Introduction

Making Transparency Visible

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Transparency has become ubiquitous in seemingly every sphere of social, economic, and political life. Despite its pervasiveness and presumed efficacy in business and political discourse, transparency remains a theoretically vague and ethnographically elusive category that occludes more than it reveals. Rather than assuming that transparency is itself transparent, or a programmatic tenet to be implemented or executed, this volume turns the question on its head: What are the technological practices, material qualities, and institutional standards producing transparency in extractive, commodity trading, and agricultural sites? How is transparency certified and regimented by "ethical" and "responsible" businesses, or valued by investors, from auction rooms to sustainability reports?

These questions mirror the shift from the post–Cold War project of transparency as anti-corruption, governmental accountability, and legal access to information, to its more recent trajectory in international commodity trade, sustainability, digitalization, and supply chain governance. In its current instantiation, policy demands for transparency have become an indirect tool in the governance of global supply chains. More acutely, transparency has also reverberated precipitously in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing inflationary environment. Price increases and product shortages in the midst of a supply chain crisis have increased demands for transparency from consumers, governments, and regulatory entities alike, going beyond the discursive attribution of moral attributes *of* transparency and toward an action-oriented call *for* transparency. This sudden exposure of longstanding dependencies and newly revealed supply chain fragilities in global markets has repositioned the centrality of transparency in a context of heightened consumer anxieties and the questions surrounding the efficiency of commodity flows in times of crisis. In effect, definitions of supply chain transparency in sustainability governance have been premised on making certain things visible to

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the protagonists of these processes. This would include "a state in which information is made apparent and readily available to certain actors" (Gardner et al. 2019: 164), "the disclosure of information" (Mol 2010: 132), or "openness and reduced secrecy, garnered through greater availability of information" (Gupta and Mason 2014: 5). Yet, for all the claims that transparency *works*, less attention has been paid to *how* it works, even when it fails to achieve its purported goals.

This volume responds to this problem by examining the political instrumentality and social relevance of transparency through an ethnographic focus on the social, legal, and economic regimes that govern the global supply chains of mineral and agricultural products. Calls for transparency in the mining and agricultural sectors emerged along with the rise of global sustainability politics, especially the UN adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, and the pressure on global corporations to adopt more legible compliance and accountability mechanisms. This demand for transparency in extractive and agrobusiness operations has accompanied the heightened production of natural resources – doubling in the last twenty-five years and poised to increase exponentially to keep pace with the demands of energy transition – as well as its increasingly visible deleterious social and environmental impacts (Shapiro and McNeish 2021: 4). Along with the acceleration of extractivism worldwide, anthropologists, geographers, and sociologists working on and with rural communities impacted by the unchecked expansion of supply chains thus increasingly encounter transparency discourses flowing downward from the very same industries causing social and environmental harms. Often, such claims are relegated to legitimization strategies, and thereby neglect to pay attention to how transparency works and what it actually does. In contrast, management and supply chain research has sought to develop and assess transparency technologies, but without considering how new evaluation instruments and standards or quantification processes that are meant to bring transparency to consumers have been interpreted by those subjected to their implementation. Building from ethnographic studies of transparency, the volume articulates the notoriously slippery analytics of "local" and "global" by examining the mediation practices and technological processes that commodities, actors, and institutions undergo to be deemed transparent. In turn, each chapter describes ethnographically processes of valuation charged with making transparency a global value. As a portable concept connecting material

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objects, agents, forms of expertise, and cultural practices across the world, transparency brings together otherwise dispersed fields of value enacted in processes of disclosure, immediacy, trust, and truth-making. Rather than these dimensions being mutually exclusive, we consider them as never-fully-aligned moments in the making of transparency, and as complementary to the value of transparency.

Moving past the liberal *Geist* and development creed behind the concept (Appel 2019), the book situates transparency as a total social fact in the making of commodities. Inspired by Mauss's attempt to observe how persons, objects, knowledge, and techniques were specifically assembled to form the social, the chapters approach the global value of transparency through an ethnography of the makers of transparency across institutions, markets, and technologies, and in the production of scientific and ethical knowledge. The chapters examine how different actors – industry associations and government agencies, corporate managers and traders, auditors and certifiers, farmers and miners – define and produce transparency as a global value in and through natural commodities. Transparency works and is made visible, we suggest, across the four conceptual moments organizing the volume: disclosure, immediacy, trust, and truth. These notions, which together shape understandings of transparency and how power is diffused through it, frame the ethnographic contributions of this book. The next sections conceptualize the socio-material worlds, practices of epistemic authority, and cultural tensions attached to notions of disclosure, immediacy, trust, and truth as these respectively structure the means and ends, the paradox, the ideologies, and the visibility of transparency. This introduction then discusses how these conceptual moments together assemble transparency as a global value in the context of supply chain capitalism. Finally, we provide an overview of the chapters.

The Means and Ends of Transparency

Coupled with the "demonstrative-revelatory" technological advancements of the early 2000s (Lawrence 2020: 510), the dawn of transparency on a global scale had its original momentum as an idealized guarantor of democratic governance, access to information, and anti-corruption movements (Birchall 2014; Fung et al. 2007; Garsten and De Montoya 2008; Hetherington 2011; Mazzarella 2006). As it was

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transformed under the guise of openness and accountability, political power became increasingly cloaked in opacity and conspiratorial thinking as "the raison d'être of transparency claims" (West and Sanders 2003: 12).

This dynamic of openness and opacity was magnified with mining and agricultural products in a new "grammar of responsibility" (Barnett et al. 2010). Increased public scrutiny, consumer awareness, and market pressure toward environmental and social impact disclosure (e.g., Kalkancı et al. 2016; Maloni and Brown 2006) steered corporations in these sectors to adopt "ethics" as a new market orthodoxy (Dolan and Rajak 2016). To its critics, the corporate social responsibility (CSR) movement responded through virtuous discourses and the theatricality of responsibility, sustainability, and accountability (Benson and Kirsch 2010; Coumans 2011; Rajak 2011), as well as corporate technologies of social engineering and co-option (Kirsch 2015; Verweijen and Dunlap 2021). CSR discourses have saturated the vocabulary of corporations, but the meaning and relational content of CSR are obscure even to those who promote its "implementation" (e.g., Van den Brink et al. 2019: 396–397) and to the agents and engineers in charge of negotiating it (J. M. Smith 2021). While these terms often coalesce in CSR reports, responsible standards, sustainability indexes, or certification schemes, we approach them through the common lens of transparency, put to use both as a means – that is, to assess corporate (ir)responsibility, (un)sustainability, and (un)accountability – and an end – to benefit from an unquestioned global value.

As a means, transparency has been mainly approached in sustainability and supply chain research from the perspective of its capacity to deliver "normative" (participation and the right to know) and "substantive" (environmental protection and effective governance) criteria (Gupta and Mason 2014; Mol 2010: 132). Reasserting the absence of a common definition, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development broadly considers that transparency characterizes a situation of "comprehensive and timely access to information and data that are necessary to hold policymakers, institutions and enterprises accountable for their actions," insisting that "transparency is not an end in itself but rather a precondition for accountability" (UNCTAD 2020: 2). According to this logic, once implemented, transparency is turned into a de facto instrument for governing supply chains and drives transformative expectations in global sustainability.

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And yet, such expectations must also acknowledge that transparency is itself a subject of political and normative conflict rather than a neutral disclosure device deployed to increase accountability, democracy, and participation (Gupta et al. 2020: 85). As a result, transparency is often pluralized to reflect its various orientations to sustainability governance, be it inward (firms' internal management), outward (their impacts), or downward and upward (a view toward its employees or the firm as seen by its subordinates) (Heald 2006).

As an end, transparency has been operationalized through rankings, benchmarks, due diligence procedures, and compliance with standards, all of which are increasingly demanded by investors and firms' shareholders. Various types of transparency are also distinguished by their presumed beneficiaries (citizens, experts, market actors) or their underlying aims (less corruption, increased legitimacy, efficient governance, capital accumulation, abolition of hierarchy) (Tienhaara 2020). Nonetheless, concerns about how these various artifacts of transparency should be implemented tell us little about what transparency means to various publics and actors, how it is constructed, or how it ultimately works, or fails to do so. Although definitions of transparency go relatively unquestioned in supply chain governance, transparency projects are thus necessarily parceled (i.e., what is disclosed to whom) and intermediated (i.e., through acts and artifacts of disclosure).

This dual approach to the means and ends of transparency opens up space for reflection on how the concept structures and is structured by relations of power – that is, how such projects are developed, for and by whom, and with what effects. If transparency can be charged with value in trade relations, it is critical that we understand what is meant by claims to unmediated access to valuable information in attempts to re-embed transparency projects: If our world is one of mediation, then what forms of mediation do we want and need?

Mediation and the Paradox of Transparency

As Koivisto rightly notes, the language of transparency is one of metaphors. With its roots in the Enlightenment, "the very optical feature of seeing through" (Koivisto 2022: 21) allows the metaphorical use of transparency as a manifestation of immediacy. As a metaphor, she argues, transparency can be considered a medium between an

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object and a viewing subject, whose ideal is paradoxically one of immediacy, or an idealized proximity and intimacy. This paradox is further stated by Alloa, who defines transparency as "mediated immediacy" (2018), or Birchall, who considers it an "invisible medium through which content is brought … into the visible realm" (2014: 81–82).

Taking seriously the mediated character of transparency, we depart from a slightly different epistemological tradition to approach the paradox of transparency. Already in his 1881 PhD dissertation, Franz Boas, the "father" of American anthropology, noted that perception was necessarily shaped by the situation of the observer. From this general statement, according to George Stocking (1965: 57), Boas questioned "the very possibility of a general measure of all perceptions or of a general law governing the relationship of stimulus and perception" – that is, the existence of unmediated perception. In his famous article "On Alternating Sounds" (1889), Boas described how "a new sensation is apperceived by means of similar sensations that form part of our knowledge," or, in other words, that experience is mediated by the culture in which someone is socialized. Therefore, immediacy – such as that promised in enlightenment sciences, or now in transparency discourses – is by definition impossible.[1]

The claim that transparency is a process of mediation which incorrectly understands itself to be a process of *disintermediation* – the "paradox of transparency" – is a central idea of this volume, following what Andrea Ballestero describes as the "literal impossibility" of unmediated perception (2012). The challenge here is that moments of disclosure presuppose a process of enclosure (Kockelman 2016) in which the thing revealed is eventually captured and reified. Questioning what Koivisto coins as "the metaphorical authority of transparency" (2022: 5), the ethnographies in this volume attempt to show that it is possible to do the work that transparency projects often seek to do but in a more reflexive way.[2] Each chapter demonstrates

[1] The Boasian genealogy of the paradox of transparency in anthropological literature was suggested by Alex Golub at a workshop held in Geneva in 2019 with all the authors of this volume.

[2] In a collection of anthropological essays, Vaughn and Fisher (2021) bring the question of the specific "witnessing" practices and apparatuses that may reinforce or challenge fundamental understandings of environments, and call into question what they call the mediatization of environmental matters. Such insights

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that more robust claims to epistemic authority imply moving past the self-evidence of the transparency metaphor and building upon ethnographic engagement and longstanding reflections on reflexivity as a condition of anthropological knowledge production, with ethnographic attention paid to the medium of transparency, on the one hand, and acknowledgment of the researcher as a positioned medium, on the other.

As this volume suggests, the paradox of transparency offers a fruitful entry point to investigate transparency beyond the normative and substantive assessment of its implementation. Indeed, any kind of transparency project implies the mediation of numerous actors, institutions, standards, laws, and documents in order to produce the unmediated visibility that transparency proposes. At the same time, ethnographic approaches to transparency have tended to reproduce epistemological frameworks that also have their limits. First, in line with Simmel's sociology of secrecy (1906), transparency has often been construed as the second term of an interactional equation with opacity, implicating a social process of boundary-making. A major issue in such approaches is that dyadic conceptualizations of transparency and opacity, publicity and privacy, disclosure and concealment often result in being both the *explanans* and the *explanandum*. Anthropologists, sociologists, and geographers interested in natural resources and global supply chains have tended to take transparency as an *explanans* of specific forms of production and related cultural practices, and to criticize it as a depoliticizing machine mainly through governmentality thinking. As an *explanandum*, this approach has oriented efforts to reveal and disclose what transparency conceals in binary terms, simultaneously hindering the possibility of analyzing transparency as an emerging value between and beyond predefined boundaries; and, more insidiously for researchers, to reproduce these binaries themselves through the illusion of revealing undisclosed truths.

contribute to highlight the variety of sights and the attuned role of human and nonhuman mediations in producing fragmented, and often contested, views on environmental interventions. Similar concerns are taken up by different contributors to this edited volume. Our approach to transparency is further inspired by Sarah Besky and Alex Blanchette's (2019) expanded conceptualization of both human and more-than-human labor in an attempt to denaturalize the politics of work in its relation to nature.

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Second, in line with Foucault's work on total institutions inspired by Bentham's panopticon, transparency ideologies are often seen as manifestations of discipline and governmentality. They legitimize aspirations to "control at a distance" (Foucault 2008), just as labeling something a "conspiracy" tends to delegitimize it as an inappropriate and inferior form of knowledge. Transparency, in this view, is seen as the counterpart of regime complexity and as an instrument of power, notably shaping lives through big data and algorithms (Besteman and Gusterson 2019) that are increasingly contested by privacy demands, or what Birchall (2021) calls a "right to opacity." Yet, transparency-as-governmentality also potentially reproduces the utopia of disintermediation it seeks to criticize. For example, digital transparency, Flyverbom argues (2016), entails at the same time secrecy and transparency, hiddenness and openness, and is better approached as a "management of visibilities" through digital intermediaries, such as those put forth in blockchain projects, traceability tags, or smart contracts that increasingly populate supply chains (e.g., Bolay 2021; Calvão and Archer 2021). Similarly, calls for making algorithmic systems accountable have grown in response to their perceived opacity and discriminatory practices, despite the limitations and inadequacies of this idealized view of transparency (Ananny and Crawford 2016). This algorithmic transparency is often premised on the desirable idea of understanding how a system works by cracking open its black box, an idea of "complete transparency" that is by itself an "impossible goal" (Crawford 2021: 12). This is in part the effect of the technologically mediated work of transparency, as seen in the case of predictive policing and surveillance (Brayne 2021). These systems hinge at once on artificial intelligence and automated decision-making processes with built-in accountability procedures, while at the same time relying on external third parties that skirt these transparency obligations in collecting and storing data.

The critical point here is that we should not mistake the aspiration of unmediated access to a given object for its mediating technologies; rather, to understand what is transparent requires "attention to the technological foundations and mediations of transparency, such as the techniques and devices used to manufacture transparency" (Flyverbom 2016: 111). Transparency is thus a product of the age of globalization, and a catalyst for organizing, valuing, and (de)legitimizing different forms of knowledge. More than looking at transparency as inherent in

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an object or system, we follow calls to "show instead how these limitations can be starting points for reconstructing accountability for systems that cannot be seen into, held still, or fully traced" (Ananny and Crawford 2016: 13). This collection of ethnographic studies of mining and agricultural commodity production and circulation extends this line of questioning. The chapters examine how miners, farmers, buyers, and sellers of natural commodities create their own theories of knowledge and enactments of sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff and Kim 2009: 120) about transparency in the broader world. How are such practices and knowledges made transparent – that is, how are they made into interpretable representations while appearing immediate to the knower?

Ideologies of Transparency

If the lens of mediation offers suitable conceptual affordances to approach transparency-in-the-making, the broader aim of this volume is to expand this approach to understand how transparency emerged as a global social value. This requires bringing back the ideologies capable of building trust in sociotechnical mediations of transparency. Andrea Ballestero (2012) suggests the notion of transparency ideology, which can be used analogously with "language ideology" and "semiotic ideology," to highlight the ironic imperative of transparency in disavowing the artifice required to create immediacy. Such disavowal can be interpreted in line with what Mazzarella (2006: 489) calls "politics of immediation," whereby the denial of mediation, albeit a constitutive process of social life to make society imaginable and representable, manifests the intensification of a bureaucratic ethos and occurs because it implies distance, intervention, and displacement. Similarly, an account of transparency as a semiotic ideology (cf. Keane 2018) would suggest the need to reveal interiority in a world in which mediation is a constitutive fact of life.

Anthropologists have productively engaged with this contradiction, generating a powerful critique of any claim to "see through" ideologies in order to understand "what's really going on." These ideologies can be considered as a theory of representation which holds that something which is not visible can be made visible to a knower. This often involves bringing something that is distant in time or in space into the contemporary space-time and lifeworld of the knower – something

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that the "free market" is often believed to realize. In other words, transparency promises direct knowledge despite spatial and temporal distance, conveying conspecifics into different sorts of social roles and stereotypes which are differently empowered.[3] In this view, anthropologists of transparency "problematize taken-for-granted ideas about who is observing and who is observed, about the materiality of documents as vessels of knowledge, and, ultimately, about the desirability of transparent arrangements" (Ballestero 2012: 160). In doing so, they hope to examine how transparency is a "political technology" and thus "a form of intervention into a world constituted by relations that can be molded, corrected, and regimented" (160). And like all political technologies meant to build trust, transparency can be used by a variety of actors and in different ways. In contrast with its assumed neutrality in bringing the sight of a subject onto an object, transparency necessarily occurs across antagonistic social fields. Anthropology has fruitfully engaged with some of these dimensions of transparency. For instance, Marilyn Strathern (2000a) opened a vast field of research on audit cultures. Strathern brought attention to processes of "second-order description" in representing the academic field and the growing opposition within it. Beyond education, the concept of audit cultures became central in critical analyses of other social fields, such as CSR, development, or international organizations. Likewise, others contributed to an understanding of the epistemological violence of quantification (Merry 2016) and the instrumental uses of transparency as a tool of neoliberalism (e.g., Rajak 2011; Shore 2008), as well as the undergirding ideologies of secrecy and conspiracy (West and Sanders 2003), in what we might call, after Joseph Masco (2021), an "anthropology of opacity."

If semiotic ideologies speak to the reflexive discourses people have about language and the assumptions they carry about how signs work in the world (Keane 2003), we pluralize transparency ideologies to reveal these contradictions of interiority and distance. This move paves the way for an anthropological approach to transparency that can ultimately reconcile the aspiration for a global value with a desire for

[3] To take an example from a study of diamond trading in Angola, claims of knowledge about "the market" and what "it" is charging for the commodity play a critical role in setting prices (Calvão 2015). Similarly, the ethnic affiliation of gem traders can be analyzed in terms of the trust created by biographic entanglements across space and time (Brazeal 2019).

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an "ethics of invisibility," as in the case of "digital miners" in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, for whom "seeing and transparent visibility were extensions of the colonial gaze and a form of predation" (J. H. Smith 2021: 27).

Seeing Transparency

These reflections should not be limited to subsuming transparency under discursive and visual metaphors of cultural mediation. Transparency projects are also materialized and enacted in documents and procedures, as well as technical – and increasingly digital – devices, whose ordinariness makes them largely invisible, all while being infused with institutional considerations structured upon dyadic oppositions such as transparency/opacity or visibility/invisibility (see Brenneis 2006). Semantics of transparency as they are upheld in sustainability governance can be traced to other governmental practices and have their epistemological roots in modern science's institu tionalization and in the Enlightenment's aspirations for universal truth. Stemming from the optical revolution, dynamics of mediating transparency in science went hand in hand with the development of instruments, documents, and material experiments to expand visibility, whereby the world could be made legible provided that one looked at it correctly (Levitt 2009: 2) – that is, with the right tools and prior knowledge. Similar dynamics unfold in the practice of government, whereby the state is assumed to be able to "see" as long as it deploys adequate subjectifying techniques such as censuses or mapping (Scott 1998). While most "professional visions" (Goodwin 1994; see also Pentimalli and Rémery 2020) explicitly code the world and highlight some of its features at the expense of others, few would claim that their vision should be aimed at transparency.

The premises of the optical revolution established an ocular-centric view that still drives many of the processes examined in this volume, including the capacity to digitally track and trace raw materials, to produce documents for certification and verification, often at the expense of more direct, though less visible, forms of accountability and trust embedded in social relations. The literature on how documents work as objectivity machines (Hoag 2011) and mediators of knowledge (Hull 2012; Riles 2006) provides striking illustrations of how "transparent" access to information is embedded in objects and

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sociotechnical networks. Not unlike Latour's (1991) reading of Shapin and Schaffer's *Leviathan and the Air-Pump* (Shapin and Shaffer 1985), truths – scientific, but also legal – are experimentally produced in processes of mediation, whereby cuts are made in hybrid networks of humans and nonhumans whose stabilized forms work as evidence for scientific or legal truth claims upon which representations of transparency are grounded.

When applied to the making and circulation of natural commodities, transparency is geared in particular to spatial representations defined as "supply chains" or "production networks," as well as "sustainability networks" (Ponte and Cheyns 2013). Across these "chains" and "networks," raw materials traverse what can be called, after Mazzarella, "nodes of mediations" to designate "sites at which the compulsions of institutional determination . . . come into always provisional alignment in the service of different [transparency] projects from the grass roots to corporate boardrooms" (Mazzarella 2004: 352).

Earlier, we suggested that transparency is a total social fact in the making of global commodities. To grasp this holistic perspective, the chapters in this volume examine a variety of dispersed yet interlinked sites, including banks, laboratories, trading houses, centers of expertise, courts of law, government offices, NGOs, and corporations. Empirically building upon such siloed sites, the temporal and spatial dispersion of the total social fact of transparency is also susceptible to a Latourian analysis. Transparency can be decomposed as a series of mediations between a distant location and "oligoptica" – sites in which "narrow but precise views" are manufactured and are represented in transparent "panoramas" (Latour 2005: 173–190). Building upon the spatialities that constitute actor–network theory, Oppenheim (2007: 478) adds that "oligoptica" and "panoramas" describe mediations "in a summation of other places, times, and agencies through which a local site [oligopticon] is made to do something." This something, in the case of this volume, includes the production of ontological truth claims toward a broader representation (or panorama) of transparency. This has methodological benefits since oligoptica are the exact opposite of (utopian) panoptica, as they exist concretely as investigable sites (a laboratory, an NGO, a government office, a trading house). Seeing transparency as it is traced across these sites offers an alternative to the individual contextualization of different transparency projects within their own institutional and political agendas. In other words, an

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ethnographic focus on processes of transparency-in-the-making rather than transparency-as-something-else (e.g., as governmentality or disclosure) allows us to analytically overcome the fragmented nature of transparency in its already institutionalized forms.[4] These are representations that illustrate on a wider scale the inevitable status of "secondary-order description" of transparency projects that has already been pointed out by Strathern (2000b).

As different scholars of so-called algorithmic transparency have reminded us, the problem may not lie with the perceived or assumed opacity or inscrutability of these systems, to which transparency would serve as a panacea (Amoore 2020: 5). Instead, focusing on sites of mediation (or oligoptica) opens up the possibility of understanding the shared or contested practices and semiotic processes occurring across dispersed endeavors, sites, and frameworks, connected nonetheless by material flows, semantic repertoires, or forms of expertise. Much like digital algorithms become "ethicopolitical" entities increasingly "implicated in new regimes of verification, new forms of identifying a wrong or of truth telling in the world" (Amoore 2020: 6), we need to go beyond seeing transparency *in* transparency; instead, we should "look across" these assemblages as complex "sociotechnical systems" to understand not how they contain but how they enact what makes them accountable (Ananny and Crawford 2016: 2).

Toward a Global Ethnography of Transparent Commodities

Acknowledging that transparency is a global value suggests paying attention to how transparency projects materially organize and semiotically regiment the global production and circulation of commodities across local settings. The field of sustainability governance in particular has seen a proliferation of transparency initiatives to monitor increasingly complex global supply chains, ushering in the promise of an era of unmediated visibility, increased participation and inclusion, and enhanced efficiency (Gardner et al. 2019; Grimard et al.

[4] This is manifest, for instance, in assessments of the degree of its implementation against stabilized versions of transparency standards, codes, procedures, and definitions of the visible and the invisible. These would come closer to transparency as "panorama" in Latour's phrasing, which is the claim to see everything while at the same time seeing nothing, since panoramas are essentially displayed grand pictures of what they claim to see (Latour 2005: 273).

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2017; Sarfaty 2015; Sauer and Hiete 2020). The recent spread of transparency in international trade and corporate management illustrates the enmeshment of supply chain capitalism in most spheres of life (Tsing 2009) along with the growing use of extractivism to describe processes of harvesting the earth's surface and its subsoil (Gudynas 2009; Ye et al. 2019) and the "social wealth" of everyday human interactions and cooperation (Mezzadra and Neilson 2017). Agriculture and mining – that is, food and mineral supply chains procuring natural commodities – are the focus of this book because they share the extractivist process that has precipitated sustainability concerns in recent years. The violent logics of extractivism, understood as "taking resources without reciprocity nor stewardship" (Shapiro and McNeish 2021: 20; see also Dunlap and Jakobsen 2020), are increasingly noticed and denounced in scientific scholarship and by the wider public. Indeed, while extractivism expands and intensifies globally, so does its contestation (Kröger 2015; Willow 2018) and the greater visibility of its social and environmental impacts (Esty 2004; Gupta and Mason 2014).

The chapters draw primarily from mining or farming as social processes, sharing a focus on "raw" materials to assess the ambiguous valuation of these objects and their qualities.[5] Complementing an already rich literature on the momentum of extraction, the book's contributions are interested in how natural commodities are interpreted and valued as they move away from the site where they were first harvested. Our concern is less with the circulation of commodities themselves (Appadurai 1986) than with the way transparency regimes structure this circulation. By focusing on moments and processes of mediation toward disclosure, immediacy, trust, and truth in the making of transparent commodities, we render transparency observable, allowing researchers to identify the connections and power relations between specific sites, actors, institutions, and technologies across global supply chains.

Often dubbed with positive connotations of ethicality, responsibility, and sustainability, the huge number of initiatives that are meant to

[5] This is not to suggest that these qualities are valued solely at their initial stage of production or harvesting. As Alex Blanchette (2020) demonstrates for the US factory farm, it is at the initial stages of the industrialized pork complex that a standardized pig – and life itself – emerges. It is to these contested but defining processes of valuation that this volume seeks to contribute.

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bring more transparency to agriculture and mining supply chains vary greatly in scope, focus, and mechanisms of enforcement. Initiatives such as the voluntary principles on security and human rights in mining merely provide guiding standards to companies, while a regulation such as the US Dodd–Frank Act seeks to tackle the risk of conflict financing through mandatory due diligence. Certification schemes such as the Kimberley Process have become mandatory to trade diamonds, while fair trade and organic certifications operate on a voluntary basis. Traceability mechanisms are increasingly requested by accrediting bodies to access licit markets, while the conduct of traceability is mainly outsourced to contractors specialized in giving credence to corporate claims of "responsibility." Despite the heterogeneous natures of these initiatives, they share the premise that "supply chain transparency" is considered a *sine qua non* to reach their purported accountability aims (Gardner et al. 2019), to prove the authenticity of their sustainability claims, and to further value them on the markets. In relative contradiction to discourses on advances in sustainability governance, contemporary analyses of global supply chains demonstrate heightened marginalization (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019), invisibility (Sassen 2014), and precarity (Tsing 2015). Rather than dismissing transparency as a smokescreen for neoliberal capitalism, the essays in this volume engage head-on with notions of transparency in order to better understand its status as a global value that numerous actors construct, negotiate, mobilize, and contest in their daily lives.

Taking stock of the inevitably mediated and parceled out character of transparency projects and their shared connection to a global value, the essays in this volume collectively propose a theory of transparency as a quality being worked through series of mediations toward *disclosure*, *immediacy*, *trust*, and *truth*. Each of these concepts manifests successive moments as well as various – and sometimes contradictory – practices in the making of transparent commodities.

Disclosure refers to the processes of making certain things, actors, and processes visible in trading processes. *Immediacy* entails the discourses and practices of expertise used to perform unmediated access to what is being disclosed. *Trust* points to the relational and technological aspects of mediating immediacy and the distributed credence of accountability claims in politics and bureaucracies. *Truth*, finally, addresses the ways in which transparency projects seek to make ontological claims on

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nature and sustainability incontestable by (re)ordering socio-material worlds through legal frameworks and sociotechnical devices.

By offering a holistic view of the making of transparent commodities through the lens of these structuring concepts, the volume hypothesizes that transparency is construed in the linkages between valuation practices, technical expertise, bureaucratic legibility, and narratives of truth and ignorance. Accordingly, the contributors' efforts to interrogate the making of transparency as moments of *disclosure*, *immediacy*, *trust*, and *truth* facilitate a comparative ethnography of how transparency works, not through the lens of predefined, isolated variables, but from the perspective of transparency as a total social fact that both produces and is produced by various actors and institutions. These concepts relate to four complementary dimensions of the production of transparency, which enable the comparative establishment of transparency within a broader system of value (see Graeber 2001: 13–15). The value of transparency, in other words, can be made perceptible only in relation to other terms in a system of meaningful distinction.

Overview of Themes and Chapters

The volume seeks to answer the following questions: How is transparency regimented, standardized, or institutionalized by traders, international regulators, evaluators, and managers? What are the technical, aesthetic-sensory, and material conditions that enable the discourse and practice of transparency? What power relations sustain, or undermine, the emergence of transparency as a global social and economic value? What political projects, forms of violence, and practices of inclusion and exclusion do such endeavors establish and legitimate across production and consumption? What makes specific commodities transparent and ethical – or, by the same token, opaque and unethical? Rather than describing how transparency is implemented, the chapters in this book scrutinize the different ways in which it is constructed in moments of disclosure, immediacy, trust, and truth, thereby illuminating its various, sometimes contentious, and often unintended effects along with the pervasive appropriation of nature by expanding supply chains.

Disclosure

The first part of the book examines how ideas, technologies, and materials about transparency are strategically appropriated, valued,

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and actively integrated as semiotic repertoires in trading processes. For an object to be understood and valorized as transparent, and possibly ethical, in economic exchange, we suggest that it must pass through frameworks of semiotic engagement that make certain qualities visible to interested publics (buyers, governments, citizens). For instance, trade secrets require a demonstrable commercial value to be qualified as secrets. Similarly, acts of disclosure legally convert social values into commercial ones. As the chapters show, disclosure is not necessarily opposed to secrecy; rather, it works alongside opaque exchanges in ambivalent trade relations. We grapple with conventional studies of face-to-face exchanges in so-called "traditional" local markets alongside studies of global market institutions and the bodily, performative, and semiotic elements of financial practices. Therefore, we conceptualize the production and consumption of transparency in practices and discourses of disclosure as they unfold in the regulation of trade, to highlight the power dynamics undergirding competing definitions of transparency.

In a historical account of the state-led reform of the tea industry in postcolonial India, Sarah Besky analyzes how the emergence of Indian auction centers established by the state contributed to make visible the workings and infrastructures of the tea trade. The reform brought competing definitions of transparency and practices of disclosure to a context of competition on global markets between the UK and its former colony. While market transparency was upheld as a guarantor of the free market by British regulatory institutions, notwithstanding opacity in the trade itself, Indian auction centers contested this view of transparency. Transparency, as construed by Indian regulators, allowed the state – through its intermediary position between producers and consumers – to better control and govern the trade. Reminiscent of more recent initiatives promoting ethical certifications, auction centers worked as a technology allowing potential buyers to look inside the sensory qualities of tea offers. Competing and changing views of transparency, according to Besky, manifest a hidden tension between the quality of tea as a product and the quality of the market itself, which recent attempts to re-spatialize the trade through digital platforms seek to merge.

Matthew Archer explores the relationship between transparency and sustainability in discourses around corporate sustainability and sustainable finance, in which transparency is understood as the disclosure of information about companies' social and environmental performance. Understood as such, Archer asks who determines what

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counts as relevant enough to be measured and reported, and who decides that the information disclosed is sufficiently detailed to be trusted as evidence of transparency. And, in turn, which actors are trusted to connect an assessment of transparency to a claim of sustainability? The chapter argues that the reliance on transparency as a means to achieve sustainability has created an approach to sustainability where transparency is taken as evidence of sustainability itself – that is, transparency is no longer a means to an end, but an end in and of itself.

Nethra Samarawickrema examines the role of secrets in the Indian Ocean sapphire trade, where exchange is based on arbitrage. What are the ethical frames within which certain forms of secrecy are permissible and expected? From emic notions of what it means to conceal and reveal knowledge, Samarawickrema illuminates gem traders' conceptions of ethical conduct in relation to secrecy. The chapter asks how transparency is conceptualized in relation to a trade where concealment and disclosure are folded into the embodied practices that make up everyday modalities of negotiation, brokerage, and arbitrage. Reading trading secrets as a part of the craft of trade, the chapter reframes the assumption that a lack of transparency amounts to deception and examines instead how concealment may be imbued with ethical concerns too.

Immediacy

The second part of the book takes inspiration from studies of audit cultures that render transparency legible. This allows us, in turn, to conceptualize the production of transparency across the realms of technical expertise and epistemic authority, including their contestation through strategic ignorance. This approach to transparency addresses the paradoxes of immediacy claims and offers an alternative to the all-pervasive thinking about governmentality. In so doing, the authors present an ethnographic instantiation of the instabilities and the predatory dimensions implicated in projects of disintermediation.

Brian Brazeal points out one recurring paradox of responsible sourcing projects whereby people may do honest and ethical business that is illegal while transparency is weaponized against them by powerful actors seeking more direct access to natural commodities. Drawing upon multisided research on the extraction and trade of rubies, Brazeal empirically reminds us that transparency is a technical claim that is

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often mistaken for an ethical one. This ambiguity is particularly salient in Brazeal's depiction of responsible sourcing experts such as consultants, compliance officers, and CSR managers, who mediate access to artisanal ruby miners' knowledge and production. The expert knowledge they produce, while infused with "good-faith" ethical concerns, enters companies as intel to further expand coercive strategies, whose outcomes may sometimes be dramatic.

The emergence of digital transparency is the focus of Filipe Calvão and Emanuel Hermann's chapter. What happens when the promise of unmediated transparency meets the impossibility of disclosure? Faced with the growth in digital technologies for tracking and tracing mineral commodities, the chapter assesses the value of technologies modeled after the blockchain ledger and the role of organizations promoting digital-based certification technologies for mineral supply chain management. Based on research in the Democratic Republic of Congo's cobalt mines of Kolwezi and in mining sites partnered with De Beers's GemFair program in Sierra Leone, the chapter examines first how transparency permeates both resources – cobalt, a critical component that enhances the performance of lithium batteries, and diamonds, an icon of hyper-consumption – in the broader digital turn in the extractive industries. Second, the chapter looks at this digital turn as an attempt to introduce disintermediated trust in certification mechanisms formerly reliant on third-party verification. It suggests that digital transparency operates through practices of concealment, even as it is represented as the technological pinnacle of accountability.

Finally, Sam Shuman explores the precarious position of diamond brokers in the context of an emerging transparency regime enabled by standardized diamond certificates, pricing lists, and e-commerce platforms. The ethnography challenges dominant conceptualizations of disintermediation in global supply chains, the so-called tendency to "cut out the middlemen." Rising transparency infrastructures in the diamond trade do not render diamond brokers obsolete, Shuman argues, but inform the constitutive role of strategic ignorance as a form of expertise both in brokerage and in transparency.

Trust

In the third part, the chapters address the political projects and competing understandings of sovereignty, democracy, and accountability

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that the fabrication of transparent commodities enables. They examine the relational and technological structures mobilized to build trust and distribute credence to accountability claims in politics and bureaucracies. As Corsín Jiménez puts it (2011: 178), trust figures as an engine of epistemic distance compression, collapsing knowledge, responsibility, and relationships into one single social form. Unraveling the politics and technologies conflated in representations of trust helps the chapters move beyond normative dichotomies of transparency and secrecy, publicity and privacy, ethics and corruption. While transparency is often presented as a remedy to so-called trust crises, especially in markets and states, or in value and sovereignty, the contributions ethnographically describe the changing meanings, beliefs, and instrumental uses of these terms in political projects of trust-making at various scales.

Elizabeth Ferry examines three institutional endeavors to produce trust about the value of gold and transparency in market and state. This ethnography investigates three specific clusters of transparency – certification schemes, blockchain technologies, and verification performances by central banks – and seeks to produce trust about the possible commensuration of gold and transparency. Ferry considers gold and transparency as global values that actors in different markets seek to align. This process is necessarily unstable, Ferry shows, for both gold and transparency are engaged in competitive processes of value-making in which each term of the equation should stand as a stable and uncontested referent to the other.

Proposing a reflexive approach to sight-dominated cultures in research and politics, Les Field's chapter offers an alternative approach to the transparency–sovereignty nexus through an analysis of Greenland's nation-building project in the context of climate change and a future extraction-based economy. Transparency, Field proposes, is a multifold political project to look through varying lenses not only at the past and present, as is often presumed, but also at the future. Extractivist prospects in agriculture, rare earth elements, aluminum, uranium, and ruby mining convey competing lenses, and attuned transparencies, that are derived as much from the materiality of those materials as from the political futures they support.

Andrew Walsh, moving away from the Malagasy sapphire mines on which he long worked, shifts our attention to the emerging aid projects that crop up in their vicinity. These aid projects are based on do-it-

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yourself (DIY) principles, offering a side perspective on transparency and accountability initiatives (TAIs) through their permeation throughout the development and aid industry. Drawing upon the seeming incompatibility of TAIs and DIY aid, Walsh's contribution questions the fetishized calculative rationalities of transparency from the perspective of those who are supposed to benefit from it. While DIY aid projects may be looked upon suspiciously by dominant players and large donors as they are not subject to TAIs, the ethnography points out that they are nevertheless embedded in social relationships of trust and mutual accountability, which may indeed discourage the sort of transparency promoted by TAIs.

Truth

The last section of the volume frames transparency in between ethical discourses of truth and the materiality of the commodity itself. Drawing from sociological and anthropological work on materiality and qualities, as well as science and technology studies, contributions examine the network of actors defining and negotiating through sociotechnical devices and legal frameworks the "true" qualities of commodities. (For a discussion of the expert appraisal and meanings of qualities, see Besky [2020].) Thinking about truth, as Mulla recalls (2021), cannot be separated from thinking about responsibility – that is, asking "to which collectivities we belong, and to whom we owe our responsibility." This dimension is made increasingly salient by the consumption of extractivist products of which "ethical" diamonds are an iconic example (Bell 2023). By scrutinizing how transparency projects reorder socio-material worlds and hierarchically organize normative frameworks to make ontological claims on nature and sustainability incontestable, this last set of contributions questions the assumed relation between ethicality, sustainability, and transparency in the regulation and distribution of responsibilities attached to the extraction of rents from nature.

In an ethnography of the instruments and aspirations of Indian rice organic certification, Shaila Seshia Galvin questions how transparency works as a semiotic technology in the active production of "organic" as a quality endowed with a particular truth. Key parts of the "game of revelation" Seshia Galvin describes are the sociotechnical devices of digital compliance systems and tagged traceability. In performing the

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fantasy of immediation, such devices obscure their own crucial role of mediator in the certification process. The resulting truth regime of organic certification, the chapter argues, connects not only with practices of truth-telling, but with the actual making of truth backed with new forms of evidence and inspection that sustain and explain the power of transparency both as a value and as a form of action.

Drawing on ethnographic research among social activists and corporate managers, Matthieu Bolay's chapter investigates the contentious role of Swiss gold refineries in conflating material, social, and legal procedures against responsibility standards that permit the licit trade of bullion on international markets. Looking at the work of entangling and disentangling legal frameworks together with the socio-material purification of gold, Bolay's contribution analyzes how different veridictions on transparency are produced, contested, and valued. In particular, notions of ownership and provenance that are central to the authorization of accountability claims are given different meanings by shifting the situation of importing gold in different normative frameworks, such as industry "responsible sourcing" standards and certifications, financial surveillance and customs regulations, and freedom of information laws. Accordingly, these legal entanglements frame gold as a material commodity, as a liquid monetary asset, or as a digital dataset. As a veridiction project, Bolay argues, transparency does not necessarily reveal undisclosed truths but rather establishes new truths.

Sarah Osterhoudt, finally, analyzes some of the paradoxes of organic certification. Building upon an ethnography of vanilla organic certification in Madagascar, the chapter addresses how multiple knowledges, scales, and epistemologies of transparency come into play in the certification process. While seeking to bring transparency to the farming process and trade intermediaries to make organic products morally desirable in markets, certification itself operates largely outside the scope of transparency – at least from the perspective of the vanilla producers it certifies. The emphasis on written knowledge to enact transparency and traceability, while deemed more capable to cross scales, inevitably undermines other forms of transparency. Numerically correct counting does not align with socially correct counting, just like written trade agreements weaken the local accountability of verbal contracts. In organic certification, framing

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transparency as exclusively morally driven forms part of the power apparatus of these projects. It obscures the underlying forms of economic, social, and political work that certification does, as well as the role of these programs as intermediaries themselves, extracting profits from the vanilla supply chain.

* * *

Through these conceptual moments, the book explores the social, material, political, and technological conditions underpinning the production of transparency as a total social fact. In doing so, the contributions do not seek to connect disparate geographic points in supply chains; rather, they describe emerging forms of mediation charged with enacting transparency across a commodity's lifespan. As a traveling concept, transparency connects distinct networks of material objects, agents, and forms of expertise in nonlinear paths. The movement, and impasses, between them are as vital as the sites themselves. This approach conceptually renews our understanding of transparency in a context where supply chain capitalism encounters digitization and ecological emergency. If each chapter examines how transparency is defined and produced, taken together they offer a nuanced and situated approach to this process by introducing a plethora of relevant actors whose daily activities actually make transparency.

By framing moments of disclosure, immediacy, trust, and truth as inherent in the making of transparency as a total social fact, this volume identifies the construction of a global value, moving beyond its conventional opposition to secrecy or opacity. Through the eyes, practices, and perspectives of the makers of transparency, the chapters mobilize the networks of production, trade, and verification as a rejoinder to studies of consumption. Importantly, this volume does this at a moment when new technologies of production (e.g., synthetic) and verification (e.g., blockchain, digitally mediated traceability) are transforming imaginaries of nature and consumers' expectations of transparency, as well as producers', traders', and regulators' practices. Asking *How Transparency Works* beyond its development creed allows for a better understanding of the social and political relevance of transparency and its contradictory effects in the politics and practices of actors unevenly positioned across global supply chains.

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