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Massey University

**Entanglements and Disentanglements:
A Posthuman Approach to Mercury Use in
Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining in
Antioquia, Colombia**

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in Social Anthropology at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

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Abstract

This research uses qualitative research techniques and posthuman theories to investigate the dynamic relationship between artisanal and small-scale gold miners and mercury in the context of Antioquia, Colombia. This is done to contribute to understandings of, and inform potential solutions for, the global environmental problem that is mercury pollution from artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM). Miners come to know mercury through practices, and through these practices, mercury comes to be co-constitutive of an informal ASGM industry. Mercury provides an easy yet profitable mode of gold extraction with limited capital expenditure. Eliminating the use of mercury means a re-constitution of ASGM as a formal industry with higher levels of capital investment, new actors and a shift to a more representational approach to knowing materials. The use of toxic mercury and an increase in the enforcement of mining legislation are framing miners as illegal. Formal, responsible mining is becoming a dominant reality, and informal miners who resent being labelled illegal are working to transition to this reality. Miners' experiences of this transition vary greatly, and this variation can be explored through the lens of ecological habitus. Many miners are using mercury elimination to perform good citizenship by mining responsibly, introducing a performative aspect to formalisation. Nevertheless, miners still face significant challenges to formalisation. As a result, many miners have had to become subcontractors for large-scale mining companies, entering exploitative relationships with which mercury, through its absence, is complicit. Taking this approach towards understanding the relationship between miners and mercury has helped to resolve the conflict between material and social deterministic views of the practice of mercury use, and linked mercury to a wider political context, which is a necessary consideration for a collaborative approach with miners to eliminate mercury.

Keywords:

Artisanal and small-scale gold mining; ASGM; mercury; Colombia; anthropology; posthumanism; entanglements; politics of materiality; performativity; informality.

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