commodities in general, and gold in particular, rose in the early 2000s. Gold reached a nominal high of just over $1,900 per ounce in 2011 (when adjusted for inflation, the high at the beginning of 1980 is still the historical high in real terms).[6] For several years after this, gold's price wandered in the range of $1,100–$1,300 per ounce, in many cases close to the cost of production. In the summer of 2019, gold rose again above $1,500 and above $1,800 during the Covid pandemic, invasion of Ukraine, and rising inflation. This is in part because of gold's generally accepted value as a barometer for fears of instability and crisis,[7] and the fact that its price tends to move independently of other important asset classes such as the US dollar and the

[4] The spring 2022 experiment by the Russian government in fixing a gold–ruble rate, then requiring payment for oil and other commodities in rubles, as an attempt to shore up the ruble, is a curious but not significant strategy, according to most observers (Mihailov 2022).

[5] www.kitco.com/scripts/hist_charts/yearly_graphs.plx (accessed June 24, 2019).

[6] www.moneymetals.com/precious-metals-charts/gold-price (accessed June 25, 2019).

[7] Gold's surge during the coronavirus pandemic and the war in Ukraine provides cases in point, although expectations that high inflation in spring and summer 2022 would push the price still higher have not (yet) materialized. A headline in November 2020 articulates the idea of gold as a haven in times of crisis well: "Gold Falls as Biden Transition, Vaccine Hopes Erode Appeal" (Iyer 2020b).

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stock market (Baur and Lucey 2010). As of this writing, in September 2024, gold reached a historical (nominal) high at $2,580 per ounce, with the 400-ounce gold bar topping $1 million in August 2024 (Maruf 2024).

Notwithstanding these recent high prices, gold-mining companies since the 2000s have faced a series of ups and downs. The dramatic Bre-X hoax concerning an alleged gold mine in Indonesia brought lots of unwanted publicity to the ill-regulated field of "junior mining" and what one interlocutor described as a "nuclear winter" in mining investment (Tsing 2000). A few years later, high metals prices spurred exploration and production in many brown- and greenfield sites, building on existing or newly exploited facilities, as well as artisanal and small-scale mining in Latin America, Africa, Australia, and Papua New Guinea; these in turn have sparked conflicts both explosive and grinding (Kirsch 2014; Li 2015; Luning 2012; Rosen 2020). These years have increased public awareness of the links between gold mining and armed conflict, and the severe environmental damage caused by both "informal" small-scale mining and large-scale mining, especially open-pit mining (Verbrugge and Geenen 2020). Calls for further controls, transparency, and ethical practices in the gold sector have grown more and more insistent.

Gold faces opposition in financial circles as well. Because it is listed as a commodity, many institutional investors (such as pension funds) cannot invest in it. Many financial professionals dislike it as an investment because in its physical form it gives little to no return and in other forms (as mining equities or exchange-traded funds) it can be risky and its price movements complex and difficult to understand. One interlocutor, when asked why many financial advisers don't like to invest in gold, licked his finger and held it up as if testing the direction of the wind, and said, "It's too hard to interpret." Its cultural and affective associations as outdated and fetishized ("idolized" or "worshipped," as my interlocutors would tend to describe it) and the vocal presence of "gold bugs"[8] (called by one of my interlocutors "the tinfoil hat crowd," in reference to the farcical Facebook attempt to pit conservative news commentator and gold bug Glenn Beck against a poodle in a

[8] This subset of gold investors and commentators believes strongly in the intrinsic value of gold, mistrust what they describe as "fiat money" and "paper gold," and sometimes advocate a return to the gold standard. They are often, though not always, politically conservative.

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tinfoil hat) make it seem kooky and cranky to some investors, and organizations such as the WCG spend time distinguishing their perspective on gold from these more extreme positions and seeking to burnish gold's reputation as a sensible, rational investment.

Of course, gold is still recognized widely as a valuable asset and it still commands cultural force the world over. Its price is high and demand for gold in China, India, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East booms; and, as the recent prices attests, it continues to work as a safe-haven asset in times of uncertainty, and to respond to changes in interest rates. Technologies for investing in gold (such as exchange-traded funded and asset tokenization) continue to be invented. Nevertheless, gold's age as a global currency is over, and its integrity as a stable nexus of value-making practices has been fraying for some time. Moreover, its associations with money laundering and arms trading and the environmental damage caused by mercury use, large-scale open-pit mining, and unregulated small-scale mining have placed the industry on the back foot, causing some actors and institutions to mobilize transparency as a strategy to "clean up" the industry and "burnish" its reputation.

Transparency talk can be found throughout gold extraction, circulation and, investment these days; this chapter centers especially on the invention of technologies to render the supply chain more transparent, the mobilization of blockchain technology (discursive and material) in these technologies, and, drawing on the topic of the *Gold Investor* article with which I began, efforts by central banks to project simultaneously transparency and security with respect to their gold reserve holdings.

Transparency's Trajectory

Transparency technologies have been defined by Andrea Ballestero in the introduction to a 2012 *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* special issue on the topic as "a political and legal device . . . intended to correct the democratic deficits of existing forms of law, bureaucracy, and even subjectivity" (2012a: 160). They aim to infuse institutions with rationality, fairness, and accountability, and are generally contrasted with opacity, secrecy, conspiracy, and corruption.

The story of transparency's journey to prominence and proliferation as a global value can be told in several different ways: as, for instance,

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a descendant of *glasnost* (the term describing movements toward "openness" within Soviet institutions during the Gorbachev period) promoted by NGOs (especially environmental ones) in the former Soviet republics (Zakharchenko 2009). In this context, transparency projects are positioned as part of the movement for "democratization" and against "corruption." The organization Transparency International, which was founded in 1993, has developed a ranking system to measure governmental corruption, an early use of metrics.

The language of transparency also became enfolded into emerging audit culture in the 1990s (Power 1994; Shore and Wright 1999; Strathern 2000), both as a normative discourse and as a set of tools and institutions. For instance, in 1999, Shore and Wright, in speaking of the particular iterations of audit culture within British higher education, wrote: "Foremost in the new semantic cluster associated with audit culture are 'transparency', 'accountability', 'quality' and 'performance', all of which are said to be encouraged and enhanced by audit" (1999: 566). In this sense, the language of transparency provides the discursive infrastructure for audit culture in its various iterations. In addition to these semantic uses of the language of transparency, technologies of transparency have emerged in multiple areas. These include systems of certification that attest to the ethical sourcing of commodities; the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative standard, to which national government can sign up to improve transparency surrounding revenues from oil, gas, and mining; and chain of custody protocols and infrastructures – including, as we will see, digital technologies like blockchain. This chapter attends briefly to the ways in which a language of transparency is deployed (as, for instance, by Thiele, in the article discussed above) in order to help establish the gold market as ethical and ethics as a meaningful component of the gold market, and then moves to a discussion of several technologies of transparency in supply chains and in the verification of gold in central bank vaults.

Transparency's trajectory has brought it to the realms of gold mining, refining, transport, and finance. In recent years, the hidden aspects of gold's expressions as a global value (its presence and location in vaults, the London Fix Price, the OTC market[9] in London, its

[9] OTC stands for "over the counter" and refers to a decentralized market that takes place with an independent infrastructure or framework (like a stock market).

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use in arms dealing and narcotrafficking) have come under increasing scrutiny. Within these contexts, transparency emerges as both the idiom through which those who insist on knowing more about how gold moves through the world operate, and also the procedures and infrastructures by which those who are invested (literally and figuratively) in gold seek to defend themselves. These actors use transparency to combat "political risk," to broaden markets for gold through "ethical marketing" techniques and pronouncements, and to sidestep governmental regulation; at a broader level, they seek to shore up its status as a global value. The article by Carl-Ludwig Thiele and the "steps to increasing transparency" it describes reflect one example among many of these attempts to use transparency to shore up gold, even as the article also uses gold to ratify transparency. In what follows, I briefly discuss three sites where processes of transparency intersect with gold, paying particular attention to how both are made and unmade as global values through these intersections.[10]

Supply Chains

One such site, with an accompanying set of technologies for creating transparency, is the gold supply chain from mine to refinery to market. These technologies include certification schemes – that is, methods by which consumers can learn the path that gold has taken from the mine, and through which different origins for gold are (putatively) "certified." Many of these are collected in the OECD's *Due Diligence Guidance* (OECD 2016). They can been used to ascertain (ideally) that the gold is "conflict-free" – that is, not sourced in areas that are "identified by the presence of armed conflict, widespread violence, including violence generated by criminal networks, or other risks of serious and widespread harm to people" (OECD 2016: 66) These systems occur at all points in the supply chain, though many are concentrated at the refinery or "choke point" stage, and refineries are now compelled by the London Bullion Market Association (LBMA) to follow its "responsible sourcing guidelines" as a condition for inclusion in the Good Delivery List (a list of accredited refineries, previously

[10] This chapter draws on a broader research project I have been conducting since 2012, focused on gold as a physical object in mining and finance, and based in field research in Colombia, Mexico, the US, and the UK, including over seventy interviews with financial and mining professionals, miners, and activists.

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focused only on questions of gold purity and security).[11] In the words of Matthieu Bolay:

> Through the idioms of transparency and responsibility, such initiatives [guidance frameworks, certification systems, and other technologies for ensuring that gold extraction and circulation follow ethical norms] pretend – although selectively – to render visible and legible the social life of gold and the networks that brought it into being prior to its legitimate and licit status as a commodity or financial asset. (Bolay 2021: 90)

Not surprisingly, gold supply chain certification programs range widely in their restrictiveness and are also frequently criticized either for being too utopian or as corporate "greenwashing." This is, of course, a localized version of arguments that are common throughout the domains of ethical supply chains, fair trade, corporate social responsibility, and business and finance more generally (Falls 2011; Kirsch 2014; Rajak 2011; Reichman 2011; Tripathy 2017; West 2010). As in these other cases, there is a fundamental instability at the heart of these endeavors; as soon as a particular certification garners the support of corporations, it tends to alienate many activists, more or less by definition. Put in the terms I have been using in this chapter, the challenge of certification lies in the tension over whether values of transparency (and related concepts of ethics and accountability) and gold (as something produced and promoted by global corporations) are opposed or aligned.

Over the past eight or so years, the position of mining companies and member associations such as the WGC and the LBMA has shifted dramatically toward supporting certification and, at least nominally, greater transparency in general. To a significant but difficult to measure degree, their response has been provoked by the emergence and strengthening of guidance frameworks for responsible gold production such as the Initiative for Responsible Mining Assurance (IRMA) and Earthworks' "Golden Rules" (part of its "No Dirty Gold" campaign),

[11] The importance of refineries as sites of ratification of gold's conflict-free origins was underscored in a scandal that broke in August 2019, in which at least 1,000 gold bars were found in the vaults of JPMorgan Chase fraudulently stamped with the logos of major Swiss refineries, as a way of concealing the "dirty" (read: conflict-related) origins of the gold (Hobson 2019). Bolay explores the "dual understanding of 'integrity,' both physical and ethical" and the ways in which refiners have been tasked as the guarantors of both senses of integrity in the wake of the OECD guidelines for responsible mineral chains discussed above (Bolay 2021: 86).

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which tend to operate outside the industry or, in the case of IRMA, with only a few relatively small mining corporations participating.

Greater attention to responsible mining has been evident through the course of my research, including at the two LBMA conferences I have been able to attend. At the LBMA conference in 2014, there was a post-conference "Responsible Gold Forum" co-sponsored by the LBMA and the Responsible Jewelry Council, which lasted about two hours. Since many attendees were either leaving for the airport or socializing with colleagues, it was only sparsely attended. In one session, presenters were immediately put on the defensive by a member of the audience who complained that the acronyms and jargon of the proposed certification process were too hard to remember.

In 2018, one of the eight sessions and a keynote speech in the main conference were devoted to ethical concerns and transparency. In the panel session, entitled "Gold Bar Integrity Up the Supply Chain," the deputy director of the NGO Enough Project, which works primarily in Congo, spoke to a robust audience about supply chain transparency to ensure conflict-free precious metals. Later, an executive of the WGC remarked to me that inviting a member of an NGO of this type (i.e., independent of a corporation or member organization) would have been unthinkable a few years before.

Within the industry, reasons given for the benefits of greater transparency are pragmatic as well as ethical, at least once one leaves behind the realms of websites and presentation slides. Van Bockstael argues:

> [M]any current initiatives that are being supported by key players in the mining industry are promoting a host of principles dedicated to sustainability, but can also be seen as a way of insulating the "responsible" members of the mining industry from those who, by omission, are less so and who could, in the future, be responsible for the next environmental disaster due to mismanagement, or provide the spark for the next big activist campaign due to links with unsavoury regimes or atrocities. (Van Bockstael 2018: 53)

Here, we can see a strategy of calculated display, not only as an act of compliance and ethical consideration, but also as a shield to protect other, more enclaved and opaque processes that may not be so ethically oriented.

Since these two conferences, the WGC, the member organization for the majority of the world's medium and large gold-mining companies, has worked to produce information and strategies to bring

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transparency and related "responsible" practices to the gold market. In 2019, the WGC launched the Responsible Gold Mining Principles (RGMP), a framework of principles and guidance for its member companies with respect to mining and the supply chain.

Terry Heymann, chief financial officer for the WGC, who also oversaw the development of the RGMP, describes the framework in the publication *Climate Action* as "an overarching framework which sets out clear expectations to investors, consumers and downstream users as to what constitutes responsible gold mining" (Cooper 2020). The RGMP sets out ten principles, divided into "Governance," "Social," and "Environmental" (following the now canonical division within ethical/responsible business and finance). Issues related to transparency of supply chains, impact, and revenue are covered primarily in the first three and the tenth principles.

The RGMP comes with several supporting tools, including an "assurance framework" to help with implementation and oversight and a benchmark comparing the RGMP and the framework from the International Council on Mining and Metals (also a member organization, but for metals-mining companies more generally, not only gold-mining companies).

These "frameworks," "guidances," and "benchmarks" seek to perform a hortatory function and to set out a common set of standards for what responsible gold mining would look like. These are necessary technologies for building transparency or other forms of ethical practice, but they do not get into the specific details of how these can be met.[12]

The WGC website states that "Conformance to the RGMP is a requirement for membership in the World Gold Council"[13] and the principles have achieved broad-based support as a metric used by companies to demonstrate their compliance with its goals, and maybe also to work toward greater compliance.

Blockchain

One rapidly emerging area for handling the details has been blockchain technology. The 2018 LBMA conference featured a slew of companies

[12] Other frameworks from actors at different positions along the gold "value chain" do include verification processes, including, in some cases, third-party verification.

[13] www.gold.org/esg/responsible-gold-mining (accessed September 17, 2024).

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touting blockchain technology in a whole slew of applications, but especially to guarantee a transparent and clean "chain of custody" from mine to refinery. This guarantee is crucial to most precious metal certification schemes, and since refineries often bear the brunt of costs of certification, there is a strong interest in increasing trustworthiness and lowering costs at that stage of the journey (Bolay 2021).

Blockchain technology purports to provide this by means of a digital, distributed ledger that supposedly cannot be hacked. At the 2018 LBMA conference, as I mentioned above, there were numerous vendors advertising blockchain technology, as well as a keynote speaker and panel participant presenting on the possibilities of using the technology for greater transparency. A presentation by Sakhila Mirza, General Counsel for the LBMA, on "Gold Market Integrity" discussed at length the capacity of "technology" to create transparency while also ensuring the continued capacity for discretion in the highly specialized and secretive gold OTC market. Her presentation concluded with a call for proposals on how best to meet the requirements without exposing market participants too much (how to negotiate the divide between secrecy and display). Figure 7.1 is a slide in her

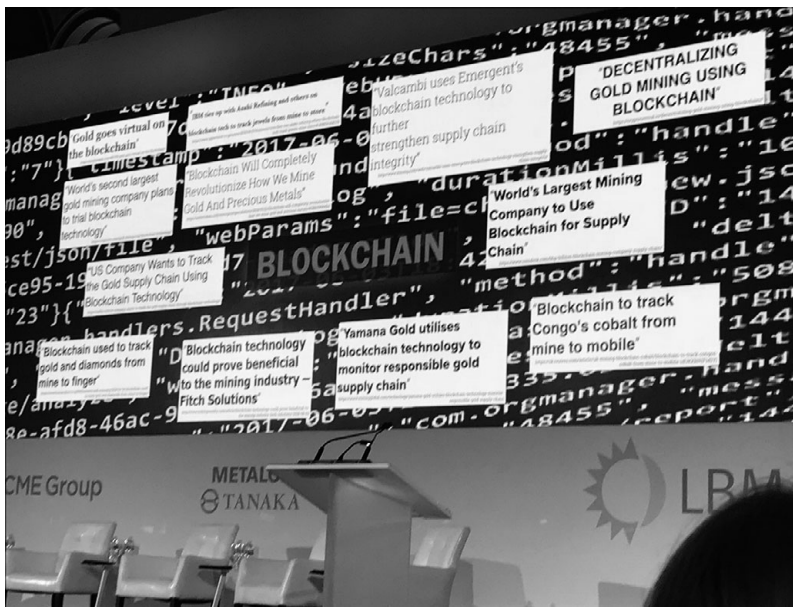

Figure 7.1. A presentation slide from the LBMA meeting, 2018.

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presentation demonstrating how much blockchain technology is expected to be part of this solution.

In fact, using blockchain technology to bring transparency to the gold supply chain isn't so easy to do, especially along the lines of the "private" or "proprietary" solutions I saw advertised at LBMA. Filipe Calvão notes this contradiction, saying: "The notion of centralized or permissioned database locations, which is to say, who controls access and dissemination of data, is . . . at odds with the principles of distributed accountability" (Calvão 2019: 129). One financial technology expert with whom I spoke, who had been invited to the LBMA 2018 conference, confirmed this point, saying:

> A lot of what I saw [in the vendor booths] was based on a misguided understanding of what blockchain is. As long as it's private you are just using an expensive database. You can't put gold in a blockchain and think you're putting transparency in the supply chain. You can't truly put something on the blockchain, you're just using the system as a pointer.

That is, you can record bars of gold in a database structured by blockchain technology, but there will be points of weakness in the system – who logs it in, how the bar is labeled or identified – so the very reason why you would use blockchain in the first place is lost.

Acknowledging this need for "human appreciations at the entry point" of digitized information on gold into the blockchain, Bolay (2021: 97) also foregrounds other ways in which the technology creates new kinds of actors, networks, and possibilities, including the simultaneous storage of digitized information concerning gold's movement through the chain of custody and the process of creating digital slices of gold as a transferable asset, or of the ethical inscriptions linked to it (as, for instance, conflict-free gold) through the process known as "tokenization." Asset tokenization is a current trend in financial technology or "fintech" that has opened new possibilities for rendering gold as a physical object divisible and liquid through creating a "digital double" (Bolay 2021: 99) on a blockchain.[14]

[14] As Bolay notes, "digital gold" shares some (but only some) characteristics with other financial vehicles backed by physical gold (Bolay 2021; Ferry 2020). The LBMA has begun to invest considerable energy and money in these initiatives, described more fully in Bolay's piece and publicized through a series of articles and webinars (Lowe 2021; Morris 2015). See also parts 1–5 of the LBMA webinar series "Digital Gold" at www.lbma.org.uk/videos/p7

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In an article in the journal *Political Geography*, Filipe Calvão and Matthew Archer (2021) examine the ways in which blockchain technologies have proliferated in mining industries, arguing that these modes of creating, managing, and owning data by digital means are "parallel but . . . increasingly inextricable from the material extraction of minerals, developed under the banner of blockchain-based due diligence practices, chain of custody certifications, and various transparency mechanisms" (2). Like my interlocutor, they also note that, "in contrast to public blockchains like Bitcoin, these are primarily private blockchains that operate as permission-based centralized ledgers" (3). Not only do these "expensive databases" not provide the transparency and accountability they promise, Calvão and Archer show that they also carve out new channels by which value can be extracted from commodity chains, often in highly opaque and unaccountable ways.

In the past few years, it seems some of the buzz over blockchain as a technology for bringing transparency to gold supply chains has diminished (as we see with other "use cases" for blockchain), partly because the challenges and costs of implementing it at scale have become more evident. A November 2023 article in the environmental journalism magazine *Mongabay* outlines these challenges and costs in Brazil, noting that "blockchain shouldn't be viewed as a panacea to an industry rife with social and environmental risks" (Espinosa and Lyons 2023).

Central Bank Vaults

As I have introduced above, transparency projects have also been coalescing around the verified presence of gold in (especially European) central bank vaults. And these, too, show us the process by which vying values of gold and transparency can at times be brought into (uneasy) alignment and at times work to undermine each other. For one thing, a dynamic by which transparency projects are made publicly visible – the ways in which they are performed – happens in all domains where transparency operates but intersects with gold in particular ways. For one thing, gold as a global value manifests, and arguably depends on, an oscillation between display and secrecy, at times flashing out spectacularly and at other times hidden away in vaults, graves, or hoards. This aspect of gold has been

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noted by several anthropologists, including Maurice Godelier (1999) in his use of gold to demonstrate the "enigma of the gift," which he sees as a dialectic between keeping and giving away (see also Weiner 1992), and Gustav Peebles, for whom gold operates as a key example in his re-theorization of "the hoard" as a fundamental principle of banking (Peebles 2014; see also Ferry 2020).

In an article in the journal *Cultural Geographies*, Erica Schoenberger draws on diverse archaeological and ethnohistorical sources to show how gold's scarcity has been enhanced at certain moments through artificial restriction of its supply. Among other sites, Schoenberger points particularly to the necropolis of Varna in what is now Bulgaria, which dates to the fifth millennium BCE, in which large quantities of gold were sequestered in what she describes as "self-cancelling supply" (Schoenberger 2011: 7). That is, by burying gold, Varna's chiefs simultaneously demonstrated their power and removed gold from circulation. While Schoenberger's emphasis falls on the notion of socially constructed scarcity, the material she presents also suggests a counterpoint between display and removal from display. The golden objects associated with royalty are frequently displayed on ceremonial occasions such as coronations and weddings, but are then removed from display by being buried and placed in vaults away from public view. The process of "self-cancelling supply" described by Schoenberger can also be seen as a process of revealing and removing from view.

Schoenberger concludes her discussion by noting how the pattern of sequestering gold by burying it in tombs continues into the twentieth century with the practices of holding gold reserves in central banks. She writes, "From the graves of Varna to the underground vaults of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, the history of the social value of gold is in part a history of different ways of creating artificial scarcity" (Schoenberger 2011: 19).

For one thing, between 1999 and 2019, many central banks signed a collective agreement restricting how much they could sell, in recognition of the potential to destabilize the gold price by flooding the market (as happened in the late 1990s). The WGC described this predicament and the agreements that have been developed to manage it thus:

> Collectively, at the end of 2018, central banks held around 33,200 tonnes of gold, which is approximately one-fifth of all the gold ever mined. Moreover,

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these holdings are highly concentrated in the advanced economies of Western Europe and North America, a legacy of the days of the gold standard. This means that central banks have immense pricing power in the gold markets.

In recognition of this, major European central banks signed the Central Bank Gold Agreement (CBGA) in 1999, limiting the amount of gold that signatories can collectively sell in any one year. There have since been three further agreements, in 2004, 2009 and 2014.[15]

This need to restrict the circulation of gold, at least periodically, overlapped with gold's dual role as object of visual display and invisible hoard (Graeber 1996).

In September 2019, the CBGA was allowed to lapse, so banks no longer participate in this voluntary agreement to limit sales on the grounds that the market in gold had grown and matured since the 1990s and that banks had "no plans to sell." The rationale that the CBGA is no longer needed is based largely on the idea that central banks continue to hold and buy gold, suggesting that the function of self-canceling supply continues to operate, even after the agreement has ended.[16]

Strikingly, central banks – and central bankers – find themselves in a complicated position with respect to the gold reserves they hold. Because of the shift in gold's position in the global economy since the end of dollar–gold convertibility in 1971 (as discussed above), the importance of gold as a national asset has inarguably declined, although observers differ by how much. Those who are more attached to the idea that gold has intrinsic value and who mistrust the very concept of "fiat money," not surprisingly, feel that stewardship of gold reserves remains a critical task for central banks. Others – perhaps including many central bankers – are agnostic about or skeptical of the sound money thesis but recognize gold's cultural and symbolic force, which make it a telling barometer for global crisis or instability.[17]

Indeed, most central bankers, arguably, see the management of the money supply as a far more important dimension of their job.[18] As one

[15] www.gold.org/reserve-asset-management/central-bank-gold-agreements (accessed June 10, 2021).

[16] www.ecb.europa.eu/press/pr/date/2019/html/ecb.pr190726_1~3eaf64db9d.en.html (accessed July 23, 2022).

[17] This was shown in a November 24, 2020 Reuters headline: "Gold Falls on Hopes for Vaccine, Smooth Biden Transition" (Iyer 2024a).

[18] Although I have not had the pleasure of interviewing Carl-Ludwig Thiele, I have interviewed five central bankers, including two members of the Deutsche Bundesbank. Based on these conversations, and my understanding of

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interlocutor, former chair of a European central bank (though not one with large gold reserves), told me, "When I talk with other [central] bankers, we find gold a bit of a nuisance. We wish we could get rid of it." Nevertheless, central bankers must, at least nominally, respond to the public pressure to keep the gold they have. In addition, central banker must be extremely careful about any information or publicity connected to their gold holdings. Public statements concerning gold in central banks tend toward "managed transparency," including carefully timed press releases, public statements, and photographs demonstrating their careful stewardship of the nation's gold supply.

The Deutsche Bundesbank gives a good example: in the face of (mostly right-wing) pressure to move the gold holdings housed in New York and Paris back to Frankfurt, framed in terms of a lack of transparency and a sense that perhaps the gold "wasn't really there," the bank instituted a transfer (called by some outside the bank a "repatriation"), which was completed in late 2017.

The many interviews, articles, press conferences, and other media artifacts (including the *Gold Investor* article), and the book and museum exhibition that accompanied its completion, can be seen from several angles: as full-throated celebrations of gold; as demonstrations of the bank's "increased [though necessarily limited] transparency"; and as protections against the potential liabilities of gold as a kind of anti-value (as Van Bockstael argues above). These public performances of gold's presence and the transparent actions that allow the gold to "shine forth" draw on powerful ideas about materiality (including qualities like mass and shine) and value as tied to white male and European bodies. Figure 7.2, an image included in an article on the Bundesbank website announcing the completed transfer of Germany's gold from New York in 2016 (the transfer from London was completed in 2017), brings together a lustrous gold bar and some kind of testing or logging tool (which also looks a bit like a jeweler's loupe, suggesting that its purpose is to "see" the gold either literally or figuratively) with the date of the bar and the word "Switzerland" (where the most trusted refineries are concentrated). In this image,

Bundesbank policy, I suspect Thiele agrees with this position; the first sentence of his article reads "At the Bundesbank, we are tasked with ensuring price stability and have a variety of monetary policy tools to deliver it" (Thiele 2017).

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Figure 7.2. Gold bars at a press conference, Deutsche Bundesbank, 2017.
Source: Photograph by Abdulselam Durdak/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images.

transparency, accountability, gold, whiteness, and maleness converge in a coordinated act of making value.

Transparency infuses gold with value in each of the three areas I have described, but with different histories and different effects. As I suggested above, the frameworks for responsible and ethical supply chains fall within a broader range of attempts to establish ethical value chains for many different commodities and can be seen as and analyzed in terms of pressures from nongovernmental organizations, activist groups, and consumers concerned with environmental and social justice. Blockchain technologies are mobilized to meet these ends but also participate in other conversations with other concerns, such as freedom from governmental interference and the "transparency" of distributed ledgers, as well as the increased liquidity of digital assets, with the promise of a more "transparent" field for investment in gold. The transparency work done by central bankers is oriented somewhat differently, toward finding new solutions to a perennial problem they face – how to perform gold's "real" presence in their

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vaults while also keeping it secure. These varied audiences and aims sometimes align, but not always. By viewing them next to each other, I hope to have highlighted the ways in which transparency and gold converge and vie against each other as global values.

Gold's fortunes in mining and finance are up in the air these days. In mining, gold faces what companies and investors call "political" or "reputational" risk, narrow profit margins (especially as new technologies of transparency become more necessary), and impatient investors. In finance, actors vie to shore up its place as a globally recognized and trusted asset, or to relegate it firmly to a humbler place, according to its relatively restricted use values in jewelry and technologies, and as one among any number of commodities on which to build derivative contracts (futures, options, etc.). In these stormy seas, languages and techniques of transparency are conscripted to right gold's ship, and, in doing so, to solidify transparency itself. As in other exercises in imperfect commensuration, gold and transparency both align and grind gears; in doing so, as David Graeber has written, they "bring universes into being" (2013).

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8 *Lenses of Transparency*

Optical Disjunctures Around Mining and the Future in Greenland's Nation-Building Project

LES W. FIELD

Transparency is a term inseparable from the idiom of sight and vision. The connotation is that being able to see through – to something true, authentic, and real – and being able to see clearly are necessary qualities of transparency, both as applied in this volume and as a sensory experience. It is a commonplace that for human beings the visual dominates all other senses, or at least that humans typically construct "sight-dominated cultures," although this is not an unvarying characteristic (see Hutmacher 2019). Historically speaking, anthropology may be a particularly visually dominated discipline (see Goody 2002); this is evident in the universal acclamation for an emphatic seeing-is-believing methodology, "participant observation," and the manner in which the visual is the central component in the ethnographic trope of arrival. While some anthropologists developing "the anthropology of the senses" claim "to have dethroned vision from the sovereign position it had allegedly held in the intellectual pantheon of the western world" (Ingold 2011: 316), the elaboration of transparency does not contest the domination of the visual for us humans or for the anthropologists in this volume, such as myself. We instead agree to travel down the road with the refined sensibility of seeing, analyzing, and critiquing transparency, as a social fact, and transparently, as our analytic parameter, in the worlds that we contributors have explored. I write about my attempts to see processes by which mining is initiated, the valuation of different minerals, and the manner in which mining and minerals are instrumental to nation-building in my periods of ethnographic observation in Greenland, which have been brief: a month in 2019, a month in 2021, and in between, remote research and communication dictated by the conditions of the pandemic. In this research, climate change, natural resource extraction economies, and nation-building are all on view, so to speak.

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I am not sure if, with respect to the topics I engage in this chapter, there is a definitive expression of what "seeing transparently" means for an outsider to Greenland, or what it might mean for an anthropologist. For that reason, I have opted to use the metaphor of different lenses. Lenses offer different visual perspectives from which to look into complex situations. In this article, the lenses focus upon four situations demarcated by: (1) the centuries of Danish colonization and ongoing coloniality; (2) more than four decades of advance toward the establishment of an independent nation in Greenland; (3) the development of gem mining involving both small-scale artisanal miners and resource extraction corporations; and (4) the globalized corporate push to mine rare earth elements that are central to the development of green technologies. In each case, transparency can be related to forms, levels, and mixtures of disclosure and nondisclosure by different interlocutors, which surface (or do not surface) in environmental studies and impact statements, corporate brochures, statements made and policies enacted by governments, and the critiques leveled by environmental organizations and small-scale miners.

I organize this chapter, then, keeping in mind the primacy of the visual as a project of transparency, recalling what we experience when we visit the optometrist and we are asked, as we look through different lenses that are exchanged and inserted into the strange machine in front of which we sit: Is the first lens or the second lens clearer? The third or the fourth? Arranged as elaborations of a sequence of lenses, I ask readers (and myself) which lenses make things clearer, and in what ways. In what follows, it should be clear as well that, notwithstanding the profound role of colonialism and its enduring aftermaths that suffuse each lens of transparency and opacity, the people of Greenland are not victims. They are not intrinsically vulnerable to a marauding modernity that by its very nature must corrode their identity, such that outsiders, like anthropologists or other scholars, can maintain a stance that understands what is going on in Greenland as describable by loaded terms such as "adaptation," whether that refers to climate change or to the politics of postcolonial transformations (see Nuttall 2010).

Lens One: Greenland's Colonial History and Trajectory Toward Independence

In twenty-first-century Greenland, the collective imaginary is dominated by the goal of nationhood via full political independence from the

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kingdom of Denmark. All of the political parties proclaim that goal, although they propose or assert varying timelines and caveats about how much of a relationship with Denmark might or should be maintained. The great majority of Greenlanders are indigenous Inuit people whose ancestors migrated from the northern reaches of what is now Canada and Alaska after 1200, and who are the successors to a host of other indigenous peoples who have inhabited the land since at least 2500 BCE. Greenland's lengthy relationship with Denmark is complex: Danes arrived on Greenland's shores in 1721, in search of the Norse colonies that had been settled by Icelandic farmers at the end of the tenth century. Unbeknownst to the Danes, who were very much motivated to find the Norse descendants to convert them from pre-Reformation Catholicism to Denmark's state religion of Lutheranism, those colonies had disappeared in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Danes instead converted the indigenous people, who are almost all Lutheran to this day; almost all have Danish surnames, many have some Danish ancestry, and Danish remains a dominant language (Rud 2017). In these ways, Greenland is both a Nordic country and a colonized territory attempting to become the independent country of an indigenous people (see Dahl 2005; Gad 2009; Mazza 2015).

Home-rule government in Greenland was established by the Danish state in 1979 and further strengthened by self-rule provisions that the Greenlandic population voted in favor of expanding in 2009. Denmark provides the Greenlandic government with a block grant of a little less than $550 million each year. That might not sound like much in US economic terms, but the total population of Greenland is only a little more than 56,000 people. The home-rule government established Greenland's nationhood. The official language is Greenlandic, in which the country's name is Kalaallit Nunaat. Its flag and many other aspects of sovereignty, both substantive and symbolic, have been determined by the home-rule government, which initially controlled everything except foreign relations, defense, currency matters, and the legal system. With self-rule in 2009, the Greenlandic government gained control over the legal system and some aspects of defense, and increasingly Greenland conducts its own foreign policy – with Iceland, Canada, the United States, and, perhaps most importantly, China. Independence, the Danish government has made clear, will mean the end of the block

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grant, which at the current time the Greenlandic government deploys as it sees fit (Sejersen 2015). Denmark is willing to phase out the block grant in stages as Greenland's economy becomes self-sufficient, and has specified how much the block grant will be reduced as Greenland's economy expands (Nuttall 2017; Rasmussen and Gjertsen 2018).

Throughout the history of indigenous peoples in Greenland, food has been produced through strategically honed mixtures of hunting land and sea mammals and fishing numerous species; therefore, unlike most any other emergent national identity and nationalism that I know of (Rud 2017), in Greenland the nascent nation-state is entirely divorced from an agrarian or agricultural imaginary.[1] At the same time, the contribution of local hunting and fishing to the daily diet of most Greenlanders has diminished drastically in relation to the central role of imported foods, and these two activities are very unlikely to ever produce the income needed to diminish Greenland's dependence on Denmark's block grant. For the political-economic class that rules the country, for whom, as Nuttall (2010) and Sejersen (2015) point out, anticipation about the future of Greenland is a subject of continuous debate, the shortest and surest route to self-sufficiency seems to be a resource economy based upon mining and fossil fuel extraction. Moreover, in Greenland, the development of an extractive economy is linked with an effort "to secure a collective safety net, a kind of livability for the future that involves an apparatus for redistribution, even if that is knitted at the expense of local resource practices and environmental integrity" (Hastrup and Lien 2020: xv). The fusion between an extractive economy and a welfare state society, which Hastrup and Lien call the "welfare frontiers" of Greenland and other parts of the Nordic countries, also brings together very different regimes of transparency – or a lack of transparency. Prior to 1979, decisions about extraction, and economic development as a whole, were entirely in the hands of the Danish colonial authorities – and, by virtue of their nondisclosure to Greenlanders, they were certainly not transparent (see Rud 2017). How much home-rule, self-rule, and the horizon toward full independence have addressed that opacity is explored in what follows.

[1] Martin Skydstrup, personal communication, 2019.

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Lens Two: A National Economy, Resource Extraction, Infrastructure, and the Technical Fix

Mining and large-scale industry are part and parcel of Greenland's colonial history and nation-building present. Since the nineteenth century, when Denmark closely controlled the economy, and into the twentieth, mining has appeared on Greenland's conceptual horizon both as a very real manifestation of colonial development and as an illusion or unrealizable dream of great wealth, which in the twenty-first century would be the basis for independence. In the case of the former, the mining of cryolite, a mineral that was essential to the purification of pure aluminum from mineral bauxite all over the world until a substitute was developed, was conducted in southern Greenland from 1854 until the deposit was exhausted in 1987. The essential contribution of Greenland to the industrial production of a key metal resource was therefore anything but an illusion. Yet resource and infrastructure megaprojects in Greenland often do not come to pass (see Nuttall 2010; 2012; 2017; Rasmussen and Gjertsen 2018), and, as Hastrup and Lien write, "Resource imaginaries, in other words, are not that easily realized, and sometimes are just that: imaginaries" (2020: xii).

Massive resource extraction projects and the worlds of infrastructural construction that accompany them are discussed in technical terms worldwide; these are discourses that are explicitly ideological and political, linked to particular outcomes and visualizations of the future. In recent literature about the phenomenal economic and political power of the Gulf state monarchies, Günel, for example, has described "technical adjustments":

> Abu Dhabi's renewable energy and clean technology projects, such as Masdar City, have aimed to generate technical adjustments as a means for vaulting ahead to a future where humans will continue to enjoy technological complexity without interrogating existing social, political and economic relations . . . Technical adjustments, which are intended to maintain existing values while inventing new technology to address climate change and energy scarcity, operate in opposition to environmentalism. The hope is that technical adjustments will allow humans to extend their beliefs and perspectives into the future without requiring them to ask new moral and ethical questions and without developing new virtues. (Günel 2019:10–11)

Kanna (2011) described similar applications of technical adjustments in what must be called the fantastical development of the city

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of Dubai, under the rubric of neoliberal globalization, urbanist ideology, and the divas of global architectural design.[2]

Meanwhile, in Greenland, technical adjustments in the form of mega resource extraction and related infrastructure projects are also seen as a fix, but that strategy is not necessarily seen as enabling a wholescale sociopolitical inertia, as Günel suggested is the case in Abu Dhabi. The technical adjustment in Greenland renders independent nationhood possible, and facilitates the ascendance of an elite social class and its worldview and values over others; perhaps one might see the technical adjustment as enabling both something new (i.e., Greenlandic nationhood) and simultaneously the entrenchment of the new elite's values and ethics, as in the Gulf monarchies. On the subject of an enormous aluminum smelting complex that between 2007 and 2016 was intensively planned and designed to be built by the global hegemon Alcoa in the small town of Maniitsoq on Greenland's southwestern coast, Sejersen wrote:

> The technology complex in question (a smelter, two dams, electric transmission cables, etc.) carries with its large-scale systematic socio-technical nature and enormous potential. The astronomical economic investments that are required, its spatial and temporal consequences, and also the political expectations invested in the project gave it a certain momentum . . . The technology may thus reinforce a particular system of values and relations. (Sejersen 2015:111)

This project would have doubled Greenland's CO_2 emissions and its energy consumption. As part of the planning process, the Greenlandic government assessed the local hunting and fishing industries and the livelihoods they provide for Greenlandic communities. In that context, leading politicians proposed "re-educating" hunters and fishing people for new occupations associated with the aluminum complex (Sejersen

[2] The "technical adjustments" argument resonates with what Tania Li calls "rendering technical," with respect to the field of economic development. When development planners "identify an arena of intervention, bound it, dissect it, and devise corrective measures to produce desirable results" (Li 2007: 123), they render the problem or project "technical" and relieve themselves and the bureaucracies they serve of the need to analyze or even acknowledge systems of political, economic, and social inequality.

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2015: 124–125). Even without the intrusion of mega resource extraction and infrastructure projects, fishing and hunting in Greenland are already highly regulated by both national and international regimes that limit what can and cannot be caught and therefore consumed.

The processes of consultation by which the planning of the Maniitsoq aluminum complex was executed were intensely fraught; that is to say, they were far from transparent to the residents of Maniitsoq, and likely to the majority of Greenlanders, a characteristic that applies in the discussion of the development of mining projects more recently (see Nuttall 2013). Sejerson noted:

> In November 2010, the Greenlandic environmental organization, Avataq, accused the Greenlandic government of keeping the public in the dark about the human and environmental impacts of having an aluminum smelter. (Sejerson 2015: 178)

That accusation, which hinged on the primacy of the visual, provoked demands from the government for proof, which Avataq in turn provided.

In 2020, an article in *Arctic Today*, a self-described "Arctic business journal," declared:

> The idea of building a hydroelectric plant for industrial production near Maniitsoq was first broached more than a decade ago. Negotiations dragged on due to a disagreement over who should fund its construction, and, by 2016, the administration admitted that it had given up on striking a deal with Alcoa. (McGwin 2020)

Whether or not the lack of transparency, which here signals the government's nondisclosure about the effects of aluminum smelting, was the main reason the project did not manifest, the debate around the aluminum smelter nevertheless revealed how technical adjustments figured in the ways Greenland's government and political elite envisioned nationhood and what the Greenlandic people ought to be doing for work. There is, to be sure, the mirage-like character of large-scale resource extractive projects in the Arctic, which I referred to previously, but there is also the disjuncture between the "relative transparency of bureaucratic practices" (Hastrup and Lien 2020: xvii) in Nordic countries such as Greenland, on the one hand, and the calculus of profit-driven, behind-closed-doors corporate decision-making for a company like Alcoa, on the other.

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Lens Three: Competing Transparencies in Greenlandic Gem Mining

A ruby and pink sapphire mine, owned by the Norwegian-financed Greenland Ruby company, opened at Aappaluttoq in the southern part of Greenland's vast Sermersooq municipality in 2017. Greenland's ruby mine operates to produce gems, but also as a synecdoche: a part of the ongoing debate about mining and transparency, which effectually embodies the larger scenario. I would argue this case in two ways. First, the ruby mine as a new venture in resource extraction settles mining as a technical adjustment that supports the Greenlandic nation-building project. Second, Greenland's ruby mine offers an opportunity to showcase corporate transparency in the soft light of an Arctic Scandinavian setting, for a gemstone that from Myanmar to Mozambique (Brazeal 2026) carries the weight of nightmarish human rights catastrophes and ugly environmental degradation.

In their glossy pamphlets and website promotional materials, the Greenland Ruby company declares:

> Greenland Ruby gems are mined by adhering to the strict ethical, social, human rights and environmental laws and responsible practices. Transparency and traceability are extremely important aspects of our project. Gems come with a certificate or origin authorized and issued by the Government of Greenland. This certificate assures buyers these stones come from an ethical source. (Greenland 2017–2018: 74)

Moreover, the company claims that "10% of the mine's material is to stay in Greenland for tourist and local operators." During my 2019 fieldwork season, I asked shop owners who sold jewelry in Nuuk whether their inventory included Greenlandic rubies, either as loose stones or set in particular pieces. There was only one to be found. In fact, in Greenland Ruby's promotional materials, which one would expect to present the most favorable picture possible, it is at best quite unclear who has specified or will establish these "strict ethical, social, human rights and environmental law and responsible practices," or how the company is to be held accountable to those standards. Greenland Ruby's ideas about transparency are based, I would argue, primarily upon the traceability of the stones and legal frameworks mandating environmental policy, all in the context of an international corporate business framework of profitability. As we will see below,

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that kind of transparency contrasts sharply with a sector of small-scale, artisanal-type miners and gem polishers, who envision an autonomous and agentive role in bringing the stones from the ground to a marketplace that serves their local, Greenland-based set of interests (Brichet 2020).

The corporate domination of ruby mining in Greenland comes on the heels of fifteen years of contorted events and turnarounds, following the discovery of the deposit at Aappaluttoq by US geologist William Rohtert in 2005, at a time when ruby crystals, apparently quite a few of extremely high quality and potentially great value, could be picked up on or just below the surface. An extended struggle ensued in the pre-2009, pre-self-rule era. On the one hand, local residents claimed the right to gather and sell rubies as well as claiming to have had previous knowledge about them in that region; on the other hand, the first company to propose the mine, the Canadian-owned True North Gems, together with the Danish Bureau of Mines, actively repressed those locals' gathering activities through a series of arrests and temporary detentions, confiscating many of the finest-quality gems that had already been gathered.[3] In this battle, so-called historical stones – that is, valuable stones collected before the self-rule government's establishment of local laws and licensing in 2009 – were considered illegally mined, making current and past sales of such valuable stones mined before that date also illegal. True North Gems went bankrupt in 2016 following the scandals produced by these battles, but it was not long before the Greenland Ruby company was formed, and the same leases and permits were utilized to open the mine in 2017.

At the time Rohtert discovered the Aappaluttoq deposit in 2005, Greenlanders could apply for and receive licenses to take gems out of the country, to trade shows, and to sell them, under the 1999 Mineral Resources Act of Greenland, as administered by the Bureau of Minerals and Petroleum (BMP), which was still under Danish control. A local enthusiast group, the Greenland Stone Club, was regularly issued such export licenses. Ironically, Rohtert was one of the co-founders of True North Gems, the company with which the BMP colluded to restrict Greenlanders' ability to gather rubies and sell them, which later led to arrests, confiscations, and detentions.

[3] William Rohtert, personal communication, 2019–2021; Ilannguaq Lennert Olsen, personal communication, 2019.

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As reported on the Fair Jewellery Action website,[4] Rohtert was accused and charged with smuggling rubies out of Greenland in 2007, and detained by the police at the request of BMP. Earlier that year, he had been discharged from True North Gems after evaluating a large sample of rubies from Aappaluttoq and assigning them high wholesale values that were previously noted. Rohtert had also convinced True North Gems to fund gem prospecting, cutting, polishing, and jewelry design courses in Greenland, the first of their kind, which have had a ripple effect in the ensuing years as those who were trained in these classes in turn train friends and relatives.[5] His goal had been to create employment opportunities for Greenlanders, and to make it possible for Greenlanders to sell gems at the highest possible prices. Following his replacement as the project manager for Aappaluttoq, the gemstone cutting and polishing courses were discontinued and locals living near the deposit were informed, in spite of earlier assurances from BMP, that they were no longer allowed to prospect for rubies from either the exploitation or the exploration zones where True North Gems was operating. The rubies in True North Gems' possession were without explanation re-evaluated as much less valuable, which not coincidentally reduced the projected revenue from the mine and the tax contributions that could be expected to the Greenlandic economy. A resonant ordeal unfolded for Greenlanders Niles Madsen, Christian de Renouard, and Thue Noahsen, among others, all of whom had worked with Rohtert and had extant collections of valuable rubies and had tried to continue their gathering activities. BMP, in collusion with True North Gems, had these individuals banned from such activities and from selling any gemstones in Greenland or abroad.[6]

These events led to an international outcry and very bad press for the Greenlandic mining industry, and then to the founding of an activist group, the 16th August Union, named for the day a helicopter with armed police on board confronted Madsen at the site and banned his presence there. Subsequent and significant political and economic involvement and investment ensued, led by a fair trade organization, Fair Jewellery Action, based in Santa Fe, New Mexico. A petition

[4] https://fairjewelry.org/campaigns/
[5] William Rohtert, personal communication, 2019–2021.
[6] https://fairjewelry.org/campaigns/

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supporting the local people who had been banned and had had their rubies confiscated collected signatures from almost 5 percent of the Greenlandic population in less than three weeks. In 2009, the Greenland ombudsman reviewed the Madsen case and decided that BMP had acted inappropriately. That same year, Greenlanders voted to endorse self-rule, and the new government began drafting new policies that affect small-scale mining and the sale of gems.

For the rubies of Greenland and the possible benefits of rubies for Greenlanders and Greenland, this is not a story that necessarily ends negatively, at least not so far. Perhaps in the context of gem mining and transparency, there are only comparatively better or worse outcomes rather than outcomes that can be seen as unmitigatedly positive or negative. For example, the current conditions for ruby mining and for ruby miners in both Myanmar and Mozambique (Brazeal 2026) are by comparison very much more negative. In Greenland, while, as indicated, there are many reasons for skepticism with respect to the large-scale corporate mine run by Greenland Ruby and its pledges to conduct itself according to standards of social and environmental responsibility, small-scale miners such as Ilannguaq Lennert Olsen, whom I interviewed, express a certain degree of optimism that, in Greenland, the mining of gems could be conducted in such a way as to include small-scale miners. A few years ago, Fair Jewellery Action and the 16th August Union drafted a comprehensive report entitled *Creating a Prosperous and Inclusive Gem Industry in Greenland* (Lowe and Doyle 2013), with very specific and concrete policy recommendations that support what Ilannguaq is doing as president of the Nuuk Gemstone Guild (in Greenlandic, the Nuummi Ujaqqer Institute Peqatigiiffiat).

In a 2018 interview with the most widely read Greenlandic daily, *Sermitsiaq*, conducted by the newspaper's chief editor Poul Krarup, Ilannguaq noted that post-2009 positive legislation has in fact created a licensing system that facilitates small mining by Greenlanders in the areas where rubies have been found, although these areas exclude the concession zone granted by the Greenlandic government to the Greenland Ruby company (Krarup 2018). From our conversation, I concluded that what is still lacking is the human and technological infrastructure that could make finished products of raw rubies. "We must help each other to invest money in both extracting and polishing

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many of our different gemstones," Ilannguaq commented. "We Greenlanders are good with our hands. I believe also that many could easily learn to facet gemstones." Ilannguaq worries that the laws in Greenland still do not adequately protect small-scale Greenlandic miners, and eventually gem cutters and polishers from foreign investors will attempt to conclude agreements that create exclusive relationships of dependency with and monopoly control over Greenlandic "partners." One step in the direction that Ilannguaq and his guild support was the government's Ministry of Raw Materials drafting a "Country of Origin" certificate, for which, one may recall, Greenland Ruby appears to take credit in its promotional materials. Ilannguaq's organization is dedicated to substantive support for training and education for small-scale miners in the value-added industries of cutting, polishing, and ultimately jewelry design and manufacture. In my own interview with Ilannguaq in 2019, we imagined a situation in which Greenlanders mine rubies, Greenlanders polish and facet rubies, Greenlanders design and create jewelry with their rubies, and the rubies themselves are of such high quality that they are not subjected to the heat treatment that almost all corundum gems receive in Thailand, where the vast majority of stones are sent to be processed. The Greenlandic rubies we imagined would be the most valuable in the world. As Brichet (2020), writes, such an imaginary is already decades old.

When the process that led to a ruby mine in Greenland began, it very much seemed like the companies involved operated opaquely, making claims about high ethical standards and traceability which were, at best, difficult to substantiate, but which nevertheless made for good public relations. But the development of legible standards in the legal frameworks of Greenland's self-rule government has advanced, a development that may not be perfect but does demarcate traceability and the conditions of extraction. The changes are complex. By 2021, Greenland Ruby had opened a store in the Nuuk Center, the city's prestigious shopping emporium, where one could purchase loose stones and also jewelry designed and produced by Greenlander artisanal jewelers. To what extent these developments responded to the experiences and interventions of Ilannguaq, Fair Jewellery Action, and the 16th August Union is not evident. In 2023, Ilannguaq was hired by the government of Greenland's Ministry of Natural Resources (formerly the BMP), and his intention is to transform the laws

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regulating small miners.[7] At the same time, a recent public publication by Greenland Ruby repeats the same obfuscations regarding the history of ruby mining in Greenland and the same unsubstantiated claims about transparency (Henning 2023: 48–49). More seriously, the Greenlandic daily *Sermitsiaq* reported in 2022 that Greenland Ruby was $100 million in debt and had yielded only $10 million in sales since production started at Aappaluttoq.[8] In 2023, the mine shut down (McLemore 2023), and in 2024, Greenland Ruby put the mine up for sale (Jeffay 2024).

To repeat Hastrup and Lien's wry observation, "Resource imaginaries, in other words, are not that easily realized, and sometimes are just that: imaginaries" (2020: xii). At the same time, the role played by Greenlandic miners and their allies like Rohtert from the beginning of the Greenlandic ruby industry to the current moment of uncertainty has interjected a demand for and a version of a kind of transparency that contrasts with that of the corporate entity and creates an unstable dynamism between the two. In the mining of rare earth elements that I discuss next, the confrontation with transparency is more stark and the stakes much higher.

Lens Four: The Opaque Worlds of the REE Economy

Not far from Aappaluttoq, and located in the far south Kujalleq municipality, sharply debated megaprojects center around two deposits of rare earth elements (REEs) that are closely located to one another: Kvanefjeld (in Greenlandic Kuannersuit), next to the town of Narsaq; and the Tanbreez mine Kringlerne, or Killavaat Alannguatin in Greenlandic, which is near the larger town of Qaqortoq.

The global market for REEs is highly constrained by China's stranglehold over both the mining and the refining of these strategic elements; China produces up to 90 percent of REEs (Gronholt-Pedersen and Onstad 2021). There is certainly a drive, led by the US and the EU, to break or at least evade the Chinese monopoly on these high-value metals. The planned mines at Kvanefjeld and Tanbreez would exploit extensive, very high-quality deposits of REEs, which

[7] William Rohtert, personal communication, 2019–2021.
[8] "Røde rubiner I rødt: Gigantisk underskud I minekoncern [Red Rubies in the Red: Gigantic Deficit in the Mining Group]," *Sermitsiaq*, August 20, 2022.

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"the US Geological Survey says are the world's biggest undeveloped deposits of rare earth metals" (Gronholt-Pedersen and Skydsgaard 2021). Greenland Minerals and Energy (GME), an Australian-registered company, which is developing Kvanefjeld, describes the proposed mine as "a large-scale rare earth project with the potential to become the most significant western world producer of critical rare earths."[9] The four largest shareholders in GME are Citicorp, J. P. Morgan Australia, HSBC Australia, and Leshan Shenghe Rare Earth of China, each of which has purchased a stake between 11.3 percent and 14.3 percent. Tanbreez Mining Greenland is owned by an Australian company which is itself a subsidiary of Westrip Holdings Ltd in the UK (Hansen and Johnstone 2019).

The REEs comprise a complex of seventeen distinct elements with widely varying, essential uses in key technological applications. Among them, neodymium, a prime component of the Kvanefjeld deposit, is used to produce the magnets used in wind energy technologies that are central to sustainable energy production globally; neodymium iron boron magnets are the strongest magnets known and a critical component not only in green energy technologies and fuel efficiency, but also in the miniaturization of electronic devices. Gearless wind turbines use approximately 200–300 kilograms of this element, hybrid cars like the Prius use 1 kilogram, and MRI scanning machines require 1–3 tons of neodymium. The Tanbreez deposit's REE array is comprised mainly of "lanthanum and cerium – relatively plentiful metals used in telescope lenses and auto catalysts to cut emissions. About a fifth would be yttrium, which is in demand for lasers and the superconductors used in quantum computing" (Gronholt-Pedersen and Onstad 2021).

But neodymium and other REEs are not the only elements that would be purified from the Kvanefjeld mine. The deposit at Kvanefjeld contains not an insignificant amount of uranium ore, perhaps 20 percent of the total ore body; once purified, this can be used in power plants or in the production of nuclear weapons. As early as 1955, the Danish Atomic Energy Commission had identified uranium at the Kvanefjeld deposit, and Danish scientists had conducted technical studies relating to extracting uranium at Kvanefjeld; these studies continued for almost thirty years. Work on the Kvanefjeld deposit was abandoned in 1983 after the Danish government

[9] See https://etransmin.com/kvanefjeld-project/

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established what has been called a "zero tolerance policy" with respect to uranium and other radioactive materials, which affected all three countries in the Danish realm (Denmark, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands). In 2013, following extensive re-study of the Kvanefjeld deposit and already in the era of enormously increased demand for REEs for wind turbines and other uses, the Greenlandic parliament voted to remove the ban on uranium mining, independently and distinctly from the rest of the Danish realm, clearing the way for the exploitation of the Kvanefjeld deposit, which has been debated in Greenland ever since.

GME claims:

> Environmental impact studies have been completed which show the project does not create significant issues for the local environment or residents of nearby communities. Extensive radiation studies show the increase in radiation exposure caused by the project is negligible. The level [sic] of dust generated by the project are very low and well below European standards.[10]

Many residents of the immediately adjacent town of Narsaq fear the extensive tailings, both radioactive and toxic rare earth residue, that the mine will produce, as scholars have reported for almost a decade (see Hansen and Johnstone 2019; Nuttall 2012; 2013; 2017). As early as 2013, Nuttall described the GME consultation process and corporate transparency as lacking substantive public participation, decision-making, and involvement in formal regulatory processes, which led to distrust of officially sanctioned assessments of social and environmental impact. In 2019, and as a result of ethnographic interviewing in and around the Narsaq and Qaqortoq communities, Hansen and Johnstone reiterated:

> The decision-making processes [with regard to both Kvanefjeld and Tanbreez] were found lacking by our interviewees in many respects, in particular as regards the time taken and the exchange of information … the alarm caused by risk can create an atmosphere of powerlessness and paralysis among citizens. This points to the need for strategic planning and support to communities at the early exploration stages. (Hansen and Johnstone 2019: 8)

In other words, GME's assertion of transparency with respect to the central concern about radioactive contamination caused by the mining

[10] See https://etransmin.com/esg-sustainability/

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and extraction of uranium ore was highly contested by the adjacent resident communities.

The fact that a uranium mine has even been considered feasible in a part of the Nordic Arctic, in countries where equality, livability, and the benign role of the state seem to be taken for granted, underscores the challenges inherent in what Hastrup and Lien have called the "resource frontiers" of this region:

> On the one hand, [the resource frontier] indicates that configurations of resourcefulness involve practices of exploiting, controlling, and even colonizing land seen as somehow peripheral, uninhabited, up for grabs, exploitable from elsewhere and in need of pioneering development and resource transfer. Hence the notion of "frontier." On the other hand, "welfare frontiers" point to efforts to advance and realize particular democratic visions of good living conditions for all legitimate citizen-subjects, even in regions seen by state authorities as marginal in one way or another. (Hastrup and Lien 2020: vii)

An Althusserian Marxist approach to such a situation (Althusser 2006) might reasonably consider the values and stated intentions of the welfare state in Greenland as part of the ideological state apparatus that works to obscure, or render opaque, the actual exploitation of resources and labor, which is the primary role and mechanism of the capitalist class in any capitalist country. This does not imply that either the Greenlandic government, in envisioning national independence as hinging on the technical adjustments of resource exploitation, or the Danish government, in insisting that Greenlanders pay their way to that independence, is intentionally, not to mention maliciously, deceiving Greenlanders – either specifically in Kujalleq or in the whole country. I would not, however, doubt that implication with respect to the corporate entities that are ready to develop Kvanefjeld and Tanbreez – or any other corporate mining venture, for that matter. For them, I would suggest, the welfare state component of the welfare frontier in Greenland is part of the specific conditions they need to work with in order to exploit the resource they want to extract; different conditions prevail elsewhere, but in each case, the corporation's goal remains the same. (See Maguire [2020] for a similar argument with respect to aluminum smelting and geothermal energy in Iceland.) The tense and intense differences between the intentions of the state and those of the corporations, particularly over the anxiety-

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ridden possibility of radioactive contamination and the use of uranium mined in Greenland in the production of nuclear weapons – by the United States or China – came to a boil in 2021 when snap parliamentary elections were called, precisely over whether the Kvanefjeld mine would finally receive approval to begin excavation. The Inuit Ataqatigiit (IA) party, which strongly opposes Kvanefjeld, while still leaving the door open for the Tanbreez project, won 37 percent of the vote; the Siumut party, which previously controlled the government, won only 29 percent. IA led the new coalition government, in which the welfare side of the welfare frontier in South Greenland has received new emphasis, and – for the moment at least – the transparency of a state's commitment to welfare gains has taken priority over the formulae of and for corporate transparency (see Neuman 2021). As of 2023, the Greenland Ministry of Natural Resources formally terminated all contracts for the Kvanefjeld mine (Ianucci 2023); the Greenland government was sued for $11.5 billion (Hartmann et al. 2024). In 2024, ownership of the Tanbreez mine was in transition, but operations had still not started (Bye 2024).

Concluding Thoughts: Materiality, Transparency in the Era of Climate Change, and Nation-Building

In closing, I draw attention to the difficulties surrounding my deployment of "transparency" via the metaphor of lenses that this chapter has employed, and also reflect on the contrast between the materials that I have focused upon.

Greenland's geographical and political adjacency to Scandinavia makes for a situation in which mining corporations are held accountable in ways that are not as demanding in other locations, such as ruby-mining regions in Mozambique or Myanmar. What is visible in my recounting of the history of ruby mining in Greenland is the deployment of the rhetorics of transparency by Greenland Ruby, for example, in addressing the demand for accountability. Yet the small-scale ruby miners seek a transparency that is not only about satisfying the discerning tastes of gem-buying consumers, and not even only about creating space for noncorporate kinds of mining, gem processing, and jewelry design, but, I would argue, also about these miners' sense of belonging and inclusion in the emergent Greenlandic nation.

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That point turns our attention to the aspirations of the political class that is planning Greenland's political independence, and how resource extraction plays a central role in that process. With respect to REE extraction, that class – and the Greenlandic government as a whole – is accountable to the Greenlandic electorate in a country where elections do matter. That accountability highlights demands for information transparency around a substantive menu of environmental dangers that are posed by the very process of mining REEs, their transport, and the insinuation of uranium and radioactivity into all of these processes.

The ontological differences between the materials under discussion and on view – rubies and neodymium most notably – remain striking. These are natural materials, in a sense, but no less produced, no less manufactured, yet still agentive as entities. Faceted or polished rubies are all about visibility, about the explicit adornment of the body and the performance of adornment in a broad optic, about subjective qualities such as color, on exhibition in the brightest or most favorable possible light. By contrast, the presence of purified REEs such as neodymium is always opaque: not conspiratorially hidden but systemically behind the scenes, ensconced within the machines they make possible, never visible except as effects – profoundly powerful effects.

Rubies thus proclaim their presence through their exaggerated visibility, and each one is judged unique and individual, but such a treatment of rubies also obscures their origins – not necessarily in a geographical sense, since stated provenance deeply affects the calculation of their value, but certainly to cloak the relationships of labor exploitation, colonial and neocolonial control, and environmental destruction. Neodymium, yttrium and the other REEs are always invisible, and because their prices are standardized by purity and weight, their materiality is made generic: like for all metals, as an industrially produced mass, any one piece is equivalent to any other piece as long as weight and purity are equivalent, notwithstanding demands to render such generic materials "ethically produced" as well.

As Raymond Williams so saliently observed, all of these commodities, all of these phenomena – sight itself – are produced under a system of class domination:

> [This] thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for

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most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives. It is, that is to say, in the strongest sense a "culture" which has also to be seen as the lived domination and subordination of particular classes. (Williams 1977: 110)

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9 *Transparency and Trust in DIY Aid*

ANDREW WALSH

Publish What You Fund (PWYF) has been pursuing ambitious goals with limited means since 2008. Operating out of "a modest one-room office above an Italian restaurant on London's South Bank" (Honig and Weaver 2019: 579) with an annual operating budget of less than £1 million, PWYF is dedicated to "the global campaign for aid and development transparency," envisioning "a world where aid and development information is transparent, available and used for effective decision-making, public accountability and lasting change for all citizens."[1] This ongoing campaign's already significant impact owes much to PWYF's flagship publication, the annual Aid Transparency Index (ATI), an open access "ranking of [the world's largest] donor agencies" that aims to "galvanise major donors to progressively increase and improve the aid and development information they make available."[2] Within just a few years, the ATI has become an essential source for the international aid industry's key players, "as important for gaining prestige in the development aid sector as Guide Michelin is to high-end restaurants" (Hedlin 2018: O506).

PWYF is just one of a "dazzling range of aid transparency and accountability initiatives [TAIs]" (McGee 2013: S108) that have emerged since the turn of the century in response to the widely held understanding that previously acceptable ways of delivering international aid have been insufficiently scrutinized. TAIs proceed with the assumption "that, through greater accountability, the leaky pipes of corruption and inefficiency will be repaired, aid and public spending will be channeled more effectively and development initiatives will produce greater and more visible results" (Gaventa and McGee 2013: S4). Whether or not these initiatives are successful in delivering on the promise entailed in this assumption, they have unquestionably brought the international aid industry's most powerful stakeholders in line with a growing number of other transparency-focused global actors.

[1] See www.publishwhatyoufund.org (accessed June 24, 2021). [2] Ibid.

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TAIs affecting the work of international aid have developed alongside a wide range of global transparency and accountability initiatives, including the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) discussed elsewhere in this collection. Indeed, PWYF was modeled on Publish What You Pay (PWYP) – a "global movement" of organizations and coalitions that has been campaigning for an "energy transition that leaves no one behind."[3] As with PWYF and other TAIs of international aid, PWYP and the EITI are commonly represented and understood as necessary correctives to a corruption-ridden status quo. No matter what the industry, it seems, the effects of prescribed transparency are meant to be similarly cleansing. As Sovacool notes in a largely positive assessment of what the EITI has accomplished since 2002, "sunlight is the best disinfectant," by which he means that "opening things up to heat (greater public scrutiny), light (independent data), and fresh air (institutional forms) offer a compelling antidote to corruption" (Sovacool 2020: 1452; citing Matisoff 2013). Questions remain, however, about the tangible effects that the EITI has had for the "citizens living in resource rich countries" (Klein 2017: 773) whose empowerment and improved wellbeing are among the initiative's goals. Most obviously problematic is that whatever is brought to light in the reports demanded by the EITI remains largely inaccessible to many of those whose interests these revelations are intended to serve, "locked up in pdf files" and written in "highly technical" language that demands "sophisticated levels of expertise in order to be critically analysed" (Klein 2017: 773). Also concerning is all that is *not* revealed in these reports, including "the social and environmental [impacts] of extraction" and "accounts of public expenditures linked to extractive revenues" (Klein 2017: 773), as well as the ambiguities entailed in small-scale extractive work, such as artisanal mining of gold and gemstones (Pederson et al. 2021; Walsh 2004), through which the global extractive industries' least powerful stakeholders operate at the margins of global markets, engaging in practices and relationships that can be incompatible with the EITI's standards for transparency and accountability. It seems that whatever successes the EITI might be said to achieve, key stakeholders, sites, and dynamics are destined to remain in the dark.

[3] See https://pwyp.org/ (accessed August 25, 2025).

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In this chapter, I suggest that something similar is apparent in the global aid industry. Taking the qualitative approach that others have used to reveal what transparency initiatives in the extractive industries have left unexposed, I focus especially on what the aid industry's TAIs do not and cannot tell us about what has been called "citizen aid" (Fechter and Schwittay 2019), "grassroots international non-governmental organizations (GINGOs)" (Appe and Schnable 2019; Schnable 2021), "demotic humanitarianism" (Taithe 2019), or, as I will call it, DIY aid – an increasingly prevalent means by which global citizens looking to help others are "connecting" (Fechter 2019), fairly directly, though often from afar, with people in need. Although DIY aid's practitioners are commonly motivated by concerns shared by advocates of TAIs – for example, concerns over the perceived ineffectiveness of traditional ways of delivering aid – they tend to operate outside of the existing international aid arrangements that organizations like PWYF are looking to reform. Indeed, if PWYF and other small but increasingly powerful watchdog organizations are among international aid's most promising start-ups – that is, a growing sector of small projects with the potential to revolutionize the existing aid industry from within – DIY aid might be understood as the domain of upstarts – that is, a growing sector of small projects that frequently defy, confound, and undermine the logics and systems of the existing aid industry.

Drawing from recent work on DIY aid generally as well as from ethnographic research with a specific project in Madagascar, this chapter addresses how DIY aid is incompatible with certain expectations of transparency and accountability. While DIY aid projects are unquestionably tripped up by many of the obstacles to effectiveness that TAIs are meant to identify, their small size and distinctive relational foundations and operations can make them resistant, if not immune, to the kind of corrective scrutiny that TAIs demand. This doesn't mean they go unscrutinized, however. Rather, stakeholders in DIY aid tend to scrutinize themselves and one another in pursuit of what is most important to ensuring the effectiveness of the projects they share – that is, trusting relationships.

TAIs and DIY Aid

I first became aware of the growing importance of DIY aid while doing ethnographic research on conservation and artisanal mining in

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northern Madagascar in the early 2000s. The first decade of the century brought both an influx of visitors to the region (tourists, researchers, missionaries, gemstone traders, and Peace Corps volunteers, among others) and the telecommunications infrastructure needed to enable long-term connections between these foreigners and would-be local collaborators. The subsequent arrival of cheap smartphones, Facebook, and WhatsApp, and the spreading popularity of GoFundMe appeals and cellphone banking only improved conditions for DIY aid. By 2010, it hardly seemed strange to meet an Australian toyshop owner, Eve, devoting herself and her resources to the construction of a schoolhouse in an out-of-the-way Malagasy village. While visiting an eco-lodge in the region in 2008, Eve had learned from a frustrated local teacher that children in a neighboring community had to walk over five kilometers to and from the nearest school. She proposed to do something about the problem presented to her and, surprisingly to some, followed through with action.

I began referring to projects like Eve's as examples of "DIY foreign aid" following Nicholas Kristof, who lauded the revolutionary potential of the form in a *New York Times Magazine* cover story (2010). Kristof presented DIY aid projects as poised to succeed precisely where their large-scale counterparts fail. Emerging from the intimate collaborations of just a few "global" and "local" actors intent on achieving modest goals, they promise to achieve the truly participatory interventions that tend to elude international aid's big players carrying out much more ambitious projects. What's more, given that funding for DIY aid generally flows fairly directly from benefactors to beneficiaries through new social technologies, online fundraising campaigns, paid volunteering, and direct marketing to ethical consumers, it promises possibilities for short-circuiting dysfunctional global "aid chains" (Bebbington 2005) that are traditionally mediated by the complex, impersonal, inefficient, corruptible, state-supervised arrangements that have inspired so many TAIs in recent decades.

The growing popularity of DIY aid has also raised red flags among those concerned with the emerging sector's capacity to enable neocolonial "white savior" (Cole 2012) fantasies and encourage problematic visions of international aid as the domain of selfless, apolitical, well-meaning people whose good intentions and resistance to reproach means they can work without oversight (Algoso 2010; McLennan 2014; 2017). Even the cover image accompanying Kristof's story – a

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photograph of a young, white, American woman surrounded by Nepalese children – suggests a concerning cliché that is widespread enough to have been parodied through the popular "Barbie Savior" Instagram account (Schwarz and Richey 2019). Critique and parody seem to have had little effect on the growth of DIY aid, however. In fact, as I will argue shortly, DIY aid's practitioners are in many ways immune to the concerned scrutiny of critical observers who might question their intentions or methods.

Schnable's *Amateurs Without Borders* (2021) offers an excellent overview of DIY aid, drawing attention to the tremendous growth and developing patterns of what she terms grassroots international NGOs. That DIY aid operates outside of the international aid's mainstream is maybe most obvious in the CVs of those who make it happen, the "amateurs" of Schnable's title, who, although generally well educated, typically have "no professional experience in international development" (Schnable 2021: 3). These are people who tend not to aspire to careers in "Aidland" (Mosse 2011), where "professionalized" (Schnable 2021: 8; citing Hwang and Powell 2009) aid workers move "among NGOs, government agencies, and for-profit contractors" (Schnable 2021: 10; citing Mosse 2011; 2013) in ways that make learning the ways of the mainstream a must. DIY aid is also set apart in how it depends not on the "contract revenue or foundation grants" that makes the salaried work of aid professionals possible, but, rather, on the largesse of project founders, the purchases of ethical consumers, and the "volunteer labor and individual donations" (Schnable 2021: 2) of millions of supporters.

While DIY aid projects often stay afloat thanks to the modest contributions of many, they are almost always dependent on a few energetic individuals (Schnable 2021: 16) – people like Eve – whose visions, dedication, and, often, money make them happen. These individuals never act alone in realizing their projects, however. Another common feature of DIY aid identified by Schnable is that it always takes shape "in a personal, relational context" (2021: 13) in which benefactors, beneficiaries, and an array of intermediaries engage with one another as something more than just stakeholders. Eve certainly couldn't have built a schoolhouse in Madagascar on her own. Her project could never have been completed without the support and friendship of the English-speaking Malagasy guide who helped her negotiate the complexities of Malagasy banks and marketplaces, the

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collaboration of local teachers and parents, and the hospitality of villagers who hosted her every year. Although it was Eve's proposal that started the project, it was her relationships with these others that drove it to completion.

The features that set DIY aid apart in the world of international aid – that it is dominated by amateurs, sustained by private donors, and driven by relationships – are also what render this emerging sector invisible to those in the aid industry's mainstream. More than just unnoticed, DIY aid projects tend to fall "outside of the purview of governments, NGO registries and coordinating bodies, and other official systems" (Watkins et al. 2012: 291) in ways that make them hard to track or scrutinize in any systematic way. Not that practitioners of DIY aid are necessarily interested in, or likely to invite, such scrutiny. Drawing "resources from their *personal networks*" (Schnable 2021: 16, emphasis in the original), and without the ambitions of aid professionals, they have little use for what the mainstream offers and so need not play by its rules. In fact, some DIY aid practitioners avoid the mainstream as a matter of principle, contrasting their own bare-bones, action-oriented approach to helping others with what they portray as the bloated, corrupt, bureaucratic operations of international aid's biggest players.

Over the past ten years I have been working with a team of Canadian and Malagasy colleagues and students to study the development, operations, and impacts of DIY aid projects in northern Madagascar. We have been following, and sometimes collaborating with, a variety of projects: the previously mentioned schoolhouse project, an urban home for neglected children, an early childhood nutrition program, and, the case I focus on here, Madagascar Health, a project dedicated to providing free medical care and education to residents of underserved communities. All these projects were conceived and founded by foreigners with good intentions but, in most cases, limited training or experience in international aid, and each has produced an array of new relationships between these and other foreigners and a wide range of Malagasy stakeholders with interests of their own. We learned early on that in choosing to do something *for* the people of Madagascar, the foreigners who catalyze and support these projects inevitably find themselves doing something *with* specific and heterogeneous groups of Malagasy people. Not surprisingly, the relationships produced in the process are characterized by the power

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differences, ambiguities, and potential for exploitation or corruption over which proponents of TAIs might express concern. As discussed in the following sections, however, these relationships can be hard to assess according to the "calculative rationalities" of "audit culture" (Shore and Wright 2015: 421) so fetishized in the TAIs of international aid's mainstream.

Scrutinizing Madagascar Health

Madagascar Health's origins can be traced to the late 1990s when the project's now seventy-something-year-old American founder David (a pseudonym) first traveled to northern Madagascar's sapphire-rich hills to oversee local operations for a Thai mining company. Unhappy in the company's highway-side base camp, David moved uphill and pitched a tent near the company claim where he joined a bustling rush of Malagasy artisanal miners. He soon began distributing basic medical supplies to anyone in need, and used his access to and expertise with a bulldozer to level a site outside of the claim on which he and his new neighbors could live more stably in a community that has come to be known as Ambatotsara.

Several years into his stay in the region, David was gravely injured when the bulldozer he was operating tipped over on top of him. Long-time residents of Ambatotsara recall hearing the commotion of the accident and then seeing David stumble out of the bush, bleeding and delirious. Responding quickly, they loaded him onto a makeshift stretcher and transported him to the highway for help. David was evacuated by the company, but, as the story goes, he vowed to come back, intent on repaying his debt to those who had saved him. Several years later he did just that, returning unannounced to Ambatotsara with a Malagasy interpreter and the promise to finance the construction of what would become Madagascar Health's first clinic. The project has been operating ever since, albeit through many ups and downs. At one point a fire destroyed the clinic and David's small mudwalled house, taking thousands of dollars' worth of medicine and most of David's belongings with it. David responded by returning to the US to drive a truck and earn the money needed to rebuild. Years later, in 2015, he explained his tenacious dedication to the project by describing it as his salvation. After a soldier's life of violence, death, and trauma, Madagascar Health had brought him the peace of serving others.

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Like all international aid, DIY or otherwise, Madagascar Health can be described as supply-driven – it wouldn't have come to be without David's decision to create it and wouldn't continue operating (as of 2024) but for the ongoing support of a small group of other foreigners. That noted, there has never been any question of the demand, and need, for the access to basic healthcare and schooling the project has offered. Surveys we undertook in 2015 and 2023 revealed overwhelming support among the local population for the project's existence. Not that local observers had only positive things to say, however. In 2015, local observers told us of the clinic's frequent shortages of medicine, of their confusion over the services it would and wouldn't offer, and of their dissatisfaction at being repeatedly called upon to contribute unpaid labor to maintaining the project's infrastructure. And this was only some of what we heard and reported back to the project's management.

My goal here is not to present a fully transparent account of all we learned about Madagascar Health during our research. Rather, I intend to discuss the project considering the relationships that have enabled it to be effective in the ways that it has been. These relationships have been and continue to be scrutinized, just not in ways idealized by TAIs. In fact, the sequence of best practices that justify TAIs – with expectations of greater transparency leading to greater accountability and more effective aid – can sometimes be upended in a project like Madagascar Health. As discussed here, the mutual trust and accountability of stakeholders in DIY aid projects may even serve to discourage transparency in the name of ensuring ongoing effectiveness.

After David's departure from Madagascar in 2016, Madagascar Health has stayed afloat, and even grown, thanks to the ongoing aid of former volunteers. Having stayed connected with the project's Malagasy manager, François, on Facebook, these foreigners show their support by sending money and by starting or sharing online fundraising appeals. In return, François regularly sends photographs of Madagascar Health's operations and new projects in process, a practice he explained as an outcome of a perceived need "to let [supporters] know that things are going well in case they're wondering 'Where did my money go?'" Mejia, Urrea, and Pedraza-Martinez might refer to what François is doing here as engaging in a strategy commonly found on crowdfunding platforms by demonstrating "operational

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transparency" that serves to reveal "the work that is performed behind a service or system, which increases [a donor's] perceptions of effort and trust" (Mejia et al. 2019: 1773; citing Buell and Norton 2011; Buell et al. 2016). This strategy only works, however, if the foundations of trusting relationships have already been established. Where strangers to Madagascar Health might reasonably expect some transparent and public accounting of how their donations to the project are being allocated, a good number of former volunteers clearly trust that François and other members of Madagascar Health's local staff are pursuing the project's goals just as diligently in their absence as when they were there. Simply put, then, Madagascar Health's effectiveness at delivering foreign aid to intended beneficiaries depends not on how transparent its operations are to a global public of mostly unknown foreigners but on the well-established trust of just a few. How, then, is such trust achieved?

It isn't unusual for DIY aid projects to be funded, at least partly, by people willing to pay for the "hands-on" (Schnable 2021: 16) experience they offer volunteers. In the case of Madagascar Health, foreign volunteers pay for the privilege of engaging in the daily work of the project's medical clinic and school. In the process, the connection between their contributions of money and labor and the effective realization of the project's goals becomes crystal clear – any doubts they have about the effects of their participation in the project are put to rest by participating in its work. In the recent past, before an endowment ensuring that the project's clinic would always be stocked with medicine, the connection between volunteers' participation and the project's effectiveness was established even before their arrival in Ambatotsara. François would meet volunteers at the airport and then take them, almost immediately, to a bank to withdraw Malagasy money and then to a pharmacy to pay for the medicine they would be distributing over the course of their stay. To one group of volunteers I spoke with in 2018, traveling this circuit and then seeing the medicine they had bought be given out at the clinic cemented their confidence in a project they had previously known only through its Facebook page. As one of them told me, participating in the work of the project in this way brought the assurance that their money was "going to the right things."

Working with Madagascar Health brings volunteers more than just satisfaction, however. It also brings experiences with and realizations

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of the great depth of need that drives local demand for what the project offers, as well as an appreciation of the complexities of delivering healthcare and education in the region. All fifteen medical volunteers I have communicated with over the years understood that their participation in the project did little to address the most pressing, chronic problems facing its patients and nothing to alter the underlying structural causes of their need. Several also identified the obvious problem of a funding model that, until recently, has been so dependent on the choices and presence of privileged people like them. One former volunteer recognized and expressed concern about how the locally celebrated presence of foreign volunteers at Madagascar Health's clinic might devalue the care offered by Malagasy healthcare providers; another worried about the possibility that poorly trained volunteers might engage in misconduct. The most critical of the former volunteers I communicated with reckoned themselves complicit in reproducing what they considered to be a fundamentally flawed project: couldn't the money they and other foreigners spent by traveling to Ambatotsara have been put to better use?, they wondered.

The concerns listed above were communicated to me in confidence, albeit with the understanding that I might refer to them in the way I have here. I have certainly never seen anything like these comments posted on Madagascar Health's all-important Facebook page or in the project's visitors' book. That volunteers sometimes hold back from disclosing their concerns in public should not be taken as a sign of their lack of accountability, however. Those critically minded enough to discern Madagascar Health's shortcomings were generally self-aware and modest enough to appreciate how little they knew of the complexities involved in running the project. Most of those I spoke with were certain that, whatever the project's flaws, there is no question that it is effective in its own way. In volunteering with the project, they were unquestionably doing *something* to help the people it intended to serve, and this was always seen as better than doing nothing. Former volunteers were also conscious of the uncertainties facing the project's staff and its local beneficiaries, and aware of how public critique might only exacerbate their situations. Given that many volunteers had first found the project through a search on Facebook, they understood that critical posts or comments might dissuade others from volunteering. And if volunteers stop coming and Madagascar Health ceases operations, they know who will suffer. Even the volunteer who confessed to feeling

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complicit in reproducing a flawed project abstained from public critique, choosing instead to put the project behind them and ignore new fundraising appeals.

That Madagascar Health's former volunteers and steady supporters feel the way they do about the project owes a great deal to the project's local staff. In fact, François and other Malagasy employees of the project contribute more than anyone to ensuring Madagascar Health's ongoing effectiveness, in part by playing two key roles that mediators of DIY aid commonly find themselves in. First, they serve as the "trusted associates" (Schnable 2021: 24) of the foreigners who support the project, providing distant funders with photographs and reports of local operations and helping visiting volunteers adapt to life in Ambatotsara, working long days alongside them and sharing meals, bonfires, jokes, and the solidarity that results. At the same time, those who speak English and/or French as well as Malagasy act as "brokers" (Schnable 2021: 24), communicating the project's plans to its intended local beneficiaries, while also translating local understandings, needs, and concerns for the project's foreign supporters and volunteers. This can be difficult work, leading François to concern himself not so much with ensuring full transparency in all communications as with deciding how messages might be most effectively communicated to their intended audiences, and what might sometimes be better left unsaid for the sake of ensuring the project's ongoing effectiveness.

All staff members I have spoken with over the years have noted the difficulties inherent in roles that require them to fulfill the (sometimes difficult to meet) expectations and needs of foreigner supporters and volunteers while managing the expectations and envy of their Malagasy neighbors, who often assume that they benefit more than they do from their proximity to foreigners. Obviously, staff members do benefit somewhat from the project, earning salaries and sometimes receiving small gifts brought, left, or sent by the foreign volunteers they come to know intimately. What troubled François when we spoke in 2018 were rumors of other, illicit, benefits that he and other staff members were said to be skimming from funds meant for the project's intended beneficiaries. The only way he would win over local doubters, he told me, was with hard work and the results that would yield. He was especially committed to seeing through the construction of a long-promised larger clinic that would enable patients to stay for several days when in need of repeated treatment. Much like the trust

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of foreign supporters, the trust of local people could not be taken for granted – it had to be earned by demonstrating that it was deserved. This clinic was, in fact, completed in 2021.

For François, ensuring the project's ongoing operations and effectiveness has meant interacting with others in particular ways. By sending photographs of work in progress to foreign donors or leading jet-lagged volunteers along the airport–bank–pharmacy circuit, for example, he enables the people who keep the project going to do so with confidence. By keeping in touch with these same people on Facebook, sending congratulations on degrees earned and children born, he keeps these relationships alive. The extent to which such interactions are calculated to encourage foreigners to continue supporting the project is not as important as the fact that they emerge from and foster existing social relationships, with all the ambiguities and complexities that entails. I hope it is clear by now that it is these relationships, and not the generosity of foreigners or strategic maneuvers of local staff, that keep Madagascar Health going, enabling it to be effective in the ways it is. Building and fostering trusting relationships among the project's already implicated stakeholders have certainly figured more centrally in sustaining Madagascar Health's work than have any efforts at ensuring the transparency of the project's operations. Does that mean the project has always been as effective at delivering aid to its intended beneficiaries as it could possibly be? I have no idea and I don't know how such a thing might be determined. The fact that projects like Madagascar Health are by their nature seemingly immune to the "calculative rationalities" of "audit culture" (Shore and Wright 2015: 421), fetishized as ethical in the work of international aid's mainstream, may be among their most promising features.

Having argued that Madagascar Health is not transparent or accountable in ways expected by the international aid industry's TAIs, I should add that I am not sure how it might be made so. TAIs promise a kind of certainty – around finances, for example – that can be hard to achieve in even the best relationships. Not that anyone is asking for such strict certainty. Whatever anyone might think of it, this project will go on being effective in its own ways so long as the relationships that keep it afloat allow. This doesn't mean that we should overlook what can be problematic about projects like this one or ignore the concerns of those who might expect more of them.

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In fact, as discussed below by way of conclusion, attending to those on the demand side of international aid (DIY or otherwise) tends to reveal a great deal of what can be overlooked or forgotten when foregrounding supply-side priorities and perspectives.

Conclusion

There are many reasons why the international aid industry's most powerful players and ambitious start-ups have embraced TAIs. Some TAIs, like PWYF's ongoing campaign, are enabled by and focus on the vast amounts of data generated by the aid industry's biggest players, and while this work is inspired by the goal of serving "all citizens," it most obviously affects those it scrutinizes; as noted earlier, a high ranking on PWYF's annually published ATI means a great deal to those who secure it, and I imagine that a low ranking would be just as consequential. Aiming for different publics, "metacharities" (Singer 2015) such as Giving What We Can, GiveWell, 80,000 Hours, and others use a similarly objective, data-driven approach to assessing the work of international aid's smaller (but potentially powerful) players, producing rankings and certifications intended primarily for the perusal of independent philanthropists, many of whom embrace the tenets of "effective altruism," convinced that "reason and empirical evidence" ought to govern their decisions in order "to ensure that ... donations do the most good possible" (Rubenstein 2016: 513). Given the competitive marketplace of a world in which there will always be more demand for than supply of aid, a stamp of approval from one of these "metacharities" can give a project a significant advantage over others, making the incentive for pursuing certain kinds of transparency and accountability obvious.

Since the key stakeholders in TAIs are those who design them, those who are (or who hope to be) evaluated by them, and those who attend to their results, it follows that their impact will be most apparent in these stakeholders' actions. More than that, TAIs shape how these stakeholders interact. In proposing certain standards of transparency and accountability as necessary preconditions for the delivery of effective aid, they present a clear path: (1) applying certain standards of transparency and accountability ensures the reputations of trustworthy projects and organizations; (2) certified reputations ensure deserved funding; and (3) deserved funding ensures effective aid. The implied

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possibility that international aid's effectiveness might be predetermined is obviously attractive, especially to those, like effective altruists, who expect that their generosity should guarantee certain effects. In fact, what TAIs do most effectively is to simplify what could be fraught choices over what people, priorities, and projects are deserving of international aid. TAIs allow aid's biggest suppliers to outsource their scrutinizing, propping up their confidence and assuaging their doubts while freeing them from the messy prospect of becoming too involved with aid's local brokers or beneficiaries. In this sense, a commitment to the logic of TAIs can be liberating, delivering suppliers of international aid from concerns over the good that might or might not result from that aid by assuring the beneficence of good choices.

Whatever else might be said of DIY aid, it is anything but liberating. As I have experienced it and have come to understand it through the research discussed in this chapter, it is entangling in ways that can be as confusing and frustrating as they can be enlightening and rewarding. And this is what makes projects like Madagascar Health so interesting to consider alongside TAIs and other aspects of the international aid industry's mainstream: they offer unparalleled opportunities for observing the fundamental dynamics of international aid in action, requiring that we attend not only to the varying experiences and imaginations of differently positioned stakeholders but to the relationships among them. As suggested in this chapter, these relationships are complicated – just like all human relationships – and this means not only that their internal workings can be hard to expose (with or without the light of TAIs) but also that whatever comes from them is just as likely to result from what is opaque as from what is clear to those they involve.

In the end, though, DIY aid is like all forms of international aid in one important way: it is a product of the choices of those who make it possible. For people living in and around Ambatotsara, Madagascar Health isn't most obviously DIY (instead of mainstream), an upstart (rather than a start-up), or amateurish (and not professional). To them, this project is most obviously an outcome of that which has brought so much else into their, and their ancestors', lives – the power of foreigners' choices. And while the intended beneficiaries of this project are prone to scrutinizing foreigners' motivations and intentions, they are as unlikely as I am to arrive at a transparent account of David's motivations for creating the project or volunteers' intentions in paying to

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work for it. Not that this lack of transparency matters too much to them. Our conversations with people around Ambatotsara consistently revealed the same simple point: why or how Madagascar Health does what it does is not as important as the fact that it does it and will hopefully do more. For them, benefiting from international aid means living in the uncertainty and opacity of others' choices.

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PART IV

Truth

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10 *Transparency and Truth in Organic Certification*

SHAILA SESHIA GALVIN

A question I am often asked when sharing my research on certified organic agriculture undertaken by smallholder farmers in northern India, goes along the following lines: "So, were these farmers *really* organic?"[1] For a long time, I was inclined to treat questions like this as peripheral to my research. They often puzzled and even troubled me, for the purpose of my work is not to assess and evaluate farmers but to better understand how the quality of becoming, and being, organic is assembled in the first place. Over time, the frequency with which such questions have been posed pushed me to pay more attention – instead of tuning them out, I reflected on why such a question could be ethnographically significant in its own right. As I have discussed elsewhere, a question like this needs to be located in histories of racialized suspicion and *mis*trust (see Galvin 2022). But to ask whether farmers are "really organic" also assumes that there is something that organic *really* is. And so, unraveling this question can help us understand how transparency projects like those associated with organic certification come to constitute truth regimes.

In what follows, I work to develop a different stance toward the question "Is it *really* organic?" by thinking more carefully about some of the assumptions and implications latent in it – particularly the assumption that organic has an objective and verifiable truth status. I aim to show not only how transparency works in certification, but what transparency does; I do this by exploring how transparency instruments and aspirations work as semiotic technologies (Hull 2003; 2008; 2012b) and practices that actively produce – rather than merely reveal – a quality called "organic." In this regard, my work is inspired by research that attends to the importance of semiotic

[1] I engage with this question, and its implications, more fully in an essay published online by Allegra Laboratory from which portions of this chapter are drawn (see Galvin 2022).

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technologies and infrastructures in bureaucratic processes (Hull 2003; 2008; 2012b; Weichselbraun 2019). In his study of Pakistan's Capital Development Authority, Hull (2003; 2008; 2012b) demonstrates the importance of what he terms graphic artifacts – files, lists, maps, stamps, and signatures, among other things – for understanding meaning-making and signification within bureaucratic and governmental processes. Hull's effort to advance understandings of "governance as material practice" (2008: 501) is pushed further by Weichselbraun, who examines how the material semiotic characteristics of metal seals used by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Iran's uranium conversion facilities function as "the *semiotic infrastructure* of nuclear governance that materializes international law and geopolitical relations between states through the IAEA's supposedly neutral techno-epistemic devices and practices of interpretation" (Weichselbraun 2019: 505, emphasis in the original). For these scholars, conceptualizing particular material artifacts as semiotic technologies or infrastructures has yielded important insights around questions of agency and intentionality.

Building on this, I suggest that, in the case of organic certification, semiotic technologies that range from certification documents to tags affixed to sacks of rice bring organic quality into being as something endowed with a particular reality or truth. Pushing on what the editors of this volume characterize as the paradox of transparency – a process of mediation that presents itself as one of disintermediation – I argue that this process is a fundamentally productive and political one, in which institutionally anchored semiotic technologies are essential not simply for mediating between an object (say, organic quality) and an observing subject (in this case inspectors responsible for organic certification), but for producing the object itself.

Transparency Beyond Opacity

Transparency, understood as discourse (West and Sanders 2003) as well as a "political technology [and] form of intervention" (Ballestero 2012: 160), has been most closely associated with the late twentieth-century turn to voluntary regulation, accountability, and public management. Without question, transparency projects have profoundly shaped "political and legal landscapes" (Ballestero 2012: 160), but they are informed and legitimated by, and seek also to produce, ethical

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and normative ideas, practices, and dispositions. Transparency is promoted as an indispensable element of good governance, conveying "trust, openness, fairness" (West and Sanders 2003). In this regard, the rise and expansion of audit as an instrument of new public management in the late twentieth century is especially illustrative of the power of transparency as a global social and economic value; as Power observes, audits "promise external visibility of internal processes" (1996: 21).

Such notions of transparency resonate powerfully in India. Secrecy has long been enshrined in the practice of government and linked with the legacies of colonial power. In the late twentieth century, transparency impulses in India not only reflected global discourses, but also moved in step with domestic political reforms harboring democratizing and participatory objectives as well as with processes of economic liberalization. At this time, Mazzarella observes, transparency was "much beloved by the NGO business and other transnational growers of civil society, [as] the term ostensibly suggested public accountability in political processes" (2006: 489). Transparency has also been taken as an expression of a more enduring form of what Bornstein and Sharma call "technomoral politics," the "complex, strategic integration of technical and moral vocabularies as political tactics" (2016: 77).

The ascendance of transparency as a technomoral value with global currency has necessarily drawn anthropological attention toward its tensions and contradictions, in particular with varying forms of concealment, secrecy, opacity, and ignorance (Mathews 2008). Comaroff and Comaroff historicize the contemporary fascination with transparency, placing it within the enduring relation of "the manifest and the inscrutable," as an indelible facet of power (2003: 288). West and Sanders likewise posit that "ideas that power operates in hidden ways make necessary claims that it operates in the open" (2003: 12).

Yet the emphasis on transparency as affording (or not) a kind of technomanagerial visibility or legibility (Scott 1998) risks overlooking the particular kind of *revelatory*, purportedly truth-telling work that projects, such as audit, undertaken in the name of transparency do. Dunn writes:

> [T]he self-representations contained in auditable documents are supposed to create "transparency." That is, they purport to have a one-to-one correspondence with what actually goes on in a firm or an organization, thereby granting the auditors (and, by proxy, those who trust the auditors) the ability

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to look into the firm and *see what actually happens there*. (Dunn 2007: 42, emphasis added)

The truth-telling powers ascribed to audit, and what the editors of this volume signal in their Introduction as disintermediation, have been taken up within public policy in the context of welfare delivery, democratization, and anti-corruption. A number of scholars have critically engaged with such processes, querying what the revelatory potentialities of audit and other transparency projects in fact produce. In India, the Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGA) built in considerable documentary infrastructure to ensure transparency and avert corruption, but ultimately led to "an enhanced focus on the production of what my informants described as the *sarkari zindagi* (state life) of NREGA, a life that, more often than not, does not readily map onto its *asli zindagi* (real life)" (Mathur 2016: 7). This distinction that transparency produces between the "state life" and "real life" of the state bears affinity with Hansen's (2001) distinction between the profane and sublime dimensions of state power. For Mazzarella, the "game of revelation" in which the Indian state engages through its various transparency projects "reinstates the constitutive mystique of the state" (2006: 494). In the fields and offices of Uttarakhand's organic program, the "game of revelation," undertaken at various moments and through diverse practices of certification, is in fact crucial to producing organic quality as something real and true in the first place.

Transparently Organic?

Unlike the fertile Indo-Gangetic plain in which India's Green Revolution took root, or the districts of southern and western India where horticulture and GM cotton have taken hold, Uttarakhand is a region that many people claim has always been organic. Bypassed by agrarian transformations that swept through other regions of the subcontinent – on account of a mountainous terrain, rain-fed agriculture, and sparse road and transport networks – for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Uttarakhand was rendered politically and economically peripheral (Berreman 1985; Mawdsley 1998; 1999). Yet, in 2003, shortly after Uttarakhand was hived off from the plains of Uttar Pradesh and created as a state, the new state government established the Uttarakhand Organic Commodity Board, the first commodity board of its kind in India focused on the development and

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promotion of organic agriculture.[2] In the years that followed, the Organic Commodity Board facilitated the development of contract farming between aspiring organic farmers and a major India rice retailer that would procure organic basmati rice from the Doon Valley, a fertile region surrounding the state capital of Dehradun.

My research in Uttarakhand explores the tensions of being "organic by default" and becoming "organic by design," through, among other things, the adoption of certification schemes and contract farming in the twenty-first century (Galvin 2014). As I have described elsewhere, certification, paradoxically, often generates uncertainty and does not always succeed in enlisting farmers as faithful subjects of its audit and inspections regimes (Galvin 2018; 2021). In the Doon Valley, the kind of transparency and legibility that certification systems seek (and often claim) to achieve proved elusive as documents were invariably incomplete and on-site inspection interviews produced conflicting accounts of agricultural practices.

Organic certification often manifests as a commitment to transparency, requiring farmers, producers, and processors to make their work visible and legible through documentation, inspections, and sometimes also residue testing of their crops and land to check for the presence of prohibited inputs. Yet, as a characteristic or property of comestibles, organic does not manifest in any readily knowable way, in a material or physical sense. Organic, therefore, remains a quality largely intangible for everyone other than those who labor to produce it. Paradoxically, it is precisely this difficulty of discerning organic quality that impels the work of transparency, assembling a multitude of practices, documents, and sociotechnical objects to make visible something which cannot be readily seen, and to make more perceptible and traceable the production processes that bring organic, as a quality of comestibles, into being.

From Paper Work to Digital Transparency

Organic certification is accompanied by copious practices of documentation. Upon registering with the Organic Commodity Board, farmers

[2] Uttarakhand was formed in the year 2000, when it separated from the larger and mostly plains state of Uttar Pradesh following a movement for statehood that waxed and waned over the course of the twentieth century.

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are given a farmers' diary in which they are to record virtually every facet of their agricultural activities. Through the Board, farmers were also assigned a "master trainer," an extension worker who advised farmers on issues related to cultivation, certification, contract farming, and marketing and who completed booklets called "farm files." These contained the same information as the farmers' diaries and even more, documenting every plot of land cultivated by a farmer (most farmers would cultivate multiple plots of land) and such things as the history of cultivation, irrigation sources, and future cropping plans. The Board, moreover, employed a cadre of internal inspectors whose task was to review these documents and conduct inspections of every farm registered with the Board.

During the four years when I conducted most of my fieldwork, from 2005 to 2008, internal inspectors produced internal inspection reports and spreadsheets (called actual farmers' lists) which were forwarded to a third-party certification agency. There, third-party inspectors reviewed documents in order to prepare formal risk assessments, an exercise that helped them identify subsets of farmers to follow up with for further inspection. For example, if internal inspections yielded questions and concerns about whether farmers maintained adequate buffer zones between conventional and organic plots, or about the source of their seeds, third-party inspectors would note these as "risky farmers" whom they needed to contact. Third-party inspections therefore focused on a narrower set of farmers who had been signaled in internal reports and spreadsheets as "riskier."

Third-party inspections also produced further sets of documents, among them observation sheets, which recorded any issues or problems arising from the inspection, and finally led to the preparation of an inspection report. This report was then evaluated by a certification committee, which made recommendations for actions to be taken for subsequent years; the committee also conducted its own inspections of a subset of farmers registered with the Organic Commodity Board (especially those whose risk assessments had identified them as being at greater risk of noncompliance).

This system of linking internal control systems to third-party certification agencies through the manual preparation of documents changed in 2010 with the development of TraceNet, a web-based platform for managing the certification process which claims to be the "world's first online system for organic traceability." Promising to offer its users the

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ability to "track the trail" across an entire food supply chain and thereby to afford "transparency across the system," TraceNet has digitized many aspects of the certification process. Since its introduction, the Board's internal inspectors no longer forward their inspection reports and actual farmers' lists to the third-party certification agency but instead enter details into TraceNet, which then algorithmically generates lists of farmers identified for further inspection by third-party certification inspectors. Third-party certification agencies similarly use TraceNet to enter data gathered from their review of documentation and field inspections. Scope certificates, issued to producers, and transaction certificates, issued to buyers and exporters, are issued via the TraceNet platform by these certification agencies.

The introduction of TraceNet was hailed by the Organic Commodity Board's certification manager as an enhancement of transparency. "Now there is no bias," he told me in 2016, as he described the changes TraceNet had brought about in carrying out the everyday work of certification. This sentiment intimates the kind of "fantasy of immediation, of frictionless social mechanisms" that Mazzarella (2006: 499) describes in relation to the rise of e-governance in India. It is a fantasy that appears to be especially associated with digitization, but Hull reminds us that documents, too, have been "overlooked because it is easy to see them as simply giving immediate access to what they document" (2012a: 253). The rise of digital platforms and technologies such as TraceNet similarly seem to afford such access, bestowing transparency with a seemingly frictionless form. A promotional video for TraceNet, produced by the Delhi-based software company that developed it, lauds its "in-built checks and balances [that] enable instant reference of previous steps in the supply chain … GPS system to trace farmers … real time information of producers, processors, traders, and their trading activities, anytime, anywhere, 365 by 24 by 7."[3] In appearing to make the fantasy of immediation a reality, TraceNet also obscures the ways in which it has itself become a crucial mediator of the certification process. While seemingly providing a transparent and "frictionless" platform for recording and generating information about certification, it centralizes the collection of data from inspection reports at the national level by

[3] "TraceNet: Traceability Solution for Organic Products Exported from India," www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zb1K_hLSu0 (accessed July 27, 2023).

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the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority within the Ministry of Commerce.

Tag and Trace

As the introduction of TraceNet exemplifies, traceability is taken to be integral to the kind of transparency sought in many supply chains, including one that organic certification processes also seek to establish. Because organic is not a quality inherent in any product, but one that is conferred on basmati through the land on and practices through which it was cultivated, along with the methods of storing, transporting, and processing it after harvest, it is necessary to trace or follow the products of the land as they are harvested, stored, transported, processed, and packaged. In the Doon Valley, the procurement of basmati by a large Indian rice retailer which I refer to as Hira Foods, the company with which farmers had formed a contract arrangement, marked an important moment when grains of rice themselves were made traceable. Procurement occurred, shortly after basmati was harvested, when farmers brought their unmilled basmati paddy to a collection point to be evaluated by quality and technical inspectors from Hira Foods. At this stage, quality inspectors were evaluating unmilled basmati not primarily for its compliance with organic standards (this had happened during certification inspections), but instead in relation to government of India standards for export-quality basmati rice. At this stage, transparency efforts were directed less at making visible the organic or agricultural practices of farmers; instead, since rice was collected from hundreds of farmers across the valley, the tagging of bags ensured that it would be possible to trace an individual grain back to the sack and farm from which it originated. As bags of paddy were unloaded and weighed by daily laborers, Hira Foods' technical adviser, Dr. Sharma, kept detailed records in a document called "Procurement of Organic Basmati, Kharīf 2007." These details included the variety, the stage of conversion and/or organic status, the precise weight of each bag, the total number of bags brought by the farmer, and the total price per quintal.

While the bags were sewn closed, Dr. Sharma filled out tags to be affixed to each sack. The tags included information on the administrative block, the date, the farmer's name and a unique code number,

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the variety of rice, the year of organic conversion, the number of bags brought by the farmer, the total weight, and the pre-agreed price named in the contract (and dependent on the stage of conversion). In addition to these written details, the tags were also color coded, with different colors indexing different stages of conversion (zero, first, and second year, and fully organic). Dr. Sharma explained to me that the color coding was intended to ensure that illiterate laborers who handled the paddy as it was transported and processed at the rice mill would be able to separate paddy at different stages of organic conversion. As material semiotic objects, these tags, through the detailed information they relayed through both their form (color) and the written script, brought the paddy into a larger regime of traceability. They ensured that appropriate measures could be taken to separate paddy at different stages of conversion and certification, and made it possible to know, even as rice was aggregated and processed in batches at the rice mill, from which farmer, and which place, the paddy originated.

The tagging of bags, and the tags themselves, not only distinguished organic from conventional rice, but also indexed distinctions within the category of organic according to the stage of conversion. Marking distinctions in this way mattered, because the stage of conversion could determine in which international markets basmati might be sold as organic. In particular, basmati rice that had been certified organic for a period of two years (marked as second year on the tags) could be sold as certified organic in Indian domestic as well as European markets, but not in the US, which required producers to undergo a three-year conversion period before their products could be certified organic according to United States Department of Agriculture organic standards. Tags attached to sacks of unmilled basmati paddy served crucially as what Latour has called immutable mobiles – material and semiotic objects that produce transformations as they travel, without being themselves transformed (Latour 1987; 2005; see also Dun 2005). These tags are intended to reflect, and to inscribe, on mobile and mutable grains, an organic status acquired through place and methods of production and to render these grains traceable as they move through the supply chain. Linking national and international standards regimes with sacks of rice, these innocuous objects do crucial semiotic work – making organic something that is materially meaningful and discernible.

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Organic Truths

The revelatory work that transparency projects claim to do connects them with practices of truth-telling and, more potently, of truth-making. In this regard, transparency projects such as organic certification might be seen to be emblematic of what Foucault described as "the will to truth" (1980). Truth, he writes, is a "thing of this world … Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth" (1980: 131–132).

Truth regimes, indeed, operate in a range of ways that themselves shift over time in step with transparency's shifting forms. For example, as asylum claims in Europe are made subject to ever greater scrutiny, Fassin and D'Halluin (2005) recount how, in France, medical certificates documenting evidence of torture through physical bodily harm and injury are increasingly necessary forms of evidence. While in the past the truth of asylum claims was adjudicated on the basis of asylum seekers' testimony, these authors describe how in recent decades it has been increasingly mediated through medical expertise and the production of medical certificates that authorize such truths. These authors argue that, "whether it reproduces the account or attests to the consequences, the scriptural trace envelopes the fragile words and invisible wounds of the asylum seeker in its legitimacy … In the context of generalized skepticism, the written testimony is the highest form of truth-telling" (Fassin and D'Halluin 2005: 606). Similar kinds of processes are evident in other settings: for example, criminal trials, where DNA samples are seen to work as a "truth machine." Lynch observes that, within the space of a few years:

> [The] statistical procedures and correction factors, which had seemed so obscure when compared with the tidy declarations of fingerprint examiners, now stood as emblems of transparency, only now transparency did not mean intuitively *apparent*; instead it referred to calculations of probative value that were logically traceable through formulae accepted by experts. (Lynch 2008: 65)

Organic agriculture and its certification may be a far cry from such settings, but parallels nonetheless exist insofar as documents and now the forensic testing of grains for prohibited residues are regarded as indispensable "proof" of organic status. This revelatory power of transparency and the insertion of transparency instruments in

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proliferating regimes of truth built around audit and other forms of inspection and surveillance are what sustain and explain transparency's power as a value and a form of action. This chapter began by reflecting on a question that often arises in relation to products that are marked as certified organic: "Is it *really* organic?" Revealing of the ways in which racialized suspicion mingles with the normative and ideological power of transparency, it is a question that in fact urges us to query how it is that certification produces organic (or anything else) as a truth in the first place.

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11 *Discreet Transparency*

Dealing in Plural Veridictions in Swiss Gold Refineries

MATTHIEU BOLAY

In 2015, a coalition of 114 Swiss organizations including NGOs, trade unions, political parties, churches, and business associations launched a federal popular initiative to amend the Swiss constitution by adding a new article (Article 101a) on corporate accountability. The text, which was finally rejected in November 2020 by the majority of Swiss cantons despite being accepted by 50.7 percent of voters,[1] established that Swiss companies and those they control outside the country would be required to respect human rights and international environmental standards. The innovation of this text was that it introduces civil liability for the parent company in case of violation of these standards by the companies it controls elsewhere in the world. Between the launch of the initiative and the popular vote, the coalition embarked on a long campaign to raise awareness about the deleterious impacts abroad of several large companies based in Switzerland. The coalition's strategy was multifaceted, but one of its most visible aspects was an intensive and systematic examination of the procurement practices of certain companies active in the "riskiest sectors" – namely, the extraction, processing, and trading of raw materials. During the campaign, several organizations, mostly new to this type of "guerrilla auditing" (Hetherington 2011), published numerous reports pointing to acts of "misconduct" (human rights abuses, environmental damage, corruption, money laundering, tax evasion) and, by the same token, to the inability of the Swiss legal framework to prevent the harmful impacts abroad of companies established in its jurisdiction.

[1] In the tradition of "direct democracy," federal popular initiatives in Switzerland allow new articles to be added to the Swiss constitution. One of the conditions for the adoption of a popular initiative is that the proposed text is approved both by the majority of voters in the country and by the majority of the twenty-six cantons.

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Among the various sectors considered to be "at risk," the gold-refining industry quickly came under the spotlight of the coalition, and by extension the media. Although the refiners cultivate a certain discretion, it is estimated that 70 percent of the world's mined gold transits through this industry (WWF 2021: 20), which has a strong presence in Switzerland due to its historical links with the banking, watchmaking, and jewelry sectors. Because of its fungible nature, once the material has been aggregated, melted down, and refined according to international standards, the different origins of the gold disappear mechanically. Echoing the classic issue of commodity fetishism, the social life of gold and the traces of its potentially contentious past prior to refining are literally erased in favor of a standardized and commensurable licit product that can be bought and sold in licit international markets.

As a response to growing concerns among consumers about the possibly harmful origins of gold (e.g., Bloomfield 2018), the refining industry adopted responsible sourcing standards deemed to guarantee compliance with international norms of sustainability and human rights, yet without disclosing the provenance of the metal. In this chapter I examine the industry struggles and the legal processes through which the "responsible sourcing" claims of refining companies are established, made visible, and verified. I suggest that that Swiss refineries operate under a register of discreet transparency, through which this industry aligns with the contemporary trope of transparency while preserving discretion as a core business value. Refiners' practices, I suggest, are both discr*eet* in their efforts to preserve secrecy in their business operations, and discr*ete* in the legal processes through which they separate normative orders to establish different veridictions on the "true" provenance and ownership of gold. The chapter suggests that the various legal entanglements of gold and transparency establish specific "veridictions" (Latour 2004: 298), or different ways of defining what is true or false by textually linking and dissociating facts, persons, and objects in the construct of a situation. Based on the premise that corporate disclosure does not necessarily reveal undisclosed truths but rather produces new truths, I further argue that such work of legal entangling mediates the "responsible" status of gold as a veridiction project essentially aiming at establishing new truths.

I draw on ethnographic fieldwork in Switzerland and London with political activists, policymakers, and gold-refining industry actors

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within their respective epistemic communities and events, as well as on longstanding research among gold producers and traders in West Africa.[2] The chapter interrogates how growing expectations of transparency about the provenance of gold – largely at odds with the technical process of purification and the norms of business secrecy – are negotiated by gold-refining industry actors, coalition activists, and the Swiss government. I start with a brief genealogy of the "public secret" (Taussig 1999) about the provenance of gold refined in Switzerland – that is, the shared but hardly articulable knowledge (Taussig 1999: 5–6) that gold from ethically contentious sources transits through Switzerland. By sketching the controversies surrounding the elusive notion of provenance as applied to a fungible, and potentially indefinitely recycled, substance, I propose an examination of three competing approaches to corporate responsibility. For each, I pay attention to the different roles, conceptualizations, and legal entanglements of transparency and secrecy, broadly understood as the disclosure and access – or the lack of them – of singular elements mobilized to claim so-called responsible business relationships.

Responsible Gold: The Legal Entanglements of Transparency

Guarantees of ethical responsibility for gold refined into bullion and semifinished products are based on industry self-regulation through compliance with the standards of the London Bullion Market Association (LBMA), the umbrella organization of refiners that issues accreditations for over-the-counter trade. In addition to technical and financial criteria such as a minimum refining volume capacity or compliance with the standard to reach at least 99.5 percent purity of gold, LBMA-accredited refiners have been required since 2011 to comply with the Responsible Sourcing Programme (RSP). This standard embodies the principles set out in the *Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals* from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2016).[3] Refiners

[2] Research was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (projects 173354 and 201748).

[3] According to OECD guidance (2016: 17–19), companies claiming to source responsibly must conduct ongoing due diligence to (1) identify, (2) assess, and (3) mitigate human rights risks, and apply robust traceability mechanisms on that product to (4) enable third-party auditing and (5) produce due diligence reports.

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are expected to prove their capacity to have a transparent view of the "upstream" supply chain through a cascading system of due diligence self-reporting across the chain, allowing them to assess the social, environmental, and commercial practices of their suppliers. The notion of transparency is thus not only at the forefront of the LBMA's framework objectives – "ensuring integrity and transparency for the gold market." It is also in the implementation guide of its responsible standard, which is deemed to establish a "robust system of vigilance, control and transparency of the supply chains" (LBMA 2019: 7), yet without this calling into question the confidentiality of refiners' business relationships. The paradoxical promise of an assessment of the degree of "responsibility" of suppliers, yet invisible to the public, practically questions how unstable boundaries of secrecy and transparency are constituted and respectively valued in the trade and the import of natural commodities, including gold, in Switzerland.

In the context of the federal initiative campaign, the focus on gold refining by different members of the coalition was arguably strategic, since this market is regularly characterized as particularly "opaque" (Mariani 2012; Pieth 2019). It acted as a mirror to a certain national imaginary in which both watchmaking and banking – the main gold-consuming sectors – represent flagships of the Swiss economy, associated with values of precision and discretion respectively. As I was told by members of one advocacy group, by focusing on the main refineries, the coalition's limited resources could be judiciously allocated within a defined perimeter. The aim was to illustrate, synecdochically, the broader issue of accountability for wrongs in globalized supply chains, and the closely related issue of disclosure regimes that do or do not identify and attribute accountability. In particular, the judicial component of the initiative was considered the main shift toward a possible transformation of the accountability regime, adding the possibility of sanctions to the self-regulation model. Indeed, the violations that the coalition and its allies had made visible (see, e.g., EPER 2016; Global Witness 2020; STP 2018; TRIAL 2016; Ummel 2020) had had little effect so far other than to lead the targeted companies to either deny these allegations once they were made public, or to blame the suppliers under the pretext that reasonable due diligence had been carried out in accordance with industry standards. Following Pistor (2019: 6), the rhetoric at work thus oscillates between "but it's not our responsibility" and "it is our responsibility, *but it's legal*."

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In other words, mandatory due diligence, or "the production of narratives that make visible certain actors, relationships and processes of the past" (Hansen and Flyverbom 2015: 878), as already imposed by the codes of conduct of most companies, relies on a largely circular mode of verifiability as it is based on self-narration. Provocatively challenging the dominant paradigm of self-regulation and corporate social responsibility (CSR), the coalition's main question was quite simple: How can the misbehavior of certain companies be mitigated if it is assumed that only the same companies whose business practices might be objectionable are able to identify these failures? From this perspective, corporate claims of responsibility cannot be credible through the transparency apparatus of due diligence and CSR reporting alone, which are essentially "second-order descriptions" (Strathern 2000: 312) of the company by the company itself, then verified by audit firms paid by the same company. Against this circular system of verification of transparency claims, the members of the coalition insisted that only by disclosing the sources of the raw materials they trade, process, and transform would companies be able to make their claims potentially verifiable and credible.

According to the text of the proposed constitutional article, corporate accountability should therefore be dissociated from the scope of corporate codes of conduct only in order to be re-embedded into the broader framework of public transparency of the country that ultimately makes companies' operations not only possible but lawful. This proposition illustrates in its own way the shift in claims of industrial irresponsibility described by Julia Eckert (2021: 407), "from local officials to transnational facilitators." The attribution of responsibility for possible wrongs to different entities – operator, parent company, host state – and through different jurisdictions thus necessarily involves a plurality of legal orders, whose embeddings, by textually linking facts, persons, and things, give rise to what might be described after Latour as different types of "veridiction" (2004: 298).

This suggests paying attention to the "discursive entanglement, [or] the universe of statements that connect different bodies of norms to each other" (Krisch 2021: 6). I thus consider law – in various forms, including the "soft" (or non-binding) law of voluntary codes of conduct – as acting as a mediator in Latour's formulation. Indeed, Latour sees law as a "mode of enunciation" (2004: 298), whereby what is considered true or false in a situation is legally defined in a way that is

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neither strictly scientific, nor technical, nor political, but rather depends on the dominant criteria used to define a certain object in a certain situation. In the processing and trading of gold, shifting veridictions notably manifest in its material transformations, and in the displacement of the limits of transparency (and secrecy) regarding its provenance.

The Plural Modes of the Existence of Gold

The unstable materiality of resources extracted and circulated on a global scale informs their inscription in different ontologies (Richardson and Wetzkalnys 2014), or in different modes of existence carrying their own registers of veridiction (Latour 2004; 2012). By way of examples that I document elsewhere (Bolay 2021; 2022), artisanal gold mining in Guinea requires the approval of ancestors' spirits to be separated from the earth. Once smuggled to Mali, smelted and exported by officially registered *comptoirs* in Bamako, the gold acquires a status of good and a Malian geographic provenance. The same gold, when aggregated from other sources, most often in Dubai, and possibly smelted and made into jewelry, will no longer be "mined gold" but "recycled gold." Qualified by its presumed use rather than by its mode of circulation, it ends up legally free of any mining origin. Once remelted and refined into ingots to industry standards, it is considered by Swiss customs as a monetary item and not as a commodity. As a medium of exchange rather than an object of exchange, it is legally exempt from import taxes and declaration of origin. Thus, new social and normative inscriptions are conflated in the successive episodes of gold's transformation through the processes of smelting and purification of the substance from both its physicochemical and its social impurities.

With gold, the translations of a mined substance into an accredited product, tradeable on the main markets, are reminiscent of what Weeks (2020) calls "off-shore ontologies." Those are dematerialized, detached from anchorage, rely on simulation, and are, by the same token, flexible in their personification – gold being possibly considered as natural substance, as raw ore, as currency, as financial product, as jewel, or, more recently, as digital token. Such personifications act as ontological truths once their "mode of existence" is inscribed (by Guinean earth priests, for instance, by Malian-registered buying

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houses, by the LBMA's RSP, by Swiss customs, or by the Swiss Financial Market Supervisory Authority) in a register of veridiction, "far from epistemological definitions of true and false, but deserving of the qualifiers true and false" (Latour 2012: 66).

As the form of gold changes, so does its legal status, whether it is semi-purified gold from mines, also known as *doré*, jewelry, industry scrap, or refined bullion. In this respect, gold refineries have played a key role in maintaining the public secret about the potentially contentious origins of gold by "knowing precisely what not to know," to use Taussig's formulation (1999: 5–6). The roots of this industrial policy of strategic ignorance, reminiscent of other regulatory bureaucracies,[4] lie in the ambiguous status of gold as both money and commodity. Indeed, until the beginning of the twentieth century, gold refining was not yet an industry in its own right, but rather a sub-branch of the banking sector. The refining industry was institutionalized by the demand of central banks to calibrate the value of gold against chemical purity standards in order to serve as a benchmark for the issuance of paper money (Schenk 2013: 19). The artisan works of smelting, purifying, and hallmarking gradually merged into a single entity – the gold refinery – which delivered to the banks standardized and certified bars in terms of weight, shape, and purity. In this process, the refineries became the mediators of political considerations regarding the establishment of central banks and, later, of commercial banks and finance, with the transformation of a natural substance into an object of univocal interpretation, a standardized financial artifact, cleansed of its previous modes of existence.

Thus, through chemical purification to at least 99.95 percent, as defined by the LBMA Good Delivery Standard, gold is also purified of traces of its past. As Field (2019: 176) reminds us, gold's role in Western histories of money was accompanied by the erasure of other histories and ontologies of gold during colonialism. The golden adornments systematically stolen during European conquests were melted down in order to be reused as "money-commodity," in Marx's phrasing (1976 [1867]: 188). It is precisely this ambiguous status as a monetary asset and a fungible material that has contributed to making gold a specificity of the Western economy, in which it has historically played the role of a more durable and malleable fetish than

[4] See McGoey (2019) on the pharmaceutical industry.

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paper money for transporting value while hiding the conditions of wealth extraction attached to a specific "origin."

Through its strategy of guerrilla auditing, the coalition intended to "unveil" what can be considered one of the public secrets of Swiss history. In this sense, it was an extension of previous episodes of unveiling which had made public certain contentious modes of existence of gold before its requalification in the refineries. These include the role of Swiss banks in the refining and requalification of gold stolen by the Nazis during World War II (Ziegler 1997), the way Swiss neutrality was used to circumvent the UN embargo on apartheid South Africa to turn illegitimate South African gold into legitimate Swiss gold (Bott et al. 2005), and, more recently, gold's central role in various money-laundering schemes (Pieth 2019). Pressured by the political context of the upcoming vote and growing publicity about the role of refineries in processing gold from "illegitimate" sources,[5] the Swiss government commissioned an expert study of the gold sector and the associated risks of human rights abuses. The report unambiguously concluded that there is a compelling need "to increase transparency regarding the provenance of gold, [as] it is difficult [for the Swiss government] to decide on any policy measures without having access to primary sources of information" (Tratschin et al. 2017: 107). Against this backdrop, three types of veridiction define distinct configurations of visibility and responsibility with reference to the situation of importing gold. Rather than opposing notions of transparency and secrecy through clear-cut boundaries, as often assumed at least since Simmel's work on secrecy (1906), these veridictions instead seek to assemble the values associated with both terms. These veridictions result in being both discretely and discreetly transparent – that is, separated from legal responsibilities and accessible in loosely intelligible terms only to those actively seeking visibility.

Veridiction 1: Monetary Gold and Institutional Discretion

The Swiss government's recognition of its own regulatory impotence is certainly ironic. In Switzerland, opacity regarding the provenance of gold has been institutionalized since the beginning of the twentieth

[5] This term is used in the industry to qualify gold that is traded legally but questionable in terms of ethical responsibility.

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century. By then, the legal frameworks to regulate its circulation and trade were established by adapting the rules of the banking sector – then configured around the principle of banking secrecy – rather than those of customs regulations on the import and export of goods. Still today, the Swiss government considers that "the circulation of precious metals [is] more closely linked to payment transfers as a substitute for paper money than to the circulation of goods to be processed or used" (Swiss Confederation 2013: 5).

Gold thus exists physically as a substance to be mined, transported, and processed through technical and financial logistics, partly concentrated in Switzerland. However, its legal existence is that of an immaterial "liquidity" in circulation. As the former CEO of one of the leading refineries stated in the local economic press, "We are regulated by the Swiss Financial Market Supervisory Authority and we are considered a bank."[6] In this legal logic, the risks identified are those of money laundering, meaning those that may occur after the gold has been refined into bullion or once it is used as "currency," rather than those that may occur beforehand in the trade of illicit goods. As a result, the Swiss government admits that it leaves the monitoring of money-laundering risks to the indirect control of the banks that finance the commodity sector under the Money Laundering Act. This illustrates a "legal circularity" (Couture 2014) whereby one thing – here a natural commodity – is turned into another – a monetary asset – in a self-fulfilling and legally incontestable logic. By textually linking gold to a monetary mode of existence instead of a commodity mode of existence, such veridiction articulates the field of transparency outside of the circulation and material transformation of gold.

One of the main reasons for this is that Swiss refineries established their dominant position through their integration into the banking sector during the interwar period. Whereas in the early days of the industry in eighteenth-century London, refineries had to be accredited by the Bank of England in order to trade their bullion (Green and Murray 2011), Switzerland took this integration a step further by completely recharacterizing the commodity as money. Indeed, the boundary that separated the banking and refining sectors temporarily disappeared as the three main refineries were owned by the three major Swiss banks until the early 2000s. The fourth major refiner entered this

[6] www.fuw.ch/article/metalor-is-considered-a-bank/

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market later as a subsidiary of a commodity-trading firm, thereby making the reverse journey from gold as a commodity to be sold on spot markets and bullion exchanges to gold as money used as forward and financial swaps and as liquid and convertible currency.

This later, industrial trajectory illustrates another key aspect of the Swiss business environment. In addition to the banking sector, Switzerland has become a major hub for commodity trade, which has led some authors to speak of "Swiss extractivism" to highlight its central role in the "servicification" of global value chains (Dobler and Kesselring 2019). As these authors point out, Switzerland competitively provides all the necessary infrastructure for global commodity trade: "Fast and secure access to finance and insurance, excellent virtual and physical global connections, a dynamic freight industry, trader-friendly regulations, proximity to international standard-setting bodies and the plethora of international lobbying groups in Geneva" (Dobler and Kesselring 2019: 229). As with banks, Switzerland's reputation for business discretion is also mentioned as a comparative advantage of its business environment model for commodity trading.

The ramifications of gold refining in the banking and trading industries – the two main sectors contributing to Swiss GDP (Lannen et al. 2016) – help explain Switzerland's central position as a gold-refining hub, as well as the political cultivation of "discretion" in its business environment. Discretion has been institutionalized by bank secrecy laws since the 1930s; these laws offer a mirror to the public secret of gold provenance. As Genier (2014) explains, the legal entanglements underlying bank secrecy created exceptions that cannot be easily dismantled. This is the case because of the laws themselves, such as the 1934 Banking Act, which made the disclosure of Swiss bank clients a criminal offense. But more insidiously, a plethora of informal rules recommend that industry remains discreet about these very practices of discretion: for example, a note circulated by the Swiss banking association in 1962 urged its "members to avoid any promotion or publicity concerning the tax advantages offered by our country, or the qualities of banking secrecy" (Perrenoud 2003: 39).

Discretion is now often portrayed as part of "Swiss culture." Even the national tourist office promotes this narrative on its website, stating that "discretion is part of the Swiss character." In Swiss embassies, the promotional book *Swiss Made: The Untold Story Behind Switzerland's Success* (Breiding 2012) also describes the country as "the ultimate in

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discretion." Essentializing and turning discretion into a national marketing device is a continuation of political calculations from the beginning of the twentieth century to "position banking in an international environment as safe and discreet" (Swiss Federal Council 1934; cited by Leins 2018: 36). Beyond the banking sector, Swiss companies overall have "considerable discretion in reporting and the level of mandatory disclosure is low," according to Hail (2002: 742). To paraphrase Taussig, what these legal entanglements may veil – namely, the potentially contentious origin of material gold or of financial flows (it does not matter which, since the two are treated interchangeably) – is "known but difficult to articulate" (Taussig 1999: 6).

This was frequently experienced by my interlocutors from the coalition when they were confronted with rejections of their requests for information on potentially illegitimate gold in the flows of certain refineries. These refusals were justified by the fact that – like banks in terms of the assets they hold – refiners do not always own the gold they process, and therefore do not consider themselves to be in a "supply" relationship but in a "customer" relationship with their sources. The central role of trade secrecy in gold procurement was made very clear at a meeting organized by the Secretariat for Economic Affairs to which refiners, NGOs, accreditation bodies, lawyers, and scientists like myself were invited. In response to the call by one of the coalition members for greater transparency in procurement, a refinery representative stated vehemently: "What you want is to simply destroy our industry. If we disclose our customers [i.e., our sources of supply], others will be quick to attack our market. You don't ask insurance companies or doctors to reveal who their customers are. It's the same with us!" Certainly, none of the members present in this meeting would think that a shipment of gold, a health insurance contract, or a relationship with a patient were ontologically "the same" – especially in the context of a policy meeting on responsible sourcing. However, even though several organizations were able to trace the path of illicit gold in Switzerland, its entanglement through contract law, customs categories, trade secrecy rules, and banking regulations underpins a mode of veridiction in which this equivalence is true. The legal entanglements on which the mode of existence of monetary gold is based make it impossible to formally link a refined product, which nevertheless satisfies the LBMA's criteria of responsibility, to its provenance. Even when this link is known, as in the various reports

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published during the campaign, it cannot be legally articulated as such in this mode of veridiction.

Veridiction 2: Livelihood Gold and the Utopia of a Discrete Industrial Panopticon

In the face of mounting public pressure, neither refiners nor the Swiss government have remained impassive. Aligning with the trend toward supply chain governance through CSR and the ethical auditing regime, the Swiss government has been promoting a responsible sourcing program for gold from artisanal and small-scale mines since 2013. CSR commitments within the industry already existed, as well as Fairtrade-certified channels such as Max Havelaar's Fairtrade gold and the Association for Responsible Mining's Fairmined gold. However, the Swiss Better Gold Initiative for artisanal and small-scale mining is unique in that it is nationally coordinated at the industry level by the Swiss Better Gold Association, an ad hoc grouping of banks, jewelers, watchmakers, and the four major refineries. And, most importantly, it was publicly funded to the tune of CHF 8 million over four years, with a further CHF 6 million for an additional four years in 2021 (SECO 2021). The stated aim of the program is to increase transparency, accountability, and profitability in the gold value chain. It targets small-scale operations, especially those using artisanal methods, which are "high risk" according to OECD guidance and constitute 20 percent of global mining production.

Initially, the program was conceived as a support to small producers wishing to move toward fair trade certification, and introduced a premium on the market price in exchange for a monopoly on the certified mines. In order to meet the high requirements of traceability and the segregation of flows imposed by Fairmined or Fairtrade certifying bodies, the approach developed essentially consists of formalizing small producers and integrating them into a fully controlled supply chain. As with industrial mines, the main objective is to reduce the number of commercial intermediaries in order to reduce costs, and by the same token facilitate the work of traceability. Locally, however, initiatives of this type are not without ambiguity with regard to the exclusion mechanisms they inevitably establish (see, e.g., Fisher 2018), or even the new forms of control and dependence that the Fairtrade regime may imply (Besky 2013). From this point of view, Fairtrade

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certification manifests the opposite of the regime of discretion outlined above by seeking to realize the utopia of an integral top-down, panoptic view of a separate segment of the supply chain.

This is what its promoters emphasize. The secretary general of the association insists, for instance, on the technical challenges that the traceability of artisanal gold represents in the face of the permanent danger of "contamination" by other sources of gold. At the same time, such concerns largely evade the unspoken issue regarding the expansion of the few pilot projects to a larger scale. In our discussions, the partners who implement the program regularly mentioned the difficulty of recruiting new miners, who are hampered by the administrative and technical-legal burden of compliance, as well as by their reduced leeway within the informal sector. As a result, the few certified mines, located exclusively in South America, supply less than 1 percent of the total amount of mined gold imported into Switzerland from that region, and much less when compared to global gold imports from all sources. In commercial terms, the program is therefore marginal, to say the least, on a national scale and negligible on an international one. On the other hand, the initiative does not lack visibility at industry conventions, multi-stakeholder conferences, and other public events, where it illustrates the efforts of Swiss refiners to support the livelihoods of small-scale miners in the Global South. It thus paradigmatically illustrates common strategies in the "audit society" to decouple normative goals from operational ones (Power 1999), between discretionary CSR ethics of philanthropy for reputational purposes and the maintenance of core business operations.

While the decoupling of ethics and business in the CSR movement is frequently questioned as a mechanism for preserving the status quo, it nevertheless informs the separate social and material inscriptions of gold in plural normative frameworks. Strategic decoupling extends materially and legally, one might say, toward the establishment of an alternative mode of veridiction. While monetary gold is associated with an indefinitely fungible and provenance-free liquidity, certified "fair" gold is staged as a material good indexed to a supposedly inalienable local provenance. By preserving such gold from any "contaminating" interaction with other sources, fair trade certification establishes with the consumer the fiction of a relationship with the lives and livelihoods of the people who live and work in mining areas. Such gold is physically identical in every respect to gold that is not certified by the

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program. However, the gold differs by the content of the voluntary compliance and auditing standards to which it is subject, and by the extension of these standards along the supply chain to make its interpretation unambiguous. The program guards against the anxieties of "social pollution" (Douglas 2000 [1966]) that the artisanal sector represents due to its association with illegality, irrationality, and environmental irresponsibility in government and NGO discourses (Childs 2014). It does so by establishing a decoupled mode of veridiction articulated around the utopia of a dis-intermediated relationship between producers and consumers, which, paradoxically, multiplies the intermediaries – not in the production chain in this case, but in the verification chain.

Veridiction 3: Offshore Gold and Civic Rights to Information

One of the obstacles the coalition members encountered in their attempts to expose illegitimate commercial practices related to the administrative categories under which gold is registered with Swiss customs. While a commodity such as cocoa can be registered with Swiss customs under forty-five different categories depending on its form, use, and qualities, gold has only three subcategories: jewelry, raw (mined) gold, and recycled gold (already processed and refined). As customs bureaucrats unambiguously explained, as gold is considered a currency rather than a commodity, raw and recycled gold are treated indistinguishably as nontaxable assets. Due to the absence of tax requirements, customs officials do not need to distinguish whether the provenance is that of the last importer or the place of extraction. Once qualified by customs and tax regulations, this de facto conflation of terms renders the released data unreadable and useless for identifying jurisdictions of origin that might be considered more or less "at risk." The recent accessibility of customs statistics on gold, which were kept secret until 2014,[7] only performs the ideal of government

[7] According to the report commissioned by parliament on the publication of foreign gold trade statistics (Swiss Confederation 2013: 3–4), the main reason why foreign gold trade statistics were not published was to "ensure the required discretion to the gold trade." According to the report, a key element of the decision was to remain competitive with other financial centers where physical gold is traded, in particular London, whose jurisdiction (the UK) did not make gold foreign trade data accessible.

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transparency. As Birchall (2011: 14) argues, "the release of incomprehensible data" in turn helps to "keep certain practices opaque." In contexts where quantification is purposely unintelligible to outsiders – for example, in the global culture of finance studied by Maurer (2005) – the evaluation of offshore risks is subject to the ethical judgment of peers and the public, provided that situations can be contextualized in a "community of regard" (Maurer 2005: 476). This is what the coalition intended to do.

Some coalition members had indeed managed to circumvent the unintelligibility of Swiss customs' data by accessing detailed trade statistics directly from producing and transiting countries. The presence among the main exporters of jurisdictions known to be hubs for both trade and money laundering, such as the Dubai Multi Commodities Centre (DMCC) free zone in the United Arab Emirates, regularly aroused suspicion. In the name of companies' own claims to being responsible businesses, Jürg, one of the coalition's activists, took the initiative to write to the main Swiss refineries to ask them to clarify their commercial relations with Dubai. In his letter, he asked them, on behalf of his organization, to confirm that they were receiving gold from Dubai, to disclose the quantities and names of their Emirati suppliers, and to illustrate the due diligence measures taken to ensure that no gold from "high-risk or conflict-affected areas" – in line with the OECD wording – was traded in Dubai. He justified his request by pointing out that, in the previous year, import statistics showed that over 160 tons of gold had been imported into Switzerland from Dubai.

The responses he received followed a similar script. Each of the companies listed their commitments to "responsible sourcing," starting with their compliance program to meet the LBMA requirements – the first type of veridiction. In addition, they referred to their own codes of conduct and CSR programs in which they were engaged, including the Swiss Better Gold Initiative – the second type of veridiction. Finally, the replies consistently concluded that it was in any case legally not possible to disclose quantities or names of business partners for "obvious" reasons of confidentiality, thus referring to the protection of trade secrets.

Faced with this response, Jürg repeated the same undertaking, but this time he wrote as a Swiss citizen to the customs administration in the name of the federal law on the principle of transparency in administration. The subject of the request – Excel tables showing all gold

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purchases by each refinery between 2014 and 2018 – resulted, to his surprise, in a positive response from the customs administration under the application of the transparency law. As with most freedom of information laws in other jurisdictions, citizens in principle have a civic and political right to access "information that the state collects and holds on [their] behalf" (Calland and Bentley 2013: 71). The unexpected trajectory of Jürg's request thus suggests the possibility of a third mode of veridiction operating through the detachment of transparency claims to a specific product in favor of their attachment to a civic right. The dissociation of gold from its modes of existence as either a currency or a commodity also disentangles it from a producer–consumer relationship and from the main normative frameworks – industry norms and private contract law – that regulate such a relationship. Instead, it inscribes imported gold as a mere piece of information detained by the state *on behalf* of the sovereign, thereby enabling a reconfiguration of what ought to be made visible, by whom, and to whom.

Yet, the decision to disclose detailed trade data was immediately objected in an appeal brought to the highest court by the four main refineries acting together through the same law firm. The appeal brought before the Swiss Federal Court sought to challenge the entanglement of Jürg's claim with the protection of citizens' rights to information, by re-entangling it instead with the rights of companies to protect their business secrets. As summarized in the appeal, the name of the clients and the imported quantities are to be considered "business secrets, i.e. strategic economic data of great importance to four of the most important players in the economic sector concerned."

In law, for information to be considered a business secret worthy of legal protection, it must meet a series of conditions, including an "objectively founded interest in keeping the information secret" (Article 162 of the Swiss Criminal Code), meaning that the information itself has commercial value in that it provides a comparative advantage over competitors. Yet, as Levine (2011: 414) rightly points out, "the definition of commercial value as a prerequisite for trade secret protection has expanded dramatically over the past 75 years, with the result that more and more information falls under the protection of the trade secret doctrine." This expansion, which often strategically plays out in offshore outsourcing, together with the increasingly blurred boundaries between private and public entities in government, recreates

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barriers of access to information supposedly made accessible through freedom of information laws.

To several interlocutors, the question of whether details of provenance and quantities had any commercial value was questionable.[8] However, not having to disclose such information – concomitant of the ideal of Swiss discretion – was perceived as having value in itself. Thus, while claiming transparency as a core value of the industry, as in the two earlier veridictions, companies simultaneously sought to preserve secrecy in the third. What activists and a large share of the public might consider ethically and practically irreconcilable truths could therefore apparently cohabitate coherently, through strategically operating legal "cuts" (Strathern 1996) in the network of facts, persons, and things that define the situation.

One major element that enables such cuts lies in the ambiguities surrounding the notion of ownership. Ownership suggests responsibility toward the thing or situation owned, and for demands for accountability such as those made by the coalition. One recurring argument that surfaced again in the appeal was that refineries supposedly did not own the gold they processed: So why should they be responsible for it? Shifting definitions of ownership appeared clearly in the presentation of the facts provided to the high court by the refineries' consortium.

As argued in the appeal, if gold is considered a commodity "shipped from overseas by exporters," then the refineries in turn affirmed that they do not own the gold. They are merely providing a service to a "customer" – the true owner of the gold – and therefore are not responsible for its provenance or conditions of production. Yet refineries admit that they also import gold as buyers themselves. But in this case, gold would not be considered an imported commodity, but money to be transferred to financial markets, including banks and central banks. Despite the refinery being the de facto owner of the gold destined for the banking sector, the protection of confidentiality of business relations in the banking sector prevents the disclosure of any information. Terms such as "exporter" or "customer" thus operate as "shifters" (Silverstein 1976) that enable legal separations, and thereby

[8] Market intelligence firms already compile and compare such information, and sell it to refining firms. Besides, what interlocutors in the industry conceive as an object of competition is the terms of the contracts, such as the negotiation of the price per volume, or the duration of exclusivity clauses.

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the passage from the register of the right to information to that of the protection of trade secrets, all while the refineries claim transparency through separate veridiction registers.

The transparency struggles that occupied much of the Swiss vote on corporate accountability that I chronicled in this chapter illustrate that the conditions of veridiction of so-called responsible gold are never stabilized. Plural veridictions emerge in the weighing of hierarchies and relationships between various normative frameworks that define a situation. Such legal entanglements determine what, in a given situation, may or may not be seen, may or may not be evaluated, and by whom. They enable an industry, such as the Swiss gold-refining industry, to simultaneously tap into apparently opposite fields of value – transparency and discretion – by isolating contradictory claims within what could be termed after Krisch bounded "universes of statements" (2021: 6).

Conclusion

Despite the plurality of veridictions they encompass, responsibility claims – whether by Fairtrade certifiers, CSR officers in refineries, LBMA-accredited auditors, customs officers, or legal activists – are necessarily linked to the ideals of making visible and accessible both ownership (who is responsible for what at what point in time) and provenance (how responsibilities relate to the social life of gold along its journey from mine to market). The etymology of "discretion" both as a disposition for secrecy and as an act of separation helps make sense of the way in which "supply chain transparency" is differently fabricated through distinct legal framings of gold imports into Switzerland. Assuming that the different veridictions discussed in this chapter result from socio-legal mediations in a triangular relationship between an object, a provider of visibility, and an observer (see also the Introduction to this volume), we can finally distinguish the ways in which ownership and provenance are differently conceptualized and made "transparent."

In the first type of veridiction, notions of ownership and provenance are relatively autonomous and vaguely defined. Through self-narrated due diligence, retrospective views on the ownership and provenance of gold are provided by industry actors for industry actors themselves. This circularity is supposed to result from the technical and legal

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impossibility of tracing monetary gold, which is continually purified of traces of its past by discarding its commodity mode of existence and the set of regulations associated with it.

In contrast, the second type of veridiction intimately links the notions of ownership and provenance. Provenance is assumed to be made traceable to the mine and verifiable by identifying all the links in the "chain of custody." The underlying assumption is that of gold as an "inalienable commodity" (Ferry 2002) tied to the livelihoods of impoverished artisanal miners in the Global South. To exist as such, private systems of gold certification are given priority over national regulations and corporate codes of conduct governing monetary gold. Although negligible in terms of volume and, in their current form, unsuited to significant changes in scale even from the point of view of their promoters, they essentially consist in the company making visible a marginal form of production that meets the ethical expectations of certain consumers and investors for whom it is intended.

The third type of veridiction, finally, challenges both the discr*ete* (separative) and discr*eet* (secretive) dimensions of transparency promoted in the industry. By disentangling gold from its materiality and legal status either as money or as a commodity, coalition activists moved away from an ontology of individuals-as-consumers to an ontology of individuals-as-citizens. In the third type of veridiction, gold is no longer conceived in terms of its material or legal relation to a consumer, but as part of a stream of information ultimately owned by the sovereign. This approach potentially reconfigures the triad of the visibility provider, the object observed, and the observer through an alternative socio-legal mediation. This veridiction differs mainly because it places the firm as the object of scrutiny, rather than as the provider of visibility, in between the state giving sight and the citizen as observer. In so doing, it bridges two forms of transparency project that so far have relatively separate trajectories: the politics of transparency in government that emerged in the early 2000; and the more recent, and widely discussed in this volume, politics of transparency in international trade.

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12 How to Count Vanilla

Transparency Trade-Offs in Organic Certification

SARAH OSTERHOUDT

The main feature of the international vanilla market is its total opacity.

Odoux 2003: 4

Introduction

International development groups and humanitarian programs have long called for increased transparency in the places where they work – whether this be clearer election policies or better accountability for the government use of development funds.[1] Increasingly, calls for transparency resonate within global supply chains, to bring attention to severe problems including child labor, worker abuse, sub-par food safety standards, and environmental violations. For many commodities it is not only development and government groups calling for transparency, but also consumers, who seek assurances that their purchases are not facilitating abusive social, economic, and environmental relationships (Guthman 2014; Raynolds 2000). Often, commodity transparency is operationalized through the rubric of "traceability" and certifications, which theoretically guarantee that certain environmental, social, safety, and economic standards are being met from the point of production to the point of consumption for a given product (Besky 2008; Tracy 2016).

Developing commodity relationships that are environmentally sustainable, socially just, and with the capacity to track health or safety concerns is an important goal. Yet, the discursive rhetoric that circulates around calls for transparent, certifiable, and traceable supply chains often equates these attributes with fundamentally more moral and ethical systems (Busch 2000; Moberg 2014; Mutersbaugh 2002). Organizations promoting organic and fair trade certifications frame

[1] See, for example, Transparency International (www.transparency.org).

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them as "win–win" enterprises: farmers get better prices, development groups accomplish sustainability goals, consumers have better products, and everything is funded by the free market (Arsel and Büscher 2012; Galvin 2011).

Framing these projects through a moralizing lens, however, obscures the significant political, epistemological, and economic work that they do in the places where they work. In this chapter, I focus on a vanilla organic certification project in Madagascar to ethnographically examine what the project accomplishes, or not, and for whom. The case study involves a partnership between an association of vanilla bean farmers in the Mananara Nord region of northeastern Madagascar and an international certification agency. I conducted fieldwork during the pilot phase of the certification project in 2007, and then again in 2016 after the project had been in place for nine years. I observed the interactions between smallholder vanilla farmers and certifying agents, including vanilla field inventories and farmer training meetings.

The organic vanilla project reveals how organic certification processes privilege certain forms of transparency and traceability, while ignoring or undermining others. For vanilla organic certification, what may seem opaque from the vantage point of certifiers and others outside of local systems supports alternative forms of transparency and ethical accountability, especially from farmer perspectives. The processes that make particular aspects of supply chains more transparent for certain groups (including exporters, certifiers, and consumers) replace or undermine local forms of transparency. At the same time, globalized certification systems produce their own forms of non-transparency, especially for the vanilla farmers who take part in these initiatives. Smallholder vanilla producers are often not fully informed about the pricing structures, certifier responsibilities, and decision-making processes of organic certification (Galvin 2018; Moberg 2014; Tracy 2016).

Transparency is not an either/or state, but rather a spectrum of negotiations and strategic positionings (Ballestero 2012; Duffy 2005). Making some aspects of production and trade more transparent undermines transparency in other ways: beans may be counted, but other things are then not counted. Some economic costs are recorded, while others are obscured. It is the people and organizations with more economic, social, and political power that can most successfully advocate for the forms of transparency that best serve their own interests,

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even if they have the intention of supporting smallholder farmers. Given the established literature in agrarian studies and environmental anthropology, this dynamic is not surprising. This work notes how systematic attempts of outsiders to write down, make known, codify, and circulate renderings of local livelihoods tend to favor those in power (Ferguson 1990; Goldman 2003; Hanson 2007; Scott 1998; West 2005; 2006). Looking forward, certification programs could better support smallholder farmers by adopting more inclusive definitions of transparency that account for multiple forms of knowledge production, relationships of social and economic capital, and moral accountability.

Contexts of Vanilla Production and Trade

Smallholder Vanilla Production

The Mananara Nord region of northeastern Madagascar is situated along the Bay of Antongil, looking outward toward the Indian Ocean. The bay has long been a site of global trade. The Dutch East India Trading Company established trading posts in the region during the early 1600s, and the area was a pirate hub throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Ellis 2007; Pearson 1997). Throughout its history, the region has produced a variety of goods for international markets, including timber, honey, sugar cane, black pepper, and cacao. Today, the three main cash crops in the area are cloves, vanilla, and coffee. Cloves and vanilla have been in the region for nearly 100 years and gained prominence as an export commodity during the French colonial era. During colonial times, the French tightly controlled the vanilla market, forcefully restricting smallholder farmers in Mananara from cultivating vanilla beans in favor of supporting plantation production systems further north (Osterhoudt 2017).

Today, the commercial center of the region is the town of Mananara Nord, which is surrounded by many smaller rural districts and villages. One of these villages is Behazo – the site of the following case study on vanilla organic certification.[2] As with other villages in the region, the majority of Behazo households engage in both subsistence and cash-crop agriculture, organized into diversified and well-tended

[2] The names of people, villages, and organizations have been changed.

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agroforestry fields. The region is known for producing high-quality vanilla beans – an identity that farmers are understandably quite proud of, given the difficulty of cultivating and curing vanilla.[3] In Behazo, the scale of vanilla cultivation varies considerably from person to person, ranging from a few kilograms of harvest to several tons. In this area, vanilla cultivation is not primarily a wage-labor enterprise, as famers tend to their own fields (although larger-scale farmers may hire help at certain points in the vanilla harvest cycle).

In Behazo, and across many regions of Madagascar, farmers often form local associations called *fikambananas*, usually comprised of between twelve and fifteen men and women. In the Mananara region, many of these associations focus on vanilla cultivation, with members sharing labor, equipment, and information on vanilla markets and cultivation techniques. *Fikambananas* also play a social function within communities, organizing events and workshops. For a *fikambanana* to be officially recognized by the Malagasy government, members must register paperwork both with the administrative offices in Mananara and in the provincial capital city of Toamasina. Beyond associations, the next level of farmer organization is a farmer cooperative, comprised of a group of twenty or so farmer associations. While cooperatives today are increasing in number and strength in the Mananara region, this is a relatively new development within the past ten to fifteen years.

Vanilla Trade in the Global Market

The average vanilla bean travels a long and highly mediated path from Behazo farmers to American and European kitchens. After harvest, some producers sell their "raw" (uncured) green vanilla beans to other families or associations for curing. Other farmers will cure their own vanilla beans – a months-long process that involves carefully blanching, sweating, sun-drying, and sorting the beans. Households then sell these "finished" beans to small-scale collectors who travel to villages to buy vanilla to resell to larger collectors based in the town of

[3] As an orchid, the vanilla plant requires constant attention and care and is considered, along with saffron, to be among the most labor-intensive crops in the world (Correll 1953).

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Mananara.[4] Mananara operators then sell this vanilla to export societies, often based in the larger port cities, which then export vanilla to international import and wholesale companies, which then sell to distributors in Europe and the United States. Distributors sell vanilla within domestic markets, including to retail outlets and food manufacturers.

Madagascar produces about two-thirds of the world's vanilla exports, over half of which are sold to the United States (Odoux 2003). The primary region of vanilla production is the Sambava region in northeastern Madagascar, known as the "vanilla triangle," to the north of Mananara (Andriamparany et al. 2021). Insiders within the international vanilla market describe Madagascar's vanilla market as "in no way standard" and "highly speculative and very sensitive to rumors" (Odoux 2003: 4). The volatility of the vanilla market has been especially pronounced since the 1990s, when the Madagascar vanilla market was deregulated in response to pressure from international trade organizations (Salas 2007). The uncertainty within Madagascar's market reverberates throughout the international vanilla industry, as other vanilla-producing countries adjust their vanilla prices in response to Madagascar's prices.

Market deregulation, combined with a cyclone that destroyed much of Madagascar's vanilla crop, contributed to a dramatic price spike in 2003, with export prices climbing from approximately $70 per kilogram to $500 per kilogram (Salas 2007). This dramatic boom was followed by an equally dramatic crash in 2004; by 2006, international vanilla prices had lost about 75 percent of their 2003 value (Salas 2007). The market downturn hit rural Mananara farmers particularly hard. With such low prices, many vanilla collectors simply stopped coming to Mananara. The collectors who did continue to work in Mananara offered growers extremely low prices for their gourmet vanilla. The depressed vanilla market stretched on for more than a decade, finally recovering around 2016.[5]

During the prolonged years of the vanilla bust, farmers struggled to earn enough income to support their basic needs; many families

[4] It takes about six kilograms of "raw" beans to produce one kilogram of finished, cured vanilla.

[5] Beginning around 2019, vanilla prices experienced another dramatic boom event, with export prices reaching $600 per kilogram (Osterhoudt 2020).

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dedicated less time to their vanilla crops, concentrating on the clove market instead. Other farmers became curious about new forms of trade relationships including organic certification, which in 2004 was beginning to gain momentum in international markets. In Behazo, one such group was the local *fikambanana* VOKATRA, whose members contacted the Peace Corps Madagascar office to request a volunteer to help them pursue new market opportunities. Peace Corps agreed to the request, and, in 2005, at the lowest point in the vanilla market, my partner and I arrived at the village of Behazo as Peace Corps volunteers charged with the task of helping to develop an organic certification program in partnership with local vanilla farmers.

Cultures of Transparency

Fast forward two years, as I stand behind a table that was set up in front of a farmer's home. In front of me, dozens of scattered papers are pinned under rocks to prevent them flying away, but they fly away regardless. A representative of the organic certification group ECOFIN stands next to me; she is weary and grumpy after enduring a two-day pickup truck ride to the village to certify vanilla fields. As I struggle with papers, two farmers from VOKATRA are yelling at one another, as other farmers chime in from the side. As I watch, tensions continue to rise, along with the volume of voices. In other words, things are a mess.

This scene developed after many months of trying to organize an organic certification project for the twelve farmers of VOKATRA – an organization that had been together for many years, and which included some of the most skilled and successful vanilla farmers in the region. To lead up to the visit from ECOFIN, the farmers had attended informational meetings and workshops on organic certification. Together, we had filled out multiple inventory forms for each farmer, for each of their fields. These forms detailed, among other things, field locations and histories, as well as which crops farmers cultivated and the specific agricultural techniques they used to care for their land. The ECOFIN agent was in Behazo for several days to ground-truth this paperwork and to inspect the practices of participating farmers.

The fight unfolding in front of everyone occurred after one member of the association accused another member of using *fanafody* – or

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pesticides – to ward off pests on his vanilla flowers.[6] The accuser worried that this action would ruin the certification for all farmers, as the inspector emphasized that certification would be an all or nothing affair: if one farmer breeched protocol, the whole association would be rejected for certification. The accused farmer shouted back angrily and then stormed off, declaring that he was quitting VOKATRA. Others followed. The project, and the very organization that was meant to be empowered by the certification, was disintegrating. It was later formed again, but, on that day, things looked bleak.

Trade Agreements: The Written and the Spoken

The dramatic altercation between farmer association members had been foreshadowed since the beginning of the certification project, which had consistently encountered a range of suspicions, misunderstandings, and frustrations. These stemmed in part from the fact that the ECOFIN project, as with most projects of organic certification, primarily equated traceable knowledge with written knowledge. For ECOFIN, legible, transparent traces were written traces, as exemplified by the requirements for voluminous paperwork, numbered harvest batches, and written contracts (Hetherington 2012; Mutersbaugh 2002; Randrianarivelo et al. 2013; Skaria 1996). A written trail theoretically allows knowledge to cross scales between vanilla farmers, trade intermediaries, and consumers, allowing actors separated by space to keep track of the movement of materials through supply chains. Such legible paperwork is assumed to support more ethical relationships of trade and to eliminate dishonest practices.

Privileging written forms of knowledge, however, overrides the oral forms of traceability that Malagasy farmers carefully establish within their own trade relationships. In many regions, spoken agreements are a component of speech-making and public pledges, and bind together people and ancestors in social contracts (Bloch 1998). In many of the *fikambanana* certification meetings I observed, for example, one person would present information and ideas in an oral format, then another member would repeat back the information to confirm what was said. Often, the person responding would elaborate on key points or raise follow-up questions. These interactions followed familiar oral

[6] *Fanafody* is also the Malagasy word for medicine.

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templates for public rhetoric common in this region of Madagascar (Osterhoudt 2017). This format leaves space for people to raise questions, confirm plans, and establish leadership. Such spoken interactions, done before a group, also create a community of listeners who can hold parties accountable for promises made.

The certification programs, however, largely ignored such spoken and dialogic methods for establishing transparency. As such, they overlooked the important social, economic, and cultural weight given to verbal contracts and oral performance to cement relationships, including relationships of trade. Instead, the certification organization insisted that, to be transparent, agreements must be written down; including a spoken component to trade agreements was not regarded as necessary to the process.

Yet written agreements between certification agencies and farmer associations are often written in a language and in terms that farmers are not familiar with. Farmers are not given space to negotiate the terms of these contracts, which are drawn up by certification agents in consultation with the private sector partners who plan to buy the certified products. Written agreements are therefore usually negotiated, written, and safeguarded by individuals considered to fall outside of local networks of trust (Skaria 1996).[7] This produces trade agreements that are more transparent for certification agencies and other extra-local actors, but less transparent for farmers.

The exclusive reliance on written knowledge also has implications for accountability – an essential component of transparency projects. In the case of any potential dispute within certification projects, the written contracts will carry much weight in the resolution process. For many Malagasy farmers, however, written contracts are more difficult to enforce than their oral counterparts (Bloch 1998; Osterhoudt 2017). For example, if farmers feel that a written contract has been broken, they will likely be required to find recourse through the courts – a system highly skewed against smallholder farmers. The formal court system contrasts with more local ways to settle grievances – for example, through a council of elders or analogous community governance structures such as *dina* agreements for local natural resource

[7] From a historical perspective, Malagasy farmers recount stories of colonial trade relationships, in which foreign traders kept notebooks recording what they owed to farmers. If this notebook was lost, the farmers had no recourse to demand payment from traders who took their products (Osterhoudt 2017).

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management (Rakotondrabe and Girard 2021). A council of elders, however, would likely not feel confident to comment on the intricacies of an international trade contract drawn up in French or English if it came into dispute, nor would the nonlocal partners in the contract be likely to agree to settle any claims in this way.

Written contracts therefore set up processes of accountability that favor certification agencies and vanilla buyers, who can more easily enforce contracts if the farmers are seen to break agreements. Farmers, on the other hand, do not have the same available resources to enforce written contracts if the certifiers do not follow through on the agreed terms, or if they engage in corrupt or dishonest practices. This protection from accountability confers much power on certification agencies (see also Moberg 2014).

Of course, many local processes of accountability are also skewed in favor of farmers with more political influence and economic resources. Yet, while both processes have their strengths and weaknesses, one is more fully situated at the local level, which brings transparency in its own right: farmers better understand what is stacked against them within more local systems, and have established strategies for navigating them.

Field Inventories: How to Count Vanilla

The emphasis on written records privileges knowing things through counting and inventories – popular tools of many development and conservation initiatives (Li 2007; Muehlmann 2012; West 2006). Yet, counting is not without cultural nuance and political maneuvering. For example, organic certification programs require farmers to carefully estimate their anticipated vanilla harvest for the season. These estimates are recorded in individual field inventory sheets and then compiled across all farmers in the association. Harvest estimates are used to determine the quantity of vanilla that becomes organically certified; this number also helps to determine the cost of annual organic certification.

Most often, organic certifying agents are worried that farmers overestimate their production for the year. If the group is certified for an anticipated ten tons but produces only seven tons, farmers could potentially bring in three tons of "counterfeit" vanilla and claim it as part of the ten tons under certification. Thus, the certifier who came to

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the village for Behazo's pilot project was keenly interested in verifying that the estimates farmers gave for their vanilla production matched what she saw in the fields. To accomplish this task, we visited several sample fields to ground-truth data on the farmers' projected yields.

Once in the fields, however, the certifier noticed the opposite trend to what she had anticipated: instead of exaggerating the extent of their vanilla vines under cultivation, the farmers had consistently underestimated the number of vines – often to a significant degree. Observing this trend, the certifier remarked dismissively that the farmers did not seem to know what was growing in their own fields. Calling an impromptu meeting, she then took time to explain to farmers how to count their own vanilla vines. I was surprised by her conclusion that farmers lacked skills to estimate their own vanilla production – in my experience, vanilla farmers had a good knowledge of how many vines they had under cultivation.

When I spoke with farmers about this discrepancy a few weeks after the inspection, they explained to me that people did not miscount their vines; rather, they deliberately underestimated their harvest numbers. They gave several reasons for this decision. One was that the younger farmers did not want to publicly announce that they had more vines than the elder farmers, which would be a sign of disrespect that could disrupt social relationships within the *fikambanana*. People with a potentially large vanilla harvest did not want to become a target for theft, nor for people asking them for money or favors. Many vanilla farmers did not want to commit to specific production numbers, knowing the many challenges that could prevent a good harvest, including cyclones, pests, or diseases. Finally, being a new project, farmers were hesitant to pledge all of their vanilla to certification, preferring to follow the risk-hedging strategy of diversifying their trade relationships across various buyers and markets (Osterhoudt 2017).

Thus, it was not that the farmers needed to be educated on how to count their vines, but rather that they had specific reasons for miscounting them in the first place. In the end, it was the "numerically correct" counting desired by certification agents, and not the "socially correct" forms of counting useful to farmers, that prevailed. Before ECOFIN agreed to certify the vanilla as organic, farmers were required to go back and "correct" the anticipated yield numbers on their inspection sheets.

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Representing Transparency: The Spreadsheet

The organic certification project not only privileged certain forms of writing and counting, but also how this information was represented (see also Galvin 2018). Most notably, the process encouraged mastering the Excel sheet format, as became evident during a follow-up visit I made to the organic certification project in 2016. Nine years after the first disastrous attempt at organic certification, I again sat in on a meeting between Behazo farmers and an ECOFIN agent. This time, the farmers were part of a large cooperative, with professional leadership and a membership of hundreds of farmers. The meeting was not held outside a village home, but in a fancy hotel in Mananara. Instead of scattered papers pinned under rocks, the cooperative representatives worked on laptops, with the field inventory data neatly presented in the form of Excel spreadsheets. The data were beautifully legible, arranged in neat columns. Looking at the screen, the ECOFIN agent complimented the group on its work. There was a cursory visit to a few vanilla fields, but the spreadsheet inspired trust, and the ground-truthing of reported harvest numbers no longer played as much of a role in the proceedings.

I left the meeting impressed by how well the farmers had figured out what the murky system of transparency was supposed to look like, through the eyes of the certifier. They realized the connection that certification programs make between the quality of information presented and the presumed quality of the thing that the information represents (Galvin 2018; Hetherington 2012; Tracy 2016). With the presentation of an Excel spreadsheet that inspired trust, the materiality of the vanilla vines faded into the background.

Economic Transparency, to a Point

A common goal of transparency projects is to bring to view problematic economic relationships, such as corruption, predatory lending, paying workers nonliving wages, and extreme profit capture. Organic and fair trade programs, for example, often circulate narratives that criticize "middlemen" involvement in commodity trade networks, connecting the activity of trade intermediaries to decreased profits for farmers. Certification agencies promote their projects as an alternative to this model, noting that participating farmers receive higher prices

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for their products, in part by forging more direct linkages between farmers and consumers (Osterhoudt et al. 2020).

This baseline narrative, however, does not disclose how certification agencies themselves act as "middlemen" in the trade process. These organizations charge significant costs for certifications. Although farmers and businesses may receive welcome price premiums for organically certified vanilla, these premiums must be balanced against the considerable direct and indirect costs to farmers and businesses to obtain certification. Organic certification in Madagascar is conducted by accredited for-profit entities, and they charge a good deal for their services – services that must be performed each year. For businesses engaged in certification programs, they must often hire teams of people to manage certification paperwork and reporting requirements, representing another significant expense.

In addition to the direct costs of certification fees, the organic certification process includes significant indirect costs (Randrianarivelo et al. 2013). For farmers, there are the indirect costs of lost work time and the need to purchase new materials required to pass certification, such as vanilla bean drying racks, wooden storage boxes, or forms of organic fertilizer. There are also the indirect costs for both farmers and businesses that come from hosting certifying agents during their site visits. These agents stay in villages for several days, and often expect to be shown a "good time" by farmers. After nine years of hosting ECOFIN project representatives, for example, farmers noted that they feel pressured to buy the agent lavish food and drinks and put them up at the most expensive hotel in the region. A happy agent, they say, is more apt to give them a better inspection.

In their project narratives, however, certification agencies do not make readily visible the direct and indirect costs they charge to farmer associations and vanilla buyers. Organic certification agencies often present their work as purely a social mission, instead of as a socially minded business, and many consumers do not realize that they rely on extracting profits from the commodity chains they certify. Overall, while making some forms of economic costs transparent, certification programs obscure their own role as economic actors within the vanilla commodity chain.

Ultimately, certification agencies act in a role analogous to the "middlemen" they criticize, as they capture significant profit and value from agricultural supply chains. These outside agencies often replace

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local Malagasy individuals involved in the vanilla supply network – usually younger Malagasy men and women from local villages who transport vanilla from place to place, connecting farmers with buyers. Organic certification projects, instead of empowering local Malagasy individuals to perform the paid work of certification, bring in people from outside the region to profit from the vanilla trade. Certification projects also open up space for people like me – an American with no experience in vanilla farming – to capture forms of value within the vanilla supply chain (Corson 2016; Guthman 1998). In the end, certification programs do not eliminate trade intermediaries as much as they replace local intermediaries with extra-local ones (Osterhoudt et al. 2020).

Discussion: Transparency, Knowledge, Power

During the public argument between VOKATRA members, the farmer accused of wrongdoing at one point angrily shouted: "If you don't trust me, just test my vanilla beans for pesticides!" Indeed, this statement raises a key point about the process of organic certification. If organic certifications were only about keeping chemicals out of the ground, all that would be needed for a successful certification would be to randomly test products for contamination. Instead, organic certification comes with a suite of auxiliary complications: paperwork, field visits, trainings, and audits. This raises the question: If these requirements are not necessary to make a vanilla bean organic, what types of work are they doing? Which forms of knowledge, profit, and power do certification programs enable, and which do they obstruct? And who tends to ultimately benefit from organic certifications?

Certification organizations often present their work as driven by social concerns, as they claim to promote more transparent – and morally desirable – relationships of trade. Yet, as we have seen with the Behazo case study, framing traceability and transparency as exclusively morally driven projects obscures the underlying forms of economic, social, and political work that these projects do. Through the ECOFIN organic certification programs, local forms of knowledge, accountability, and economic profit are gradually replaced by extra-local forms (cf. Corson 2016; Jaffee 2012; Webb 2012). As a result, while organic certification projects may increase transparency for certain groups, they decrease transparency for others.

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As the opening quote of this chapter notes, the global vanilla supply chain, like many global commodity chains, is a highly opaque system. This murkiness has negative consequences for smallholder farmers, who often lack the power or resources to navigate the market to their advantage. Making the power structures, economic interests, forms of patronage, and deep historical roots of exploitation in the vanilla industry more transparent unquestionably holds much potential to empower farmers in Madagascar and in other vanilla-producing regions of the world. Transparency programs with this goal could focus their attention "up" the chain, examining the role of export groups, state-led regulatory policies, multinational food corporations, and the organic certifying agencies themselves in the vanilla commodity network. Yet, vanilla certification programs do not focus transparency efforts on systems at these levels. Instead, they focus on smallholder vanilla growers and their fields. This approach repeats the oft-critiqued tendency for development groups to focus on local symptoms, instead of extra-local drivers, of challenges such as economic exploitation, political insecurity, and environmental degradation (Andriamahery and Zhou 2018; Blaikie 1985).

Moving forward, certification projects can adopt a more nuanced and equitable approach to transparency that recognizes the trade-offs inherent in projects of visibility. As commodity chain projects cannot achieve perfect transparency, they can mindfully select which forms of economic, political, and environmental relationships to bring to the fore. They can continuously ask which types of transparency are important to whom, and how alternative forms of transparency can be included within project designs. Such an orientation would underscore that transparency is not as much a question of which groups have better ethics, but of which groups have more power to define what becomes seen and what remains hidden.

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Methodological Appendix

Making Global Comparison Possible?

FILIPE CALVÃO AND MATTHIEU BOLAY

While cross-cultural comparative approaches seem to be increasingly utilized across disciplines, this volume both explores and problematizes the purpose, aim, and methods underpinning the comparison of a global value such as transparency. The volume is based on research in disparate locations of the world – from European boardrooms and expert laboratories, Malagasy vanilla plantations to Indian tea auction rooms, Mozambican ruby mining to approaches to future resource extraction in Greenland. In its ensemble, the volume does more than bring empirical specificity to disparate geographies of supply chains; instead, the comparative effort seeks to assess the processes and forms of mediation enacting transparency in ideas, objects, and practices. As such, the contributions mobilize comparative effort to examine a similar object – the ideological and aspirational goal of transparency and its attendant practices, which are produced through variously different forms: technological, qualitative, institutional.

Moreover, the comparative method was applied flexibly as an evolutive, concurrent, and interconnected process. This means that, in order to assess how transparency regiments the global production and circulation of commodities and political discourse, each contribution attends to the conditions underpinning the making and construction of transparency as a total social fact organizing contemporary life. In the sociological and anthropological approach that lies at the core of this volume, the comparative method was developed through ethnographic engagement with specific institutional practices and intellectual paradigms. Concretely, this meant that anticipatory and preparatory discussion developed an initial set of questions, which were reformulated and refined in a first workshop organized in Geneva in June 2019. During this phase of the project, serious consideration was given to the data generated by different techniques of knowledge production and their embedded epistemological, ethical, and theoretical assumptions. In the unstable relationships of practices,

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representations, and production, our comparative approach was used to trace, commensurate, and render visible the making of transparency.

However, for a comparison to be possible, one needs to start from the assumption of discrete entities. Keen to avoid an essentialist and reductionist vision of transparency, the volume chose to focus on the terms of a processual relation: not defining what contexts and practices exude "transparency," but how something can be deemed *transparent*, and what the terms are of its relation to the opposite cognates of opacity and secrecy and in the broader context of capital and knowledge on a global scale. In Saussurean terms, this implied seeking the comparative position of transparency in a broader system of values rendered meaningful through relation to each other. The value of transparency, thus, can be made perceptible only in relation to other terms in a total system of meaningful distinction and contrast. In so doing, to follow Appadurai's (1996) suggestion of moving from culture-as-noun to cultural-the-adjective, one steps into a more germane "realm of differences, contrast, and comparisons."

While comparison is at the core of the anthropological project, the very possibility that ethnographies could be comparable has been the object of debates since the institutionalization of the discipline. This paradox, already pointed out in E. E. Evans-Pritchard's famous aphorism that anthropology's "only method, the comparative method . . . is impossible" (see Candea 2019), tends to be addressed either by emphasizing the specificity of cases and dismissing comparison as naïve positivism, or by reclaiming more methodological efforts to make cases comparable. Such positions reflect longstanding epistemological divides between inductive and hypothetico-deductive approaches – or the study of processes irreducible to singled-out variables on the one hand, and the study of variables' dependent causations on the other.

The ethnography of global processes intended in this volume inevitably raises questions of scale, both vertical and horizontal. Is it about zooming from "10,000 feet up" down to specific and particularly illustrative sites, as in Michael Burawoy's extended case method (2009), or about tracking processes spreading across various sites, as in Anna Tsing's ethnographies of "global connections" (2005)? This volume does not intend to formulate answers or methodological prescriptions regarding what would be the best scalar practices for studying a global social value. Yet, the multisited ethnographies in this volume propose an illustration of an in-between approach, which is

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particularly suitable for analyzing the multifold manifestations and meanings of transparency as it is constructed and interpreted across commodities' global production networks.

The pervasive expansion of "global supply chains" as a determining feature of contemporary capitalism (Sassen 2014, Tsing 2009) rendered multisite approaches inevitable in order to understand the connections and disconnections they enable on a global scale. In his seminal essay, George Marcus insisted that "multisited ethnography [was] not a different kind of controlled comparison ... generated for homogeneously conceived units"; rather, it was a nonlinear tracking effort where "comparison emerges from putting questions to an emergent object of study whose contours, sites, and relationships are not known beforehand" (Marcus 1995: 102). Global supply chains typically produce unpredictive trajectories not only of commodities in motion, but of the concepts that regiment their circulation. In this context, our approach to transparency does not intend to compare its degree of implementation across predefined sites or stages of production, but rather to track the nonpredictive trajectories of how this traveling concept is constituted across global supply chains.

We take the concept of mediation to be critical in this approach. In fact, the objects, representations, and technologies of transparency move through nonlinear paths, often punctuated by impasses, around "nodes of mediation." For William Mazzarella (2004: 352), "nodes of mediation" can be defined as "sites at which the compulsions of institutional determination and the rich, volatile play of sense come into always provisional alignment in the service of ... a vast range of social projects, from the grass roots to corporate boardrooms." The language of nodes is deployed in the volume to emphasize how these physical and conceptual sites are connected, not in terms of the "'actual' interconnections of 'things' but the conceptual interconnections of problems" (Weber 1949).

While we retain the image of (global production) *networks* for heuristic purposes, the *nodes* we identify are not those of well-separated stages of production connecting things, but those of mediation connecting concepts. From the perspective of a commodity lifespan, transparency does not therefore map easily onto a qualitative state, comparable and measurable on a transparency–opacity continuum, but onto various moments and locations where it engages mediations toward *disclosure*, *immediacy*, *trust*, and *truth*. These four

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core concepts relate to different dimensions of transparency that respectively convoke valuation practices, technical expertise, bureaucratic legibility, and truth narratives – and each of these nodes illustrates one form of mediating a commodity across meaning and value. These concepts enable us to compare how transparency works, not *against* predefined isolated variables (such as states, institutions, or stages of production), but *from within* the perspective of commodities' engagement with concurrent processes of making them transparent. Thereby, while we do not compare homogeneously conceived units identified "beforehand," we are able to compare the works of disclosure, immediacy, trust, and truth deployed in the making of transparency.

Taking inspiration from authors who have reconceptualized "the field" as an assemblage of the multiple spaces traversed by ideas and interlocutors (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Ong and Collier 2005), contributors to this volume scrutinize the ethnographic production of knowledge in the politics and relations between proximity and distance, "here and there," "up" and "out" (Clarke 2004; Hannerz 2003; Marcus 1995; Nader 1969). In doing so, we pave the way for comparative research across disparate regions of the globe around one key, defining global value by way of a relational and contextual approach to transparency. Ultimately, this forces a rethinking of scale-making projects in the multidimensionality of capitalist spatiality by paying attention to how the particular scale of transparency interacts with, transgresses, or extends other global values, from property to the nation, sustainability, and development. This examination of a global value such as transparency is only made possible by way of rich, fine-grained research into the grounded social worlds that produce and enable it, as well as the empirical and conceptual movements between and across different forms of transparency. This volume, accordingly, ensures that this global comparative method generates rigorous, verifiable, and reliable data, critically overcoming the sense of geographic and cultural distance that has dominated our disciplines for so long.

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