

‘decolonization was not’ merely a backdrop ‘for Congolese students’ but also constituted ‘the world in which they lived’. It served as ‘their’ encompassing ‘horizon’, extending beyond the immediately visible landscape to encompass both tangible reality and the realm of possibilities (19).

Monaville’s book firmly anchors itself in what he refers to as the ‘global’. Within the context of his writing, this concept assumes paramount significance. He perceives it ‘not as a neutral framework for the addition of singular histories’, but rather ‘as a field of struggle’ (9). This compelling argument calls for a reevaluation of our understanding of ‘world-making’, similar to the reorientation advocated by Adom Getachew.¹ Monaville’s primary concerns also resonate with ‘the question of the world and its habitability’ at the heart of Achille Mbembe’s recent work.² Monaville’s central focus in relation to this question revolves around the inquiry of the world and its relevance to educated Congolese individuals across different generations, from the early twentieth century through decolonization and beyond. Three distinct moments stand out in this regard: the era of Belgian colonization, characterized by strict control over the international mobility of Congolese people and their education beyond primary school (20–62); the policies adopted by Catholic missions that embraced a politics of closure, mirroring the approach of the colonial state (65–102); and the transformative 1960s, where the barriers imposed by colonialism were dismantled, leading to a profound openness to the world (109–27). During this era, Congolese students perceived themselves as active agents, shaping the world through their ideas, rather than being mere victims of the international order.

The beauty of this book lies in both its content and form. As Nancy Rose Hunt aptly emphasizes, ‘form matters in history’.³ Monaville’s book exemplifies an approach that integrates ‘theory and form’, thereby offering a valuable contribution to the historiography of student activism, decolonization, the Cold War, and the Global Sixties.

doi:10.1017/S0021853723000634

Intellectuals with Pickaxes

A Ritual Geology: Gold and Subterranean Knowledge in Savanna West Africa

By Robyn d’Avignon. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022. Pp. 328. \$104.95, hardcover (ISBN: 9781478015833); \$27.85, paperback (ISBN: 9781478018476).

Emily Lynn Osborn

The University of Chicago

(Received 9 December 2023; accepted 9 December 2023)

Keywords: Senegal; West Africa; environment; political ecology; labor; migration; mining

It is well documented that gold fields have the power to transform human relations. The 1849 gold rush in northern California and the unearthing of the Witwatersrand gold reef in the 1880s in

¹A. Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self Determination* (Princeton, 2019).

²A. Mbembe, ‘Notes on planetary habitability’, Keynote address, ‘Climate, Sustainability and Inequality Seminar’, University of the Witwatersrand, Nov. 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1AKvMN5ock>

³N. R. Hunt, ‘History as form, with Simmel in tow’, *History and Theory*, 56:4 (2018): 126–44.



South Africa are but two examples of mineral finds that changed wide streams of human history — and that also stimulated a wealth of scholarly interpretations. Robyn d’Avignon takes a different approach in *A Ritual Geology: Gold and Subterranean Knowledge in Savanna West Africa*. The inspiration of her study is not spectacular bursts of mineral discovery, and their frenzied, turbulent, and somewhat predictable aftermaths. Rather, d’Avignon uncovers the systems of knowledge and engagement generated by the subterranean, gold-yielding Birimian plateau in southeastern Senegal. D’Avignon refers to the dynamic force field of human practice and belief that emerges from the promise of gold in this region as ‘ritual geology’.

In a monograph of seven chapters, D’Avignon carefully elaborates the way that ritual geology has helped to shape the way that gold, over many centuries, has been imagined, apprehended, and extracted in and around Kédougou, Senegal, a region known historically as Bambuk. Ritual geology proscribes who can mine gold, and how. Ritual geology shapes the political, social, ritual, and occult obligations that result from extracting this rich mineral from the earth. That is, the spirits of the earth demand sacrifices for their golden lodes, and that dynamic produces an array of responsibilities, opportunities, dilemmas, and hazards. The central purveyors of ritual geology are African *orpailleurs*, or miners, a label that, in recent times, has come to be translated as ‘artisanal miners’, although d’Avignon rightly identifies the limits of this term. The cosmology of gold that guides the exploitation, or *orpaillage*, of these goldfields has proved to be durable and malleable, resistant and incorporative. It has helped Bambuk function as a center of wealth-producing human activity for over a thousand years: as a means of income generation for the entrepreneurial and adventurous, and as an emergency ‘granary’ for people facing famine and crisis.

As d’Avignon establishes, one effect of this ritual geology is to calibrate and check the exploitation of Birimian gold by ambitious searchers and political leaders. The need to appease the spirits and loosen their grip on gold troubles devout Muslims, and it has also served to keep at bay a series of Muslim empire builders and religious reformers (Chapters Two and Seven). The French colonizers proved no more adept when it came to controlling gold production. Inspired by visions of creating their own California gold rush, French engineers and colonial officials in the latter nineteenth century launched initiatives aimed at displacing *orpaillage* with modern technologies and ‘scientific techniques’ (89). These efforts failed, and in some cases they did so spectacularly. By the twentieth century, the French came to appreciate the profits that came from taking a hands-off approach to the gold fields. Working on their own, *orpailleurs* extracted enough gold to significantly boost colonial exports, while also feeding gold dust into colonial coffers through the head tax. The challenges that political leaders face in their efforts to profit from mining reveals a persistent ambivalence associated with mining Birimian’s rocks. Gold can certainly pave a pathway to rich rewards, but seeking ‘quick wealth’ at the expense of ritual geology’s norms can be risky, and sometimes fatal. Indeed, d’Avignon notes that there is a ‘razor-thin line between earning a moral living from *orpaillage* and trafficking with occult forces and human greed’ (200).

Even in the twenty-first century, as multinational mining corporations carve into ancient goldfields, sanctioned by permits and concessions granted by the Senegalese state, ritual geology exerts itself. The sites of those highly capitalized mines owe their origins to French colonial geologists and engineers who often followed, quite literally, in the footsteps of *orpailleurs*, starting in the 1920s, to locate and map the emplacement of Birimian’s golden lodes (Chapter Four). Today, *orpailleurs* and their leaders invoke a rich mix of custom and tradition — and claims about technologies and soil depth — to make demands on the state and on corporate mining interests. These actions render murky the documentary regime of laws, surveys, and contracts, on which those mining conglomerates depend. D’Avignon makes plain that the influx of multinationals in southeastern Senegal has made the playing field of mining highly uneven. But ritual geology and its purveyors nonetheless continue to shape processes of gold extraction.

There are two features of this work that merit particular note. First, d’Avignon’s temporal scope is very deep, reaching back to the era of ancient Ghana and the demand made for human sacrifice

made by the snake, Bida, in exchange for gold. This perspective offers a refreshing departure from much of the historiography on mining in Africa, which focuses heavily on the late nineteenth century mineral finds in the southern reaches of the continent. As is well known, the discoveries of gold and diamonds in what became South Africa were rapidly harnessed to the racial hierarchies of the White settler society and helped give rise to the most highly capitalized, technologically modern, and labor repressive mining monopolies in the world. This pattern of monopolization, coercion, and extraction swept across the matrix of mineralized lands in southern Africa. In contrast, by considering the gold fields of Kédougou over the *longue durée*, d'Avignon reveals a setting in which Africans function not as 'laborers and victims of land alienation', but rather as 'intellectual actors' who produce mining knowledge and actively direct and regulate gold mining (3). Relatedly, by using a subterranean geographic feature as her central unit of analysis, d'Avignon avoids overdetermining the role of more recent political formations, specifically the French colonial state and its nation-state successor, Senegal. With this firm anchor in Birimian rocks, d'Avignon draws a coherent, animating line from Wagadu (Ghana) to Ancient Mali, through the era of the Atlantic trade in enslaved people, to that of French colonial rule, and into the present day. It is a remarkable, and compelling, feat of temporal framing.

The second notable feature of this book relates to the specificity and historicity of its categorizations, affinities, and descriptors. D'Avignon shows that the moral and spiritual requirements of orpillage significantly complicate ethnic and religious designations and associations (Chapter Seven). Likewise, d'Avignon employs the terms 'indigenous' and 'local' and 'tradition' lightly and deliberately, not as a facile shorthand for all things African and non-European. This discipline of precision takes broad effect: the Jakhanke, Maninka, and Pulaar-speakers filling the pages of this book emerge quite rightly as worldly, informed, and cosmopolitan seekers and actors who, among other things, know their legal rights, recognize the workings of power, and effectively adopt and manage new technologies. Today, orpailleurs often deploy ideas about custom and tradition to advance their cause and protect their claims. As d'Avignon reveals, this vocabulary forms part of a strategic discourse of locality that is politically expedient in a context of intense competition with vast mining enterprises. But it also obscures a wide net of transnational connections that help to organize orpillage (Chapter Six). In other words, technologies imported from elsewhere can be found in the goldfields mined by orpailleurs, just as they can be found in the goldfields mined by corporations.

A Ritual Geology effectively brings together several fields of study and disciplinary paradigms. It offers a historical account of Senegal, Francophone West Africa, and West Africa. It contributes to fields of science, technology, and knowledge production; it draws on earth sciences and the principles of geology, which are combined with the approaches and methodologies of both history and anthropology. The sources that d'Avignon uses to make her case are oral and written, archival and popular, epic and anecdotal, cultural and religious; they include medieval accounts of state formation and disintegration, interviews conducted with orpailleurs and their families, a wide reading of traveler's accounts, archival records, and geological reports; and insights derived from spending a great deal of time, on the ground, with peoples living in Kédougou, a place where d'Avignon first lived as a Peace Corps volunteer and to which she later returned as a researcher and scholar.

It is a rare to read a book that is, at once, innovative in its methodology, provocative in its argument, convincing in its claims and evidentiary foundations, and beautifully written throughout. Historiographically, d'Avignon's book stands as an invitation to a field of study that seems, at least in my view, increasingly focused on urban phenomena, twentieth-century transformations, and tight chronological windows. Ethically, this book testifies to the complex and often moving insights that can be gained from approaching peoples and places, of the past and of the present, with humble curiosity and a profound sense of shared humanity.