*Africa* (2024), **94,** 475–496
doi:10.1017/S0001972024000378

# Reviews of books

## Debating mining

***This book review section consists of three sets of debates about three books. Each debate includes reviews followed by a response from the author.***

James H. Smith, *The Eyes of the World: Mining in the Digital Age in the Eastern DR Congo*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press (hb US$95 – 978 0 226 77435 0; pb US$33 – 978 0 226 81606 7). 2021, v + 360 pp.

Fresh fighting is once again drawing international attention to the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In covering escalating clashes between the Congolese army and the M23 rebel forces, popular media and policy commentators invariably mention the region's mineral wealth and the role of Congolese 'digital minerals', such as coltan, in powering mobile phones and similar devices. We should care about what happens in the Congo, such reports often imply, because we all carry a piece of it around in our pockets. And, more pointedly, the conditions under which these materials are mined and fought over are horrific, approximating a novel scramble for resources based on coerced labour in Africa's 'heart of darkness'.

In *The Eyes of the World*, James Smith offers an essential corrective to such narratives by unearthing the perspectives of artisanal miners and traders themselves, the individuals and communities who extract and move digital minerals from the DRC's subsoil into global circuits of production. Smith's principal argument is that, viewed through his interlocutors' eyes, artisanal mining in the region is 'a kind of conflict-ridden collaboration' (p. 32) that – in the aftermath of war and amidst massive displacement and dispossession – has emerged as a hugely important site of opportunity and community. Fundamental to the operation of the sector and to local understandings of its dynamics is the notion of movement. Miners' mobility and the circulation of wealth mean that 'many hands can touch money' (p. 45), establishing conditions not for resource-based war but for peace.

Outside actors, however, either fail or refuse to see artisanal mining in such a light. Instead, the titular 'eyes of the world' (i.e. the attention of an 'international community' comprising conservationists, 'anti-slavery' crusaders, humanitarian NGOs and corporate extractors) see miners as victims and/or criminals harvesting 'blood minerals'. In response, these observers and outside actors elevate transparency-focused, bag-and-tag certification schemes or industrial extraction as preferred alternatives. Congolese involved in the trade regard these efforts as a unified project aimed at enclosing deposits and/or 'cleansing' minerals of their origins (of having been wrought by Congolese hands from Congolese earth), and they resist them. Miners circumvent attempts by companies and regulators to exclude them from sites, or to purge their 'dirty' minerals from the supply chain. They decry the tags of

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transparency initiatives as 'handcuffs' (*craca*) that marginalize and immobilize. Meanwhile, they valorize their own labour (in holes, in dirt, under challenging conditions) as acts of self-sacrifice, as requiring collaboration and skill, and as producing (the conditions for) post-conflict reconciliation and economic improvement that benefit society writ large.

This is, in short, a masterful and most necessary book. Smith's writing is simultaneously beautiful and cogent. The ethnographic material is often humorous, frequently incensing, sometimes heartbreaking, and always compelling. Through rich and evocative description, Smith transports the reader, as if by wormhole, to particularly productive scenes, then details and interrogates settings, characters, dialogue and underlying dynamics in ways that entertain, illustrate and illuminate. He excavates miners' worlds – situated histories, territorial struggles, labour arrangements, wartime trauma, economic projects, cosmologies, spiritual negotiations and more – to great effect. He not only gives voice to the labourers who produce the stuff upon which the contemporary world runs, but also emphasizes the political implications of miners' projects of movement and self-organization as having collectivist, arguably even anti-capitalist, orientations.

I could go on at (much) greater length in praise of Smith's book, but I do have several questions to pose for the sake of discussion and elaboration.

While Smith's theorization of movement is enormously effective for framing the contemporary circumstances, what remains less clear is the longer history and origins of such ideas and practices; how they relate to Congolese conceptualizations of lifecycles and the future; and whether Smith sees this 'theory from the south' as offering a framework for understanding the dynamics of late capitalism and resistance to it in rural Africa more broadly, across both space and time. Has movement as an ethos long characterized Eastern Congolese visions of the good life? And/or how contingent is it to the (post)colonial moment and the mining sector? How does movement relate to notions of 'the frontier' in African studies (e.g. the work of Kopytoff and others), and to kinship, expansion and intergenerational growth? Beyond evasion of colonial authorities, what did movement entail for Eastern Congolese under Leopold II and the Belgians? In a context where residents have endured forced relocation (by colonial overseers) and displacement (during war), is there not also a negative valence attached to mobility, and some sense of nostalgia for being settled? Do Smith's interlocutors (favourably) anticipate ongoing mobility (as miners, or as something else)? Or do they aspire to more sedentary agrarian (or urban) ideals or futures, to being rooted once again (along with their ancestors) in particular patches of earth? How do these imaginings of the future fuel, limit or otherwise shape the political potentialities of artisanal miners' resistance, collectivism and autonomy? Smith tells us through the words of his interlocutors that 'there's nothing like the love that … diggers had for one another' (p. 214), and he repeatedly emphasizes the centrality of collaboration, reciprocity and trust. At the same time, we learn very little about actual affective interpersonal relationships between miners. How do miners cultivate and maintain relationships with one another amidst movement? How are ties established, what form(s) do they take, how do they transform, and what do they do?

Such queries notwithstanding, *The Eyes of the World* is a magisterial contribution to contemporary scholarship on labour, extraction and the socio-political worlds of artisanal mining. It comprises a powerful interrogation of late capitalism and competing configurations of work and value ‘on the margins’ (though really at the core), one that centres the perspectives of Congolese mining laborers to reveal how they use their hands to dig and to build, *together*, amidst exploitation and ruination.

Brian Ikaika Klein
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA
Email: briklein@umich.edu
doi: 10.1017/S0001972024000378

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The thing about minerals is that they are either there or they are not. So what happens when they are there? The common answer with respect to Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is ‘conflict’. The idea that minerals cause conflict in the region has become commonplace and has motivated extensive monitoring schemes and legislation ostensibly designed to prevent this conflict. In some ways this seems a laudable aim. People should not be slaughtered, crushed, maimed or poisoned to produce the devices now necessary for everyday life.

The key question, however, is one of causality. James Smith’s book, based on several years of challenging and physically demanding fieldwork, turns the popular understanding of the connection between minerals and violence on its head. There is a connection, but it’s the other way around: war created a mining economy. Conflict in the region displaced huge numbers of people, making them available for mining while rendering other economic activities less possible. People dispossessed by war entered artisanal mining, which boomed as the war subsided. This was also a time when new digital technologies created a demand for metals known as the ‘3Ts’ – tantalum, tin and tungsten. The perception that demand by Western consumers for laptops and smartphones caused conflict, that ‘new technologies were *converted into* violence in Congo’ (p. 55), was a powerful and disturbing one. The perception that artisanal miners were either victims or perpetrators of violence was also reinforced by NGOs, visiting journalists and the international mining companies that intended to displace them.

At the centre of the book are the lives and concepts of diggers and dealers in minerals. Miners’ lives are characterized by movement, mobility and the continual creation of new relationships with other miners, traders and *négociants* (middlepersons). They often understand their work in relation to the history of industrial mining in the region, even if their day-to-day activities are quite different. This is partly because there is a pervasive uncertainty around artisanal mining that pushes many into debt, as the uncertainty of generating an income from mining is coupled with the certainty of expenditure on food and the materials needed to mine.

These rich descriptions are one of the great strengths of the book. Miners are usually seen by both outsiders and urban Congolese as either victims or criminals who perform degrading work. In fact, they have pride in their work and insist that they are the ones who produce wealth, implying that those who diminish and criticize them ultimately depend on them.

That said, while Smith begins by saying the book focuses on the ‘work’ of miners (p. 3), there is more about how minerals are sold and how extraction is financed than on the actual work that miners do to extract minerals from the earth. Some of the tasks around