



A final issue to consider, particularly in our current time of the Anthropocene, which appears to be addicted to extraction, is what ‘our rightful share of the earth’s subterranean granaries’ ought to be (p. 206)? Would the answer to this question change if we seriously considered locally specific ritual geologies?

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Response by the author

I am honoured by Muriel Côte’s, David Damtar’s and Iva Peša’s thoughtful engagements with *A Ritual Geology*. With the limited space I have here, I will respond to the provocations of the reviewers about the limits and possibilities of a ‘ritual geology’ as a concept and the politics of producing knowledge about *orpaillage*.

Muriel Côte queries if West Africa’s ‘ritual geology’ is in fact gendered, given such practices as African men leading colonial and postcolonial geologists to ‘*anciennes mines de femmes*’ (p. 120). Women also cultivated distinct ritual engagements with the female-spirited snake of Nininkala, who haunts alluvial gold deposits along riverbanks. The dozens of oral histories I conducted with women *orpaillieuses* enabled me to document the shifting engagement of women with gold mining and processing over the course of the twentieth century in Senegal and, in more isolated cases, Guinea and Mali. But it was more difficult for me to discern how women had shaped West Africa’s ritual geology – ‘practices, prohibitions and cosmological engagements with the earth’ – in earlier time periods. In part, this was an issue of sources. Arabic manuscripts and oral traditions that reach back to the medieval period contain few references to women’s work in gold mining. Some oral traditions relay gendered concepts about the management of gold and water, but it is difficult to discern if women shared or authored the concepts relayed in oral texts. More work can and should be done to track the gendered evolution of the region’s ritual geology. One promising avenue would be to compare women’s songs with oral traditions about gold across a wide geography. I am also hopeful that ongoing ‘salvage’ archaeology – carried out before corporations dig new open-pit mines – will shed more light on the evolving nature of women’s gold prospecting and mining work over the *longue durée*.

Iva Peša takes up my provocation that a ‘ritual geology’ could have comparative value elsewhere in Africa and beyond. But, as Peša rightly points out, we are unlikely to find much continuity in terms of African mining and religious institutions in a place like the Zambian Copperbelt or on South Africa’s Witwatersrand, where a long history of industrial mining has largely obliterated precolonial mining economies.

I agree. Indeed, the case of *orpaillage* in savanna West Africa is unique precisely because African families and lineages dominated gold mining in the region until the twenty-first century. By contrast, contemporary artisanal mining economies in Zambia and South Africa are more accurately understood as post-industrial in their technical and social forms. I argue in the book that attention to the texture of such regional divergences in mining can help us better understand the unique grievances and expectations for mining that are mobilized in moral and legal debates over sub-soil rights across the African continent today. It will also lead to new forms of geographic and historical comparison. For example, I expect that ritual geologies with a family resemblance to that which I describe for the West African savanna might be found in the historical and ethnographic record of mining in Latin America, where Indigenous, African and European mining techniques and labour regimes have intermingled since the sixteenth century. I also find inspiration in Côte's suggestion that ritual geologies – in and beyond Africa – can offer conceptual resources for reimagining our mineral commons beyond the toxic social and ecological legacies of Euro-American mining capitalism.

David Damtar turns the tables of knowledge production, a central theme in my book, to query the limits of what an 'outsider' can know about *orpaillage*, particularly its ritual dimensions. I appreciate this question, as it was a preoccupation of mine during the research and writing of this book. Of course, I was excluded from certain conversations, topics and spaces by my gender and status as a white American woman. I also restricted my own access to knowledge and practices that my interlocutors classified as 'secret'. When I started this project, I wanted to avoid research on the ritual dimensions of *orpaillage*, given the long history of travellers to West Africa who described African gold miners as technologically backward and mired in superstition. But stories of ghosts, spirits and sacrifices emerged so commonly in interviews and in archival records that to ignore these otherworldly forces would be a disservice to my interlocutors. While my subject position limited my access to some forms of knowledge, it facilitated my entry into mining and government offices, spaces my Senegalese colleagues often struggled to access. I was so overwhelmed by these inequities that, at many junctures, I considered abandoning this project altogether. But I also felt a responsibility – more accurately a debt – to the time, generosity and stories that so many people invested in me. So, I leveraged 'my privilege to tell the history of a West African mining tradition that has been racialized, denigrated, and portrayed as static by powerful actors' (p. 28). The result is a partial view of a complex African technological industry that is worthy of many more books than my own.

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