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

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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.

### **Table of Contents**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	]
ABSTRACT	III
TABLE OF CONTENTS	IV
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS AND TABLES	VI
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	(
The Global Problem of Mercury Pollution The Minamata Convention	(
Mercury Reduction Themes	10
Alternatives to Mercury for Gold Extraction	10
Appropriate Technology	1
Education	1:
Formalisation	12
Social Dynamics	13
The Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining Industry	13
The Anthropology of Mining	15
The Anthropology of ASGM	16
A Theoretical Toolbox	17
Deleuze and Guattari	18
Posthumanism	19
Bourdieu and Ecological Habitus	23
Conclusion	24
CHAPTER 3: THE CONTEXT OF ANTIOQUIA, COLOMBIA	26
Mercury Use in Antioquia	20
Colombia	28
Antioquia	29
Medellín	33
Caucasia	32
Cogouig	33
Seguria	

Gold Mining in Antioquia	35
Scale and Economic Significance of ASGM	36
Mining and Armed or Criminal Groups	37
Informality	38
Formalisation Initiatives	39
Legality and Supply of Mercury	40
Enforcement of Mining Legislation	40
Mercury Reduction Initiatives	41
Conclusion	42
CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY	44
Fieldwork Methods	44
Interviews	48
Purposive Observation and Deep Hanging Out	49
Legal Seminars and Miner Training Centre Visits	50
Ethical Considerations	51
Positioning Myself within the Field	52
Introducing my Key Research Participants	56
Carlos	56
Esteban	57
Miguel	57
Felipe	57
Mateo	58
Juan	58
Santiago	59
David	59
Other Participants	60
Conclusion	60
CHAPTER 5: ENTANGLEMENTS WITH MERCURY	62
Alluvial Open-Pit Mining	63
Dredge-Based Placer Mining	66
Hard Rock Mining and Gold Processing Workshops	67
Gold Buying Shops	75
Tradition, Custom, and the Nature of Change	78
Awareness of Mercury Poisoning	80

v

ASGM: A Performed Entanglement of Miners and Mercury	81
Conclusion	84
CHAPTER 6: DISENTANGLING MERCURY	86
Dredge-Based Placer Mining	87
Alluvial Open-Pit Mining	96
Hard Rock Mining	100
Gold Processing Workshops	101
Gold Shops	103
A New Mode of Education in El Bagre	108
Conclusion	109
CHAPTER 7: THE POLITICS OF DISENTANGLING MERCURY	110
Formalisation	111
Formalisation through Subcontracting to LSM	114
Alluvial Open-Pit Mining	119
Dredge-Based Placer Mining	123
Processing and Sales	124
Mercury as a Discursive Material	126
Conclusion	128
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION	130
REFERENCES	135

## List of Illustrations and Tables

29
30
). 31
32
34
47
69
70
70
74
74
75
76
77
77
88
89
89
90
90
. 105
.106
. 106