The Eyes of The World: The Mining and Regulation of “Digital Minerals” in the Eastern DR Congo

Taken as a whole, my work shows how an extractive economy in tantalum, tin, and tungsten (referred to in NGO circles as the “3 Ts”) shapes experiences and understandings of space, time, and value in the Eastern DR Congo. I offer an opening into this work by juxtaposing the life and history of a world-famous artisanal mine called Bisie to a new conflict minerals tracking scheme devised by a consortium of tin smelters working with high tech companies like Sony, Intel, and Motorola. The smelters, called the International Tin Research Institute, promise to use digital technology to ensure that our iPhones and other digital devices are “conflict free.” In the Eastern DR Congo, Bisie and the tracking schemes each became very different models of peace-making and unmaking—each entailing radically different assumptions about the meanings of conflict, technology, artisanal and industrial mining, and the ontology of resources, amongst many other things. Some Congolese go so far as to argue that the shutdown of artisanal mining in 2010 and the subsequent implementation of tracking schemes were a direct response to the artisanal, democratic “movement” that characterized Bisie. In showing how digitized tracking schemes work, and ultimately fail, to decontextualize, simplify, and immobilize the improvisation and movement that characterized Bisie and places like it, I put the tracking scheme (a technological fix) and Bisie (a social and ontological improvisation) into conversation with each other. In the process, I highlight the intertwined themes of temporalities, information, and visibilities in the world of Congolese artisanal mining.

Smith received his PhD in social-cultural anthropology from the University of Chicago (2002), and was a Rockefeller Research Fellow at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame from 2003-04. His research interests include The Cultural Politics of Time, Artisanal Mining and Resource Extraction, "Development" Vernaculars; and Religion and the Occult in Africa. He is the author of Bewitching Development: Witchcraft and the Reinvention of Development in Neoliberal Kenya (University of Chicago Press, Series in the Practices of Meaning, 2008) and co-editor of Displacing the State: Religion and Conflict in Neoliberal Africa (University of Notre Dame Press). He is currently conducting ethnographic research on the social life and political economy of coltan mining and its regulation in DR Congo, with generous support from NSF.