MALLEABLE TERRITORIES: THE POLITICS AND EFFECTS OF MINING GOVERNANCE IN POST-SOVIET GEORGIA

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Abstract

On December 13, 2014, the Republic of Georgia’s central government made a rapid series of decisions behind closed doors. These legislative moves allowed RMG Gold, the Russian-owned mining company operating in Georgia’s southern Mashavera Valley, to destroy the archaeological site at Sakdrisi-Kachgariani – the oldest gold mine ever discovered and a national cultural heritage site. The government’s decision followed more than a year of contentious struggle among competing political factions, yet in the end the mining work moved forward and continues expanding today. RMG’s destruction of Sakdrisi was just one event within Georgia’s broader political transition, de-centralizing resource governance toward corporate interests through a territorially based system of extraction licenses. This dissertation investigates the political geographies of Georgia’s resource governance transition, analyzing the politics and effects of mining governance in this post-Soviet market-oriented democracy. I analyze this topic using a mixed methods approach, combining semi-structured interviews, discourse and textual analysis, and a spatial database of mining sites throughout the former Soviet Union. My analysis illustrates how these political practices contribute to the broader geopolitical shifts within the country and across the region, occurring in part through the narratives and embodied experiences of people living near the Sakdrisi-Madneuli mining complex. Through this investigation I argue that the Mashavera Valley’s “malleable territories” – my phrase for this territory’s flexible and governable nature, especially as it relates to mineral governance, mining, and the government of people and things – emerge from a range of political practices, geopolitical imaginations, and material experiences to reshape the political spaces of Georgia and the South Caucasus. Together these findings illustrate how environmental struggles and practices of resource governance contribute to broader shifting power geometries and a lived vision of geopolitics.
MALLEABLE TERRITORIES:  
THE POLITICS AND EFFECTS OF MINING GOVERNANCE IN POST-SOVIET GEORGIA

by

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Chapter I – Introduction: Situating Sakdrisi

1. Introduction: Situating Sakdrisi

A 2014 BBC headline dubbed the conflict “Georgia’s Gold Mine Dilemma” (Demytrie 2014) while a local Georgian news outlet cried of “Sakdrisi Gold Fever” (Burchuladze 2015; see Figure 1). Others reported that “Strike-Hit Gold Mine Spills Polluted Water into River” (Civil.Ge 2014) and “Georgia Opt for Gold Mining at Protected Historical Site” (Rimple 2014).

The metal mines of the Mashavera River Valley near Georgia’s southern border with Armenia (see Figure 2) have supplied a source of extractive wealth for powerful actors in Georgia since the Soviet regime opened the first modern copper mine here in the mid-1970s. The operations developed increasing economic significance in the years following the 2003 Rose Revolution as the government continues rolling out a series of dramatic post-Soviet reforms, first under Mikheil Saakashvili’s United National Movement and then the Georgian Dream coalition led by Bidzina Ivanashvili and his successors. This new era of reform and intensified economic
development allows Georgia to claim relatively high international rankings in political freedom and human development – both the highest in the South Caucasus – as well as ease of doing business, in which Georgia ranks sixth globally (Freedom House 2018; The World Bank 2019a; UNDP 2018). Many Georgians welcome the relative stability reforms have brought following the initial era of post-Soviet independence and political chaos (Cheterian 2011; Jones 2013; King 2009).

Yet aggressive efforts to reshape life, economy, and government in Georgia have met political resistance in many directions and venues. Forces of resistance and domination play out distinctly in the Mashavera Valley, as practices governing natural resources, protecting environmental health, and developing economic opportunities intersect in residents’ lives. The

*Figure 2: Sakdrisi locator map (Map credit: Author)*
effects of uneven development appear starkly here (Smith 1984), though at times the Valley’s political contours follow surprising patterns.

Global histories of gold and copper extraction run as deep as the fault lines lacing the Caucasus mountains, and produce violence of all sorts. Empires have risen and fallen by hunting, extracting, hoarding, and fighting for gold. Valuable veins carry histories far more powerful than their inert contents might initially suggest. The Earth’s varied golden geologies drive changing geographies of conflict and development, settlement and expansion. Gold’s social and material power manifests visibly in Georgia’s southern landscape.

For example, if you stand on the edge of the Dzedvebi Plateau and know where to look, you begin to see such veins cut back through time – past the economic precarity of many in the region today, beyond the small but thriving mining town of the late Soviet era, further back than even St. Nino’s adoption of Christianity early in the 4th century AD. Archaeologists have worked methodically in the river valley for roughly two decades, unearthing a network of settlements and small-scale industrial facilities spanning several thousand years and extending beyond the 5th millennia BC (Stöllner and Gambashidze 2016). The international team of scholars eat Georgian *khachapuri* cheese bread while digging, scraping, sweating under the sun and working late into the night cataloging ten thousand stone and metal tools in their database. They have recreated Neolithic and Bronze Age tools to test their hypotheses in action: softening rock with fire, pummeling it with rock axe heads, grinding it into dust for panning and scouring. These tools and practices – alongside the presence of small winding rock tunnels, complex adult and juvenile burial grounds, and mundane traces of human life including midden heaps and well-used pot shards – offer telltale signs of the world’s oldest known gold mine. The Mashavera Valley holds
sites key to understanding humanity’s long history of exchanging shiny yellow metal for agricultural products, weapons, prestige, and anything else we deem valuable.

In my dissertation I focus on more contemporary events unfolding through and in relation to the Mashavera’s rich landscape. On December 13, 2014, the Georgian government made a rapid series of decisions behind closed doors that allowed the mining company operating here, RMG Gold, to destroy the main archaeological site in the valley at Sakdrisi-Kachgariani (Civil.ge 2014; GYLA 2015). The government’s decision followed more than a year of political protests, counter-protests, labor strikes, social media campaigns and attacks, legislative decisions and reversals, and media coverage both local and international. Protestors opposed the region’s ongoing history of mining operations, which release dangerous toxins into the ecosystems of the agricultural region, in addition to the loss of global cultural heritage that occurred when the Russian-owned gold mining company destroyed the Sakdrisi archaeological site. Meanwhile, the mining complex is nearly the only major source of employment in the region beyond subsistence agriculture, leaving the approximately 75,000 people living in the surrounding municipalities marginalized against the company’s entrenched political and economic sway (GeoStat.Ge 2018). Metal mining practices here have produced a complex and uneven political geography of discourses, imaginations, and material flows in Georgia’s Mashavera Valley.

Environmental conflicts such as these have proven central to political histories throughout the former Soviet region. For example, ecological activism played a significant role in the Soviet regime’s collapse, including driving nationalist movements toward autonomy and providing crucial pressure points in eroding the Soviet government’s legitimacy during the late 1980s and early 1990s (Breyfogle 2018; Davidov 2015; Dawson 1996, 2000; Josephson et al. 2013). Environmental tensions continue into the post-Soviet era and throughout much of the
broad region, simultaneously shaping ecologies, political relations, and economic trends (Agyeman and Ogneva-Himmelberger 2009; Bond 1994; Coumel and Elie 2013; Davidov 2013; Gel’man and Marganiya 2010; Henry 2010). Georgia is somewhat unique among the formerly Soviet countries, though, not just for its notable development achievements but for the trajectory the government has taken to get there. As I elaborate in my dissertation, the government adopts a distinctly libertarian system of auctioning off exploration, commodification, and extraction rights for all natural resources, including forests, water, hydrocarbons, minerals, and metals (Quinn 2017). Like most license and concession systems (Bridge 2007; Côte and Korf 2018; Geenen and Verweijen 2017), Georgia’s is territorially demarcated. However, territorial practices present unique tensions in Georgia, as nearly 20% of the country’s territory is internationally contested as the de facto breakaway states Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Kolossov and O’Loughlin 2011).

Georgia’s territorial contests figure centrally in both the region’s domestic politics and broader international geopolitical discourse (Browning 2018; Suslov 2018a; Toal 2017), ensuring territorial practices here exist as relatively exceptional yet also broadly edifying of the deep connections among resource geographies, territorial practices, and networks of power relations. As a result, Georgia provides a crucial case for understanding the relationships between territory and extraction under newly emergent forms of capitalist governance. Through its recent history of reforms, Georgia in some ways offers a natural experiment in neoliberal devolution, rolling economic and environmental activities away from visible centers of state power in unprecedented fashion. Meanwhile it is also an emerging democracy with a recent history of authoritarian-leaning leadership and violence. The country is also rich in resources and cultural heritage, generating increased risks for contestation between capital accumulation and cultural heritage preservation. This is especially so as the recent volatility and growth in gold commodity
prices and resulting global intensification of gold extraction touch down around the world following the 2008 financial crisis. These forces all collide around the case of the new gold mine at Sakdrisi, emerging from a history of both Soviet copper extraction throughout the region and ancient mining.

My dissertation therefore addresses the complex political geographies both emerging from and driving the series of events that destroyed the ancient Sakdrisi site; continue delivering both profits and poison to the Mashavera Valley’s people and ecosystems; and reshape divisions and alliances among local populations. “Georgia’s Gold Mine Dilemma” (Demytrie 2014) originally drew my attention to Sakdrisi, yet apropos headlines only hint at the complexities of economic development, environmental activism, archaeological knowledge, and political identifications entangled in this landscape.

Through my research I therefore analyze the knot of power, people, and resources tied together here by focusing on three primary research questions that explicitly interrogate the region’s dynamic political geographies:

1. How do protesters and supporters of the Sakdrisi gold mine and other mining projects in Georgia develop their claims in the debate over the territories’ futures, including their particular geopolitical and ecological narratives, imaginations, and identities?
2. In what ways do non-state actors shape geopolitical narratives and practices at the site of conflict?
3. How do non-state actors’ perspectives compare to broader political attitudes about territory, political identity, and natural resources in Georgia’s transitioning society?

Resting beneath each question lies a fourth: What does the Sakdrisi mining project mean for people living here, and how has its expansion transpired?

In asking these questions, I engage with long-held post-structural traditions in political geography and political ecology to investigate the power relations and discursive practices – simultaneously material and meaningful – that produce and constrain political possibilities in
Georgia’s contemporary system of resource governance. To do so, I adopt a mixed-methods approach, driven primarily by interviews and supported by a range of other research methods and empirics, including participant observation, discursive and textual analysis, and investigating secondary quantitative datasets.

My analysis reveals three primary empirical findings of the event-ful geographies unfolding in southern Georgia. First, elite social networks and historically embedded political relations in post-Soviet Georgia profoundly shape the country’s systems of resource valuation, rent extraction, and governance, through a process I term political alchemy. Second, the use of territorial governing practices here drives distinct shifts in the geopolitical imaginations of people living within and proximal to the mining complex, revealing that RMG is mining the homeland. Finally, the Sakdrisi-Madneuli mining complex’s local political geographies develop from a series of distinct, sub-state borderings, forming a metaphorical extractive archipelago. The Mashavera’s extractive spaces emerge distinctly within Georgian state territory, yet through corporate relations and socio-material practices also connect to other mining sites throughout the former Soviet Union. Together, my findings illustrate how the politics and effects of mining in post-Soviet Georgia stem from an assemblage of practices and technologies governing lands, political subjects, and their environmental resources together – a collection of malleable territories. These findings illustrate how environmental struggles and practices of resource governance contribute to broader shifting power geometries and a lived vision of geopolitics.

This opening chapter situates my dissertation project as it relates to the Sakdrisi case I have briefly introduced above. I next define the literatures I engage in the course of the dissertation, before clarifying the specific methods and approach I put to work in my research. I
conclude by outlining the remainder of the dissertation and summarizing the subsequent chapters.

2. Politicizing Environments: Literature and Framing

My dissertation primarily draws from and contributes to the political geography and political ecology literatures. I combine these broadly defined approaches to understand how environments and natural resources become politicized through diverse spatial practices by individuals and institutions. To do so, I also engage with scholarship spanning cultural geography, anthropology, area studies, and science and technology studies. While I divide the following scholarship along thematic and sub-disciplinary lines, I also adopt a decidedly interdisciplinary perspective, viewing disciplinary boundaries less in terms of their differences and more for their overlaps and shared lineages.

2.1. Disaggregating Spatial Politics

Contemporary political geographers often adopt post-structural approaches to power and space, a trend that has grown over the course of several decades and stands apart from the still-pervasive “realist” views embedded in certain influential strands of international relations and political science (Dalmasso et al. 2018; Glasius 2018a, 2018b). For example, contemporary political geographers widely embrace the notion that standard objects of international political analysis – state, territory, society, sovereignty – set analytical “traps” through their perceived coherence (Agnew 1994, 2010, 2015a). Scholars instead consider these categories as the effects of diverse power relations, regimes, and technologies, and instead grant analytical attention to relational and practice-based categories – the “state effect,” “territory effect,” “de facto
sovereignty,” etc. – over any misleading reifications of those practices (Jeffrey et al. 2015; Koch 2013b; Mitchell 1999).

My dissertation combines the findings and framings of contemporary political geography, including popular and feminist geopolitics, and broadly defined nature-society scholarship including political ecology. In doing so I contribute toward a disaggregated view of environmental politics and natural resources that some might label “environmental geopolitics” (Castree 2003; Dalby 2014; O’Lear 2018; O’Lear and Dalby 2015). Undergirding both my approach and much critical environmental scholarship of recent decades (Bakker and Bridge 2006; Bridge 2009; Castree 2005; Dalby 2014) is the idea that a Cartesian division between human and non-human entities is a socially constructed binary far less stable than people often recognize in everyday practice (Agnew 2003: 6). Instead, things deemed “natural” or of “the environment” emerge instead as the products of unstable, fluid framings that categorize the world both materially and rhetorically. I bring such an environmental geopolitics approach to bear on the political protests and contests around Sakdrisi, specifically asking: How do some people narrate the Sakdrisi site as a symbol of cultural heritage while others see environmental disaster? What drives some to ignore these elements and focus on the jobs mining brings to the region? Who benefits from the mining project, and who is harmed? Crucially, however, this constructivist approach does not imply that the world exists only as a product of human imagination, devoid of material properties or significance.

In fact, it is quite the opposite. Scholars working in the post-structural tradition instead see socio-natures like metal mining landscapes as products of both material properties and the meaning social relations designate to them (Castree 2001; Peluso 2012; Swyngedouw 2004). For example, Gavin Bridge argues that “resources ‘become’ only through the triumph of one
imaginary over others” as societies transform materials into commodities (2009: 1221), such that “the fact that something – whales, tar sands, genetic diversity – is regarded as a resource (or not) tells us rather more about a society than it does about the substance itself” (1220). Philippe Le Billon clarifies that the material and the immaterial always work in tandem to shape political geographies of the environment as "political imaginations shape geographies of enclosure and exclusion,” materially defining the bounds of what society may even consider a “resource” for human utilization (2013: 296).

A disaggregated, or generally post-structural, politics of the environment is not without its criticisms, often along lines that deconstructing objects of analysis too much may leave us with little to work against in efforts toward environmental and social justice (Lave 2015). Similar criticisms demand careful and thoughtful consideration. Environmental geopolitical relations involve diverse forms of violence, vast reserves of “blood and treasure” (Dalby 2008: 415) released through conflict, and histories of inequality and oppression that, in many ways, have produced the modern world’s unjust contours (Auyero and Swistun 2009; Davies 2018; Nixon 2011; Peluso and Watts 2001). However, within a post-structural approach – simultaneously descriptive, analytical, and deconstructive – I see the possibility to do much constructive work for the people and places I investigate. Analytically disaggregating political geographies of the environment presents rich opportunities "to think otherwise about the kinds of power shaping the places, patterns, and spatial processes of the world today" (O’Lear 2018: 2). John Agnew similarly holds that analyzing political imaginations and their alternatives “might help in thinking about and starting to practice a world politics no longer subject to the depredations of the modern geopolitical imagination” (2003: 13). As a lead archaeologist told me on a tour of the prehistoric Dzedvebi Plateau dig site, “If you do not research the past, the future is already lost”
(Interview 68). Inspired by this sentiment, I hold that political actors cannot imagine different worlds until we collectively define and understand the borders of the old, both materially and immaterially.

My research questions’ significance therefore lies in helping understand whose blood, which treasure, and what effects stem from these disaggregated environmental politics. In asking these questions I analyze how people act to produce and contest powerful divisions and categories of society and resources. These elements make up a broad vision of environmental governance, to which I turn next.

2.2. Living Environmental Governance

Morgan Robertson argues that “the state” provides a crucial analytical category among political ecologists for understanding struggles over defining and controlling natural resources (2015). Yet the histories of political geography and political ecology clearly illustrate that neither is “the state” a coherent, monolithic entity nor is environmental governance isolated to state practices (McCarthy 2007; Reed and Bruyneel 2010; Robbins 2008; Robertson 2010). This tension presents a key analytic focus in studies of environmental governance, which Bridge and Perreault define “not as the ‘governance of nature’ but as ‘governance through nature’ – that is, as the reflection and projection of economic and political power via decisions about the design, manipulation and control of socio-natural processes” (2009: 492). Resource governance unfolds through diverse institutions by ”defining what is economically, technologically, and politically possible at particular moments,” lending “coherence and stability to efforts to extract, process, market, and consume natural resources” (Bridge and Jonas 2002: 760). Scholars of environmental governance accordingly question the state’s centrality, while highlighting how
such political categories may not capture the full complexity of power relations governing natural resources (Bridge and Perreault 2009: 476).

My dissertation explores the technologies of government that may or may not fall neatly under inherited labels like “neoliberal” governance (Bakker 2009; Castree 2008; Castree and Henderson 2014; Heynen et al. 2007b; Himley 2008; McCarthy 2005a; Robertson 2004) or other *a priori* categorizations of environmental political geographies. Doing so recognizes that resource governance emerges from multiple intersecting governmentalities, or technologies of government (Fletcher 2017). In adopting this position I draw inspiration from scholarship that approaches eco-governmentality as a more *diverse* ensemble of powers – at times expanding beyond the realm of natural resources – to advance a collective understanding of the links and disconnects between territory and resources (Braun 2000; Mitchell 2002; Robbins 2007; Watts 2004). In other words, through my dissertation I investigate the ways people narrate, define, and experience the government “of men and things” (Foucault 2009: 96).

In moving beyond the environmental governance literature’s frequent focus on specific institutions and neoliberal governance, my dissertation likewise answers Himley’s calls for a more in-depth, ethnographic focus on the *practices* that produce or contest resource governance regimes (Himley 2008: 445). I also take inspiration from Bulkeley’s (2005) shift toward a more spatially and socially disaggregated understanding of environmental governance, in turn drawn from Saskia Sassen’s (2003) work on networked and territorially un-/re-bound conceptualizations of environmental governance (see also Rocheleau 2015; Rocheleau and Roth 2007). I develop Sassen’s and others’ findings at greater length in the penultimate chapter, but my ultimate goal is to examine the power relations connecting “state” and “non-state” actors, negotiated through defining and struggling over natural resources but also enacted as part of a
broader disaggregated, *lived* spatial politics. As I show, political geographies of the environment enroll people farming the Mashavera Valley to survive; representatives of Georgia’s major political parties; mine employees; political activists affiliated with the Georgian Orthodox Church; local environmental NGO members; health care workers; former government officials; and so many more. My dissertation advances an understanding of environmental governance built on a commitment to frame environmental “politics as a social practice” and to “connect formal politics with everyday practice” (Bridge and Perreault 2009: 485–6).

2.3. *Assembling Research*

Contingency and emergence in political geographies of environmental governance provide a third intellectual foundation for my research. I address these concepts through what some term “assemblage” (Robbins and Marks 2010) or “hybrid” geographies (Whatmore 2002). My approach generates opportunities to consider the disaggregated nature of spatial politics, lived experiences of environmental governance, and entrenched patterns of injustice within one analytical framework. Robbins and Marks illustrate one example of how assemblage geographies might look through their case of prion-caused illness in American elk populations. The authors take the socially constructed division between humans and non-humans as merely a starting point, showing how a purely socio-political explanation for shifting power geometries "tells only a fraction of the story” as both prions and elk "were active in reworking the social fabric of the region” – yet "while neither the elk nor the prions lobbied local officials, in the absence of their socio-natural and fundamentally relational condition such a radical reconfiguration of property rights would have been unlikely" (Robbins and Marks 2010: 176–7). In a similar fashion Sarah Whatmore’s hybrid geographies approach adopts a more distributed notion of agency in

Scholars of global geopolitics have recently expanded hybrid and assemblage debates deeper into struggles over defining and controlling space, showing how entities typically considered non-human shape geopolitical practices through the formation of geopolitical “assemblages” (Dittmer 2014, 2017) or “constructs” (Flint 2016; see also: Braun 2006; Grove and Pugh 2015; Legg 2009; Müller and Schurr 2016). Geographers represent only a small portion of the broader intellectual field of scholars researching and theorizing assemblages, and Chapter 2 engages a greater diversity of scholarship to probe the intellectual and practical considerations of assemblage thinking in social science research more broadly. Ultimately, though, these frameworks empower me to analyze political geographies of the environment in the Mashavera Valley not just as immaterial mental framings but as complex “political machines” (Barry 2001, 2013) similar to other explicitly socio-material political geographies: hydrocarbon pipelines with metallic properties that may cause distribution failures; diplomatic documents that pile up and degrade over time; floating military blockades that could protect battalions or let them die; and so on. As my case study in Georgia shows, the political imaginations of people living near the mining complex, broader discursive scripts circulating through media reports and governing bodies, and multiple scales of political economy all intersect in the Mashavera’s political environments.

Assemblage scholars often prioritize practices of territorialization as key mechanisms for such political machines, and this concept remains central to my framework. Territorialization refers to practices that produce territory in diverse forms as humans and non-humans alike interact within a political milieu: through property relations (Blomley 2017), constructions of
national homelands (Diener 2006; Kaiser 2002), dividing ocean spaces (Zalik 2015), and so forth. For Whatmore, focus on the diverse practices of territory allows "for attending more closely to the labours of division that (re)-iterate their performance and the host of socio-material practices – such as property, sovereignty and identity – in which they inhere" (2002: 6). Focusing on the socio-material practices comprising territory’s assembled and contested nature allows me to move beyond analytical categories that potentially obscure more than they reveal: territory, state, society, and so forth.

The three literatures I point toward here – disaggregated political geographies, lived practices of environmental governance, and assemblage research – form the intellectual columns supporting my dissertation project. In the following sections I sketch out the methodological approach I adopt in implementing this intellectual framework.

3. Capillary Tales: The How of Where

The general intellectual approach outlined above provides a framing for the questions I ask in my dissertation, particularly concerning political geographies of the environment as they take form in the post-Soviet Georgian mining industry. As a result, I investigate practices of environmental struggle, identification, and uneven economic development as they produce new geographies here – or, as I phrase it above, the how of where. This section draws inspiration from the disaggregated view of environmental politics laid out here to name my research approach capillary tales, tracing stories and scripts along the branched, diffuse, and cross-scalar pathways of power they travel through. I do so by connecting the research methods of critical and popular geopolitics, contemporary cultural geography and anthropology, and broader views toward mixed methodologies in the social sciences.
3.1. Lived Geopolitics

Critical geopolitics can simply be thought of as the analysis of “how space is ‘labeled’” (Agnew 2003; Dodds 2001; Dodds et al. 2013; Megoran 2017; Ó Tuathail 1996) or the spatialization of international politics through discursive practices, defining people, places, and their relationships. O’Loughlin et al. illustrate how scholars might study these geopolitical storylines, or the ways “geopolitical events, locations, protagonists, processes and interests are organized into a relatively coherent narrative of explanation and meaning” by drawing on geopolitical scripts “to explain the event itself and its immediate causes” (O’Loughlin et al. 2004: 284–5). Discourse-focused studies, however, risk remaining at 10,000 feet above the ground, disconnected from the people living out the scripts under investigation and removed from the broader social and discursive processes from which they emerge. Therefore I adopt a more localized, disaggregated, and “thick” view of geopolitics that draws more heavily from contemporary anthropology to better understand the “work these formulaic or orthodox discourses do as political practices” (Koch 2016b: 45). As Gerard Toal explains,

*thick geopolitics* rests on recognition of the importance of spatial relationships and in-depth knowledge of places and peoples. Grounded in the messy heterogeneity of the world, it strives to describe the geopolitical forces, networks, and interactions that configure places and states. It recognizes that local conditions matter, that agency is rarely singular, that power is exercised geographically, and that location, distance, and place influence its operation. (2017: 279)

For some scholars, a more “grounded” framework to inter-state relations is insufficient: they critique the broader critical geopolitics approach (both "thick" and “thin”) for continuing to ignore the everyday experiences and agencies of people living in the spaces described and characterized (Dittmer and Gray 2010; Sharp 2000). Instead, some analysts focus on more banal imaginations as they shape geopolitics in more *popular*, mundane ways (Benwell and Dodds 2011; Billig 1995; Dittmer 2010a; Dittmer and Gray 2010; Falah et al. 2006; Koch 2013b,
Narratives of national identity, people, and place circulate through both popular media and conversations in everyday life and as a result may include both elite and non-elite voices (Dittmer 2005; Dittmer and Dodds 2008). While some more “realist” scholars might consider popular geopolitics as detached from the machinations of formal and classic geopolitics, their view discounts how discursive practices drive contemporary international relations, world-building via geopolitical assemblage, and “identity-related practices at a multiplicity of levels and sites” (Saunders 2017: 5).

When framing natural resources like Georgia’s metal resources, geopolitical scripts drive individual experience as they become imbricated with “resource imaginaries” such as in Mongolia’s mining industry (Jackson 2015b). In analyzing Kazakhstan’s changing geopolitics and resource economy, Koch illustrates how by “investigating elite and popular ‘geopolitical imaginaries’… we can begin to understand the more general processes of state-making, in which the ‘state,’ ‘territory,’ and ‘nation’ are conflated as one entity, and with what effect” (2013b: 110). Koch acknowledges that elite and popular discourses are often inextricably intertwined and inform one another, demonstrating the value of adopting a popular geopolitical lens for analyzing emerging and always-contested political forms in a post-Soviet environment.

Over the past 15 years, political geographers have largely embraced popular and ethnographically oriented geopolitical approaches in their scholarship, especially in post-Soviet space. An early pioneer of this account was Nick Megoran (2006). Through his ethnographic and critical geopolitics of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan boundary’s historical biography, Megoran demonstrates how mundane state practices shape local lives through a range of localized practices – the adoption of different alphabets, new telephone systems, changing road signs,
establishing conflicting time zones, shifting bus schedules, the removal or retention of political statues, etc. – in addition to larger macro-political economic trends of state development (collective vs. neoliberal, etc.) (Megoran 2004, 2006, 2017).

A lived, thick, popular geopolitics approach also aligns with many positions within feminist political ecology. Feminist political ecologists foreground the heterogeneity and unevenness of diverse social relations – including gender, class, race, age, and other dimensions of subjectivity that intersect within and among us all. These uneven social relations both produce and cross spatial networks, driving critical political struggles especially as related to environmental dynamics (Elmhirst 2011; Mollett and Faria 2013; Nightingale 2011; Plumwood 1994; Rocheleau et al. 2013; Sundberg 2015b). Yet even if lived and embodied, geopolitical relations still unfold through discursive and representational practices. Thus, in the following section I develop a framework for considering geopolitical scripts as simultaneously lived, discursive, and politically contested as cultural formations shape power relations across scales.

3.2. Geo-Stories and Storytelling

The focus on lived experience in feminist political ecology, popular geopolitics, and post-structural scholarship more broadly relies on a more intimate view of history and geography, focusing on what Foucault calls the “slender thread of events.” Foucault sees “slender threads” as “the main, fundamental part of history,” each of which “passes through the eye of a needle” (2011b: 106–7). Scholars might consider geography in a similar fashion, approaching what Donna Haraway calls intimate “geo-stories” (2016) or the capillary tales I develop here.

I have approached this dissertation as an act of tracing slender threads through the world’s woven fabric – following flows of material and capital while also tracing the outlines and paths of lived stories and their telling. As I illustrate throughout, a focus on stories and
storytelling in many forms allows me to trace the contours of temporary, but historically emergent, assemblages – political machines filled with discourses, bodies, institutions, and metals (Barry 2001, 2013). Doing so produces a more nuanced account of political and environmental change that more readily allows for the contingency of these geographic events.

Focusing on stories, discourses, and meaning follows long post-structural traditions in anthropology, geography, and other interpretive social sciences concerned with issues of representation, power, and systems of meaning. These approaches seek to undercut the academic compulsion to uncover and define universal, a-historical truths (Foucault 1977b, 2011a; Nietzsche et al. 1998), a position I find essential for seeking to understand and explain political change in politically tumultuous locations like Georgia that do not necessarily follow the framings of strictly structural explanation. Scholars in this broadly defined school of thought often embrace some version of stand-point epistemology, drawing from the Nietzschean view that all knowledge is partial, situated, and stems from each person’s position within networks of uneven power relations (Haraway 1988; Harding 1993; Nietzsche et al. 1998; Rose 1997). To this end John Law suggests that

we cannot describe everything. Indeed, the notion of describing everything is an empiricist nonsense which presupposes an all-seeing ethnographic and theoretical eye. (For to see it all, I have to blaspheme and turn myself into God by claiming omniscience.) But to know that this is the case in our heads, and to know it in our hearts, these are two quite different things. Still, despite everything, we cling to our blasphemies. (1994: 47)

The efforts to overcome “our blasphemies” underlie what John Law calls a “modest sociology” (Law 1994) and what Jessica Alina-Pisano terms a “realist ethnography” (2009). Contemporary post-structural modes of investigation differ from, for example, past “realist ethnographies” of the first half of the 20th century that attempted to explain a whole “way of life” by documenting the “plain facts” of a tribe or other social group in a functionalist manner
Rather, long-standing post-structural forms of realism have ossified into a general analytical approach that jettisons the notion of objective truth – that “facts” are ever “plain.” Scholars instead aim to "peel the onion" of social interaction in a self-reflexive way so the ethnographer can "contextualize and interpret her subjectivity: to be conscious of the ways that her position conditions the observations she makes" (Allina-Pisano 2009: 54). In other words, all truth claims are socially constructed (Foucault 2012; Legg 2016) – all stories are subjective. Acknowledging the world’s instability and subjectivity actually proves essential to establishing rigorous social investigation, whether through ethnographic means, interviews, focus groups, or other forms of interpretative social interaction (Mullings 1999). Law again contends that:

> Nothing is necessarily stable, and consistency is a product. So a modest sociology will seek to turn itself into a sociology of verbs rather than becoming a sociology of nouns… it will seek to avoid taking order for granted. Thus if there appear to be pools of order, it will treat these as ordering accomplishments and illusions. It will try to think of them as effects that have for a moment concealed the processes through which they were generated. (Law 1994: 15)

Law’s analytical shift may seem minute, yet it bears enormous implications for the way scholars frame research questions and undertake research practices. Rather than understanding social relations by analyzing static, ossified social objects, scholars must investigate practices – the things people do and that produce relations with other people, ourselves, and the world around us. Michael Billig echoes Law’s view in his call to focus less on abstract nouns and more on “people and their actions” to produce a more “populated” scholarship (2013: 7). Though I often fall short of Billig’s sensibility, his ethic still guides my research process as I focus on an “enlivened” political geography, focused neither on social orders nor identity, but on ordering and identification (Brubaker 2006; Law 1994).
I pursue an “enlivened” research agenda by investigating storytelling practices, which provide useful pathways for empirical social science research beyond just analytical interpretation of stories. Storytelling provides mechanisms for what Charles Tilly terms “contentious politics” as stories provide the “collective, public making of claims that, if realized, would affect the interests of those claims’ objects” (2002: 6). Stories help us make sense of social processes as they afford frameworks for "sequential, explanatory recounting of connected, self-propelled people and events" (Tilly 2002: 26). As such, stories provide windows into power’s constitutive relations, allowing analysts to trace the capillary paths through which power operates (Foucault 2003). Interviews are especially useful tools for eliciting explanatory stories from people whom scholars encounter during research, as I discuss in later sections. My focus on events and the contentious stories people tell about them produces a view that “what matters in history are not structures but interactions — and, in particular, contentious interactions” (Tarrow 2008: 228).

“Contentious performances” (Tilly 2008) of storytelling about events and patterns also become readily apparent in intimate “geo-stories” (Haraway 2016), ordering space through the eye of the geographic needle. As I elaborate in Chapter 2, my focus on stories, storylines, storytelling, and scripts – specifically as they deal with natural resources, territory, and people’s political relations with the world – contributes to the transdisciplinary and as yet still relatively vaguely defined “geohumanities” (Cresswell and Dixon 2017). In the following section I outline the mixed and hybrid methodologies necessary to implement my “capillary” approach.
3.3. Hybrid Methodologies: Mixing Geographic Methods and Approaches

Stories of people and the environment do not just emerge in research from textual or verbal discourse (Doolittle 2010). Readable texts circulate almost everywhere as books, magazines, images, films, and landscapes (Forbes 2000), all existing as the products of capillary discursive forces and geopolitical scripts (Dittmer 2005, 2010b; Dittmer and Dodds 2008). Likewise, stories take many forms, and storytelling unfolds through multiple media – often in ways researchers might not consider within single methodological framings (Dittmer and Gray 2010; Dodds et al. 2010; Foxall 2013; Hughes 2013).

Scholars utilize mixed and heterogeneous epistemologies and methodologies in numerous ways (Elwood 2010), some adopting different modes of data collection and analysis to develop knowledge about different kinds of processes and structures – for instance broad changes in labor markets and individual household responses to them (Hanson and Pratt 1995). Meanwhile, others combine diverse data types to develop hybridized epistemologies, combining interviews or ethnography with remotely sensed or other geospatial data to study a single phenomenon (Knigge and Cope 2006; Nightingale 2003).

I embrace mixing methods as hybrid epistemology, acknowledging both the limitations of any single methodology and the “entangled” nature of research positionalities (Haraway 2016; Neely and Nguse 2015). For instance, in her research on climate change adaptation planning in Nepal, Andrea Nightingale illustrates how “epistemologically plural research” can produce richer insights about complex socio-ecological problems by probing the inevitable gaps among diverse empirics (2016). Yet hybrid investigations require acknowledging and embracing the ontological and epistemological tensions that exist among the different methodologies utilized (Barry et al. 2008; Doolittle 2015; Nightingale 2016).
Through my own hybrid approach, I follow the lead of contemporary post-structural anthropologists like Stephen Collier, Aihwa Ong, and Paul Rabinow, who sever the isomorphic assumptions between anthropology – the study of competing cultural logics and practices in human society (Rabinow 2003) – and ethnography. In fact, Stephen Collier embraces the diversity of anthropological modes of investigation in analyzing post-Soviet urban government, claiming his research method is avowedly not ethnographic (though he does draw some research practices from the rich tradition). He explains:

Given the proliferation of other kinds of objects in contemporary anthropology, it seems reasonable to ask not whether a certain study is ‘an ethnography’ but how certain practices associated with ethnography can fit into a toolkit for contemporary anthropological inquiry... a technique of inquiry that begins from the specificity of a certain place, is oriented by the weight of its problems, by the density and polyvalence of the experiences that one finds in it, and that leads to other sites, where other techniques of inquiry must be used. (Collier 2011a: 29)

Collier’s approach provides a model for studying what he and Ong term “global assemblages,” or “global forms... articulated in specific situations... territorialized in assemblages” (2004: 4).

My research advances a broader focus on socio-material practices from multiple perspectives and methods: ethnographically influenced, discursively focused, and enrolling diverse empirics and the epistemologies their investigation might require. In the following section I review my specific research practices as I implemented them in research processes from the Mashavera Valley to my desk, and from Tbilisi to Syracuse.

4. Research Practices

4.1. Interviews: Listening in Stereo

Ethnographers historically tend to focus on “the local,” with even multi-sited ethnographic approaches addressing multiple localities (Hage 2005; Marcus 1995). However, as
some leading contemporary anthropologists contend, understanding problems bound by geographies not-necessarily-local requires investigating the broader social and political fields in which they exist (Burawoy 2000), including the “awkward” scalar framings that might move beyond classic conceptualizations of “immersive” research in anthropology and geography (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003).

I find this “awkward” scalar framing especially important when investigating “out of the way” places like the Mashavera Valley’s small industrial cities Kazreti and Bolnisi, removed from the power centers of both Soviet and post-Soviet geographies (Collier 2011a; Tsing 1993). Out-of-the-way landscapes inhabit an in-between-ness that destabilizes analytical focus on centralizing structures of global capitalism (Gibson-Graham 2004) – simultaneously central to the sub-state region and connected to transnational commodity chains yet also removed from centralized powers. Immersion here requires neither a limited focus on a single place in isolation nor a multi-sited ethnography following definitive political-economic links. Immersion here instead requires an “awkward” scalar flexibility.

Schatz suggests that this kind of ethnography requires a guiding sensibility of deep engagement rather than necessitating a researcher be fully “neck deep” and “socially immersed” as prescribed by classical ethnography (Schatz 2009). An “ethnographic sensibility” is helpful because it moves past the artificial distinctions bounding “traditional” ethnographic field research (Clifford 1997; Fischer et al. 2009; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Katz 1994; Marcus 1995, 2007; Platt 2012): "between fieldwork and deskwork, between research site and site of analysis, between researcher and researched, and so on... a general sympathy for interlocutors is nonetheless the hallmark of ethnographic research” (Schatz 2009: 6–7).
Interviews therefore serve as the foundation of my research methodology, informed by a distinctly ethnographic sensibility of deep engagement and general sympathy for interlocutors. The 75 interviews I carried out for my dissertation took a variety of forms – ranging from semi-structured to unstructured. Though not included in the total number of interviews, countless informal interviews and conversations (Bernard 2011) helped contextualize my dissertation research over five months of fieldwork and three summers in Georgia. My approach follows findings by feminist geographers who reveal how interviews profoundly relate to the places in which they take place and that analyzing their location and context can reveal much about the power relations shaping research conversations (Elwood and Martin 2000; Inwood and Martin 2008). Accordingly, I consider each interview as "a micro-situation within a larger sociocultural context" and "both a product and a process" (Borer and Fontana 2012: 46) – an ongoing relation between interviewer and interviewee, as well as with their people and environments.

My own personal immersion in Georgia was not limited to dissertation-specific fieldwork but stemmed from a total of five trips to Georgia over the eight years of my graduate education (totaling nine months). My immersive activities included language studies, public art workshops, site visits, living at the office of a collaborating NGO for three months, assisting in the opening of pop-up exhibits, editing documents for collaborators, and more. My experiences over a long temporal window allowed me to develop the ethnographic sensibility necessary to contextualize interviews and the dynamic practices of storytelling interview respondents undertook in sharing with my research collaborators and me.

An interview, however, is neither a key to “true” experiences nor merely the product of thoughtless automatons drawing from ephemeral discourses. Rather, they are an opportunity to “listen in stereo,” as Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack describe the process of "receiving both
the dominant and muted channels clearly and tuning into them carefully to understand the relationship between them" (1991: 11). While Anderson and Jack use this phrasing to describe interviewing women about their unique experiences, their approach is useful in a variety of settings: interviewing women, men, elites, conversations through translators, or even informal group conversations. In applying this “listening in stereo” approach to my fieldwork in Georgia, I try to inhabit the liminal space between positionalities, listening “deeply” (Koch 2019) to explicit words, vague implications, body language, and interactions of all sorts, rather than framing myself as either an outsider listening in or an insider trying to share insights beyond the interview’s intimacy. Doing so helped respondents feel comfortable in conversation but also helped me maintain awareness of my own assumptions, prejudices, and positionality within conversation as best I could – with the intention of seeing around them, but knowing I could never fully escape my own situated position. The Zapatista ethic of “walking with” people encapsulates this well: my research was not designed to "help" or "be like" them but "to be involved in the struggle for a just world from and in our own sites of entanglement and engagement" (Sundberg 2015a: 123; Zapatistas 2005).

The people I walked with most frequently, though, were my research collaborators – assistants, translators, colleagues, loved ones – without whom my dissertation could not have happened. My research collaborations enroll friends, allies, my wife, Georgians young and old, Georgian and American students, and more, in relations of shared interest. At each step of collaboration, their positionality influences mine and shapes the research project (Pratt 2010). For example, my most frequent collaborator is a woman named Mari. Mari is an art historian and environmentalist who, along with several of her allies, took a leading role in the protests against Sakdrisi’s destruction. She moved on to other interests after the archaeological heritage site’s
destruction, yet she became one of my closest friends and collaborators during the research process, helping as a translator and introducing me to key contacts in the region. While some might see her prior political commitments as a flaw of research design as inevitably influencing her translations and our collective interpretation of events, her subjective positionality was extremely helpful – and often explicitly necessary – for this project. She offered critical insights about the intimate dynamics unfolding in the valley, as well as lending me rapport with reluctant respondents (Adler and Adler 2002) in small mining communities shaped by fear of retribution from the mining company, in ways I never would have experienced otherwise.

In this way interviews involve political acts of encounter, speaking, listening, and negotiating inherently uneven power relationships (Faier and Rofel 2014; McDowell 2010: 165). Interviews require actively engaging subjects in discursive exchange to assess how "stories are assembled and communicated and how they circulate in various domains of society" (Gubrium and Holstein 2012: 31). In many ways therefore the relations among myself, my research assistants, and the people we speak with during the course of research define “the field” more than any single location or practice, linking – and in some ways changing – our lives in the process (Caretta and Cheptum 2017).

Interviews for this research involved a standard protocol: acquiring consent (either written or verbal as respondents affiliated with large institutions were typically the only ones who felt comfortable signing IRB-approved written release forms1); audio recording when

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1 In some ways this hesitancy to sign releases and other unfamiliar paperwork may relate to the history of formal paperwork in the Soviet Union’s authoritarian past. In his account of state actors forcing people to sign false statements in the interest of the institutional state, Solzhenitsyn explains, "Our habit of obedience, our bent (or broken) backbone, did not suffer us either to reject this gangster method of burying loose ends or even to be enraged by it. We have lost the measure of freedom... By now we are even unsure whether we have the right to talk about the events of our own lives" (1974: 143). In my research I take this history of centralized political government, self-incriminating documentation, and fear very seriously. Therefore, while I still held myself to the requirements of Syracuse University’s IRB and widely held ethical standards of informed consent with human subjects, I also hold myself to additional ethical standards that might not necessarily be included within institutionalized IRB standards. For example, Tittensor demonstrates through his sensitive political ethnography of Turkey’s Gülen movement that qualities including rapport, friendship, trust, and reciprocity can stand in as effective and, in certain contexts, more
agreed to (or video record, though that never occurred); hand-written notes to complement and
guide my analysis (e.g. details noticed about the setting, follow-up questions, body language or
other observations of respondent, group dynamics if a group interview, etc.); and then
transcribing, when necessary, for thematic textual analysis (primarily non-expert or non-elite
conversations). Involving research assistants and translators, of course, altered interview
dynamics, as did writing notes and making audio recordings.

When I was unable to record conversations or take notes due to the wishes of
respondents, I tried to sit down in a quiet location as soon as possible following each interview,
recalling as many details as possible before my memories began slipping away – in a café
wearing headphones, a nearby park or other open space, or, most frequently, the kitchen table in
whatever apartment I was living in at the time. My interview protocols, positionality, writing,
and analysis all converged in these reflective moments, often in unexpected and revealing ways.
I next turn to the broader and overlapping analysis, writing, and storytelling practices I undertook
to capture the “thick” contextualization for which I strive in this dissertation.

4.2. Analysis: Discourse, Text, Numbers

John Creswell conceptualizes mixed qualitative research through the metaphor of "an
intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends
of material" (2007: 35). Each researcher bears the responsibility of deciding how she will mix
and weave materials and threads together according to the needs of her research project. I briefly

appropriate alternatives to the biomedical model of informed consent implemented by IRB boards and imposed on sensitive
political ethnographies (2016). Such dynamics underlie many research dynamics in authoritarian or hybrid political regimes and
further entrench the need to search not for indelible truths, but for the terms and bounds of locally-contingent discourses
(Foucault 2011b: 106–7; Glasius et al. 2018; Goode 2010; Koch 2013a).
explain here the materials I drew together on my research loom: transcription, discursive and
textual analysis, and quantitative stories.

First, I developed a research model Cresswell categorizes as a "concurrent embedded
strategy," comprising a primary qualitative method (e.g., interviews) supported by a secondary
set of data embedded within the first (e.g., textual database, spatial database, health statistics,
public opinion surveys, etc., many of which I employ here) (2009: 214). My primary research
process thus began with interview conversations as outlined above, followed by note elaboration
and, in many cases, transcription. Transcription is not a-political; rather, it is an integral,
subjective component of the discursive analytical process affording just "one representation of
the interview" (England 2002: 212). As such, my transcription decisions were key to shaping my
analysis and findings. I personally undertook word-for-word transcription of conversations with
local people living near the mine, both in English and through translators, to get as close to their
lived narratives and scripts as possible while attempting to acknowledge and work beyond my
own discursive prejudices.

As I found through the course of my research in Georgia, discourses enroll and bound a
diversity of practices, including diverse speech acts or the textual and narrative scripting
practices often considered by geopolitical researchers: "those which are said in the ordinary
course of days and exchanges, and which vanish as soon as they have been pronounced" but also
"religious or juridical texts," "literary" texts, and "scientific texts" (Foucault 1981: 56–7).
Following Foucault, "discourses must be treated as discontinuous practices, which cross each
other, are sometimes juxtaposed with one another, but can just as well exclude or be unaware of
each other" (1981: 67). For my work in Georgia, I approached this issue by pairing the findings
of interviews with a large Evernote database of over 1,000 elements: policy documents and
legislation, expert reports, social media posts, news articles, YouTube clips, and other textual artifacts (including image- and video-based elements) collected throughout dissertation research. Combining these diverse resources allowed me to investigate the discourses, themes, and imaginaries circulating through the mining communities of the Mashavera Valley as well as broader media channels and other social arenas.

Political geographers and other social scientists have long utilized discourse analysis to assess spatial, geopolitical imaginations and the work they do in the world. Key elements of discourse analysis include text and context – written words and their properties in relation to their surroundings and milieu, including the conditions and power relations that allowed the production of each text as well as the material effect (or potential) the text has on the world. Jason Dittmer (2010b) explains that language fills multiple constructive tasks and roles. Two of these tasks include "political building, in which power is attributed or invested in various material or intangible goods," and "connection building," in which an author or speaker establishes "a topology of values, people, and places" (Dittmer 2010b: 280–1). I view these tasks as constitutive of stories – narrating scripts where characters (subjects) do things (practices) in particular settings (places and times), granted meaning and positioned in relation to various other scripts. The discourse analysis I produce is thus "a situated reading of life’s phenomena" (Dittmer 2010b: 285) rather than an “arrival” at some pure and definitive truth.

Within discourse analysis, a more specific thematic analysis offers a theoretically flexible technique for identifying, analyzing, and reporting discursive patterns as scholars encounter and analyze them within the world (Braun and Clarke 2006). Inductive approaches like thematic analysis lead to explanatory theories and hypotheses for further deductive investigation. However, while many qualitative researchers adopt “emergence” narratives to explain their
process of analysis – that the patterns simply “jumped out” at them from the data, emerging naturally from the source under scrutiny – the process is in fact highly active and patterns only emerge through and alongside the researcher’s particular labor, values, and positionality (Braun and Clarke 2006).

My thematic analysis therefore followed general protocols within qualitative social sciences (Ayres 2008; Cope 2000). I first imported transcribed interviews, interview notes, and Evernote materials into the qualitative software analysis program NVIVO 12, an industry standard for qualitative research practices. I then read all transcribed interviews and notes, searching for preliminary observations, connections, and themes while applying thematic codes to text. I anticipated some categories based on an initial list of themes and codes I developed during interview experiences, while others were surprising and came through my practices of analysis and reflection. Regardless of designation, I marked all codes using NVIVO’s analytical tools. I then re-read, revised, and collated my thematic labeling, identifying geopolitical imaginations and scripts – subjects, practices, places – especially relating to natural resources and metal mining in the Mashavera Valley. I also noted anything else that struck me as particularly interesting or relevant to understanding the diverse socio-material relations circulating around and through popular discourses in the region. My searching and assessing process is key to the simultaneously descriptive and iterative natures of thematic analysis and refinement, as “qualitative data are segmented, categorized, summarized, and reconstructed in a way that captures the important concepts within the data set” (Ayres 2008: 868). Yet diverse ways of knowing require different modes of analysis.

The hybrid epistemological approach outlined above positions the divide between critical and quantitative geographic approaches as a false binary constructed and emerging from a
history of disciplinary politics (Barnes 2009b; Creswell 2010). Indeed, joining more qualitative and quantitative perspectives can provide a unique lens on the multiple dimensions and registers of environmental governance. Barnes and Hannah argue for taking numbers and statistics seriously – like, for instance, the census data, health statistics, and public opinion polls I implement here – as "a crucial component in the construction of social reality... woven into the very fabric of modernity. [...] Numbers create worlds embedded within wider social projects turning on authority and control" (2001: 279). Quantifying the practices and experiences of a political body are crucial to the biopolitical, geopolitical, and geoeconomic forms of mineral governance implemented in Georgia and elsewhere, suggesting a strong need to consider these numbers in context.

Simple quantitative analyses also provide a kind of storytelling in this dissertation. The alternative stories of quantified worlds I encounter here involve, for example, assessing geographic illness patterns at the level of populations through government statistics, as biopolitical governing practices require (Evered and Evered 2012; Foucault 2008, 2009; Kivelä and Moisio 2017). I also evaluate public opinion polls to see how different geopolitical imaginations might circulate through discourses in Georgia beyond the communities of the Mashavera Valley (Ó Tuathail and O’Loughlin 2013; O’Loughlin et al. 2005). I furthermore engage aggregate political economic measures from international organizations (World Bank, United Nations, etc.) and the Georgian government alike to tell stories of capitalist governance through trends of international trade, development, and dispossession (Harvey 2007b; Heinrich 2012; Henderson 2013). Finally, I have compiled an ever-growing database of mining sites throughout the formerly Soviet region, including documenting other sites of protest, by
combining data from the USGS, the industry data aggregation company *Mining Atlas*, and my own case collection from news outlets and other scholarship.

Analysis of these data primarily consists of basic descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations (Rogerson 2015), which I performed in the STATA software package. I undertook all mapping and geodatabase construction in the ArcGIS desktop suite. These more quantitative methods are essential for framing and contextualizing my dissertation’s qualitative focus – presenting opportunities to reflect on and address the silences in research (Kwan 2002; Mountz et al. 2003) while also offering alternative storytelling forms regarding the political geographies of the environment unfolding in southern Georgia.

4.3. *Writing: Stories and Silences*

Dydia DeLyser argues for the importance of discipline in academic writing "to build writing into our lives in a positive way, not a painful one" (2010: 355). I have taken a long time to discover how to effectively turn my creative energies to the particularities of the written medium. However, the dissertation process has provided an opportunity to hone my -graphy practices through my relationship to the geo- of the world. DeLyser also illustrates that "in qualitative research, the writing, in an important way, is the research" (2010: 343) as scholars explore, decipher, construct, and make sense of research practices and findings.

Indeed, writing was a central and active element within the research process itself, not isolated to the domestic space of the desk after a distinct and foreign period in the field. Writing, reflection, and narrative framing instead infuse research from the proposal stage to the final edit, passing through ethnographic field notes, organizational scrawls on my whiteboard,
communications with collaborators and respondents, and so forth (Billig 2013; Emerson et al. 2011; McPhee 2017).

Concerns of ethical commitment to research subjects demand particular attention during writing practices, especially when disseminating research in its final written form as I release the stories I collected to circulate in the world. I follow standard IRB protocols of changing respondents names other than for public officials, include greater context of interviews whenever possible, and take explicit digital security precautions to protect the identities of people with whom I spoke (e.g., secure passwords for hard drives and documents, two-factor authentication for online backup services, not writing down respondents’ names in any notebooks or spreadsheets, etc.). These precautionary practices prove essential for both understanding the meaning of statements in context and protecting people who may have put themselves at risk to share their stories with my research assistants and me. Despite my best efforts, my dissertation, like all texts, is still rife with silences we may only ever partially transcend, if at all (Barnes and Duncan 1992). I close this methodological review by sketching three silences of my dissertation.

Three silences exist within this dissertation. First, my research took place in diverse social environments with varying levels of discursive freedom (Glasius et al. 2018; Koch 2013a). Though Georgia has a much freer media environment than some post-Soviet countries, the communities proximal to the mining complex often remain quite hesitant to speak with people they deem outsiders. Much of their reticence to speak openly seems to stem from fear of retribution from RMG, which controls most of the region’s employment, maintains a presence of armed guards around the mines and village of Kazreti, and is involved in nearly every level of local government. While RMG does not engage in overt violence against the region’s populations, the threats are clear and limit who feels comfortable speaking with an American
graduate student and his colleagues. My interviews in the mining communities were therefore limited to individuals with whom I connected via snowball sampling and interpersonal connections (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). I had far more conversations not occur than did, limiting the number and diversity of voices I engaged. I therefore feel responsible to practice self-reflexivity regarding my research processes followed by, as Glasius et al. phrase it, “transparency about our practices, not our respondents” (2018: 107–8).

Second, at times many respondents felt uncomfortable discussing certain culturally sensitive topics with me. For instance, I encountered complete stonewalling on certain topics that, in other contexts, respondents discussed quite openly. Many times I was unable to coax anyone to discuss health and illness issues other than in the broadest terms when speaking with people as a lone, male, foreign researcher with a research assistant. However, arriving at an interview with my wife and occasional research collaborator, Martha, changed the dynamic radically as my own perceived subjectivity changed in respondents’ eyes. Respondents frequently treated me as more trustworthy when she was present, and many people in the Georgian cultural context apparently feel more comfortable discussing health issues with women over men (though I imagine Martha’s personality also contributed significantly to our research dynamics [Moser 2008]). Related shifts in inter-subjectivity, endemic to the research process (England 1994; Gubrium and Holstein 2012; Poon and Cheong 2009), produced some of the most revealing and emotional conversations of my dissertation research, while other discussions just simply would not have occurred otherwise.

Third, and finally, silences exist from the methods I did not use during research – primarily the participatory video techniques I originally planned to utilize in my dissertation. Numerous scholars successfully illustrate that visual, specifically video-based projects, can
enhance socially engaged research in a variety of ways, both analytical and empowering (Garrett 2011; Garrett and Brickell 2015; Hughes 2013; Kindon 2003; Rose 2012; Shaw 2016).

Academic film-making has a complicated history of exoticized and colonial documentation of non-western places, cultures, and female bodies, though scholars have tried to rectify such uneven power dynamics through participatory models of research (Crang 2010; Elwood 2007; Milne et al. 2012; Pain and Kindon 2007; Pratt 2010).

I originally proposed to frame my dissertation research around such a participatory video project. I anticipated drawing from my prior experiences as a television producer to guide a collaborative video project with people living in the Mashavera’s mining communities. I planned to use this process of producing a brief documentary video as a vector for new analytical opportunities, interrogating popular geopolitical discourses as a form of public and participatory geography (Fuller 2008; Valentine 2005, 2008; Ward 2006, 2007). In doing so I planned a collaborative method of video filming and editing as an opportunity to involve participants as meaningfully engaged research partners rather than simply as data resources to be used and abandoned once the project had concluded (see Bryan and Wainwright 2009; Rhoades 2006), while also unearthing connections among alternative data sources. However, the project did not come to fruition for several reasons.

In part my failure stemmed from the fact that, for funding reasons, I never remained in Georgia for more than three months at a time, sometimes for as short as six weeks. My shorter-term engagements limited opportunities to nourish the kinds of relationships necessary for “neck deep” and technologically demanding engagements. Meanwhile, I did not feel I could maintain my commitments in the way ethically required to not turn my research into an even more extractive process than international investigations typically already are. I took additional steps
to develop other iterations of my project – including leaving several smart phones and hand-held HD video cameras with a politically active collaborator, and partnering with Martha, a photographer, for two trips to document mining practices using alternative documentary techniques – yet none of these efforts panned out.

I ultimately came to see my failures in part as another product of the fear permeating the region. People often did not want even their hands photographed or voices recorded, let alone provide video interviews, fearing company retribution. Colleagues who have tried instituting similarly engaged projects in the region encountered comparable patterns. Fear is a powerful emotion, and recognizing when not to use these powerful, and therefore potentially endangering, research technologies is essential for ethically maintaining research engagements (Kindon 2016; Walsh 2016).  

5. Conclusion: Chapter Overview

Together my writing practices and silences form my dissertation’s foundation. The six chapters in your hands or on your screen are the product of labors by my collaborators and me, although any errors are solely my own responsibility.

In the current chapter, Situating Sakdrisi, I have briefly introduced the case and my approach to the research project. This includes first sketching out the events and policies surrounding the Sakrisi-Kachgariani archaeological site’s destruction and the ongoing mining practices in the Mashavera Valley (see Figure 3). I then introduce the broad literatures I engage in my dissertation, as well as the epistemological approach I develop to do so. I have closed by

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2 I further developed these views during my experience as a Public Humanities Fellow through Humanities NY (formerly the NY Council for the Humanities) during AY2016-17, as well as through my engagements as a founding member of the University of Arizona’s Public Political Ecology Lab (PPEL).
reviewing the methodological practices I employed. In Chapter 2, *In Media Res*, I develop the post-structural theoretical framework I adopt in the rest of the dissertation. I draw from a Foucauldian view of power’s spatial dimensions to argue for an analytical focus on event-ful geographies, framed by a series of research vignettes. In doing so I develop an approach to political geographies of the environment that relies on genealogically tracing events to identify and explain the powerful assemblages governing the world’s environments, territories, and people.

![Figure 3: Mashavera Valley landscape (Rendered in Google Maps) (Sources: DigitalGlobe, Landsat / Copernicus, Google 2019)](https://www.google.com/maps/@41.3026798,44.3673226,2213a,35y,26.72h,72.09t/data=!3m1!1e3)

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 represent my dissertation’s empirical heart. Chapter 3, *Political Alchemy*, interrogates the recent history of mining governance in Georgia. In doing so I explain how Georgia’s system of controlling and extracting value and rent from territory emerged from socially embedded networks and political relationships, producing a particularly uneven resource regime in the process. Chapter 4, *Mining the Homeland*, analyzes national imaginations and geopolitical scripts of the Georgian homeland as they circulate in the Mashavera Valley’s
popular discourse, illustrating how mining practices change how communities identify politically. Chapter 5, *Extractive Archipelagos*, assesses the diverse political geography of sub-state and informal borders existing across southern Georgia’s mining landscape, in part produced by the governing regime assessed in Chapter 3 and the shifting geopolitical imaginations outlined in Chapter 4. The system of socio-material borderings in Georgia produce a kind of “political island” around RMG’s mining complex, simultaneously distinct yet connected to the surrounding environment and landscape through numerous vectors. The “island” metaphor relates the Mashavera Valley to other extractive spaces throughout the post-Soviet region via the history of corporate ownership and related practices of mining governance. These links produce a loose string of connected spaces located within, yet separate from, varying state spaces – an extractive archipelago.

Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation by presenting how the constellation of governing powers operating here produces new geographies that rely on competing geopolitical imaginations, experiences of environmental health and economic development, and the territorial effects produced by intersecting and competing powers. In doing so I outline two primary areas to which my dissertation research contributes intellectually: (1) a renewed and revised scholarly attention to socio-environmental events and (2) the territory effects of resource governance regimes as political networks, newly re-centralized within corporate entities, producing what I term *Malleable Territories*. 
Chapter II – *In Media Res*: Power, Event, Assemblage

1. **Introduction: A Mine and A Puzzle**

   Sakdrisi announces itself with a cloud of dust, and we roll-up our windows as we approach the mine. The land increasingly dries out the farther southeast you drive from the Greater Caucasus mountains toward the cracked desert landscapes of Armenia, Azerbaijan, southeastern Turkey, and eventually Iran. Here near the Georgian-Armenian border, however, sprawling forests and scattered farming villages reveal the valley’s rich soils.

   A lumbering Soviet-era diesel truck headed in the opposite direction kicks up another cloud of dust on this muggy June day. I ask the driver, eyes still bleary from the previous night, to pull over. Anxious for a cigarette, he agrees, and there across the valley, finally, is my first view of the dust’s primary source: the Sakdrisi gold mine.

   Tectonic forces, the same that continue shaping the Caucasus Mountains themselves, produced this rich gold and copper deposit more than eighty million years ago. However, modern social and political forces also started converging here in 2005, when an archaeological team began excavating artifacts hinting at a human story of extraction at least 5,000 years old (Hauptmann et al. 2013). The Georgian Parliament extended this historically relevant pattern of extraction with its decision, made on a single night in December 2014, to allow the primarily Russian-owned mining company, Rich Metals Group (RMG), to begin blasting at Sakdrisi. This decision placed the region’s rich archaeological history, prominent agricultural sector, and diverse ecosystems at risk, sparking some of the largest environmental protests seen in Georgia since the Soviet Union’s collapse. A diverse activist coalition of students, environmentalists, labor organizers, and members of the Georgian Orthodox Church had camped along a river bank near the proposed mine site for four months. Meanwhile, sympathizers took to Tbilisi’s streets in
protest and a demonstration of solidarity, part of a trend toward increased political activism in Georgian urban society.

In the end these demonstrations and protests had little effect, and the mining project progressed rapidly. Today Sakdrisi, along with the Soviet-era Madneuli copper mine operating on the valley’s other side, contributes significantly to Georgia’s foreign exports. Together these two mines form the economic cornerstone for surrounding communities, and RMG is actively surveying the rest of the region for future developments. Employment options outside the mines are primarily limited to farming, and those young people who don’t leave typically must decide between producing metals or vegetables. The region is commonly known as Georgia’s breadbasket, and people sell produce grown here in markets throughout the country’s urban

Figure 4: Sakdrisi mining pit
(Photo credit: Martha Swann-Quinn, 2017)
centers. The landscape is beautiful and fruitful, but the communities, company, and government here have complex relationships with one another.

“We should try to move closer,” says Niko, a local environmentalist and my guide for the day. We get back in the car and continue driving toward the place that, less than a year earlier, was a hill as green as its neighbors and an invaluable archaeological site. Today we see only a large ocher pit, the newest strip mine in post-Soviet Georgia, growing by the day.

Open-cast mining (also known as open-pit or strip mining), like that undertaken at the Sakdrisi site, is one of the most globally common techniques for extracting gold today. Open-cast mining requires using large machines that strip surface vegetation or soil covering the deposit in a terraced form. Miners repeatedly blast, collect, and remove rock by the truckload. To extract the precious metals contained within, miners then treat the ore with poisonous chemicals such as cyanide, producing toxic tailings – waste – in the process. Open-cast mining therefore leaves the surrounding countryside altered and often profoundly polluted, affecting areas well beyond the location of metal deposits.

On this morning, I am attempting to better understand what effect the mine has already had on this place and the people living in its vicinity. Niko leads me to a stream downhill from the Kazreti pit that has consistently produced copper since Soviet times. A lean and sway-backed cow, slowly ruminating, watches from the road as we walk a short distance down the rows of young corn, turning left into the brush. Before today, I have heard stories that people working farms between here and Bolnisi experience the effects of heavy metal poisoning with increasing frequency. Now I see why.

Pushing back willow saplings and buckthorn bushes, Niko points toward the shadows. The line of brush covers a stream running through the field, and the water flowing through is
orange, opaque, almost milky – direct toxic run-off from the nearby copper mine. We navigate a half-kilometer downstream to where the water is taken up by a large, rusted pipe, supplying this polluted water as an irrigation source to many farms in the valley.

*How could this egregious pattern of pollution happen? What allowed the initial mining blast to take place, the first in a series of practices that produced this large, toxic, profit-generating pit? How did that explosive event unfold in relation to the complex political, economic, and environmental dimensions existing throughout Georgian territory? Why did prolonged protests fail in this emerging democracy? What effects were these activities generating among the surrounding population? Were deeper connections between the destruction of cultural heritage and the blatant pollution flowing past me hidden in the stories I had heard so far? Was this indicative of broader political trends across the region?*

The obvious causal answers that immediately came to mind – personal greed, structural corruption, blatant disregard for the environment – angered me, and felt true, but left me unsatisfied. Such generalities left little traction to actually move toward greater systemic understanding and solutions, obscured complexities of the situation I had begun to see in my previous weeks of research, and potentially absolved individual people from the consequences of their destructive actions. Where should I begin in my pursuit of answers? How could I begin examining and comprehending the intersections of power, geology, culture, and ecology that presented themselves before me?

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The objective for my dissertation further crystallized along the stream bank that morning. I needed to understand how this mining development had come to exist, what social conditions and forces produced this situation, and what political and environmental effects the opening of
this new extractive venture had generated, and for whom. In this chapter, I lay out the theoretical / methodological conceptual tools and underlying perspectives I use to pursue these goals. To do so, I first draw from geographic scholarship to theorize the spatial dimensions of power, especially the driving forces of politics and spatial contests in post-Soviet extractive environments. I next briefly explore how geographers have addressed the production of scale, crucial for defining how, where, and in what ways power circulates through human-influenced environments. From this I conceptualize “events” as the driving moments in the production of space, offering analytical windows onto the processes and forces behind such geographic transformations. I next identify the products of these processes, forces, and events as socio-spatial assemblages. Applying Michel Foucault’s genealogical methodology to recent history around Sakdrisi, I finally adopt the position that these material and social forces can be traced through the practices and relations that produce and surround them. Throughout the remainder of this dissertation, I utilize a theory of practice and event to explain this new extraction site’s emergence as a political and ecological assemblage. Contingent local histories of identity and development shape this extractive assemblage, as do broader regional histories and experiences of political economy and extractive industries. In short, I argue that explaining such environmental events as the destruction of Sakdrisi and expansion of mining in the Mashavera Valley requires tracing outward, following the social and material practices and relations that have produced this event across scales.

Niko touches my shoulder, drawing my attention back to the fields surrounding us.

“Come – you should meet someone else,” he says while turning back toward the car. I climb in behind Niko, and we take off in a cloud of yellow dust.
2. Power and Events in Geography

2.1. Economies of Power: Space and Scale

The politics surrounding the Sakdrisi extraction project are complex, explicitly spatial, and often feel elusive. While geographers have long engaged in debates over the nature of space’s relationship with power, the conceptual approach I find most useful emerges from the work of Michel Foucault and scholars who have drawn from and expanded his body of research. This work primarily focuses on practices of power and politics, including processes of political subject formation, as they shape historic and geographic development. Thus, rather than taking guidance from any explicit spatial theoretical finding of Foucault’s (e.g., governmentality or biopolitics, which, though important components of my later analyses, I do not use as an analytical starting point), I follow the example of scholars within the broad “practice turn” in the social sciences to draw from Foucault’s work for both conceptual and methodological guidance (Jones and Murphy 2011; Koch 2014). Throughout this chapter, I specifically use Foucault’s conceptualizations of power and space as they emerge from his understanding of history, and their direct implications for historically and geographically contextualized investigations of contemporary social forces – akin to a spatial form of what Rabinow and Marcus term an “anthropology of the contemporary” (2008).

Foucault most explicitly developed his theory of power by analyzing the historic development of modern institutions meant to shape human conduct – the penal system, the asylum, norms of human sexuality (1977a, 1988, 1990) – as well as through his series of lectures at the Collège de France investigating the general topic of government (2003, 2007b, 2008, 2011b, 2012, 2016). His general theory of power moves beyond either a negative, purely repressive, coercive conception or one that requires ephemeral constructions absent real people
with real experiences and lives (e.g., “the state” as an all-encompassing presence, haunting daily life but never visible). Instead, Foucault’s concept of power is both broad enough to allow application across diverse social phenomena and specific enough to provide an analytical path, grounded in empirics, for spatial scholars to follow.

In a lecture from 7 January 1976, Foucault defines this theory of power in opposition to both classical transactional (as discrete, possessed, and exchanged among individuals) and Marxist (relational, but always in service to economic organization of society) views of power. Rather, Foucault’s position is built on two basic premises:

We have, first of all, the assertion that power is not something that is given, exchanged, or taken back, that it is something that is exercised and that it exists only in action. We also have the other assertion, that power is not primarily the perpetuation and renewal of economic relations, but that it is primarily, in itself, a relationship of force. (2003: 15)

Power is neither purely repressive or coercive nor based only in violent struggle or war; power is also productive and exists through the co-constitution of practices and discourses of knowledge and truth. Also writing against a homogenous, juridical understanding of power embraced by Freudian psychoanalysts in which “Power is essentially what says ‘you must not’” (2007c: 153–4), Foucault develops a “conception of a technology of power” (2007c: 154) that is heterogeneous, diverse, and, most crucially, productive. In this scheme, Foucault famously defines government as “the conduct of conduct,” constructively organizing society through power relations and practices.

The 1976 lecture series Society Must Be Defended represents an important inflection point in Foucault’s scholarship, providing an opportunity to elaborate on the key components of this theory of power and government: that power is “a relationship of force” (2003: 15),

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3 Also printed in (Foucault 1980) with slightly different translation.
circulating “through individuals” (29) and realized through actions, *practices*, things that “happen” (28). In this vision, power exists through networks of *relations*, simultaneously social and material, and as such is socially produced. Additionally, power is neither distributed evenly nor anarchically but collects and can become useful for individual interests through the form of various, contingent technologies (Foucault 2003: 32). This fluid accumulation occurs historically, and “from below,” operating through everyday practice and individual life – what Foucault terms “capillary” means (2003: 32).

Power’s capillary character suggests a profound spatiality to the generation of forces. For Foucault, space presents a crucial dimension of governing technologies, simultaneously providing the material components of those technologies governing “the conduct of conduct.” Power and space co-constitute each other, yet space also acts as the glue binding power and knowledge together. Space is fundamentally relational, intimately assembled as diverse power relations. As Foucault states elsewhere, “space is how knowledge and power intersect. Language and knowledge need a ‘proper place of inscription’” (2007a, 166). In short, space for Foucault provides the *means* for people to claim and contest both knowledge and meaning. Seen in this way, space is the *living mechanism*, the “proper place of inscription,” that joins power, knowledge, and material elements into productive forces.

Foucault’s general analytical project and method relies on power’s intimate relation with space but also the notion that multiple powers can exist simultaneously in the same locality as people implement various forces in different ways. In a 1976 lecture in Brazil, Foucault drew from the empirics laid out by Marx in Volume II of *Capital* to demonstrate that even within capitalism’s powerful structures,

there exists no *single* power, but several powers. Powers, which means to say forms of domination, forms of subjection, which function locally, for example in the workshop, in
the army, in slave-ownership or in a property where there are servile relations. All these are local, regional forms of power, which have their own way of functioning, their own procedure and technique. All these forms of power are heterogeneous. We cannot therefore speak of power, if we want to do an analysis of power, but we must speak of powers and try to localize them in their historical and geographical specificity… Society is an archipelago of different powers. (2007c: 156)

Within this analysis, Foucault does not deny the social importance of capital accumulation, dispossession, production, property, or other economic phenomena within forms of capitalism – say, in practices of extracting precious metal within a formerly collective economy. However, he identifies these as locally functioning forms of power, heterogeneous practices that unfold contingently in relation to their socio-material contexts.

Such a conceptual perspective bears important analytical implications. As the series of his lectures at the Collège de France have been published in English over the past fifteen years, Anglophone scholars have increasingly clarified Foucault’s method for studying power and politics as they shape space, history, and social forces. A key example comes from the series *Security, Territory, Population* in which Foucault characterizes this method as seeking “to know the general economy of power within which this project and structuring of space and territory is situated” (2007b: 30). As I discuss further at the close of the chapter, Foucault approached the relationships among people, space, and various forces, the “economy of power,” as a way to understand the confluence of multiple power relationships and their effects on the organization of space and progression of history.

This perspective provides a radically different starting point for analysis than scholars generally utilized previously in historical and geographic studies of political economy and human environments. In such a formulation, a mode of production is itself a technology of government based in a political field of practices, forces, and materials, all arranged to direct
“the conduct of conduct” – and it is these “prior” organizations of society and space which should serve as an analytical focus. As Lemke explains:

Foucault shows that the ‘art of government’ is not limited to the field of politics as separated from the economy; instead the constitution of a conceptually and practically distinguished space, governed by autonomous laws and a proper rationality is itself an element of “economic” government. Already in his work on discipline Foucault repeatedly pointed out that the power of the economy was vested on a prior “economics of power”, since the accumulation of capital presumes technologies of production and forms of labor that enable to put to use a multitude of human beings in an economically profitable manner. Foucault showed that labor power must first be constituted before it can be exploited: that is, that life time must be synthesized into labor time, individuals must be subjugated to the production circle, habits must be formed, and time and space must be organized according to a scheme. (2012: 10–1)

Foucault thus defined power as both profoundly spatial and, by necessity, historical. He employed various iterations of this methodological approach to study “madness,” tracing the concept’s emergence as a social affliction and “internment” as its treatment (Foucault 2011a), and the prison, where bodies were organized in confinement and destroyed in public to control the behaviors of populations (Foucault 1977a). In both these analyses – considering the emergence of practices in their specific geographic and historic contexts and analyzing them at power’s capillary level to understand broader patterns that may exist across society – technologies of power are seen as tools for organizing society through spaces, institutions, people, and things.

In some ways Foucault’s scholarship aligns with other prominent socio-spatial theories from the late twentieth century (e.g., Lefebvre 1991; Smith 1984), revealing how power and space recursively shape one another through socio-material relations. However, considering the “where” of power introduces a key geographic issue: scale, the spatial extent of power relations, their “geographical reach” (Herod 2010). Scale is especially salient for investigating natural
resource use as social practices intersect with highly scalar ecological and geologic processes and systems, such as those converging in events at Sakdrisi.

Scale presents a key problematic in geography, compelling us to consider environmental politics and the division of space (Herod 2010; Jessop et al. 2008; Paasi 2008). Geographers have considered diverse spatial metaphors to conceptualize scale as organizing space into “envelopes,” “containers,” and others. Other prominent human geographers, by contrast, argue for jettisoning the concept of scale altogether, replacing questions of extent with “flat” ontologies oriented toward discrete “sites.” From this perspective, the world does not comprise such spatial hierarchies, but rather moments of connection and disconnection between bodies and entities (Marston et al. 2005; Woodward et al. 2010). In some ways this perspective aligns with Foucault’s “capillary” understanding of power, especially its focus on actual practices and interactions of force as they exist in people’s lives and experiences. These scholars’ expressed goal of overcoming the traditionally assumed distinction – and powerful social construction – between macro and micro processes is productive to an extent. However, a practice-oriented theory of power such as Foucault’s does not align comfortably with purely “rhizomatic” and anarchic theories of social reality. Even with a focus on power’s aleatory functioning, Foucault’s vision allows for scalar effects, generated by the same intersecting socio-material relations unfolding in a capillary fashion. This analytic – that a series of small, intimate practices and relations can together produce larger-scale events – is crucial for understanding and explaining historical events that may produce a wide range of scalar effects both environmental and political: the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl (Petryna 2013); a pipeline leaking in the South Caucasus (Barry 2013); the destruction and production of vast forested landscapes (Braun 2002). Following Foucault’s project, my goal here is to trace how such scalar socio-material relations
unfold and what they look like to account for them as political economic forces, social protests, and natural resources intersect in Georgia’s mining sector.

Disaggregated Foucauldian accounts of power, scale, and non-deterministic explanation have provided important analytical fodder for political ecologists, though not without their limits. For example, in a foundational text of the sub-discipline, Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) assume a hierarchical arrangement of spatial relationships between localities, regions, states, and other scalar political entities when developing their “chains of explanation” for land degradation’s political drivers. These chains connect processes occurring at a variety of scales to explain how global structural changes do or do not interact with local dynamics. However, in their analysis, Blaikie and Brookfield assume such political ecological relations operate through a “common sense” understanding that phenomena occurring at one scale should impact those at another as long as they are “related,” without offering up what these relations may entail or look like. Blaikie and Brookfield’s argument is profoundly scalar yet frustratingly unable to provide certain critical tools for political analyses of how socio-material forces actually intersect and connect (Peet and Watts 2004; Rangan and Kull 2009; Robbins 2004; Zimmerer and Bassett 2003).

More generally, political ecologists and environmental political geographers have overwhelmingly embraced scale as a key analytic for understanding environmental politics. Yet, as Rangan and Kull argue, classical political ecology has most often considered scale as a static, a-political idea, despite how the concept is theorized (2009). That is, scale in political ecology is frequently seen as an object, not a political process, symptomatic of the restrictive macro-/micro-assumptions argued against by those scholars who adopt flatter ontologies. Some have even suggested that “political ecology might therefore proceed as a kind of study of scalar politics, exploring how various political boxes get stacked the way they do in scalar hierarchy through
historical and economic processes” (Robbins 2008: 216). Or, as Rangan and Kull state it, “Scale is the means by which ecology is made ‘political’” (2009: 36).

However, traditional conceptualizations of scale as merely a spatial container for socio-material processes are inadequate, as recent geographic debates regarding scale’s nature demonstrate. Scale is in fact the product of social processes, including the extraction, circulation, and accumulation of capital and commodities (Herod 2010; Lefebvre 1991; Smith 1984), and a social process in itself (Brenner 1999; Leitner and Miller 2007; Manson 2008; Marston 2000, 2004). Echoing these arguments, Bridge and Perreault (2009) contend that environmental governance is essentially an under-theorized scalar concept, operating at a range of scales and through increasingly varied forms of resources, yet often uncritically accepted as Blaikie and Brookfield’s “common sense” hierarchy. This divergence means that, “In short, environmental governance is often deployed in ways that flatten uneven relations of power, and which mask competing claims to, and about, the non-human world” (Bridge and Perreault 2009: 491–2).

Rather than considering scales as discrete areal units or “space envelopes,” they are better understood as connections throughout space, produced by relations of force among people and things – social and material forces intersecting in contingent ways and to varying extents (Cox 2013; Escobar 2010; Herod 2010; Rocheleau and Roth 2007; Whatmore 2002).

While these analytical tensions are thick, multifaceted, and at times conflicting, I contend that Foucault’s multi-dimensions theory of power – and the numerous scholars who have taken up his project through studying environmental politics – offers a way out of these conundrums. His work demonstrates how to assess socio-material relations and practices in a capillary fashion without sacrificing the important generative influences of context, scale, and uneven social relations. Foucault thus presented the methodological imperative to address issues of government
“on the basis of men’s [sic] actual practice, on the basis of what they do and how they think” (2007b: 358). Yet rather than focusing on moments and practices of connection alone, Foucault suggested we study politics as power in motion. His analyses demonstrate that power must be analyzed as something that circulates, or rather as something that functions only when it is part of a chain. It is never localized here or there, it is never in the hands of some, and it is never appropriated in the way that wealth or a commodity can be appropriated. Power functions. Power is exercised through networks, and individuals do not simply circulate in those networks… power passes through individuals. It is not applied to them. (2003: 29)

In fact, Foucault staked the value of his method on the fact that it allowed us to “see that there is not a sort of break between the level of micro-power and the level of macro-power, and that talking about one [does not] exclude talking about the other” (2007b: 358).

These “economies of power” – formed through relations among people and things, circulating through networks and chains, and knowable through people’s everyday practices – provide possible means for the actual production of scales. These “chains,” “networks,” or “meshes” of capillary power relations (Foucault 2007c) subsequently produce the fabric of socio-material scales. The practices which go into their making define their extents, as well as their effects, such as those unfolding around the mine at Sakdrisi. In Foucault’s vision, power operates locally, yet through its operation and circulation, it also provides the connective means for forming new regional political and material formations, embedded in historical processes, generated through local forces, and contingent on a variety of contexts. However, while this perspective might seem prohibitively complex and arbitrary, it also specifies where to begin such an analysis. In the following section I argue that scholars may strengthen analysis of political environments through a focus on events, identifying moments and locations when these various socio-material forces join together and become immanently visible.
2.2. *Between Earth and Other Worlds: The Problem of Events*

The sky is hazy and dark with clouds. Old white sheets, covered with pink and green floral patterns and crumpled as they dry, fly in place on the home-made clothesline over the farm and fields of the valley. It is December, but the rolling slopes remain green with the year’s last growth. On the hill beyond the creek, several of those familiar old diesel dump trucks line the road, but the only sound is the white noise of muffled wind, interference coming through the camera’s microphone. Without warning a large black cloud erupts from the hillside, reaching to the sky. Half a second, later the sharp clap of an explosion reaches my ears. People shout as eventually the frame shakes away, following the camera person’s perspective as they run. The small crowd disperses, shouting and confused.

Turning to look out the window, I realize I have not blinked for nearly twenty seconds. This is my first time seeing the initial explosion of the ancient gold mine at Sakdrisi eight months earlier, and, for some reason, I keep watching the trucks in the video. Arranged haphazardly, ready to collect the first small measure of what will become a seemingly endless stream of material, they wait to begin ferrying the slow flow of rock from beneath the hill to the valley floor. This place will never look the same. Scraggly forests surrounding the farm fields will recede as the pit grows, revealing the pallid earth beneath their roots. The twisted, rough tunnels that made up the old mine are lost forever, only to be recreated in museums from photographs, measurements, and memories.

The questions driving my research project, and the conceptual and methodological tools required to answer them, emerge from deeper questions of how power operates across scale, drawing together local politics and international geopolitics traditionally separated analytically; how the meanings and materiality of a mine relate to one another in the minds and soup pots of
local residents and political elites alike; and how individual events such as this first explosion at Sakdrisi become imbricated in broader historic trends of politics, economy, and ecological processes.

My chance to experience this event, the moment when a government decision exploded a site of cultural heritage for a foreign company’s profit, has already passed as I missed the prior field season due to a spinal injury. I can now only view this brief moment in contemporary history through backlit panels showing YouTube clips.4 What had allowed this development to occur, and what effects are emerging from this series of events? I have returned to Georgia in an attempt to answer this question and to untangle the multi-scalar political developments surrounding the resource extraction project at Sakdrisi.

4 This footage was broadcast on a popular Georgian news program: https://youtu.be/jeMzDh2xIpI?t=2m37s.
Human geographers have granted varying degrees of attention to “events” as an analytical concept. Scholars have primarily used the concept as a discrete framing and object of analysis for research, such as in the study of politics surrounding sporting mega-events (Ferbrache 2013; Gaffney 2010; Koch and Valiyev 2015; Müller 2017; Trubina 2014); natural environmental or weather hazards and land degradation (Hebert 2011; Sherman-Morris 2013; Walters and Vayda 2009); and post-colonial military conflicts from Palestine to India and beyond (Gregory 2010; Harlow 2012; Jones 2009).

At their core, though, events are moments which draw together practices, processes, systems, flows, and networks. As Koch argues, events provide “windows” onto the active social constitution of subjects and spaces, which are not pre-determined but produced through historically grounded processes of encounter, circulation, and contestation (forthcoming). Geographers have implemented similar conceptualizations of events in various contexts, including cultural practices of bordering in the Baltics (Kaiser 2012; Kaiser and Nikiforova 2006), battlefield calculations and tactics in besieged Baghdad (Gregory 2010), and the 1871 Paris Commune’s history (Bassett 2008). While varying in approach, these investigations typically adopt a multi-scalar perspective, acknowledging that events often have effects neither purely local nor global, but somewhere in between. Events’ complex nature draws together multiple social and material forces, providing fruitful terrain for a Foucauldian, practice-based analysis of political events.

Events have received surprisingly little theoretical attention in human geography, especially considering the concept’s importance to various intellectual and philosophical trajectories (Harlow 2012; McCormack 2004; Shaw 2012). Events specifically provide key analytical objects in post-structural political scholarship, as scholars and political philosophers
have tried making sense of historical change, political complexity, and unexpected global developments. Prominent contributors to these efforts include Foucault’s contemporaries Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou, together with contemporary thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek. Here I continue following Foucault’s thought as the most empirically grounded and analytically focused of these perspectives. As Foucault argues about the disruptive nature of events, "to recognize a discontinuity is never anything more than to register a problem that needs to be solved" (1991b: 76). Foucault differed radically from his colleagues, especially in his commitment that scholars can explain events through empirical investigation and tracing, a position aligned with much critical realist scholarship in geography.

Recent attempts to theorize events in human geography have leaned away from the empirical and toward the ephemeral, yet this trend is not symptomatic of evental analysis generally. This commitment instead reflects a specific commitment that events, defined as major ruptures in experience, reveal a realm of unrealized and previously unknown political possibility. For example, as Shaw explains while drawing from Badiou’s philosophy:

At any one time, the world we see and experience is partial, like the tip of an iceberg that plunges deep beneath a murky ocean. It is a caricature based on the relations between objects. Such contingency is held back by transcendental objects that act as anchors within a world. When these transcendentals are overthrown by inexistent objects, a new world is constituted. In a nutshell, this is the definition of the geo-event. (2012: 620)

Such concern with the transcendent beyond the “anchors within a world” emerges from the perspectives of Deleuze, Badiou, and Žižek, who concern themselves with “Events” as large-scale disruptions in collective human experience (and as opposed to the lower-case “events” of mundane life I argue for below, comprising an iceberg of empirically traceable practices [Veyne 1997: 154]). Each of these post-structural thinkers in his own way theorizes the Event as a major rupture, as the emergence of an entity from the field of possibility to the field of reality. They see
Events as indicative of a greater “beyond” – related to, yet distinct from, the world of human social practices – composed of pure possibility, where Events exist in “a ‘pure’ or virtual dimension as well as being actualized in ‘particular states of affairs’” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Lundborg 2009: 1; Patton 1997). Badiou utilizes mathematics and set theory (in ways beyond my comprehension) to theorize Events in relatively similar terms, focusing on the eruption of previously unseen or invisible possibilities: “Politics is, then, all the processes by means of which human collectivity becomes active or proves capable of new possibilities as regards its own destiny” (2013: 4). However, I find explanation in this world difficult, if not impossible, to determine. Such an Evental approach presents complexity of socio-natural phenomena as both immanent and transcendent – both of this world and beyond it – rather than something explainable, tangible, or even really knowable (Barnes 2009a; Harvey 1969).

Badiou offers several primary examples of political Events, almost all drawn from the major moments of political economic revolution in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries: the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution, the Maoist movement in China, May 1968 in France, the Arab Spring. However, from this perspective, it is almost impossible to conceptualize the political Event outside large-scale revolution. This is especially difficult to break out of as Badiou, and to an extent Žižek, sets such a high bar for qualifying Events as such and with no possibility for the existence of partial Events – something is either an Event or not (Robinson 2014; Žižek 2014). Žižek presents a somewhat more forgiving program for analyzing an Event, which he defines as “a manifestation of a circular structure in which the evental effect retroactively determines its causes or reasons” (2014: 4). This vague language represents many theorizations of Events. More specifically, “at its most elementary, event is not something that occurs within the world, but is a change of the very frame through which we perceive the world
and engage in it” (Žižek 2014: 12). From such an approach, people can only ever acknowledge Events as such in hindsight. Events only exist through ruptures in reality or dominant orders, a designation often impossible to know in the moment. Žižek’s view offers intriguing analytical possibility yet is still concerned only with large-scale, spectacular shifts in history, and in such a way that he remains focused on the immanent emergence of “other worlds.”

Non-representational scholars also consider events as immanent, intangible moments defined in terms of the “excess” beyond our representations of these moments (Ben Anderson 2006; McCormack 2003; Thrift 2004). I find these approaches equally frustrating for their acquiescence of explanatory power and disregard for empirics. However, these scholars do offer important contributions as they move their analyses from momentous, large-scale “Events” to the banal “events” of the everyday. For McCormack, events can be extremely small, mundane, and emerge from everyday relations: “events like a smile, a movement, a gesture, the playful use of an apparently useless object, the movement of the body when talking about movement, or the touch of a hand given over to the response of another” (2003: 494–5). While I find a singular focus on such affective encounters less convincing, these scholars usefully demonstrate how spatial relations develop not only through large world events but also through more intimate, embodied, and tangible moments.

Research closer to historical and anthropological analysis has produced a range of evental scholarship I find significantly more useful for thinking through these complex connections. Relational webs among social systems, individual people, and material “things” extend beyond either the transcendentual possibilities held within immanent objects or a purely socially constructed world. As Bruce Braun and Sarah Whatmore illustrate by bringing together a volume of such political-material research, meaning is not just made about things, but things themselves
are imbricated in moments and processes of meaning making, shaping history at many scales: “things are not just simultaneously material and meaningful; they are also eventful” (2010: xxi). Isabelle Stengers, in her contribution to this volume, develops an event-oriented “ecology of practices” (2010: 25), conceptualizing the event as the epistemological focal point of practice-oriented political research. Scholars can use such a perspective to convincing explanatory effect, as Barry demonstrates in his investigation of a failed metal coating used in the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline through the Caucasus. Barry considers this failure as a material-political event, where materials and humans both realize capacities through their historically contingent relations with one another (2010, 2013).

Many such investigations rely heavily on Foucault’s analytical perspective, for whom events provided a key analytical concept to investigate power relations and subject-formations. In opposition to Deleuze, Badiou, and Žižek, Foucault understood events in such a way that did not pre-suppose the immanent potentialities on which the others focus, but rather begged the simple question: If discursive and material practices drive the events of history, why should we care about transcendental, yet-unformed worlds beyond our experiences and representations? As Paul Veyne pithily answers, “one cannot make true or erroneous statements about the digestive or reproductive processes of centaurs” (1997: 176).

Foucault instead rallied scholars to study those constituent and contingent practices themselves to understand how events happen – to analyze the unfolding of the world we inhabit. Foucault termed this event-focused historic analysis “eventalization,” defining it as “analyzing an event according to the multiple processes which constitute it” (1991b: 76). Foucault’s perspective provides the tools “to see how men govern (themselves and others) by the production of truth… I would like in short to resituate the production of true and false at the heart of
historical analysis and political critique” (1991b: 79). Foucault’s evental approach to politics and political development thus analyzes the powerful practices shaping truth claims in relation to the political event the researcher is seeking to explain. In short, an evental approach analyzes how people narrate, legitimate, and claim the events of geography and history (Foucault 2016; Legg 2016). As sociologist Robin Wagner-Pacifici explains:

> events are made through the efforts of gestures and speech that give them shape; through the performance of boundary making that includes and excludes participants; through the representation of identities that are recognized or ignored. Directions are chosen, identities are challenged and cast, cases for taking action are put forward, taken up, or contradicted. Individual and collective destinies are contingent upon all these actions… events are unpredictable… Events are always a surprise. (2017: 2)

Foucault thus defined events as far more embodied, lived, and contingent than many other theorists, simultaneously unpredictable yet traceable. These events emerge from collections of practices that, coming together in moments either monumental or banal, cause a “reversal of a relationship of forces” (Foucault 1977a: 54), forces that may do so because they “are not controlled by destiny or regulative mechanisms,” instead responding to “haphazard conflicts” (154). Eventalization acknowledges historical events as themselves ruptures – not of reality from some great underlying structure but from one event to the next, regardless of observable scale – and studies them as such in pursuit of explanation.

The transcendental possibilities beyond these empirical series are somewhat analytically irrelevant within a Foucauldian evental approach. For instance, in Shaw’s examination a “geo-event” is not a simple act of reshuffling existent objects as “It is only the inexistent that is capable of transforming a world, since only the inexistent escapes the laws of what is, and heralds what is to come” (2012: 622). Drawing from Marston et al.’s understanding of flat ontology, Shaw continues that "The methodological guideline here then is to probe beneath what is obviously seen, felt, and heard, to discover what objects are marginalized to enable the existent..."
world to appear. This is how power must be studied in an evental geography: as the capacity to police the aesthetic faultline in a world" (Shaw 2012: 624).

While poetic, Shaw’s “methodological guideline” leaves much to the imagination to determine what an “aesthetic faultline” in the world could look like, what should be studied, and what the results of such an investigation may offer. Instead, Foucault expanded upon his methodological call to account for events as historical discontinuities, stating that

Even though the ‘event’ has been for some while now a category little esteemed by historians, I wonder whether, understood in a certain sense, ‘eventalization’ may not be a useful procedure of analysis. What do I mean by this term? First of all, a breach of self-evidence… of those self-evidences on which our knowledges, acquiescences and practices rest… Secondly, eventalization means… analyzing an event according to the multiple processes which constitute it. So to analyze the practice of penal incarceration as an ‘event’ (not as an institutional fact or ideological effect) means to determine the processes of ‘penalization’ (that is, progressive insertion into the forms of legal punishment) of already existing practices of internment. (1991b: 76)

Veyne explains that, within this analytical perspective, “Everything hinges on a paradox, one that is Foucault’s central and most original thesis. What is made, the object, is explained by what went into its making at each moment of history; we are wrong to imagine that the making, the practice, is explained on the basis of what is made" (1997: 160–1). Veyne expands further, stating in a footnote to the text that

*things exist only through relation*, as we shall see further on, *and the determination of this relation is precisely what explains things*. In short, everything is historical, everything depends on everything else (and not on relations of production alone), nothing exists transhistorically, and to explain a so-called object amounts to showing on what historical context it depends… However, the notion of a single determining cause is prescientific. (1997: 169–70)

Relations and practices, rather than subjects or objects (including historical occurrences), are the prime focus of history as those subjects, objects, and events are nothing more than the outcomes of practices: “there can be no event in the final analysis; that is a contradiction in terms” (Veyne 1997: 180). Instead, explanation of a political event through this approach requires investigating
the relationships, practices, and processes that comprise it, both discursive and material (DeLanda 2008; Philo 2012). As Policante succinctly states, “it is not history to determine the struggle; it is the struggle that determines the unfolding of history” (2010: 6). If we extend this logic to geography, then geographic events might represent the objects of explanation for spatial investigations, leading scholars to analyze the socio-spatial practices that produce them.

In this light, acknowledging environmental political conflicts like those surrounding Sakdrisi as “events” establishes the researcher’s goal as historicizing such moments – to move beyond the “self-evidence” of practices to explain their genesis, occurrence, and significance by studying those generative practices in geographic and historic socio-material context. Foucault describes this research objective as “at once too much and too little” (Foucault 1991b: 78), offering too many possible analytical directions and too few guiding instructions. Yet Foucault’s broader methodological practice offers tools to untangle the intersection of forces and practices visible in geographic events. In short, scholars may explain event’s complexity by investigating and tracing the practices and socio-material relations that produce them, “thinking history historically, thinking difference differentially” (McWhorter 1994: 164).

Analyzing the political forces surrounding gold and copper mining at Sakdrisi within this “sideways” historical framework (Foucault 2008; Philo 2012) thus requires establishing an evental entry point into the generative practices which comprise it. The first explosion of the mine at Sakdrisi provides such a moment from which I can trace outward the tendrils of relation that both produced this event and have resulted from it. However, embracing this position presents a final theoretical question of how this event is connected to other events, what practices and forces comprise them, and what practices we may ourselves undertake to investigate these
relations. To answer these questions, Foucault guides us to a theory of assemblage (*dispositif*) and his genealogical method.

3. Tracing the Veins: Genealogical Assemblages

The tree tops sway back and forth in the wind, dropping small branches that clang on the iron park grate. This is our first meeting, and I am nervous; the sun is setting, I am getting cold, and Irakli still has not arrived. Frequenting this public space in nice weather has been a staple of Tbilisi daily life since the Soviet government built Vake Park, a sprawling green memorial to collective modernism. However, several years earlier, the city government attempted to privatize the park, and Irakli served as a leader of the resisting occupy effort, setting up camp with his fellow Guerilla Gardeners in a grove near this gate. Stemming in part from these efforts, he was also an organizer of the Green Fist encampment near the archaeological dig site at Sakdrisi, before it was destroyed.

At last, a young man who could only be Irakli – short hair and beard, black t-shirt, eyes both tired and young – steps out of a cab on the other side of the fence.

Within the first few minutes of our conversation, it becomes apparent that Irakli wears many hats: highly educated archaeologist, continuing student, labor rights activist, environmentalist. I worry that these multiple positionalities might contribute to the very problem he sees hindering progress with his political agenda: that leftist movements here have trouble uniting because of “ideological disagreements” among a diverse coalition. Despite identifying a variety of particularly important problems facing Georgian society – unsustainable resource use, social fragmentation, abandonment of labor rights, ascendance of right-wing nationalism – Irakli tells me the solution is that "we should fight against all of these problems – all these issues are
important, and not one of them separately [isolated to] a gold mine." In his estimation, these problems are all “coming from one source: neoliberal capitalism.” Cultural heritage “is important only for the emotional part,” he asserts, quickly clarifying that heritage is still important – at least to his personal sensibilities.

Irakli is convinced that the fiercely libertarian political economic ideology that the Georgian government has adopted in recent years is the sole source of all problems in his own life and the lives of his friends. I have spoken to other Georgians who blame different causes as the source of their problems. They variably cite fraying social cohesion following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the “deviance” of Russian geopolitical interests in the region, American and European NGOs “meddling” in the affairs of Georgian society. But each explanation emerges from individual experiences, political scripts, and material realities. Understanding what brought about Sakdrisi’s destruction requires contextualizing these narratives and practices, following how they intersect. The task then is to trace through this overdetermined event (driven by forces of political economy, environment, governance, culture, health, identity, emotion) to understand its generative conditions, relations, and forces. As Veyne argues, “What is made… is explained by what went into its making at each moment of history” (1997: 160–1).

Two teenage boys teach themselves to skateboard as our conversation winds down; families with toddlers on pink plastic bikes move slowly along broad paved avenues; couples smoke and hold hands next to the fountain; old men and women walk with exercise sticks; lone readers sit on benches across the boulevard from us. Irakli continues, repeating that for him and his fellow activists, “we don’t have time,” they must unite now and act. I, like Irakli and his passionate young friends, may have already lost the chance to experience Sakdrisi before it was blown up in pursuit of extracting and accumulating gold. However, I still have the chance to
understand *why* it happened and what it means for the political and environmental landscape in which we sit. Night has fallen, and I part ways with my new friend.

3.1. *Assemblages: Environmental Politics*

To understand and explain events within a Foucauldian framework, they must be analyzed in the context of the interconnected practices, processes, and systems – the generative assemblages or *dispositif* – which produced them. The sprawling literature on “assemblage thinking” in human geography and anthropology offers useful direction in investigating the various and competing political forces shaping the conflict surrounding events at Sakdrisi. Again following Foucault, I identify as most useful for this project those perspectives focused empirically on the connective relationships among practices, discourses, and materialities, as opposed to seeking some form of transcendent reality hidden behind the world’s immanence. The notion of “assemblage” has existed in geographic and social thought for decades, arguably as early as Karl Marx’s first analyses of political economy. Yet since the 1980s the idea has taken firm root in post-structural scholarship investigating relationships between the social and the material through political contingency.

While assemblage approaches have taken many forms and labels, several key characteristics emerge from a broad body of scholarship. Robbins and Marks define an assemblage as “a dynamic structure applied to semi-stable socio-natural configurations and geographies that emerge over space and time” (2010: 181). Referring to examples such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 11 September 2001 attacks, Dittmer contends that “assemblages appear stable and coherent until they no longer do… complex systems are prone to non-linear outcomes” (2014: 394). Scholars grant these complex, contingent, and only-apparently-stable assemblages numerous monikers. For instance, some analyze the “mangling”
of actors’ specific material practices as they relate to the “military-industrial-academic complex” (Barnes and Farish 2006: 809). Others consider “geopolitical constructs,” which “emphasize agency, and hence contingency and fluidity, and not the determinism of reified structures” while also acknowledging “the stability of settings that limit or frame agency” (Flint 2016: 33). However, the more networked approaches that often accompany assemblage thinking have also engendered serious criticisms, most often centering on how they flatten power dynamics and often jettison scalar analysis.

Critics emerge from a range of disciplines, including political ecologists. Rangan and Kull argue that the hybrid political ecology espoused by Robbins (Robbins 2004; Robbins and Marks 2010) is innovative but “remains vague about the observational scales used for explaining the spatiotemporal differences that emerge from the operations of actor-networks” (2009: 36). As Lave recognizes, many scholars oriented toward political analysis of the environment find discomfort with flattened ontologies due to disciplinary commitments to social justice and the investigation of uneven, structural power relations (2015). However, as Lave highlights from within the political ecology literature, considering both human and non-human as possibly enrolled in political assemblages simultaneously does not require equity in political consideration. Lave makes a compelling case against such flatter ontologies, instead advocating for other forms of post-structural environmental investigations and pointing to Haraway’s “companion” approach (2003), anthropological “social life of things” approaches (Appadurai 2013b), commodity chain analyses, and the classic “chains of explanation” analysis of political ecology (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987) as more productive. In the end, Lave argues for the productivity of post-structural assemblage thinking without calling it such.
Key figures within assemblage thinking have developed useful frameworks for considering these uneven and power-laden contours of unflattened socio-material networks. As Jane Bennett (2010) argues, networks are not inherently flat, and alternative network theories can allow for more asymmetrical socio-natural networks than those first espoused by Bruno Latour (Latour 1987) by focusing on the relational concepts of capacity and power. Bennett’s “vital” materialism aims to overcome the tendency in western thought to “place the organic across a chasm from the inorganic” (2010: 57). Whatmore’s approach similarly distances itself from any flattened ontologies, instead characterizing these hybrid, assembled geographies as “fluid, not flat, unsettling the coordinates of distance and proximity; local and global; inside and outside” (2002: 6). Key here is the word “unsettling” – not overturning these social divisions but questioning them and perhaps pushing the boundaries of conventional thinking about resource extraction politics to arrive at new understandings of socio-material processes.

Donna Haraway’s ongoing work emphasizing the notion of “kinship” is especially helpful in studying our relationships with the world, a “together with” approach that moves beyond her earlier work on “companionship” to illustrate and highlight the shared origins of human and earth processes and events (2003, 2016). Haraway advocates analyzing these relationships via non-binary “tentacular thinking,” tracing those socio-material relationships through their connectivity and practices. Drawing from the work of Tim Ingold (2007), she argues: “Tentacularity is about life lived along lines—and such a wealth of lines—not at points, not in spheres” (Haraway 2016: 32). The goal of Haraway’s approach is to recognize and tell “geostories,” earth-encompassing “histories” that move beyond purely anthropocentric understandings of global and local change. Inspired by the work of actor-network theorists like Latour but moving beyond that flattened ontology to embrace the power-laced, lived, storied,
social lives of humans, Haraway claims her framework is “committed to an ecology of practices, to the mundane articulating of assemblages through situated work and play in the muddle of messy living and dying. Actual players, articulating with varied allies of all ontological sorts (molecules, colleagues, and much more) must compose and sustain what is and will be” (Haraway 2016: 42).

Certain scholars have identified such “tentacular,” assemblage thinking, tracing forces through socio-material practices, as a form of “assemblage genealogies.” Pointing to scholarship such as Timothy Mitchell’s (1990, 2002) analyses of material government in Egypt’s move toward modernity as an ideal example, Robbins and Marks explain,

Where these assemblage explanations depart from previous strands of Foucauldian poststructural explanation is in their insistence that people (e.g., police, doctors, entomologists) and social institutions (e.g., prisons, hospitals, laboratories) are not the sole actors in producing these configurations of knowledge and expertise. Instead, a full accounting must inevitably wrestle with the many other players at work in forcing the material/discursive worlds in which we live, with all of their consequences. (2010: 190).

As Mitchell contends, materially diverse political explanations are meant to overcome the trend across the social sciences that “studies of power and resistance continue to be dominated by a single, master metaphor: the distinction between persuading and coercing” (1990: 545). This metaphor stems from the Cartesian mind/body divide we often take for granted in understanding people and subjectivities. But if we are to take seriously the implications of Foucault’s many findings, ”Power must therefore be conceived as something two-fold, with both a physical and a mental mode of operation” (Mitchell 1990: 545). In analyzing Egypt’s political history, Mitchell (2002) adopts a distinctly genealogical approach to these socio-material assemblages, in turn throwing into question a purely humanistic and structural view of space’s political organization. Mitchell’s project lies directly parallel with some of the most influential strains of contemporary political geography, identifying spatial cognitive “traps” and

Applications of genealogical assemblage thinking have appeared in a variety of research agendas over the past two decades, emerging primarily from human geography and anthropology to investigate a range of “global assemblages” or “global forms… articulated in specific situations… territorialized in assemblages” (Ong and Collier 2004: 4). For example, Anna Tsing has directed her analyses of an “anthropology of encounters” to such diverse objects as the Indonesian rainforest and the world’s most valuable mushroom (2005, 2015; see also: Faier and Rofel 2014). Tsing’s methodology embraces an ethnographically oriented investigation of encounters between people and things in ways that draw together the “global” and the “local,” coalescing social formations around them.

Methodologically similar projects abound, from “entangled landscapes” of territory (Moore 2005: 313) to a “grounded geohistorical account” of political economic struggles (Sparke 2006: 360). Barry provides a germane empirical example of “materialist politics” through his previously mentioned analysis of a leak along the BTC pipeline in the South Caucasus. Demonstrating that materials become entangled in politics through the production of information about them, Barry contends that “Metals are not the inert objects they are sometimes imagined to be, merely shaped by social and economic forces. They are elements of lively dynamic assemblages that may act in unanticipated ways, serving as the catalyst for political events” (2010: 110). Methodologically, his approach espouses a commitment to a certain form of empiricism, one that requires us to attend at once to the specificity of materials, to the contingencies of physical geography, the tendencies of history and the force of political action. The political significance of materials is not a given; rather it is a relational, a practical and a contingent achievement. (2013: 183)
Such scholarship supplies a model for my dissertation.

To a similar end, Collier’s genealogical investigation of post-Soviet biopolitics reveals that “surprisingly, pipes and valves, budgeting formulas and bureaucratic norms, emerge as privileged sites where the relationship between neoliberalism and social modernity can be reexamined” (2011b: 2–3). Importantly, in studying the history of governance assemblages, Collier demonstrates that they are assembled through the ways that “calculative agencies were (or were not, thanks in part to the intransigence of the same infrastructures) framed through neoliberal reforms” (2011b: 27). This perspective demonstrates how analyzing social/material events, at particular locations and crossing the multiple scales of global governance assemblages, can reveal important insights into broader governing and political economic trends within specific geographic and historic contexts (Ong and Collier 2004). Rabinow and Marcus refer to studying similar assemblage relationships as an “anthropology of the contemporary,” declaring their purpose in this approach is “to choose — or find — an appropriate field site and to document and analyze such assemblages in the course of their emergence, to name them, to show their various effects and affects, and to thereby make them available for thought and critical reflection” (2008: 57).

Foucault’s legacy in understanding such assemblages – shaped by power-laden practices, enrolling people and things alike, and visible through events – manifests in a growing body of scholarship focused on environmental politics, economics, and cultural relations. In fact, this understanding of socio-material assemblage is a cornerstone of Foucault’s analyses of government. For example, as techniques of government shift, he suggested that the arbiter of sovereign power becomes someone who deals not just with management of the territory but with “a nature, or rather the perpetual conjunction, the perpetual intrication of a geographical climatic,
and physical milieu with the human species insofar as it has a body and a soul, a physical and a moral existence” (Foucault 2009: 23). Government for Foucault is, in the end, about controlling the intersection of the material world and human history; therefore, scholars must consider the government of people alongside the government of the environment. This approach offers an avenue for “coming to terms with a planet that constantly rumbles, folds, cracks, erupts, irrupts” (Clark 2011: xiv) while people live out their lives upon and in relation to it. Doing so creates opportunities to apply the empirical project of Foucault’s assemblage genealogy to human practices of environmental governance.

The title of this sub-section, Tracing the Veins, therefore nods toward three overlapping theoretical positions that I adopt in this research. First, that power operates through the capillary margins of social relations and practices, the everyday interactions that comprise the “veins” of political life. Second, that scholars can follow these relations and practices in a genealogical fashion, “tracing” intersections and divergences across time and scalar framing to better understand their generative practices. Finally, that assemblages formed by such relations and practices not only emerge from social life, but are also inherently material, such that “veins” refer additionally to the material traces of precious metals which in part drive these events. My approach emerges from research on social environments within geography and anthropology, embracing an understanding of assemblage that takes the materiality of these environments seriously rather than as merely a backdrop. Therefore, I finally turn to a genealogical method of tracing assemblage and event.

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5 See (Finn 1998) for an example that bears the same name as this subsection.
3.2. Genealogical Tracing

I’ll tell you something else: Witnesses can be manipulated, too. They’re not robots. They are manipulated by television, newspapers, friends, corporate interests... Who has the real truth? As far as I understand, the truth is something that’s sought out by specially trained experts: judges, scholars, priests. Everyone else is ruled by ambition and emotions. [A pause.] I’ve read your books... You shouldn’t put so much stock in what people say, in human truth... History records the lives of ideas. People don’t write it, time does. Human truth is just a nail that everybody hangs their hats on.

Former Soviet Kremlin official, (Alexievich 2017: 122)

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Assemblage thinking in the social sciences has become increasingly diverse, as I partially illustrate above. However, “genealogical” scholarship in political geography, political ecology, and anthropology represents a collective vision of assemblage that draws spatial practices, political subjectivities, and material environments together in an empirically coherent form. This approach offers traction for analyzing the multi-faceted environmental, cultural, and economic politics surrounding events at Sakdrisi. Tracing an archipelago of powers across society, I begin with socio-material events and follow their generative economies of power across locations and scales, both spatial and temporal. Doing so requires historically grounded analysis, concentrating on practices and discourses as they enroll material resources, and applied to contemporary political dynamics.

History for Foucault had a specific meaning that changed as he moved from what he termed “archaeological” investigations to those of a “genealogical” nature. As Philo argues, the lectures presented in Society Must Be Defended provide an important crux connecting these two perspectives in Foucault’s work, what Philo terms “political historicism.” This politicized approach to history necessarily tracks between the archaeological and the genealogical, usefully
complementing what has been cast as Foucault’s ‘critical and effective histories’ (Dean 1994)… what Lemert and Gillan (1982, 39) term Foucault’s ‘bellicose history’” (Philo 2007: 343).

Archaeology and genealogy have related meanings in Foucault’s “critical,” “effective,” and “bellicose” historical investigations, yet represent different approaches. He summarized archaeology as “the method specific to the analysis of local discursivities,” while “genealogy is the tactic which, once it has described these local discursivities, brings into play the desubjugated knowledges that have been released from them” (Foucault 2003: 10–1). These two approaches work in tandem, analyzing discourse and practice in a locality and then tracing out those that went into their generation.

Importantly, as Foucault described his method, the objects on which he focused are not institutions, ideologies, or theories but instead practices or “regimes of practices” (1991b: 75), constitutive of power relations and producing effects within the world. For example, rather than studying “prisons as institutions,” Foucault investigates “imprisonment as a general punitive practice” (Foucault 1991b: 74). The effects of practices have historic genealogies scholars can trace through the practices themselves to understand the power relations and “conditions” that produce them and make them “acceptable at a given moment” (Foucault 1991b: 75). Foucault derived his historical perspective from Nietzsche’s assessments of “origins” (Nietzsche et al. 1998), not as a singular source (Ursprung, origin, the traditional goal of history) but as the competing and simultaneous forces of descent (Herkunft) and emergence (Entstehung) – a genealogy of competing powers (Foucault 1977b). This genealogical approach analyzes practices and events “on their own terms,” without historical constants, to analyze how our explanation of historic events might be re-framed or re-ordered in an effort that they might be better understood or explained (Colwell 1997).
The first of these competing forces, *Herkunft*, “is the equivalent of stock or descent… it seeks the subtle, singular, and subindividual marks that might possibly intersect in them to form a network that is difficult to unravel. Far from being a category of resemblance, this origin allows the sorting out of different traits” (Foucault 1977b: 145). A genealogy of an event like the first explosion at Sakdrisi must therefore first concern itself with the *differences* among individuals and events that have produced it, coming to knowledge of those events by investigating the various historical forces and regimes of practices it contains as a result of that production. Importantly, though, historical and geographic difference – change over time and space – for Foucault is not interesting merely for its own sake, or for finding moments of infinite possibility. Instead, Foucault considered these dimensions for their ability to shed light on the genesis (descent) of how those differences came to be. But Foucault reiterated, “no one is more of a continuist than I am: to recognize a discontinuity is never anything more than to register a problem that needs to be solved” (1991b: 76).

The second part of Foucault’s genealogical method is *Entstehung*, or emergence, analyzing political historical subjugations in “the moment of arising… As it is wrong to search for descent in an uninterrupted continuity, we should avoid thinking of emergence as the final term of an historical development… they are merely the current episodes in a series of subjugations” (1977b: 148). Concern for emergence requires considering the power struggles that produce differences and progression through historical events and practices. Foucault’s genealogical method then is concerned with forces of historical continuity and difference by focusing on their generative practices and effects, rather than pursuing any singular truth of history. This requires investigating the power dynamics and practices which drive the acceptance of “truths” and how they exist as unique within a progression of various social forces and
relations. Foucault’s methodological move, therefore, abandons the idea that understanding an object or event requires investigating it in itself. As Veyne argues, we must adopt a form of analysis which runs parallel to this profoundly relational understanding of the world, investigating the practices that go into making any given object or event (1997) – tracing the genealogy of that particular assemblage’s formative history.

It is crucial to note that Foucault’s method is not just the study of an ethereal world created from words alone or in the imaginations of scholars. Foucault understood discourse as itself a practice intimately connected with the spatial, material components of the world and simultaneously shaping subjects and the contours of history. According to Stuart Elden, Foucault “appears not as a theorist or historian of the concept of space, but as a philosophically-informed historian whose studies underwrite a programme to ‘spatialize history, to inject an awareness of space into all historical studies, to critically examine the power relations at play in the ways space is effected and effects’” (2001: 7). Following Veyne, Foucault’s genealogical approach to history arguably offers one of his largest scholarly contributions and supplies the guiding ethos for my research.

Veyne provides an emblematic example of this method through Georges Ville’s historical analysis of the end of gladiator fighting under Christian emperors in Rome. Rather than following the apparent link of causality, that adoption of Christianity led the emperors to put an end to gladiatorship, he instead traces a whole history of different practices of government related to this event. Instead following Ville’s broad contextual historical analysis of the emperors’ acceptance of Christianity itself, Veyne points to their adoption of a paternalistic ruling form as productive of both the adoption of Christianity and the end of gladiatorship (1997; see also Veyne 1990).
While Foucault applied this methodology throughout his work, his political economic analysis of grain scarcity in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France provides a discrete and germane example of government’s socio-material nature. According to Foucault, this crisis emerged in relation to a series of events that produced the social phenomenon of scarcity, as a result (and in relation) also producing the governing technology of the free circulation of grain. Foucault identified within this argument the formation of “security” practices as a “technique of government” (2007b: 34) or “an apparatus (dispositif)” (2007b: 37) – a technology implemented to prevent an event yet producing unintended, contingent consequences. Foucault sketched a history of the “general economy of power within which this project and structuring of space and territory is situated” (2007b: 30).

Foucault specifically analyzed the apparatus of actions (practices) taken by the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French government regarding the free circulation of grain. These include “a series of controls on prices, storing, export, and cultivation” (Foucault 2007b: 32) used to protect against the political economic phenomenon – an “event” (Foucault 2007b: 30) – of scarcity, a dearth of grain that raises its price and upsets the population. As he explained, “This anti-scarcity system [implemented by the state] is basically focused on a possible event, an event that could take place, and which one tries to prevent before it becomes reality” (Foucault 2007b: 33) regardless of the effects on the population and despite the expressed ideological goals of the governing class. The result of this series of decisions and potential events was that “the politics of the lowest possible price exposes one to the risk of shortages at every moment, and so to precisely the scourge it sought to avoid” (Foucault 2007b: 33). This analysis illustrates the mechanisms of security: a series of practices governing men and space to prevent a particular event-ful outcome.
Foucault’s investigation of contradictions among governing ideologies and practices demonstrates what he referred to as a “genealogy of technologies of power” (2007b: 36), peeling back the readily apparent sources of cause and effect to critically seek alternative explanations (Colwell 1997). This analysis “is an economics, or a political-economic analysis, that integrates the moment of production, the world market, and, finally, the economic behavior of the population, of producers and consumers” (Foucault 2007b: 41) with the technologies and practices implemented in government. Viewed this way, something as seemingly banal as a “history of grain” would investigate the rich string of socio-material events, practices, and economies of power following grain “from the moment it is put in the ground, with what this implies in terms of work, time passed, and fields sown — of cost, consequently” (Foucault 2007b: 36). Through this multi-scalar political economic analysis tracing the social relations and practices surrounding such governance events, we can see the contested descent/emergence of new political subjectivities – “population,” “the people,” “individuals” – alongside governing technologies or “technologies of power” – “security” and all its functions versus those of self-regulating “discipline.” Lemke assesses this genealogical method through Foucault’s analysis of the modern state as marked by three analytical dimensions. First, it presents a nominalist account that stresses the vital importance of knowledge and political discourses in the constitution of the state. Secondly, an analytics of government uses a broad concept of technology that encompasses not only material but also symbolic devices, including political technologies as well as technologies of the self. Third, it conceives of the state as an instrument and effect of political strategies that define the external borders between the public and the private and the state and civil society, and also determine the internal structure of political institutions and state apparatuses. (2012: 25–6)

In looking to explain the causes and effects of an historical event such as the destruction of Sakdrisi, following Foucault’s methodological example requires that we trace the socio-material practices and forces which have generated this particular political assemblage,
technologies of government and particular political subjects emerging and descending from spatial and historical context. As Foucault contended,

rather than asking ourselves what the sovereign looks like from on high, we should be trying to discover how multiple bodies, forces, energies, matters, desires, thoughts, and so on are gradually, progressively, actually and materially constituted as subjects, or as the subject. To grasp the material agency of subjugation insofar as it constitutes subjects. (2003: 28).

This approach sets the task for addressing the Sakdrisi conflict just as Irakli presents it – an event crucially shaped by the historical variegations of capital expansion and market restructuring but just as importantly sculpted by a host of other social, political, and material forces. Foucault therefore applied his genealogical lens to unravel the contours of this political assemblage by tracing the practices, relations, and forces bound up in its production. In the process he uncovered how the descent and emergence of these forces affect the people and environments enrolled in these dynamics. To begin, I must try to grasp the problem as it unfolds today – in the middle of things.

4. Conclusion: In Media Res…

After leaving the rusty pipe taking up water for the region’s farmers, Niko brings me back to his office to meet a colleague. Our conversation is perhaps less immediate than the orange stream of pollution I had just seen, but in some ways, it is just as jarring. Mari, a woman in her late thirties, is sitting across the table from me. This room occasionally serves as her office when she is working for Niko’s group, the Caucasus Environmental NGO Network (CENN). She is also a journalist, and grew up with her family in Bolnisi, a mining town located fifteen minutes downstream from the gold and copper mines.
Mari has focused on environmental problems in her work, and as we converse about what has happened in the homes of her family, she leans closer, eyes getting wider, gesticulating more pointedly.

The younger generations are all leaving. There are no longer fish in the river. "The role of the government should be positive, when they have this kind of investment they should interfere really in detail to make sure this is good for” its citizens… but she feels the government has only done the opposite.

The worst for Mari is mining’s effect on the health, bodies, and fears for the future of her family and friends. For instance, Bolnisi used to be known throughout Georgia for its exquisite potatoes. But now, she says, “All the potato plantations where the irrigation is from the river water… all this dirty water gets into the soil, and then where potatoes grow, so... when you are in hell, what do you do? You have to close your eyes! [and eat the potatoes].” Mari has some techniques she thinks might help reduce the danger of eating these poisoned tubers, soaking them in water over night or cooking them for a long time, but she has no way to know if this actually helps. She feels confident that she will have a job as long as CENN has a budget, but she fears for the health, livelihoods, and lives of her loved ones.

As seen in this small corner of the world, mining in its large-scale modern form drastically alters the planet’s geology, finding rich deposits of materials society has deemed valuable and removing them from the roiling flow of tectonic geologic process. This anthropomorphic pattern began millennia ago, though with the expansion of capitalist systems in the past 150 years the trend of geologic extraction has reached previously unimaginable, planet-shifting scales as every year we now move more earth than the earth itself in pursuit of minerals
(Bridge 2013). Yet these broad trends often become most visible in the embodied experiences of the people who live close to the mine.

Later that afternoon, Mari leads me down the cobble-stoned streets built by German settlers two hundred years ago to meet her mother. The sores on her mother’s face and her stories of illness that have increasingly haunted the family – most of whom, at least to some extent, rely on the mines for work – betray the source of Mari’s fears.

The power-laden relations and practices that both shape and drive these political-ecological assemblages are key to understanding the complexities of the case surrounding the mine’s explosion, and subsequent mining activities in the region. Understanding the politics of environmental events here requires identifying the shape of relevant discursive/material assemblages, tracing the practices and narratives of relevant actors, and following the effects of such events as they unfold at (and across) a variety of scales. In short, it requires that a researcher immerse her or himself “into the middle of things” – not to pursue questions of transcendence through immanent empirics but to search for highly contextualized explanations and understandings of the political and ecological events unfolding across multiple scales.

Mari’s family bids me farewell as I begin the hour-long journey back to my apartment. They offer me a few slices of their evening khachapuri to take with me, as well as some plums and cherries from their garden. Leaving the courtyard, I reflect that our location in the valley makes it likely these were grown with water that has flown past the mines, and the orange streams trickling from beneath them. Waving goodbye, I take a bite so as to not be rude to my new friends, and realize that I am right in the middle of things.
Chapter III – Political Alchemy: Corruption, rent, and patronal networks of resource governance

1. Introduction

I was first introduced to the complications surrounding the Sakdrisi case during one of the earliest interviews I conducted for my master’s thesis research on forest governance in Georgia. In the midst of discussing timber harvesting legislation over coffee on a sweltering July afternoon in Tbilisi, a World Bank representative casually began telling me how the Rich Metals Group (RMG) had just paid USD$13 million to the Georgian government as compensation for past environmental damages at the company’s mine in the Mashavera Valley (MA Interview 008, 2012). Though I found this anecdote quite interesting, I had spent weeks trying to organize this interview and, given my research focus on forest resources and anxiety over wanting to succeed in my first international research trip, I found this news more than a bit beside the point. I daftly barreled through the representative’s fascinating revelation to continue discussing deforestation and alpine erosion, only later considering the odd details of this governing arrangement.

Though the significance of this payment would not become clear to me until several years later, I had begun investigating environmental politics amid one of Georgia’s most important and widest-ranging periods of property and resource governance reforms following the country’s independence from the Soviet Union. As I found during my MA research, this pattern of fragmented political authority and sovereignty exists not just in the mining sector, but in other Georgian natural resource markets, including forest products and hydropower (Quinn 2017). This reorganization of environmental governance entails commodifying the natural resources found throughout Georgia’s territory, and – via a series of political practices extending beyond
the realm of economic relations and amounting to what I define here as *political alchemy* –
capturing the rents extracted from those valuable resources through a series of dispossessions,
political exclusions, manipulations of social circumstances, and unequal appropriations.

Georgia’s experiences after the Soviet Union’s collapse entailed widespread shifts in
political economic relations, part of the pattern of upheaval and insecurity experienced by
millions throughout the entire formerly Soviet region. Yet forces of memory, history, and the
inertia of institutional and social patterns are equally apparent as these newly emergent relations
carry echoes of the past (Brubaker 2011; Collier 2011b; Graybill 2007; Koch 2014; O’Loughlin
and Kolosov 2017). These temporal tensions among past, present, and future, even in the face of
dramatic and visibly transformative events, illustrate Nietzsche’s characterization of history as
the result of competing and simultaneous forces of descent (*Herkunft*) and emergence
(*Entstehung*) (Nietzsche et al. 1998; see also Chapter 2). Bound within these histories, however,
are geographies of competition and struggle, alliance and growth. This chapter traces the
political, economic, and broader social relations shaping and governing the development of
Georgia’s natural resource sector since the Soviet Union’s collapse.

This portion of my analysis emerges from the puzzle that struck me on that earlier
morning beside the small orange stream in the Mashavera Valley, years after the World Bank
meeting, when I first saw the Sakdrisi pit myself: *How could this egregious pattern of pollution
happen? What allowed the initial mining blast to take place, the first in a series of practices that
produced this large, toxic, profit-generating pit?* I left the bank of that polluted stream
unsatisfied by immediate explanations of institutionalized greed, corrupt individuals, and blatant
disregard for the environment. My investigations in the ensuing years have only strengthened my
frustration with such accounts of post-Soviet extractive industries and lead me to the present analysis.

In this chapter I therefore first investigate my guiding question of “How Sakdrisi’s expansion has transpired?” before delving into the local and regional effects of mining at the Sakdrisi-Madneuli complex in later chapters. This question lies beneath each of the others considered in this dissertation, yet it also specifically addresses the project’s first primary enquiry, “How do protestors and supporters of the Sakdrisi gold mine and other mining projects in Georgia develop their claims in the debate over the territories’ futures?” (see Figure 6).

Together the answers to these questions offer key insights into the legal and political economic components of Georgia’s extractive resource regime, as well as into how these forces help shape the political geographies of resource extraction. The Sakdrisi case provides an opportunity to theorize geographies of corruption in capitalist rent relations more fully under increasingly
decentralized resource regimes. In doing so this first empirical chapter provides both the historical and geographical background for the remainder of my analysis in this dissertation.

I specifically interrogate the political practices and histories which led to RMG’s destruction of the Sakdrisi archaeology site and the effects of this expansion of mining activities. I address these topics by tracing portions of Georgia’s post-Soviet property reforms. I illustrate this transition through the case of mining governance, considering the specific changes in this sector as a territorial project grounded in shifting relations among state, society, and corporate interests. Drawing from the framework developed in Chapter 2, I approach environmental and resource governance here as an historically embedded assemblage of different political technologies still in transition (Foucault 2007c). These complex political economic relations of resource governance comprise intersections of property, value, rent, and the state. Yet key to moving beyond mere description of such a complex assemblage toward explanation requires tracing those intersections and relations, moving beyond those analytical categories to illustrate the practices through which they unfold geographically and historically.

In doing so, I take inspiration from political ecologists and political economists who hold that such an analysis requires a Marxian theory of value as an essential starting point for understanding the emergence of capitalist forms of governance and the inequalities they produce. This view provides productive guidelines for understanding property relations under capital, especially considering the ways they territorialize shifting state/society power relations (Blomley 2015, 2017). At the same time, a broad range of scholarship demonstrates the importance of understanding that economic value, as Marx understood it, presents just one among a variety of value systems, relations, and governing forces at play in a regime of resource governance – involving diverse and dynamic actors, institutions, power relations, cultural and social norms,
and material forces. I develop this perspective to analyze the complex relations surrounding the Sakdrisi case and to show how markets for precious metals and land appear in Georgia not just through the extraction of value and dispossession through capitalist exploitation. Instead, I trace these shifting spatial practices to argue that such economic relations also emerge through and in conjunction with the navigation and manipulation of broader political networks to appropriate the rents extracted from these valued resources. I refer to these practices as political alchemy, not just in reference to the long mystical history of alchemic attempts to create value from base materials, but also to highlight both the manipulative negotiation of these valuable relationships and the suspicious view of such political networks held in popular opinion.

I structure the rest of this chapter as follows. The first section uses the recent history of Georgia’s resource governance legislation to outline what some might call “standard stories” (Tilly 2002) of capitalist political economy from the Marxist tradition of critical geography. I then argue for viewing ostensibly neoliberal policies as the product of multiple governing regimes, including regimes of value, property, and rent, as well as other socially contingent relations such as patronalism and corruption. In the next section I trace the corporate structure of mining operations in the Mashavera Valley to illustrate how these multiple regimes shape contemporary extractive practices in the region, moving beyond simple categorizations of state, society, and corporate power. The chapter ends with some general conclusions about the significance of this resource regime for understanding Georgian politics more generally.

In the process I illustrate how focusing analytically on corruption per se can present problems for all the post-structural analytical issues laid out in Chapter 2. For example, and as I illustrate here, an analytic focus on corruption in the extractive sector – rather than a consideration of the diverse practices that comprise a governing resource regime – obscures
other opportunities to understand how those corrupt practices fit within broader political geographies and actual resource governance networks. Therefore, rather than focusing on practices pre-categorized as “corrupt,” I look at the broader set of governing practices and relations that might (or might not) get labeled as such. Doing so allows me to view corruption in resource sectors as not necessarily isolated to a single territory, state, legal jurisdiction, or social group, but rather as part of broader systems of “structured inequity” (Robbins 2000), not necessarily bound by the Westphalian interstate system and driven by political geographies simultaneously rhetorical, material, and territorial (Doshi and Ranganathan 2018).

I draw from a range of empirics to make this argument, sketching out Georgia’s emerging resource governance regimes of property and rent, as well as contestations against them. These empirics include background interviews with key players involved in this history; participant observation and informal conversations with political activists, industry experts, and other scholars and researchers from diverse institutions; and policy analysis; and is supported by reporting from primarily Georgian news outlets during and after these events.

2. Regimes of Capital

Structural Marxist and post-structural scholars have often actively opposed one another throughout the history of geographic thought, launching ongoing attacks over ramparts built from nearly countless manuscripts. While a complete account of these debates is impossible here (see [Cresswell 2012] for one of many thorough considerations within geography), I adopt the position that understanding what Marston and Perreault might term the Georgian political context’s unique “resource regime” (2017) requires acknowledging the important contributions generated by scholars on both sides of this debate. This section introduces key components of
environmental governance in Georgia while outlining key elements of the political ecology and political geography literatures that shape my analytical toolkit. In doing so I advance an understanding of what I term “political alchemy,” or the manipulation of social networks to capture surplus value from unequal rent relations.

2.1. Standard Stories of Capital

In the months and years following my conversation in the World Bank Tbilisi offices, I became increasingly curious and confused during my investigations of the value of resource rents to the Georgian state. On the one hand, Georgia’s total natural resource rents are smaller than most other formerly Soviet countries, on par with only the Baltic states and Moldova, both of which are relatively resource poor. Georgia’s resource rents made up only 1.002% of the country’s USD$13.994 billion GDP in 2015, or just over USD$140 million (World Bank 2019b, 2019c). This relatively small figure paints Georgia as somewhat exceptional among the formerly Soviet economies, many of which rely heavily on resource rent extraction in the post-Soviet era for economic development (Gel’man and Marganiya 2010; Markowitz 2013). To see the stark contrast in these economic foundations across the region, we need only compare the experiences of Georgia and the Baltic countries to Russia, Azerbaijan, and most Central Asian republics, which (other than Tajikistan at 2.06%) all had GDPs composed by resource rents ranging from 7.16% (Kyrgyzstan) to 20.08% (Turkmenistan) in 2015 (The World Bank 2019c).

On the other hand, Georgia is among the former Soviet Union countries whose exports most significantly rely on ores, metals, and minerals, second only to Armenia in 2015 and a

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6 The World Bank calculates these figures as the sum of rents from oil, natural gas, coal, forest and mineral resources, expressed in terms of % of GDP.

7 The World Bank defines these categories along the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Standard International Trade Classifications (SITCs) 27, 28, and 68. These classifications include raw and crude minerals.
trend that has held steady since the mid-2000s (The World Bank 2019b). Georgia’s output of metals and minerals is second only to agriculture in contributing to the country’s GNP, comprising approximately one quarter of the country’s exports (World Bank Group 2015: 31). Gold and copper tend to make up almost half these exports, and nearly the entirety of Georgia’s output of these two metals comes from operations in the Mashavera Valley (Safirova 2012). Put simply, the Mashavera Valley supplies one eighth the value of Georgia’s exports.

Though these trends distinguish Georgia’s economy as more diversified than those of other countries in the region, they also illustrate a key conundrum of the Georgian government’s rent-seeking economic behavior, as people living in the Mashavera experience those trends of export dominance directly in their daily lives. *Why would the Georgian government* – which primarily relies on a strikingly regressive tax system for approximately 75% of its revenue streams, with “privatization” contributing only 1% of the country’s total revenues and another 5% from vaguely defined “other sources” (The Ministry of Finance of Georgia 2018) – *allow such an operation to continue, especially when doing so risks political de-legitimation as dangerous extractive activities unevenly harm local citizens?* Neither international FDI nor a capitalist will to develop can fully explain the economic decisions forming Georgia’s resource governance regime or activists’ failure at Sakdrisi, despite the significance of the Georgian government’s "open for business" geopolitical signaling and the continued dominance of neoliberal thought in governmental institutions. For example, though the protests at Sakdrisi proved unsuccessful, activists in Georgia’s northern Svaneti region have held off development

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(including stone, sand, gravel, and crude fertilizers), iron, copper, nickel, aluminum, uranium, thorium, silver, platinum, lead, zinc, tin, base metals, and precious metals, including waste and scrap.
and expansion of similar proposed gold mining and hydropower projects in recent years – at least thus far (Bankwatch 2018; Cagara 2016; OC Media 2019).

Structural Marxist geographers have offered many possible explanations for such dynamics of environmental governance under extractive capitalism that might answer these questions. These include how different dimensions of capitalism intersect and shape one another, from financialization to debt and beyond (Harvey 2017; Huber 2018b; McCarthy 2012), and value’s function in circuits of capital (Huber 2018a; Kay and Kenney-Lazar 2017; Labban 2014), among others. Underlying and driving much of this scholarship is a common understanding of economic social relations, a standard story of capitalism drawn from Marx’s diverse writings and the debates that have unfolded among his followers and detractors alike. Capital’s extraction, circulation, and accumulation define this story, tying together the expropriation of laborers from the means of production by capitalists, labor and valorization processes, property relations, and links between states and their territories. The story is complicated and intensified by decades of doubling down on “free” market economic liberalism in ways that frequently produce devastating global inequalities via unprecedented accumulations of wealth (Harvey 2007a; Heynen et al. 2007b; Peck 2013).

These stories of capital accumulation have played out in nearly all sectors of the Georgian economy as citizens have grappled with the Soviet system’s collapse and replacement over the past three decades. The post-Soviet era’s first ten years brought serious social upheaval to Georgia’s population, a period that still feels fresh to many people today as the shadows of civil war, foreign military incursion, economic instability, and ethnic conflict remain visible across the country’s diverse landscapes. Following the 2003 Rose Revolution, Mikheil Saakashvili’s United National Movement (UNM) party instituted a wide-ranging sweep of
reforms as part of this effort to move past the country’s first tumultuous decade of independence, seeking to stabilize, liberalize, and privatize as many facets of Georgian life as the government could address. This ongoing transformation has included broad shifts in social structures and processes of commodification within Georgia’s political economy, as the country has tried engaging global markets, securing political status among western powers, and helping certain sectors of the population achieve improved quality of life. Reforms have targeted the national banking system, a radically simplified flat tax system, reforming the police force, offering universal health care (at least on paper), and creating an exceptionally aggressive privatization program.

This trend toward privatization spread across all sectors of the economy, yet Georgia’s natural resources were among the first on the auction block. They were also some of the most widely privatized – mirroring similar trends throughout the former Soviet Union and the first steps along a path the country is still careening down. The push to privatize all state assets represents a much deeper shift in Georgia’s socio-political regimes, including systemic changes in the country’s broader property regimes.

Following a period of informal claims defined by localized social struggles over land ownership (Salukvadze 1999), Georgian property reform has occurred through a still-unfolding series of legislation (see Figure 7 below). This series of legislative actions progressively solidified the transition from collective to private land ownership, with small plots of agricultural land distributed to families based on area of residence (urban, rural, and degrees of agricultural productivity) and a regularized cadastral survey and taxation system (Ebanoidze 2003; Salukvadze 1999). The government put collective state-owned urban and agricultural lands for corporate sale via auction, and occasionally joint stock corporations (JSCs) took over the
collective *kolkhoz* farms, leasing the land from the central government. However, when the initial stages of this process were complete, approximately one third of the country’s total arable land was still owned and leased by the state, while more than 1.7 million agricultural land parcels were registered to Georgian citizens (Ebanoidze 2003; Salukvadze 1999). In the initial rounds of property reform, the country’s highest tax rates were in the capital Tbilisi, followed closely by Sakdrisi’s neighboring district Marneuli, due to the region’s productive and rich soils (Salukvadze 1999).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Legislation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Decree No. 48, the Land Privatization Decree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Law on Private Ownership of Agricultural Land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Law on Land (Immovable Property) Registration</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Law on Subsoil</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>The Civil Code</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>The Law on State Property Privatization</td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Law on Declaration of Private Ownership of Nonagricultural Land in Use by Physical and Private Legal Persons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Article 21, Law on Expropriation Procedure of Ownership for Public Necessity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Decree No. 327, on Urgent Measures for the Initial Registration of Agricultural Land Ownership Rights and Issuance of Registration Certificates to Georgian citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Resolution N136, on Approval of the Regulation on the Procedure and Terms and Conditions for Issuance of License for Mineral Resources Extraction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>The Law on State Property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Amendments to Law on Subsoil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 7: Chronology of property reform legislation (Sources: Ebanoidze 2003; Salukvadze 1999; The Parliament of Georgia)*
In recent years the Georgian government has continued these reforms to include an electronic cadastral system of property titles. Watchdog groups have identified recent cases of the government implementing this system to dispossess villagers of legally purchased land – for instance, to develop public works such as a landfill – that was only recovered through the coordinated advocacy of international groups and residents themselves (Shermadini 2017). This property regime transition has maintained momentum, as suggested by the recently passed legislation confirming the use of blockchain technology\(^8\) to manage Georgia’s land title registry from the private sector – the first government in the world to do so (Shin 2017).

Yet regardless of the technology utilized to manage this system of land ownership, these actions are all related to the development of new property regimes in Georgia. Blomley generally defines property as “an organized set of relations between people in regards to a valued resource” (2015: 1). Property regimes are therefore built on relations of value, including of landed property as is necessary for mining and other forms of natural resource governance.

However, as both David Harvey and Karl Polanyi argue, land is a fictitious commodity that does not produce value on its own (Harvey 2007b; Polanyi 2001: 76). Marx illustrates how value emerges from the abstraction of labor, allowing people to exchange commodities by alienating the actual labor that produced them and instead establishing exchange value through an average of socially necessary labor time (1992: 300–6). In this way, land produces no economic value on its own as it exists independent of human labor. Instead, people can trade land due to practices of primitive accumulation, wherein powerful actors, such as the post-Soviet

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\(^8\) According to *Wired* magazine, blockchain technology essentially makes it “harder for digital data to go rogue” and “develop a wild social life all its own” (https://video.wired.com/watch/blockchain-explained). Blockchain does this through complex processes of cryptography that operates via a shared database with restricted access by a set of digital keys. In some ways then blockchain technology might offer a somewhat ideal libertarian accounting mechanism for property reforms, designed for transparency and security though clearly also connected to social and political economic striations of the world.
Georgian government, capture freely existing resources like land and bring them within markets as commodities (De Angelis 2001; Glassman 2006; Hall 2013; Marx 1992: 873–6; Perelman 2000). Landowners then have the capacity to establish “ground-rent” on this land, providing “a basis for various forms of social control over the spatial organization and development of capitalism” (Harvey 2007b: 337; see also: Coronil 1997) and seen in mining industries as “rent in mining” (Marx 1993: 908–16). As Harvey argues, when an entity like the Georgian government becomes a landowner, it acquires “not the land, but title to the ground-rent yielded by it” (2007b: 367). This relationship between property and ground-rent⁹ is crucial for understanding nature-society relations under capitalism (Andreucci et al. 2017). Such relations are especially salient in a place like Georgia, where the government fills the monopolistic role of rent-seeking landlord, auctioning off the rights to explore and extract resources within particular territories, as explained below (Blomley 2015, 2017).

Georgia’s broader system of resource governance – in which the land-owning government auctions off territorially delimited extraction rights to generate ground-rent – is archetypical of mining governance within advanced capitalism. Under such a “pure theory of the capitalist mode of production” (Harvey 2007b: 367), this spatial organization via relations of ground rent establishes property regimes as primary forms of territorial organization for capitalist states (Blomley 2017; Parenti 2015). Critical scholarship of rent often focuses on urban land rents (Slater 2017; Ward and Aalbers 2016) yet rent exists on many land uses. Critical political resource economists have begun illustrating how such forms of “rentier capitalism” increasingly define a wide range of sectors globally, including agriculture and oil extraction in

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⁹ Though I realize this presents possibilities for analytical confusion, I do not delve into the detailed and unique characteristics among Marx’s different categories of rent (e.g., rent, ground-rent, absolute ground-rent, monopoly rent, differential rent I and II, and so on). For further detailed discussion of these differences and their implications, see Harvey 2007.
petro-states like Venezuela (Coronil 1997; Purcell 2017). In fact, Parenti views such relationships between states and territorial property regimes as the primary vector for the accumulation of surplus value – the appropriation of rent – from natural resources (2015).

However, as I illustrate below, the monopolistic tendency of the post-Soviet Georgian government as landowner of Georgian territory provides a political milieu in which “free” and “open” markets of land access remain both uneven and limited, messy and contingent, illustrating the political effects of rent’s monopolistic nature.

2.2. Seeing Capitalist Natures in Georgia

Sometimes referred to as ecological Marxism (Castree 2015; Foster et al. 2010; Moore 2011; Smith 1984), the influence of such perspectives toward social-environmental relations under capitalism were especially prevalent in the earliest strands of political ecological thought – from Michael Watts’ pioneering work on famines in Nigeria to Susanna Hecht and Nancy Peluso’s incisive research of forest resources in the Amazon and Java (respectively) and Blaikie and Brookfield’s analyses of global land degradation – even if these assumptions were not always made explicit as such (Blaikie 1985; Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; Hecht 1985; Hecht and Cockburn 1989; Peet et al. 2011; Peet and Watts 2004; Peluso 1992; Smith 1984; Watts 1983). Watts draws from the regulation theory school to define such ecological “social transformation” as unfolding “under the stable constraints of the most general norms” of capital accumulation of surplus value – a regime of accumulation (Aglietta 1979: 68). These regimes become "imposed by social relations of production and exchange and by property relations" and shape "how resources, environments, and perturbations might be managed and governed" (Watts 2015: 34). Such attention to property relations, primitive accumulation, and commodification
under capitalism provide further core themes within political ecology (Agrawal 2001; Bauer 1998; Bridge 2007; Mansfield 2004; Peluso 2007; Prudham 2004, 2015; Ribot and Peluso 2003; Rocheleau and Edmunds 1997; Sikor and Lund 2009). By necessity such analyses often intersect with considerations of the state (Harris 2017; Robertson 2015; Robertson and Wainwright 2013), class (Ekers 2015), and acts of enclosure (De Angelis 2001; Federici 2004; Glassman 2006; Harvey 2003; Perelman 2000).

Georgia’s specific regime of accumulation has continued evolving, following the centralized Soviet economy’s collapse and the initial rounds of landed property reform in the early 1990s. The Georgian government adopted the Law on State Property Privatization in 1997, which the Parliament then replaced with the Law on State Property in 2010. Both set the terms for selling state property to private interests, including beyond landed property, representing just two among several rounds of economic privatization (Gujaraidze et al. 2007; Peluso 2007). The initial list of property types available for privatization was long and wide ranging, from monuments of cultural, historic, or artistic value to media communication and broadcasting infrastructure; the state system of water supply to cemeteries; and special economic zones to state reserves and precious metal deposits (The Parliament of Georgia 1997). However, under the 2010 law, lands designated for historical, cultural, natural and religious monuments are no longer subject to privatization (The Parliament of Georgia 2010) – a designation that became increasingly significant for the Sakdrisi case.

The final important piece of this property reform as relates to mining arrived in the second major wave of Georgia’s privatization following the 2003 Rose Revolution, when the government passed Resolution N136, On Approval of the Regulation on the Procedure and Terms and Conditions for Issuance of License for Mineral Resources Extraction (The Parliament
of Georgia 2005). This law set up a system in which the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (MENR) auctions off territorially and temporally delimited licenses for ferrous and non-ferrous mineral exploration and extraction for durations of up to 45 years. Participation in the auction process is dictated by Article 4 of Resolution N136, which states, "All license seekers meeting the license conditions under the Law and assuming the obligation to meet the requirements set by the exploitation license issuer, may have the right to participate in the license issuance as conducted by auction" (The Parliament of Georgia 2005). Article 7 lays out the conditions for issuing the license, requiring an Environmental Impact Assessment for all extractive endeavors under the Law of Georgia on Environmental Permits. As Bridge explains, such concessions “make possible processes of primitive accumulation while leaving the state’s broader claims to territorial sovereignty intact” (2013: 4).

These more specific forms of state property garner even greater focus within the legal framing of subsurface natural resources laid out during Georgia’s first post-Soviet property regime. The opening lines of the Law of Georgia No 1894, On Subsoil, defines its object as “located on the land territory, its territorial waters, continental shelf and special economic zones of Georgia.” As such, the subsoil "is a national treasure of Georgia and it is protected by the State," a law that “shall be in force throughout the territory of Georgia” (The Parliament of Georgia 1996). Within this property regime, the "Subsoil of Georgia is state property... The right of ownership of land shall not mean and shall not grant the right of ownership of subsoil" (The Parliament of Georgia 1996). The law goes on to state that "Subsoil is a part of the earth crust, which is exposed on the ground surface or located in layers of soil and reservoirs, as well as under the soil layer and the bottom of the reservoir, and which is available for exploration and usage" (The Parliament of Georgia 1996, emphasis added). It also defines extraction of these
resources as physical removal for the intent of sale or exchange: "Extraction of subsoil is the utilization of a certain amount of minerals as a result of mining carried out directly by a license holder or a hired entity at the expense of the license holder for the purposes of its direct sale or for its sale after its treatment" (The Parliament of Georgia 1996).

These simple statements require closer attention. The subsoil includes “mineral resources” treasured for their availability to “exploration and usage.” In other words, mineral resources are defined as such when they are (1) known and (2) carry both use and exchange value. Extraction of these treasured resources is only allowed when the state and license holder together determine that the materials also carry exchange value – in other words, when powerful actors know the subsoil materials and deem them valuable within a market. Furthermore, the "use" of subsoil minerals includes their "extraction," "development," and "treatment," but also their "study." This stipulation means that in effect license holders, almost exclusively corporate entities, bear responsibility for identifying and studying the resources available in the subsoil territory they have purchased de facto control of. This knowledge then guides all future environmental assessments, territorial designations, and operation expansions, with little government oversight.

Finally, each stipulation bears significant levels of interpretation by the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (MENR), which holds the right to “lay down specific procedure for exploitation of mineral, mandatory requirements to the agent etc., as well as quantitative, qualitative and timing standards and rules on exploitation of this resource to be approved for each individual case under a separate bylaw normative act of the Minister” (The Parliament of Georgia 2005). These dynamics become further complicated as political transition from the rule of United National Movement to Georgian Dream, amid other major political
transitions, have caused many large-scale changes in environmental authority: eliminating Ministries, combining others, and allowing a rapid “revolving door” of actors between government and private sectors.

The standard story of accumulation under regimes of capital sketched out here in relation to Georgia’s emerging property regime – through which the state commodifies land through primitive accumulation, the abstraction of mining labor produces value, and the landowning state extracts rent from the surplus value appropriated from wage laborers by capitalists operating on that land – is powerful, influential, and useful. More importantly, this regime is distinct and formative within the political economy of Georgia’s precious metal extraction sector. However, this story is incomplete. Though this framework supplies productive analytical categories, it leaves some important questions unanswered. For example, how can we explain property regimes and capital accumulation in the wake of transition from fully centralized, state-owned, Soviet landed property to a de-centralized post-Soviet system when vestiges of Soviet social, extra-economic relations remain so powerful and visible here?

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*Now that we have completed our review of this great Article of the Criminal Code, we are less likely to be astounded further on. Wherever the law is, crime can be found.*


2.3. Corroding Capital

Gold is the least reactive known metal in the world. It does not corrode over time, in part contributing to its historic utility as both currency and monetary standard (Schoenberger 2011). However, this physical property of indelibility does not extend to the social and economic
relations embedded and fetishized within it and other commodities. Here I draw inspiration from a number of political economists to argue that capitalism has no ahistorical “golden rules” – beyond perhaps pursuing profit – and that Marx’s analytical categories are susceptible to a wide range of political, social, and cultural variations, as I illustrate in the Georgian case below: impurities, corrosions, and deviations that actually prove central to capital’s accumulation and appropriation.

In doing so I do not mean to suggest completely jettisoning Marxist concepts like dispossession or appropriation of ground-rent, or ignoring Marx’s crucial revelations about capital’s extraction, commodification, circulation, and accumulation. Rather, I follow a range of scholars who demonstrate the need to acknowledge that power relations of property, territory, and the state are shaped by extra-economic social relations more diverse than just surplus exchange value under ideal forms of capitalist labor exploitation (Glassman 2006). Harvey himself notes at times the possible limitations that dogmatic assumptions can place upon analysis. For example, in a footnote from his explanation of Marx’s theory of rent, Harvey concedes, “The social incentives to hold land – prestige, symbolic importance, tradition, etc. – are also very important in practice, but we exclude them from consideration here because they have no direct root within a pure theory of the capitalist mode of production” (2007b: 367). Harvey suggests that the value/ground-rent connection functions in this clean manner in an ideal form of capitalism, yet outside such “pure” capitalisms other social relations and more culturally inflected value forms can shape politics of access to land and resources.

The limitations of a static and “pure theory of the capitalist mode of production” may therefore at times restrict our analytical scope, an unfortunate constraint due to the historically embedded nature of economic value, rent, and property relations. Instead, viewing the
abstraction of labor through systems of valuation and exchange, following Marx, provides the tools for “understanding capitalist exploitation in process” (Elson 1979: 171). For Elson and others, Marx’s historic view of political economy is not one of rigid structures, but of continually changing processes (Elson 1979).

Macpherson likewise illustrates how “The meaning of property is not constant. The actual institution, and the way people see it, and hence the meaning they give to that word, all change over time. We shall see that they are changing now. The changes are related to changes in the purposes which society or the dominant classes in society expect the institution of property to serve” (1978: 1). Macpherson goes on to argue that property is a right, not a material object, and does not necessarily mean private property. Channeling Marx (Marx and Engels 2008), both of these misconceptions emerge from specific historic and social contexts. Property is always a “bundle of rights” to benefit from resources such as land but must always be paired with socially contingent access, a “bundle of powers” providing “the ability to derive benefits from things” (Ribot and Peluso 2003: 153–4; see also Myers and Hansen 2019). Cohen argued in the 1920s that, due to property’s concern with rights to access or use of an object or idea, we can view property as power over others and that power over things always involves power relations among people. As such, property is directly related to sovereign power (Cohen 1927) and the manifold complications and variations endemic to such political relations over resources: metals, minerals, or otherwise.

These scholars present just a small range of ways in which regimes of capital are far more complex and political than a static analysis of capitalism might allow. I expand upon these scholarly strands to further open the assumptions and categories that at times shape enquiries of the relations among people and natural resources under capitalist systems (Harris 2017; Parenti
I do so to better understand the historically embedded geographies of contemporary resource extraction in post-Soviet Georgia as multiple political regimes and complex geopolitical assemblages shape them. In adopting this position, I do not argue whether capitalism has an outside or whether it is possible to imagine alternative systems and economies (Gibson-Graham 2006). Neither do I advocate reductionist views of Marxism embraced from the 1980s onward that caricature Marxist analysis as having “annihilated the real living people who actually produced social life” (Mitchell 2004: 60), a position Don Mitchell characterizes as “willing distortions of the nature of Marxist geography” (2004: 63).

Political ecologists increasingly adopt such constructive perspectives, perhaps most powerfully when engaging critically with our understandings of capitalism through the nature of value and our struggles to control it. At its most basic, value is a key analytic for assessing political economies of natural resources (Robertson and Wainwright 2013; Smith 2009). However, many political ecologists advocating for diverse understandings of value contend that a narrow focus on economic forces in foundational scholarship on capitalism and the environment such as Harvey and Smith “downplays the role of political struggle and contestation in actively constituting the specific trajectory of socioenvironmental change” (Ekers and Prudham 2017: 1372). Acknowledging value as “simultaneously context-dependent and universal to capitalist accumulation processes” allows analysis of “a wide array of processes and nature-society relations” within a “more open-ended premise of generalized capitalist accumulation” (Kay and Kenney-Lazar 2017: 298).

Schlosser defines such arrangements as “regimes of value,” abstractions of value “mediated through historically and culturally contingent social frames” (2013: 175), or “conditions under which economic objects circulate” (Appadurai 2013a: 4). However, as I show
below, a regime of value also enrolls the conditions under which economic objects are \textit{produced or extracted}, as Marx implores scholars to investigate the political conditions surrounding processes of primitive accumulation within specific modes of production and regimes of accumulation. Failing to adopt Marx’s analytical \textit{tools} in favor of his analytical \textit{categories} (Heinrich 2012) is “too restrictive, akin to snatching a single frame from a series of moving images” (Henderson 2013: x), robbing us of the opportunity to investigate value – and rent – “as a problem alive” (xvii).

Huber’s research is key for framing these complications of value in relation to natural resources. While maintaining the essence of keeping multiple definitions of value separate for analyses of capital, Huber acknowledges that value relations are themselves embedded within systems of cultural values (Huber 2017b). Huber argues that scholars would benefit from employing a value analysis that combines economic and cultural valuations (2018a: 153). I draw inspiration from this work to investigate \textit{how} economic valuation and appropriation intersect with the “social incentives” (Harvey 2007b: 367) for manipulating rent relations.

Tracing the value of gold such as that extracted at the Madneuli complex since the Soviet era provides an excellent example of how practices of valuation and rent fluctuate across historic and geographic context – shaped by multiple political regimes and various governing technologies beyond labor’s abstraction. Ignoring these findings in our analyses risks a fetishism like the type Marx argued against so vehemently.
3. Assembling Extraction, Extracting Rent

3.1. Complexities of Multiple Regimes

As the preceding review illustrates, practices of valuation prove central to political economies of natural resources. However, value relations provide only one piece of the puzzle, as they illustrate the social connectivity joining a regime of accumulation, yet don’t necessarily provide all the tools necessary to understand the uneven patterns of appropriation that follow practices of primitive accumulation (Andreucci 2017; Andreucci et al. 2017; Purcell 2017). The collective work of Foucauldian political ecologists and political geographers concerned with the intersection of governmentality and the environment tend to draw from his methodological assumptions that were “not anti-power but against fixing the limits of political action to a few relations and actors” such as limiting analysis only to particular class relations. Instead, as “political ecologists, we must be open to dispersed power without losing sight of the epistemological, ontological, and normative commitments through which we study power” (Valdivia 2015: 477).

I draw from Foucault’s understanding of power and government as comprising diverse, complex, and historically embedded practices and relations not isolated to any particular monolithic social entity (e.g., “the state” or “the capitalist class”) but rather a “general economy of power within which this project and structuring of space and territory is situated” (Foucault 2007b: 30). Within any economy of power exist many different powers, or political regimes – including those of capital relations such as regimes of value, property, and rent.

I therefore approach capital as an historical governing regime comprising a set of practices and processes, always potentially in flux and intersecting with other political regimes at play in a particular time and place, rather than as a totalized, global structure. The geographies
and histories of capitalism are diverse, and Georgia represents one chapter in the general development of ostensibly neoliberal governing technologies in the wake of the Soviet collapse. This recognition suggests the need to analyze the diverse and changing practices governing natural resources, including formal policy-making, their enforcement and lapses, informal governing technologies, and the relations among these sets of practices.

Such a practice-oriented vision of politics and power presents opportunities to shift the analytical categories with which scholars approach the political economy of natural resources. As just one example, Foucault defined “the state,” including capitalist states, as “nothing else but the mobile effect of a regime of multiple governmentalities” (2008: 77). This definition provides a methodological directive to study “the historical constitution of different state forms in and through changing practices of government without assuming that the state has a universal or general essence” (Jessop 2007: 37). Timothy Mitchell’s Foucauldian inspired work also implores us to acknowledge “the powerful, apparently metaphysical effect of practices that make such structures appear to exist” (1999: 89). Mitchell draws from diverse cases – including international relations between the U.S. government and Aramco in Saudi Arabia and the role of disciplinary practices in shaping the government of post-revolutionary France – to demonstrate how the boundary between state and society is made to seem like a natural, external boundary separating two separate entities, while in reality it exists as an internal, porous boundary separating two variations within a single entity of society. Joe Painter utilizes a similar perspective to analyze “the state” as the product of diverse social practices “that invoke, imply, or depend on the idea of the state… the state is our performance” (2011: 44–5). As Beth Mitchneck points out, Painter’s notion of “stateness” allows for a grounded consideration of the state existing through the social interactions between civil society and individuals (2011: 138).
Jim Glassman draws together arguments by Bob Jessop (regarding the relational nature of the state as the product of class-based strategic struggles under capitalism) and John Agnew (who famously called for considering states beyond prevailing assumptions of the territorial container model of the state) to suggest states are increasingly internationalized as they serve the interests of a global corporate elite class (Agnew 1994; Glassman 1999; Jessop 1990).

Work across political ecology and related fields provides additional texture to these findings, in many ways echoing the large body of work in political geography that also complicates classical Marxist perspectives on political economy. Gavin Bridge’s work presents an especially salient perspective, pointing to the contingent and socially constructed nature of the two related categories “resource” and “state,” both forms of social and material ordering often co-produced (Bridge 2014; see also: Harris 2012; Mitchell 1991b; Painter 2006) and reinforcing hegemonic relationships of environmental subjectivity (Birkenholtz 2008; Bridge 2014; Ekers 2009; Li 2007). Actual practices of mineral governance reveal the contingency and variation of territorial extent and state sovereignty in relation to corporate power (Bridge 2014; Emel et al. 2011; Ong 2006a). These relations become increasingly complex as practices of neoliberal capitalism extend into new spaces and markets throughout the post-Soviet region.

Such complex political geographies as exist in Georgia and many other post-Soviet environments exist as broad “minescapes” (Ey and Sherval 2016) comprised of “moral landscapes,” such that the mining environment “is a technological one—but it is also a mental landscape, a social terrain, and an ideological map” (Bridge 2004: 241). In other words, in addition to their roles in shifting political economic relations and physical environmental effects, mines and practices of mining have the capacity to shape their own underground, transformative geographic imaginations, opening ground for connection to multiple forms of valuation:
economic, cultural, and otherwise. The wide range of possible territorial, discursive, ecological, and visual practices associated with such social relations are crucial for establishing political legitimation beyond purely economic functions of valorization (Bridge 2009; Caspersen 2015; Gregory 2010; Murphy 2013, 2015; Sica and Huber 2017).

These practices articulate with a variety of other locally contingent logics including property regimes and market functions (Bakker 2010; Bridge 2014; Castree 2007, 2008; McCarthy 2005a). Recent additions to this literature only further support such a perspective, such as Nancy Peluso’s elucidation of the ways gold mining territories in Indonesia are not just the product of state power, but of property relations that emerge beyond state power (Peluso 2018). This perspective is especially important for understanding property transitions within post-communist societies. For example, Kathryne Verdery (2003) uses deep ethnographic empirics collected in Transylvania to explore how land tenure and property regimes shifted after the fall of the socialist bloc. Her findings convincingly indicate that the shift from communal ownership to private property is not prescriptive and that neoliberal reforms play out in the context of previously existing social orders and often through the practices of actors beyond “the state” (Verdery 2003).

As mentioned above, a key dimension of these governing regimes are rent relations. Some have recently called for a reinvigorated focus on rent relations within nature-society scholarship as central to environmental governance under capitalist regimes (Andreucci et al. 2017; Felli 2014; Purcell 2017; Slater 2017). Andreucci et al (2017), for example, introduce the concept of “value grabbing” to refer to the appropriation – or redistribution – of surplus value through rent relations, which the authors consider significant due to the increasing global prevalence of rentier relations over accumulation processes. Andreucci points to Visser and
Spor’s (2011) study of rapid privatization in post-Soviet Russia as a case of appropriation’s increasing importance as enclosure and “land grabbing” have helped produce a new rentier class of oligarchs (Andreucci et al. 2017: 34; Visser and Spoor 2011: 310). However, this historical narrative ignores the social striations already existing in the Soviet Union at the time of collapse and the move toward capitalist privatization.

Privatization, including in Georgia, is not an apolitical process with political economic outcomes; privatization is highly political itself, reinforcing the patronal power pyramids already existing across Eurasian political space (Hale 2014). My approach therefore diverges from Andreucci et al. in their analysis of rent’s “value grabbing” political implications, specifically as they understand the state as a reified entity serving as “the main terrain of class struggles over the rent it accrues” (2017: 32). This statist view assumes the ossified state is an object and space of economic relations. Instead, I approach the state as a semi-stable effect of multiple and intersecting power relations.

The following section digs more deeply into these relations to better illustrate how property, value, and rent relations regarding natural resources actually emerge not just as purely economic features of a state system but as more culturally inflected and contingent practices of appropriation.

3.2. Governing Regimes, Hybrid and “Corrupt”

These alternative arrangements of intersecting political regimes governing natural resources present examples of shifting arrangements of state, territory, commodification, property, and rent – what some term “hybrid neoliberalisms” par excellence and include metal mining economies (Bridge 2007; McCarthy 2005a). Diverse actors institute these reforms within
the milieu that has emerged in the Soviet wake, shaped by the patronal politics so predominant throughout the region (Hale 2014). Sites of extraction such as Sakdrisi “emerge as privileged sites where the relationship between neoliberalism and social modernity can be reexamined” (Collier 2011b: 2–3), between re-regulated property and rent regimes and the social milieu which they in part govern. However, to understand actual practices of natural resource commodification and rent redistribution, scholars also need to pay attention to centers of governance which shape the regimes of extraction and exchange surrounding these holes in the ground, rather than only studying those sites of extraction themselves (Huber 2017b). Doing so can contextualize the complex power relations shaping these governing regimes, as well as the political contours of winners and losers they produce (Huber 2018a).

Analysts and commentators often label these unequal patterns the result of “corrupt” systems, typically implicating related practices as illegal, deceptive, or immoral, especially when they emerge in “non-Western” or underdeveloped regions (Chayes 2016; Cockcroft 2014; Doshi and Ranganathan 2018; Karklins 2005; Lovell 2005; Schulze and Zakharov 2018; Strønen 2017; Transparency International 2018; Warf 2018). However, this section argues that such normative categorizations of “corrupt” practices obscure analytical possibilities for tracing the actual practices that produce such uneven political economies: the creation and maintenance of monopolistic rent relations, visible only through a disaggregated lens toward the political geographies producing and supporting these systems.

Fernando Coronil’s *The Magical State* presents empirics from Venezuela that illustrate several implications of such a disaggregated view of capitalist natures. Coronil adopts a similar view as Timothy Mitchell, drawing from Foucault’s work to conceptualize the capitalist state as the effect of a range of disciplinary practices both legitimated and contested through natural
resources – especially enrolling rent regimes. As Coronil contends, "In the case of societies organized around the capture of rent or in which rent plays an important role, a mechanical transposition of Marx’s observation will not do" (1997: 35). Identifying such inversions and manipulations of roles and analytical categories is essential within Georgian resource governance. The development of new, decentralized governance policies laid out previously have brought parallel shifts within Georgian state institutions, as I illustrate below, mutated by political and social networks both within and beyond Georgia’s international borders – yet with distinct local effects.

Studies of “corrupt” rent relations in other developing economies help illustrate my point. For example, Strønen (2017) extends Coronil’s investigations to understand how corruption of Venezuelan state bodies further alters such neoliberal economies. Strønen defines corruption as "a hybrid child of different sets of economic logics, social moralities and relationships of power" (2017: 284), illustrating how the practices of corruption (in local community councils, low-level public officials, etc.) emerge through "dark connections between political and financial elites," producing "quasi-legal or illegal riches in the public without shame or remorse" (288). In doing so, Strønen gestures to the history of anthropologists explaining corruption through various flavors of power relations – including patronal networks, kinship, reciprocity, gift-giving, and moral economies. However, such explanations always exist within a “moral terrain” (Strønen 2017: 304) of accumulation and dispossession for Strønen, defining what is “normal” or “acceptable,” and what is not.

Like Strønen I at first had only a glancing interest in these practices of corporate obfuscation and ownership in the Georgian mining industry. To a certain extent determining the real owner of these operations seemed irrelevant – the discourses circulating throughout society
were powerful on their own, even if in the end they were fabricated (though they are not). Rotating ownership of the concession license seemed to bring little change to the lives of those affected most directly by extractive trends in the region. However, the more I spoke with people living in the shadows of these mines, read financial and pollution monitoring reports, and witnessed Georgia’s political development unfold over the eight years of my MA and PhD research, the more I realized how dismissive I would be in ignoring the practices of corruption affecting these citizens’ lives – the new divisions and designations of state and non-state behavior from conjoined legal and moral perspectives. As one respondent told me about the mining company working in the Mashavera valley, it was as if they and the government were “trying all the time to legalize these illegal activities” (Interview 50).

This respondent’s designation of “illegal” versus “legal” practices in defining corruption is indicative of emergent challenges when trying to analyze rentier practices that some might categorize as corrupt, often invoking such definitions of legality to do so. Some scholars have tried expanding this definition further to enroll other normative assertions in their definitions. For instance, the introduction to a recent edited handbook on geographies of corruption defines the phenomenon as the "misuse of public office for private gains, the abuse of power, and dishonest and fraudulent conduct," including, among other things, the "selling of licenses and permits, allocations of government contracts, and mining and land concessions" as a distinct “form of rent-seeking behavior” (Warf 2018: 2–3; see also: Karklins 2005: 5). Yet, as I explain below, even these definitions prove inadequate in their inability to account for the political geographies involved in even defining some practices as corrupt and others as not. They also isolate broader historical contexts as either essentially irrelevant in defining corrupt practices (Cockcroft 2014: 2) or predictive as “path-dependent trajectories that give rise to the unique circumstances of each
social formation" (Warf 2018: 12). To wit, some argue that the Soviet blat system of favors has moved from everyday life to business circles in post-Soviet states, suggesting that post-Soviet states are almost destined to experience corrupt practices (Ledeneva 1998; Lovell 2005). Such studies offer useful empirical insights, yet they also obscure some of the functional aspects involved in defining and carrying out corrupt practices, especially as they relate to rent relations shaping Georgia’s resource regime. Corruption in Russia, for example, serves two main functions: "rent extraction and securing loyalty of subordinates the administrative hierarchy" (Schulze and Zakharov 2018: 195) yet also emerging as "a consequence of the historical evolution of the Russian state" (Schulze and Zakharov 2018: 197).

Cockcroft, a founding member of global watchdog Transparency International, also explains the post-Soviet trend of corruption as emerging from the Soviet state’s legacies, drawing a connective line between Yeltsin’s “full-scale liberalization” and Gorbachev’s preceding “partial liberalization.” These early moves toward liberalization emerged from the late Soviet era, when Brezhnev instituted a system of "controlled corruption," in which "the Politburo effectively licensed corruption but on the basis of recognized norms and at a standard rate" (Cockcroft 2014: 27). Such structural, “endemic” views of post-Soviet corruption frame these practices as emerging from the legacy of political success not being measured “in terms of compliance with rules, but in terms of achieving outcomes” (Lovell 2005: 73).

Hale illustrates the importance of such clientelist networks of patrons and personal relations to uphold power relations in post-Soviet states – what he terms “patronal politics” (2014). These patronal relation networks increasingly took root as the core of political machines in late- and post-communist government throughout the former Soviet Union, though they took somewhat different shapes depending on local and historical context (Hale 2014: 52–4). The
resulting fuzziness between state/non-state designations in post-Soviet countries (Holmes 2006; Mitchneck 2011) leads Hale to focus on what he terms patronal power pyramids as key political formations in post-Soviet politics, with a patron at the top of the pyramid connected to lower levels through clientelistic power relations regardless of designation as state or non-state (Hale 2014):

> Even private-sector oligarchs generally achieved their rise through some kind of close collusion with important state actors, often using state or former Communist Party resources as their initial capital, and they usually remained highly dependent on state structures (for sustenance, protection, or license). (Hale 2014: 110)

Yet while these historical contexts are crucial for shaping contemporary governing practices, these assessments too suffer from the dangers of Agnew’s territorial trap. These patronal networks importantly extend beyond institutions, partially evacuateing the usefulness of such categories as “state” or “non-state” as oligarchs, experts, and other elites may cross such boundaries and back again overnight (Hale 2014: 424) as post-Soviet economic networks extend beyond the boundaries of state territory. At times these vague institutional boundaries foster economic practices often closely related to corruption, such as offshore banking, round-trip FDI, and more (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017; Doolot and Heathershaw 2015; Heathershaw and Schatz 2017; Ledyeva et al. 2015). Such relations increasingly define central Eurasia’s politics and economies, corroding classic analytical categories of state, territory, property, and value as corruption, patronal networks, and market manipulation become the common practices of authoritarian capitalism.

For example, in their recent book *Dictators Without Borders* (2017), Alex Cooley and John Heathershaw argue that Central Asian dictators function “without moral and legal limits” (2017) as they move money and form political networks. In this text and elsewhere, and paralleling work by other scholars of the region, Heathershaw et al. suggest that such disregard
for limitations represents a defining characteristic of state power across Central Eurasia, including in precious metal mining sectors, as “the hybrid and polyvalent forms of statehood found in post-Soviet Eurasia… remain unexplored as features of regimes (not states) or are dismissed as mere indicators of weakness” (Heathershaw and Schatz 2017: 7; see also: Doolot and Heathershaw 2015). While Georgia is by no means the most corrupt or centralized government in a region filled with autocratic dictators, the country’s anti-corruption moves of the early 2000s have produced a hybrid democratic regime still defined in many ways by governing practices that neglect or manipulate the rule of law and the ideals of Westphalian states and capitalist development – including troubling interstate practices such as the illicit trade of radioactive material by criminal networks across the region and other forms of organized crime (Kupatadze 2007, 2010, 2017).

Cockcroft contends that Western powers are complicit in corruption’s rise in post-Soviet space, such as "the role which local and multinational companies can play and using corruption to increase market share" (2014: 115). However, this argument relies on the framing that Western powers are typically only involved to the extent that they ignore or foster corruption for their own geopolitical needs – for instance, to acquire gas from Turkmenistan – rather than practicing corruption themselves. These framings thus characterize offshore banking jurisdictions and other governmental “grey areas” as part of a "shadow economy" beyond “Western” countries (Cockcroft 2014: 165–8), filled with "black holes" (168–71) producing "secrecy jurisdictions" (171–7).

Such claims do real political work, framing these relations in normative terms that tend to mask the practices and effects of those practices deemed corrupt. For example, practices of institutional capture and “hidden” privatization of public institutions lead to claims of “state
capture,” “stealing of the state,” or “thieves of state,” (Chayes 2016; Karklins 2005), yet in Georgia this privatization is only partially hidden, rendering visible the process of making “legal” the “illegal.” Paul Robbins also characterizes corruption studies as focused on “rotten” and “extralegal” transactions yet highlights, through the case of Indian forest management, that sometimes these relationships provide the rule rather than the exception as norms of corruption become institutionalized and entrenched. Robbins draws from prominent institutionalists (Ostrom 1990) to define corruption, especially in resource governance, as “not the absence of state institutions, but the presence of differing institutions, which vie for legitimacy and trust amongst diverse players within both the state and civil society” (Robbins 2000: 426). Moving beyond definitions of corruption that rely on status as legal or illegal, which might stigmatize local, informal practices of sustainable resource governance, corruption instead becomes “the bending of explicitly equitable state institutions around structures of regional and local social capital to create unequal distributive outcomes… its structured inequity sets it apart” (Robbins 2000: 428).

In similar fashion, some anthropologists approach corruption with a deconstructive eye to question what the terms “misuse” or “public” even mean, illustrating the “grey zones” in the “structured inequities” of both democratic and authoritarian environments alike (Haller and Shore 2005: 4–6). Yet focusing instead on individual greed rather than systemic causes of corruption directs our focus to “the individual apples rather than the barrel that contains them,” while explicit attention to systemic issues often lead to societal classifications as themselves corrupt as the non-Western “Other” – without considering the normative and disciplinary effects of such “modern,” “liberal,” and “good” governance practices (Foucault 1991a; Haller and Shore 2005: 2–4). In this way “it may well be that the concept of corruption as something necessarily
hidden and occult reflects the ethnocentric, puritan, rationalist bias in the Anglophone social sciences” (Haller and Shore 2005: 12). Corrupt practices are therefore not limited to post-communist or developing countries but clearly exist at all scales of government in the EU, NATO, the United States, as well as countries throughout the developing world (Haller and Shore 2005; Holmes 2006). In short, neither our geopolitical imaginations nor our state borders limit corrupt practices, and our assessments of corruption should not be either.

This view of corruption has recently begun to take firmer root in geographic analyses. Recent calls for a critical geography of corruption – identified in both “third world” development projects and US presidential elections – adopt anthropological views toward the socially constructed and contingent nature of corruption accusations as a starting point (Doshi and Ranganathan 2018). Doing so highlights how corruption is not an a priori fact but a political designation and tool. Doshi and Ranganathan define corruption as “a normative discourse about the abuse of entrusted power” – defined beyond simply “state” power to also enroll “symbolic,” “material,” and “territorial” practices and powers – and the “resulting social decay that are always implicitly positioned relative to a perceived normal or previously ‘uncorrupted’ state of affairs” (2018: 3). Crucially, Doshi and Ranganathan also question “why some highly abusive, extractive, and dispossessing practices undertaken by entrusted agents merely proceed as normal to the workings of capitalism” (2018: 3).

Yet corruption’s symbolic power produces material results as well (Doshi and Ranganathan 2017, 2018), as Wedel illustrates through the former Soviet region’s informally-based and often-fluid governance structures (2001, 2003, 2012). What passes for legitimate in the West is dubbed “corruption” in non-Western places, further complicated by the fuzzy borders of state and non-state institutions, legal and illegal, etc., an indistinction utilized in the pursuit of
rent accumulation. These regimes of accumulation also bear territorial power, shaping spatial relations and our imaginations of them.

Such deconstructive approaches to the categories of capital accumulation may at times appear at complete odds with the tenets of classic Marxist analysis. However, capitalism for Marx is an historic mode of production, and even these foundational analytical categories are only useful in historic context such that “specific modes of production contains specific relationships” that should provide the starting point for analysis (Heinrich 2012: 32). Harvey, in the introduction to the updated edition of *Limits to Capital*, specifically frames capitalism as a “logic of power” that, by necessity, intersects with various territorial and state logics (2007b: xviii). To understand the forces driving the changes and crises of capital development, we also need to cut below the surface of our inherited analytical categories and normative geopolitical imaginations to understand the world’s spatio-temporal political reordering: territorial regimes, capitalist discourses, and a range of governing techniques. Analyzing practices designated as corrupt alongside their intersections with legitimate governance regimes is essential for moving toward solutions to such pervasive problems as "the privatization of public life" (Fogel 2018) in diverse political contexts, regardless of normative values placed on those objects of analysis.

In summary, “corruption” is a discursive and rhetorical device used to designate certain practices as transgressing entrusted power (Doshi and Ranganathan 2018), analogous to labels of “free” or “democratic” for which concrete measurements prove continually elusive and pervasively problematic. Yet corrupt practices also bear material and territorial consequences central to capitalist governing regimes. I have therefore tried to show in the preceding review that political geographers concerned with emerging forms of decentralized resource governance should not study corruption as an *a priori* object of normative analysis but instead focus on the
uneven practices to which commentators apply that label. In the Georgian mining industry these involve monopolistic rent relations, which we might categorize as “structured inequities” (Robbins 2000). The recent re-focus on rent relations within political ecology, which some have termed “value-grabbing” as rent regimes primarily comprise unequal power relations (Andreucci et al. 2017), illustrates how these practices can powerfully shape the political geographies of resource governance – especially under emerging regimes of capital (Harvey 2007a).

Commentators such as Transparency International might designate these as “corrupt” practices, and in fact they most likely are. However, these relations remain legal, at least partially visible, and codified – all hallmarks of uncorrupted practices of “good governance.” Instead, viewing “corrupt” practices in the disaggregated approach I propose reveals corruption as an unequally applied label reinforcing the geopolitical imaginations of western supremacy. Such designations provide cover for the broader patronal networks of rent appropriation spreading beyond Georgia’s borders (see Chapter 5) that might produce the greatest inequitable redistributions of rent in emerging economies – perhaps a more grounded vision of corruption and capital accumulation. These practices enroll powerful corporate and governmental actors across different corners of the world and require analyses moving beyond the interstate jurisdictional borders of the territorial trap (Agnew 1994, 2010, 2015a), as I illustrate in the following section.

4. Political Alchemy: Tracing “Corrupting” Relations of Rent and Government

While some places throughout the former Soviet Union, such as Kyrgyzstan’s Naryn region, experience widespread illegal and artisanal mining practices (RFE/RL 2016a), Georgia’s mining regulations and broader property reforms – what Foucault terms “technologies of
government” (2007c) made territorial – mean that the country’s extractive industries are heavily re-centralized and corporatized.

Within state territory, the Georgian government serves as the landowner, auctioning exploration and extraction licenses to corporate interests. However, the result of the concession framework at play here is that “land ceases to be part of national space and becomes instead a series of miniature corporate states: a modern mirror of feudal fiefdoms, with the corporate concession holder as sovereign” (Bridge 2013: 4–5), producing new, resource-based forms of graduated sovereignty (Ong 2006a: 200; see also Chapter 5). In this way, understanding the varying territorialities of property relations in an extractive industry can help shed light on the governing logics shaping emergent relationships among state, society, and corporations (Blomley 2017). These arrangements and constellations form what Marston and Perreault term a particular resource regime, or the ways in which “natural resources, forms of rule, and relations of production are brought into alignment and given territorial form” (2017: 256), remade and maintained through practices of consent, social struggle, and political alliance.

As I demonstrate here, such political social networks – defined by such somewhat ineffable qualities such as “loyalty,” “respect,” and “vulnerability” like many governing regimes throughout the post-Soviet region (Hale 2014; Taylor 2018) – are key to the Georgian mining sector’s emergence, shaping both the governing technologies of property and rent operating here, and the industrial metal extraction market’s evolution. In this way, the value of land and resources to capital is established not only through economic relations of ground rent and exploitation of labor but also through social networks, patronal politics, and elite corruption – the privatization of public life (Fogel 2018) neither unique to Georgia nor necessarily even illegal, but indicative of broader regional trends.
Examples of such corrosion of standard capitalist stories are rampant in Georgia. For instance, under amendments made to Georgia’s Law on Environmental Protection (Law of Georgia No 5640, Section II, Chapter XVI, Article 57) in 2012, companies are able to “compensate” Georgia’s state budget for environmental damage caused by their actions (Corso 2012; The Parliament of Georgia 2012a) – as the World Bank representative tried to inform me in 2012. Two companies historically involved in the mining operations in the Mashavera Valley, Madneuli JSC and Quartzite Ltd, were the first companies to take advantage of this deal, paying the government US$13 million for damages caused since 1994, a figure determined by the Ministry of Energy as the law dictates. Critics claim this number is far less than the environmental damages are worth and that the unclear conditions of these agreements provide fully subjective measures for reparation by the government with little oversight as to how this process of externality valuation unfolds (Corso 2012).

The Rich Metals Group, or RMG, is the most visible corporate entity acting in this region within Georgia and has tried to paint a greener image of the region’s mining operations in the past decade. However, results on the ground do not seem to match this projected image. Although company executives today deny pollution is occurring, stating that Madneuli labs regularly analyze the Mashavera's water and find pollution levels to be within limits, ten years ago the Bolnisi local government invited experts from the Davit Tatishvili Medical Center to examine local citizens for health issues. Of the 706 citizens examined during this period, 253 suffered from "mammary gland fibrous mastopaths and chronic cystic mastitis" centered around the village of Kazreti (Gujaraidze et al. 2007: 39–40). Anecdotal evidence suggests these trends have only worsened, and representatives of the Center refused to speak with me when I told them my research interests. In addition, the UN’s third Environmental Performance Review of
Georgia, published in 2016, assessed there had been no progress on developing a national sustainable development strategy and little progress on revising environmental standards since 2010. The report also determined that Kvemo Kartli has the second most polluted air of any region in the country, due to mining activities in the region, and that water pollution from these industrial activities are some of the most significant environmental issues facing the country (United Nations Economic Commission For Europe 2016). Minutes of government meetings from 2006 obtained by members of the NGO Green Alternative demonstrate that both corporate managers and government entities alike were acutely aware of the environmental damage the Madneuli mine operations were already generating at the time the minimal fine was paid (Gujaraidze et al. 2007: 37). Investigative reporting by სტუდია მონიტორი / Studio Monitor revealed significant differences in heavy metal contamination measurements on contemporaneous reports held by the National Environmental Agency and the mining corporation, suggesting false data were being used (სტუდია მონიტორი / Studio Monitor 2012).

While the Ministry of Environment and Protection has attempted to reform this set of mining governance legislation for close to a decade – guided by consultation with both international experts and local NGOs and with the goal of aligning with both the national constitution and international agreements established under the Environmental Action Programme for Central and Eastern Europe, progress has been slow and results minimal (Ministry of Environment Protection of Georgia 2012). However, this alteration and delay of legislation have allowed for powerful, yet negligent, corporate actors to cover the negative externalities of their extractive practices, just one move in a series of events and relations that have unfolded over the last thirty years as part of Georgia’s broader political economic re-orientation. Crucially, these practices of privatization and property regime transformation were
not immediate, but processual, linked to both the ongoing valuation and extraction of metal resources and the cultural/political dimensions shaping processes of appropriating rent.

4.1. Tracing “Corrupt” Practices and Privatization

The first iteration of this process took the form of an intense wave of privatization in the 1990s, which the government doubled down on in 2004, including in environmental sectors, moving toward increased de-centralization through a series of auctions often occurring after pre-negotiations between individual corporations and government entities (Gujaraidze et al. 2007: 32–6). The new series of legislative actions that made this new system possible indicated widespread shifts in relations between society and state, as well as international actors of many types (protestors, corporations, unions, scientists).

The payment of $13 million described earlier was a key moment in this transition. During the first wave of privatization from full state ownership of property in 1994 following the Soviet collapse, Madneuli JSC, as suggested by its name, was originally a joint-stock company in which the state was a shareholder rather than a property owner. The Georgian government privatized Madneuli JSC at the same time Quartzite LTD was formed as a Georgian-Australian joint venture intended to re-process waste material from the mine to extract increasingly trace amounts of gold left in tailings, along with several other LLCs responsible for various elements of the extraction process. These included Georgian Mining Company LLC, which owned the mining licenses for the Bolnisi region, and Trans Georgian Resource LLC, which held the exploration and extraction license for the Sakdrisi deposit (Gujaraidze et al. 2007).

Several local watchdog groups and NGOs – including Transparency International Georgia, the Georgian Young Lawyer’s Association (GYLA), and Green Alternative, one of
Georgia’s leading environmental NGOs – have undertaken the daunting task of documenting comprehensive histories of the mining operation’s ownership structure. These efforts provide insight to both the power structures shaping the mining operations and Georgia’s broader history of privatization.

Madneuli JSC accumulated nearly 4.7 million GEL\(^{10}\) in debt in the ten years following its initial privatization, resulting from corrupt and inadequate management and governance (Gujaraidze 2013). These developments were part of broader patterns of corporate malpractice throughout the Georgian economy during this decade. Such mounting issues motivated Georgia’s National Agency for State Property Management to begin assigning supervisory boards to large companies following the 2003 Rose Revolution, among which Madneuli JSC and Quartziti LTD were two of the first (Gujaraidze 2013; Gujaraidze et al. 2007). Koba Nakopia, vice-president of the Russian company Promishleny Investor since 2003, was appointed the director general of the companies in 2004. Promishleny contained an offshore subsidiary registered in the British Virgin Islands named Stanton Equities Corporation, and it was Stanton that took private control of both Madneuli and Quartziti in 2005 (Gujaraidze 2013; Rimple 2012).

Nakopia got his position at Promishleny through his connection with Sergei Generalov, a Russian oligarch. During the second major round of privatization in 2004, the Minister of Economy at the time, Kakha Bendukidze – the architect of Georgian neoliberal policy who, according to popular myth, once said he would "sell everything but Georgia’s conscience" (Jones 2015) – called Nakopia in Moscow and offered him the role of managing Madneuli (Rimple 2012: 89). This network of social interconnectivity is a prime example of a capitalist regime

\(^{10}\) 4.7 million Georgian Lari; USD$1,901,303 in 2003, according to historic exchange rates documented at XE.com.
emerging beyond pure economic, capitalist forces, but rather markets shaped by social relations, patronal political networks, and historical context, as common throughout post-Soviet space.

Nakopia left his position at Madneuli when he was elected to Parliament in 2008, yet he kept his shares in the company (Rimple 2012: 89). GeoProMining, Ltd. (GPM) owned the Madneuli mine operation since 2005, controlling the two separate holdings JSC Madneuli and Quartzite Ltd. RMG’s current general director is Dima Kalandadze, who was also GeoProMining’s general director before the mine was sold to RMG to recover debts and avoid environmental accountability. At the same time, Madneuli’s license expired in 2011, and a geologist who worked for GeoProMining opened an offshore company in Cyprus called the Caucasus Mountain Group the day before the auction was publicly announced. The company’s only shareholder is Pamtilon Holdings Ltd.,11 a global investment firm (Rimple 2012: 90). GeoProMining has other holdings throughout the Caucasus (Rimple 2012: 91) and has undertaken similarly environmentally damaging mining practices throughout the former Soviet Union, from the Mashavera Valley to Armenia and locations in Russia (Golden Dust 2017; see also Chapter 5).

The government auctioned off the current exploration licenses throughout the region in October 2011 and February 2012, selling the licenses to the Mining Investment Co. of Russia, part of the Capital Group. As GPM did not acquire the licenses and had more lucrative ventures in Armenia and Russia, the company sold its two holdings to the Rich Metals Group (RMG) for $120 million, renaming them RMG Copper (JSC Madneuli) and RMG Gold (Quartzite Ltd.) (Safirova 2012). RMG’s owners sit on the advisory board of Mining Investment Co., which purchased the extraction license for Sakdrisi-Kachaghiani in 2014 before the mining activities

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11 Some sources spell the company’s name “Pemtilon.”
commenced (Saladze 2014). The three individuals include Dmitri Kozhev, Dmitri Troitsky, who Forbes listed as one of the 100 wealthiest Russians (Rimple 2012), and Zurba Qutelia, who signed the original extraction license granted to TransGeorgianResource and Madneuli JSC in the mid-1990s on behalf of the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (Saladze 2014: 27). In short, the market valuation of access to these resources emerged not only through the abstraction of labor and accumulation of surplus value (Marx 1992: 300–6; Walker 2016) but also through a network of social relations, patronal politics, and undermining of the rule of law, without strictly breaking it (Hale 2014; Muir and Gupta 2018; Strønen 2017) – a practice of institutionalizing norms of structural inequity that some might label as corrupt (Robbins 2000; Doshi and Ranganathan 2018).

While the effects of these corrupt practices are most visceral in Georgia’s Mashavera valley (as explored in greater detail in the following chapters), they unfold through a distinctly global assemblage (Ong and Collier 2004). Both RMG and the Mining Investment Co., along with GeoProMining and the Caucasus Mountain Group, are also owned by Pamtilon Holdings and share the same leadership (Saladze 2014: 28). Extensive investigations of RMG’s corporate ownership structure reveal that it comprises various holdings based in the Netherlands, Cyprus, and Georgia (GYLA 2014; TI Georgia 2015). While RMG is ostensibly based in Georgia, investigators have found evidence that RMG and Pamtilon Holdings – with the same people noted in the registration information for both enterprises and shared board members including former members of government – are most likely part of the Capital Group,12 which, if true,

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12 The Capital Group is run by Russian billionaire Vladislav Doronin, whom Business Insider and others have referred to as “the Donald Trump of Russia” (DuJour 2014) and who has developed more than 75 million square feet of real estate in the Miami Beach area in the last decade or so (Master Brokers Forum 2017; Wooldridge 2017). Such practices oddly mirror those of other real estate-based money laundering undertaken by a range of wealthy actors connecting former Soviet spaces and large metropolitan areas around the world (Davidson 2017; Graff 2018).
would mean the company has solidified significant power in the region (Green Alternative 2017; Gujaraidze 2013; Iakobidze 2012; Safirova 2012; TI Georgia 2015). This is all legal under Georgian law.

The expansion and intensification of mining operations in the Mashavera Valley over the past fifteen years fit widespread patterns of corporate and state corruption in the post-Soviet states, “making legal the illegal” in ways incredibly harmful to local ecologies, labor rights, and national identities and with questionable economic value to the Georgian government. In recent years, British investors have begun partnering with these local companies to further explore and expand extraction patterns in the region, intensifying capital’s influence in ways that revolve as much around business networks and the politics of knowledge production as they do economic valuation (Noricum Gold 2018).

This right to exploration – defined under Georgian law as the ability to categorize and designate the value of land, territory, and resources, setting the parameters of access, extraction, and accumulation – belongs to the Georgian corporation JSC Georgian Copper & Gold (GCG), of which British enterprise Georgian Mining Corporation (GMC, formerly Noricum) has a 50% stake alongside the Caucasian Mining Group (CMG). GCG will “generate” ore and, through a formal agreement, RMG\(^\text{13}\) will mine and process the materials (Georgian Mining Corporation 2018; Noricum Gold Limited 2016). GMC was registered in the British Virgin Islands in 2010 (Georgian Mining Corporation 2018) while CMG was established in 2011 with a Tbilisi address and is affiliated with RMG as the license holder to their operational function (Bloomberg 2018;)

\(^{13}\) RMG Gold also became the subject of a major tax evasion investigation by Georgia’s Finance Ministry Investigation Service following the new Georgian Dream government coming to power in 2012 (Burchuladze, 2015), though it appears that this investigation was dropped in the ensuing years.
Caucasian Mining Group 2018). CMG is part of the Mining Investment Co. – also owned by Pamtilon Holdings (HumanRights.ge 2012).

The general pattern of privatization seen at Madneuli is indicative of much of Georgian industry as nearly every major privatized enterprise is owned by companies registered in offshore holdings (Gujaraidze 2014), and the privatization of the entire mining industry is defined by similar patterns of auctions negotiated among personal elite connections (Rimple 2012). However, such ostensibly corrupt practices governing metal mining industries in the South Caucasus are neither unique to nor even most intense in Georgia, especially when compared to countries across the former Soviet region. For example, bank data revealed through the Panama Papers leak of internal Mossack Fonseca records documents how in recent years President Aliyev of Azerbaijan ordered a state-owned mining company to purchase and close four failing gold mines owned by his family. These operations had produced equally intense ecological damage and poor labor conditions to that seen in the Mashavera, yet when the mines shut down, workers were left without livelihoods or payment (Patrucic et al. 2016).

4.2. Multiple Forces, Contested Government

In similar ways, the destruction of the ancient mine and expansion of the modern mine are direct results of these corruptions and mutations of relations within this particular assemblage of political regimes under capital yet shaped by a much wider range of social forces and political regimes. These forces are not united, historically struggling for power and influence as Georgia’s property and resource reforms unfold. For example, as the tensions over Sakdrisi came to a head in late 2013 and early 2014, employees at RMG Copper and RMG Gold also began a strike involving a majority of the mine’s laborers in February 2014, with hundreds of people rallying in
At the same time a team of German and Georgian archaeologists were finishing documentation of nearly 10,000 stone tools excavated over almost a decade of work at the Sakdrisi site, revealing a history of gold mining spanning the middle until the beginning of the 4th millennium BC, with renewed activity exploiting the gold-bearing remnants in the 4th and 5th century AD (Stöllner and Gambashidze 2016). Archaeologists undertook experimental techniques to re-create mining practices, proving that the stone tools they documented were capable of such excavations. The archaeological record confirms expectations that more labor-intensive mining practices only followed the richest veins of gold.\textsuperscript{14}

Article 40 of Georgia’s “Law on Subsoil” ensures that such "Rare (unique) geological, paleontological, archaeological sites, mineral formations, areas of meteorite placement, as well as subsoil blocks of scientific, historic, aesthetic or other cultural significance, may be granted the relevant category of protected areas in the manner prescribed by the legislation of Georgia." The law continues that "In case of detection of objects provided for by paragraph 1 of this article during the use of subsoil, a subsoil user is obliged to suspend works in respective areas and report them to the administrative body that issued the license" (The Parliament of Georgia 1996). This stipulation within Georgia’s subsoil property regime throws into question the government actions at the expansion of operations at Sakdrisi and introduces a key event in the process of valuation by the state as government bodies manipulated loopholes in legal processes – for instance, “\textit{may} be granted” – to determine the economic value of a cultural heritage site.

\textsuperscript{14} For excellent photo documentation of all these experimental practices, see (Stöllner and Gambashidze 2016). An entire prehistoric society existed in the valley around the mine, concentrated around the Dzedzvebi Plateau several kilometers away. These places were connected by a network of ritualized extraction and manufacturing processes that drove the local economy. Interestingly, at least the region’s earliest mining residents during the Kura-Araxes period seemed to have a particular concept of wealth and value as related to gold. No gold was found in any burial ground of the time, indicating that "it went either to the very rich, or it was used in communal practices and was not given to single persons" (Stöllner and Gambashidze 2016: 84) – a fascinating moment in the history of valuing gold.
The Ministry of Culture revoked Sakdrisi’s cultural heritage status in early 2013 (Agenda.ge 2014a; Burchuladze 2015), yet shortly thereafter, RMG laid off more than 180 workers in late January 2014. This layoff led to the widespread strikes at the mining operations and Kazreti plant in January and February 2014 (Agenda.ge 2014a; Rimple 2014) while public protest regarding the region’s cultural heritage was also gaining momentum. With Georgian national flags flying, protestors from Tbilisi clashed with local mine employees as the activists tried linking arms to form a chain around the heritage site. Local police had to intervene to keep the pushing and shouting from turning more violent (Georgian Broadcaster 2014d).

Protestors from the Public Committee to Save Sakdrisi began camping out on a neighboring hill in mid-April 2014 in response to this conflict and to the central government’s actions, keeping watch over RMG’s activities (DFWATCH 2014d). This group brought together students, scientists, and NGO members around their shared interest in protecting the cultural heritage site, building a temporary watchtower and tent city to track mine employee activities (DFWATCH 2014a; Georgian Broadcaster 2014c). Meanwhile, PM Garibashvili made public appearances with mine employees, with workers asking him to let them continue their jobs and blaming the former government for trying to protect the heritage site and stall economic development (DFWATCH 2015). Not everyone in the government felt this way however, with President Giorgi Margvelashvili calling for mining to stop until a lawsuit had reached a conclusion and causing RMG employees to protest at his home (DFWATCH 2014e). Considering the strike’s scale in Kazreti earlier in the year, these protests led some to accuse protestors of following RMG management’s orders.

While the work halted at times as protestors clashed and Parliament raised questions and possible investigations, eventually the activities continued, destroying the archaeological site’s
last components and expanding extractive practices in the region (DFWATCH 2014b; GYLA 2015). However, the decision to allow mining to begin at Sakdrisi was somewhat tumultuous, unfolding in the courts throughout 2014. The Minister of Culture and Monument Protection granted RMG the right to commence mining in the area in mid-March 2014, with Tbilisi City Court overturning that decision on 3 June 2014 (Agenda.ge 2014b; Civil Georgia 2014; Rimple 2014). The mining finally moved forward after swift decisions by the government on 13 December 2014 (Civil.ge 2014; GYLA 2015).15

GYLA’s detailed analysis of documentation surrounding the timeline of related government activities reveal that RMG Gold had not obtained the proper permits from the government’s Technical and Construction Supervision Agency before RMG detonated the first explosions at Sakdrisi. Therefore, the removal of the cultural heritage status was illegal under Georgian law (Saladze 2015: 15). The government’s actions seem suspicious even without an illegal designation as the appropriate government office undertook seventeen separate actions and made four decisions regarding Sakdrisi in one day on December 12, 2014 (Saladze 2015). This series of decisions, perhaps the most blatant example of corrupt behavior in Georgia’s contemporary extractive history, included a number of swiftly initiated official mechanisms, including the Deputy Minister of the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation’s adding his signature to RMG’s request letter within eleven minutes of its arrival at the Agency (Saladze 2015: 15–8). This rapid series of events culminated in the Environmental Ministry extending RMG Gold’s extraction license in a matter of two days from December 29-31, 2014 (Saladze 2015).

15 The 14 December 2014 initiation of mining activities at Sakdrisi was captured by amateur video and shared on national television on 18 December 2014 by Georgian Broadcaster (Georgian Broadcaster 2014a), seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yj6vrm7PkJw; with more footage in earlier broadcasts, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DABoYYzbojU (Georgian Broadcaster 2014b).
Youth activists in Tbilisi undertook a number of political demonstrations following Sakdrisi’s destruction: marching in the capital’s streets, protesting in front of the homes of PM Garibashvili and former PM Bidzina Ivanishvili, hosting daily concerts outside government offices, and two individuals even going on hunger strike (DFWATCH 2014f). The Georgian Patriarch Ilia II, the most widely trusted person in Georgia (CRRC 2018a), condemned RMG Gold in a public prayer following the heritage site’s destruction (DFWATCH 2014c).

Almost two years to the day after Sakdrisi was destroyed, RMG opened a museum in Bolnisi in collaboration with the Georgian National Museum on 15 December 2016. In addition to the region’s rich heritage of German settlement and early Christianity, the museum is meant to display artifacts from the archaeological site and to promote regional tourism based on the site’s cultural heritage – ironic as the denial of such heritage was the government’s prime argument for moving forward with the development. The company posted video of the opening celebration to YouTube, displaying the exhibitions’ high production value and the high-profile event’s glitzy tenor (RMG/არემჯი Richmetalsgroup 2017). Activists I worked with refused to even consider entering the museum because of what they felt it represented and what role it played in justifying and legitimating RMG’s activities.

Preliminary findings by a colleague currently working in the region with the Heinrich Boll Foundation indicate that the expansions continue producing further divisions along a variety of axes as: ethnic minority groups in the region seem increasingly damaged by toxic pollution with fewer avenues for self-advocacy, local community members protest some of the newly proposed expansions that would encroach on church territory; and it is rumored that the company has begun to quietly investigate the possibility of dislocating families living on these territories (Interview 73, 10 July 2018).
According to an investor presentation from British company Georgian Mining Company (formerly Noricum Gold), “Georgia is geopolitically stable, and supportive of mining” (Noricum Gold 2018). Thanks in part to such perceptions, new mines are emerging throughout the region, including the large poly-metal Bektakaris deposit (NewPosts.ge 2017) and seventeen other exploratory sites within the broad Kvemo Bolnisi exploration project (Noricum Gold 2018). In fact, the Georgian Mining Company has well over a dozen known targets of potential new extraction sites, all with varying levels of interest but including some labeled “bonanza grade” and located near the surface, expanded in part by reviewing historical measurements in pursuit of more aggressive drilling work in the region (Noricum Gold 2018). Noricum Gold’s CEO Greg Kuenzel told the London Stock Exchange’s Share Talk that these efforts were part of his company’s broader effort to “westernize” mining operations in the region “without further environmental planning” (LSE Share Talk 2016).

The failure of mining labor union strikes in the Mashavera Valley suggest the exceptional nature of these industrial arrangements. Elsewhere in the country, miners’ labor unions have demonstrated substantial strength to organize and demand rights, such as the coal miners of Tkibuli who went on a significant strike and organized protests that turned somewhat violent (RFE/RL 2016b), as well as a history of strikes in Chiatura’s manganese mining industry (Safirova 2012). The initiation of new mining projects has sparked protest in other Georgian regions, such as when environmental activists joined community members of the Svan village Ieli to contest the start of a new gold mine in their mountain home. Local environmental NGOs and reporters eventually determined that, despite rumors that the company was Chinese, the mining license’s owner – Optical Systems, Inc. – operates through an offshore account in Saint Kitts and Nevis, with Georgian representation and registration in Wyoming (Cagara 2016; OC
Media 2019) leaving the true owner unknown at this time. Labor issues in the mining sector continue to produce social disruption as multiple deadly tragedies stemming from unsafe working conditions in Georgia’s coal and manganese mines have sparked a series of protests in recent years (DFWATCH 2017, 2018; Pertaia 2017; RFE/RL 2017).

5. Conclusion

As these complex and intersecting forces demonstrate, the manipulation of rent and property regimes places resource extraction as a prime avenue for shaping broader social and political relations across a variety of governing regimes and at multiple scalar framings from “the state” to members of “society.” However, individual experiences in the region reveal several different forms of dispossession and exclusion, throwing into question many of the analytical assumptions often underlying more dogmatic Marxist political economic analysis (e.g., Labban 2014, Parenti 2015). “The State,” in Georgia as in all contexts, is no monolithic entity (Painter 2006, 2011), making simple correlations as “state=landowner” in economic relation with separate “capitalists” misleading and leaving scholars ill-equipped to explain such relations. People identify not only as laborers but also as either Georgian citizens or excluded people, part of a trusted social network of business associates or someone trying to get in, healthy or ill people – dynamics I explore further in the following chapter. These manifold tensions become especially important when considering the “crony capitalism” or “vulture capitalism” of many formerly Soviet economies, corrupting democratic norms if not outright acting as “dictators without borders” (Cooley & Heathershaw, 2017; Harvey, 2003). Such divisions continue to unfold here as international corporate interests influence shifting forms of graduated, de facto sovereignty in this region of Georgia (Ong 2006b; Sassen 2013b).
Therefore, if, as Bridge and Perreault argue, analyses of “environmental governance should aim to lay bare these power geometries,” (2009: 492), then I contend that political geographies of extractive industries may be understood as *political alchemy*: capturing value through a set of manipulated socio-political, patronal networks that produce contingent, often ambiguous, territorial power geometries of extraction. Citizens living in the Mashavera Valley must navigate these diverse dispossessions and exclusions daily, shaping how they view and value their environment, homeland, and themselves, as I further explore in the following chapter.
Chapter IV – Mining the Homeland: Imagining Resources, Nation, and Territory

1. Introduction

Kati’s fastidiously decorated home, its high walls furnished chicly with antique carpets and modern paintings, is located on the north side of a steep, cobble-stoned street in the heart of Tbilisi’s historic district. Removed from the souvenir shops, overpriced khachapuri, and Disney-like veneers of the neighborhood’s tourist-clogged main streets, the buildings here slump with age, propped up as much by residential dedication as the iron beams bracing their walls against the cobbles. Surviving since the 1800s and earlier, the buildings of this neighborhood are collectively listed on the UNESCO World Heritage list and offer a connection to Tbilisi’s centuries-long history of political turbulence: from periods of invasion to the 70-year Soviet occupation to the contemporary explosion of unfettered real estate development and economic

Figure 8: Historic Tbilisi
(Photo credit: Author, 2016)
renewal projects. Kati’s apartment sits halfway up one of these steep hills, and her story is but one recent chapter in Georgia’s broader history of cultural and political identification, memory, and landscape amid contentious politics.

Kati is highly educated, a former government minister, and leader of an EU-funded NGO, For a Better Environment, working to preserve cultural heritage and raise environmental awareness in Georgia and throughout the South Caucasus. She speaks nearly perfect English, presents herself as distinctly cosmopolitan, and cares deeply about the relevance of the past to our contemporary experiences. She adopts a global perspective while working diligently to preserve heritage she views as distinctly Georgian.

![Figure 9: Archaeological findings from Sakdrisi dig site](image)

From left to right, a prehistoric burial site at an archaeological settlement near Sakdrisi; representative gold metallurgy from the early Kura-Valley System; and bone tools (Stöllner and Gambashidze 2015, 2016)

Despite her devotion to issues of cultural heritage for both Georgians and the world, Kati was fired from her post as the country’s Deputy Minister of Culture in 2014 for, she believes, her opposition to the destruction of the Sakdrisi archaeological site. I visit her home one June afternoon in 2016 to hear that story. She opens the heavy metal door and leads me up a set of creaky stairs to her family’s renovated second-floor flat. Over cookies, cherry jam, and mint tea, she begins to explain the complexities of the Georgian national project for me, sharing her individual experiences of recent political economic events, political debates over cultural
heritage, and the country’s recent restructuring of environmental and cultural governance systems amid swirling questions of potentially “corrupt” practices.

“The most tragic thing,” Kati explains, “is that the state policy is oriented, really, toward the destruction and demolition of the values and natural and cultural heritage, and to give it all away and protect these aggressive businesses, and all over Georgia it is the same. This is perhaps the most tragic case, but…”

I had heard parts of Kati’s story the previous summer. Her position as a key public figure in the struggles around Sakdrisi and continued deep engagement in cultural heritage activities gave her an especially informed view of these relationships among the Georgian state, business interests, environmental governance, and collective national identity. Over the next two hours Kati shares with me many of the main points of the narrative surrounding Sakdrisi, but it is how she discusses the conflict, its generative causes and consequential effects, that interest me most today. She argues that the cultural heritage issues of Sakdrisi’s egregious destruction prove secondary for the people living there, despite the heritage site’s symbolism of collective national identity, because “the environmental problems are very cultural there.”

“It belongs to everyone,” she claims, referring to the archaeological heritage site that representatives of RMG Gold destroyed by detonating explosives in December 2014.

Despite this sentiment, however, Kati feels that “the government is doing everything in favor of these aggressive companies,” and in doing so is leaving behind local populations, undermining the country’s collective interests, and, in a zero-sum trade-off among the international system of states, allowing “foreign” interests to benefit at Georgia’s expense:

This company has some Russian owners and has been registered in some offshore [company] – in Cyprus, I think. Things have not been transparent, and the incomes do not come to Georgia. It’s not the kind of company that produces opportunity through chains
of production and end products, because then it could really create some jobs and stability. Instead they are shipping these untreated minerals prior to production.

As Kati sees it, the Georgian state is allowing “other groups to destroy Georgia” through the government’s restructuring of environmental governance systems and abandonment of collective heritage for corporate profit. Kati feels that people living near Sakdrisi typically don’t care as much about the site’s specific cultural heritage value, yet cultural and political identifications infuse nearly every conversation I have with people about the mine’s expansion. Meanwhile, Kati’s definition of “other groups” reflects a long history of defining national identity against a shifting alterity, loosely identified as “other” groups to great political effect.

Such views of overlapping natural resource extraction, Georgian cultural politics, and international relations recur again and again throughout the next two summers as I speak with community members living near the mining complex at Madneuli, employees of RMG Gold, political activists, NGO representatives, and people I meet during everyday encounters throughout the country. Defining the political significance of natural resources and cultural symbols, what it means for those socio-environmental entities to “belong” to a community, and who is (or is not) included in the associated collective pronouns such as “everyone” and “other groups” – these tensions appear repeatedly throughout my conversations.

As we chat, Kati keeps hinting at imaginations of a greater Georgian political community, of who and what belongs to it – perspectives often taken for granted in political analyses of Georgia focusing on militarized conflict and static understandings of ethnic national identity (Toal 2017). However, as some scholars have argued and as I illustrate here, these national imaginations and relations are fluid, multidimensional, and experienced in a variety of informal ways. The wider Georgian national project is collective and based on individual attachments to place, collective heritage, and imagined communities. Localized corporate mining
practices disrupt and mutate these relationships in relation to events and practices at Sakdrisi. New narratives of identification have appeared around environmental and cultural heritage governance, including new understandings of both Georgian environments and nation. This chapter demonstrates how the taken-for-granted territorial and environmental dimensions of the Georgian national project are often under-analyzed, leaving out key components of the evolving Georgian geopolitical field (Toal 2017). Further missing from academic assessments of Georgian national narratives are how individual Georgians understand and experience those discourses.

In this chapter I analyze popular political narratives, scripts, and imaginations surrounding the events at Sakdrisi as a critical dimension of industrial mining’s material and political effects taking shape in Georgia, extending my research to investigate the narratives Kati introduces me to. Adopting this popular geopolitics approach offers insight into how people contest these political scripts in the public sphere and how members of civil society experience the Georgian national project. I draw from scholarship in political geography and political ecology to investigate how emerging imaginations of a changing Georgian homeland may enter the national project. This includes analyzing how popular geopolitical narratives of environmental conflict can illuminate such often-overlooked dimensions of political change in contentious environments.

I specifically show how contrasting imaginations of Georgia’s homeland, typically envisioned as lived territory filled with resources for a Georgian people, emerge in the local context of resource extraction projects that local citizens increasingly imbue with political significance. These imaginations vacillate between positive and negative identifications in complex and multi-valent ways, driven by economic factors, environmental consequences, and broader cultural visions of Georgian nationhood and its spatial arrangements. I show this by
identifying three localized alternative visions of the Georgian homeland circulating throughout the mining complex. In developing this argument I advance broader conversations within political geography related to the political construction and legitimation of territorial and governmental arrangements in the former Soviet Union (O’Loughlin 2001; O’Loughlin et al. 2016; Smith et al. 1998), moving toward an understanding of how experiences and imaginations of resource governance shape these arrangements (Bridge and Perreault 2009; Himley 2008; Robertson 2015).

These imaginations are significant because they become incorporated into specifically political scripts about environmental governance and reveal how citizens understand local territory not just in terms of spatial extent but of quality and experience. Investigating these fluid narratives is essential to refining our understanding of geopolitics in the Caucasus, for, as Alec Murphy argues, "We cannot hope to grasp the complexities underlying the pursuit of geopolitical objectives unless we bring squarely into the picture the circumstances that shape the territorial imagination" (2015: 9–10). Implementing a “thick,” localized perspective toward geopolitical discourses (Ó Tuathail 2010; Toal 2017) experienced in everyday life near the Madneuli mining complex reveals shifting relationships of sovereignty among the Georgian state, society, and international capital through extractive practices. Such findings bear important implications in Georgia, and the post-Soviet world more broadly, as rival governments increasingly turn to politically contentious practices of environmental governance and economic development.

I begin the chapter by outlining a framework for analyzing those popular geopolitical scripts of Georgian nationhood and homeland within localized, every day, ecological practices. I follow this discussion with a brief review of key themes and tensions in Georgian national identity, both historically and today. The rest of the chapter then includes empirical analyses of
these scripts as they emerged during interviews with citizens living near the mines. In this chapter I therefore move toward an alternative consideration of resource nationalisms by focusing a popular, “lived” geopolitics perspective on a limited sample of Georgian citizens, specifically as they narrate “the homeland” and navigate political identification within Georgia’s shifting geopolitical landscape. In doing so I connect the geographies of extractive industries, nationalism, and political identification in relation to an imagined community and homeland (Benedict Anderson 2006; Koch and Perreault 2018). In the process I provide a more variegated vision of geopolitics and territorial dispute in a region most often granted scholarly attention for its ongoing military conflicts yet which is experiencing nascent and competing stages of democratic development, either of which require broader discursive regime of legitimation.

Eventually, after hours spent discussing Kati’s role in these political conflicts, I tell her that I must leave for my next appointment. She and her husband Vano escort me back to the hot summer street below. Walking down the hill toward the metro station, I realize I have only just begun to scratch the surface of the diverse ways that members of Georgian society might imagine this resource extraction project fitting into the ongoing renegotiation of Georgian national identity. Kati has suggested I speak with some people who live near the mine site to see what they think, and this is precisely what I do.

2. National Imaginations

As discussed in earlier chapters, the politics surrounding the simultaneous destruction of the Sakdrisi heritage site and initiation of a new gold mine present a complex event for explanatory analysis, one with significant economic facets and legislative regimes. This ongoing reorganization of relationships among state, society, and corporations in line with a neoliberal
economic vision of the country has created new social relationships and political arrangements, shaping new transformations in the political imaginations of local citizens – visions of a nation and homeland in transition.

Classical scholars of nationalism typically consider the phenomenon more generally as “the modern social and political formations that draw together feelings of belonging, solidarity and identification between national citizens and the territory imagined as their collective national homeland” (G. Smith 2009: 488). From within this large body of work, however, a diversity of analytical positions emerges, ranging from primordial, naturalized views – often adopted by political firebrands and reporters alike – to socially constructed and affectual considerations of nationalism. These theoretical perspectives exist alongside many forms and manifestations of national sentiments, from “blood and soil” political movements to the formation of juridical, civic communities that vary both geographically and historically.

Primordial views are historically employed by conservative nationalistic movements and have typically fallen from use in much scholarship, due to the often-problematic naturalizing assumptions about biology, genetics, race, and historically deterministic ideas of political community formation this perspective tends to bear (Megoran 2017; G. Smith 2009). Suny characterizes this view of nationality, often focused on framings of ethnicity or race, as “eruptions of long-repressed primordial national consciousnesses, as expressions of denied desires liberated by the kiss of freedom (what might be called the “Sleeping Beauty” view)” (1993: 3). Driven by essentia
ist understandings of human nature, this Sleeping Beauty notion of nationalism provides a powerful, and often dangerous, political narrative but little analytical purchase for contemporary social scientists.
I agree with Suny’s critique of primordialism, which also provides a foil for several other schools of thought. For example, from a modernist viewpoint, nations emerged in the modern era *in spite of* primordial histories, stemming from other forms of pre-existing social divisions and produced variously by forces such as industrialization, capitalism, or democratization (Gellner 2009; Hobsbawm 2012; Mann 1996). While rejecting both primordial and purely modernist views, ethno-symbolic nationalism scholars adopt a deeply historical and contingent perspective. Scholars of this tradition typically analyze cultural symbols, myths, and traditions for their collective meanings, espousing the importance of cultural contingency against inevitability for the emergence of these collective identities (Smith 2005). Suny is a prominent figure of the ethno-symbolic school of nationalism, applying this approach to nations across Eurasia (Suny 1993, 1994, 1996, 2000; Suny and Martin 2001).

Scholars of post-Soviet politics therefore have historically looked to the legacies of Soviet ethnicity policies and the latent ethno-national axes of identification they left behind as key drivers of political conflict (Hirsch 2005; Slezkine 1994; Smith et al. 1998; Suny 1993; Tishkov 1997). These bonds often enroll religious or territorial elements in defining the homeland, the space of the nation (Yiftachel 2002). However, Suny’s theorization also tends toward essentialism of a different ethno-centric sort and in many ways holds on to many of the static, primordial perspectives of a “civilizational” approach to culture and identity (Agnew 2003; Huntington 1993). In the decades since the early 1990s, critical social scientists have demonstrated this perspective as flawed for its over-simplicity and blindness toward a variety of intersectional forces and practices that also work to form and shape national identities and movements (Bassin 2007; Said 2001). The weaknesses of this ethno-symbolist perspective demonstrate the need for flexibility in analyses of nationalism, especially when trying to
investigate more complex cases with less clear-cut forms of ethno-nationalism and outside the restrictive analytical boundaries of isomorphic nation-state-territory ideals.

However, scholars from across the social sciences have demonstrated that ethnic tensions represent only one constituent dimension of broader political identification, including within a national homeland, but also within the broader complexity of political life and subjectivity within the “post-Soviet social” (Brubaker 1996; Collier 2011b; Painter and Jeffrey 2009). Perhaps most significant among these shifts is a turn toward investigating practices of nationalism and political identification, offering more complex, grounded, and “thick” perspectives on the lived experiences of contingent political geographies (Benedict Anderson 2006; Billig 1995; Brubaker 2011; Dodds 2016; Toal 2017). Within this broader, practice-oriented approach, nationalism is just one type among a broader set of social and political identifications and strategies (Painter and Jeffrey 2009), studied by asking questions such as “how do individuals become national in everyday contexts?” (Megoran 2017: 16).

Megoran’s question follows a broad heuristic put forth by Brubaker in his influential text *Ethnicity Without Groups*, in which he argues for studying practices of identification rather than simply identity as a pre-formed object in the world. Instead of seeking to understand an individual’s identity claims that “I am…,” Brubaker contends that scholars should investigate how individuals practice identification, claiming that “I am… and this is HOW I am.” (see also Foucault 2011b). In this seemingly simplistic move, Brubaker argues for a study of categorization and identification rather than categories or identities such as ethnicity, in an attempt to avoid the problem of reifying the “groupism” which post-structural scholarship has sought to dismantle (Csergo 2008; Ozkirimli 2017). For Brubaker, groupism is “the tendency to take discrete, bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social
conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis” (2004: 8). Brubaker’s broader analytical project views narrative claims of belonging as “eminently flexible and adaptable” (Brubaker 2017: 9), instrumental for a number of legitimizing or challenging political practices. These forms of political belonging include nationhood, peoplehood, and citizenship that may all intertwine and constitute one another in social life (Brubaker 2017; Tilly 2002). As such, this group of scholars illustrates the importance of assessing modern forms of political belonging along more expansive lines of analysis to generate more complete explanations for contemporary social formations.

Billig demonstrates how national identity is produced at the level of the individual, in banal, everyday practices such as hoisting a flag that produces a collective, mental “jingling in the ears of citizens” (1995: 93). Anderson (2006) explains how such national communities form through equally banal practices and in the geopolitical imaginations of people. Anderson’s “imagined communities” are not just ephemeral inventions but rather the mechanisms of socially and politically constructed communities that themselves produce an idea of nationhood (Benedict Anderson 2006; G. Smith 2009). Nationalism from this perspective exists as neither simply theoretical nor the “assertion of an inner psychological identity,” but rather as imaginations are "enhabited in common sense... embedded in habits of thought and life" (Billig 1995: 63). Such practices work in part to legitimate state formations as national imaginations overlap with state territories and suppress other conflicting geographic imaginations, often driving political conflict or contestation as a result (Dijkink 1997; Gregory 1995, 2010; Guibernau 2008).

Yet successful national scripts tend to obscure the diversity of multiple, simultaneously existing national visions. As Delanty and O’Mahony contend, “Much can be lost by always
speaking of nationalism as a single phenomenon, for in fact it has many different forms” (2002: 120). Among these forms of identification are even more general qualities emerging from how these nationalisms are imagined, including nationalism as affirmative of an identity (‘state patriotism,” “integral nationalism,” “ethnic nationalism,” or “civic nationalism”) or in opposition to and destabilizing of a pre-existing order (historic “liberal nationalism,” “secessionist nationalism,” or “reconstructive nationalism”) (Delanty and O’Mahony 2002). While such a typology of nationalist forms may limit efforts to identify other forms not included in the ten these scholars explicate, such an analysis demonstrates the possibility of a plurality of nationalisms, allowing analysts to show cases where these may overlap and change over time. Relevant examples are surprisingly common throughout the contemporary global geopolitical landscape, including the overlapping histories of reconstructive and secessionist nationalisms manifest in separatist movements from Catalonia to Tibet. The primary political drivers of such conflicts include a diversity of identifications with groups, and the resulting expectations of rights/obligations (effects) of those group memberships (Brubaker 2004, 2017; Delanty and O’Mahony 2002; Guibernau 2008).

Recent interventions within nationalism scholarship support this understanding of multiple, simultaneous, and overlapping national imaginations and illustrate its significance in shaping contemporary political contests. For example, in an interview on the twentieth anniversary of his text Banal Nationalism, Billig admits that his analysis of nationalism was perhaps too simplistic and that accounts of nationalism may need to take better account of both complicated, overlapping national narratives and the diverse political agents, such as corporations, that partake in their circulation (Dodds 2016). While expansive, Billig’s sentiment is in line with the original text, stating that
Nations often do not typically have a single history, but there are competing tales to be told... Different factions, whether classes, religions, regions, genders or ethnicities, always struggle for the power to speak for the nation, and to present their particular voice as the voice of the national whole, defining the history of other sub-sections accordingly. ‘The voice of the nation’ is a fiction; it tends to overlook the factional struggles and the deaths of unsuccessful nations, which make such a fiction possible. Thus, national histories are continually being re-written, and the re-writing reflects current balances of hegemony. (1995: 71)

As with all nationalisms, contests over various visions of a nation depend upon competing definitions of the polity or “the people,” as well as demarcating who is not included in these identifications, and where (Billig 1995; Koch 2016b; Megoran 2017).

If scholars embrace a post-structural and historicized view of politics, we might then study nationalism by “treating nationhood as a political claim rather than a cultural or demographic fact, by emphasizing the performative enactment of claims to nationhood, and by highlighting the importance of recognition by powerful external audiences” (Brubaker 2010: 376–7; Passy 2009; Tarrow 2008; Tilly 2002, 2008). These geopolitical stories also enable political identification through everyday political practices, allowing for a localized, disaggregated, “lived” geopolitics of national identification and belonging: potentially banal and comprising a diversity of actors and spaces (Billig 1995; Koch 2013c; Megoran 2017; Ó Tuathail 2010). As Toal argues, “nationalism works itself out in everyday life in local places” (2010: 257), suggesting we consider the ways actors on the ground imagine and narrate political communities in “everyday” discourse.

Scholars demonstrate how this perspective manifests empirically in the post-Soviet world by studying how nationalism unfolds through such diverse everyday practices as sport, food, photography, and education (Akiner 1997; Foxall 2013; Goode 2016; Koch 2015a; Megoran 2017). These national imaginings work in part to legitimate state institutions as they overlap with state territories and homelands, suppressing other conflicting geographic imaginations and
at times driving political contestation. Investigating geopolitical scripts of nations and homelands as people circulate and contest them in everyday life therefore requires considering kitchen-table conversations as seriously as narratives from media outlets and official state documents. The case of competing popular nationalism in Georgia following the Soviet Union’s collapse demonstrates how these multiple scripts of national identification exist in tension with one another, producing dominant but contested understandings of particular nationalisms and their related homelands.

In short, nationalism is not just about states and state projects or static categories and essential identities, but rather about how people see themselves belonging to broader communities, connecting to particular geographies, and emerging from historically embedded social practices and relations. I next consider how these national imaginations may enroll visions of a national homeland, territory, and the resources they hold.

3. Resource Nationalisms and Lived Homelands

Political geographers demonstrate how geopolitical cultures and opinions within the former Soviet Union’s conflict zones are shaped not just by militaristic intervention but also by a range of political economic factors: the provision or lack of localized governmental subsidies (Holland et al. 2018), broader economic disappointment or fear (Bakke et al. 2018; Kolossov and O’Loughlin 2011; O’Loughlin et al. 2007), and identification with more generalized geopolitical storylines (Ó Tuathail and O’Loughlin 2013; O’Loughlin et al. 2016). In less violent yet equally relevant post-Soviet contexts, Collier (2011) shows how the organization and provision of mundane necessities like heat, delivered by the government to citizens’ homes via pipes and wires, work to produce and maintain socio-political order in Russian cities.
This ever-expanding literature highlights the importance of everyday political identifications, opinions, and discursive practices for legitimating territorial arrangements and geopolitical constructs (Flint 2016; Toal 2017). Related work addresses a variety of Georgian cases from oil pipelines (Barry 2013) to transnational logistical networks (Gambino 2018) to suggest the importance of technological, infrastructural, and material relations to political formations, specifically in the South Caucasus. Such moves reveal the significance of looking beyond distinctly state-oriented actors and practices for understanding cases of political identification and resource governance. This is especially so in post-Soviet contexts like Georgia, where territory-transforming resource extraction continues intensifying (Josephson 2013) while Georgians widely hold territorial integrity and economic development as the most important issues facing the country (CRRC 2016a), with environmental issues also bearing increased significance (CRRC 2016b).

Georgia’s Mashavera case, as I argue here, reveals the significance of resource extraction projects to political identifications (Koch and Perreault 2018; Perreault 2018; Perreault and Valdivia 2010), including shifting views of the Georgian nation and homeland in localized contexts. Such relations between nation and homeland provide crucial links in forming modern political geographies. For example, Jewish nationals returning to Germany in the decades after WWII identified less with any religious or ethnic notion of identity and more with the political sense of attachment and belonging to the homeland of the German landscape, or Heimat. These identifications emerge from individual investment of political sensibility within memories of “ploughed furrows and blossoming orchards,” “pine forests,” and “learning to swim in the local river” in the German homeland (Einhorn 2000: 110). More broadly, political identifications are
empirically linked to territorial imaginations and national myths, including in the formerly Soviet region (Diener 2006; Kaiser 2002; Tolz 1998).

While images and imaginations of places and spaces are always political and contested over time, recent scholarship on open pit mining reveals the manifold ways these developments specifically and profoundly alter landscapes, ecosystems, and the socio-political fabric of nearby communities (Bridge 2004; Hecht 2018; Peluso 2018; Perreault 2013a, 2018; Vela-Almeida 2018). Such documentations of environmental politics’ multi-scalar nature align with arguments by political ecologists who emphasize the importance of everyday acts and subjectivities to the political economy of the environment (Huber 2013; Loftus 2012; Robbins 2007; Rocheleau et al. 2013). These works illustrate that banal practices often lie at the heart of environmental politics – revelations congruent with cognate bodies of political research, such as popular and feminist geopolitics, that consider the complexity of multi- and cross-scalar power relations (Dittmer 2005; Dowler and Sharp 2001; Hyndman 2004).

What specifically interests me in this chapter is the possibility that seemingly banal practices and imaginations of everyday resource governance may contribute to broader geopolitical and territorial arrangements. From this vantage, Georgian citizens in the Mashavera region carry contested imaginations of the Georgian homeland as this mining complex rapidly introduces new political tensions, opportunities, and material conditions.

Material, territorial, and environmental elements of a national homeland often prove central to these various national imaginations relating state, society, and territory, as is the case in Georgia along with many other national identifications globally. Despite the rich literature on nationalism and national identification, existing scholarship of resource nationalism often considers these links between resources and nations as much flatter and more static than
suggested by broader scholarship. While moves within political ecology to “bring the state back in” to analytical focus provide crucial framings for contemporary resource extraction policies in a globalized world (Harris 2017; Robbins 2008; Robertson 2015; Robertson and Wainwright 2013), this state focus must always be contextualized within broader social experiences and multi-scalar political relationships. As the Georgian case demonstrates, new arrangements of resource governance may (and, as I show here, sometimes do) generate new or different forms of territorial relations and practices, in turn producing new identifications of a national homeland as a result. Adopting a constructivist approach allows us to see these alternative forms of nationhood and homeland and how resource governance practices may affect the localized contours of national identification.

Scholars often identify resource nationalism as a move by rent-seeking states – typically conflated with “the nation” – to control the natural resources within their national territories, regulating their flow into global markets as a means to capitalize on resource extraction and ostensibly for the good of citizens (Bebbington 2012; Bremmer and Johnston 2009; Myadar and Jackson 2018; Perreault 2013b; Schurman 1998; Vivoda 2009). Scholars have considered a range of resources in relation to various nationalisms: hydrocarbons, valuable metals, land, and biotic resources such as fish stocks (Andreasson 2015; Doolot and Heathershaw 2015; Ganbold and Ali 2017; Kohl and Farthing 2012; Schurman 1998; Stead 2015). Childs places the work of political ecologists further in conversation with state practices, observing that extraction is “at the core of modern economic and social development” (2016: 539) and justifying scholarly focus on the state as a key unit of analysis. Yet this state-centric perspective ignores the influence that popular geopolitical scripts about such resources and extractive industries have on shaping
national identifications, the evolution of political/environmental imaginaries, and the force that these imaginations carry for legitimating geopolitical arrangements such as in Georgia.

The state-centric narrative of resource nationalism is continually thrown into question by the empirics emerging from this scholarship, showing the importance of everyday landscapes and imaginaries to connecting resources and national homelands. More productive frameworks for understanding resource nationalisms point to studying these claims as diverse sets of practices and imaginations, used to draw together and legitimate arrangements of state, territory, and society (Perreault 2013b; Perreault and Green 2013). Examples of diverse national identifications as they relate to resources and visions of the national homeland abound, including from across post-communist Eurasia, and demonstrate that banal practices often lie at the heart of environmental politics (Cheterian 2009; Davidov 2015; Doolot and Heathershaw 2015; Graybill 2013, 2017; Jackson 2015a).

In this chapter I therefore compare everyday environmental discourses of the Georgian national homeland against the typically statist frameworks and heuristics of much (though not all) of the resource nationalism literature. In doing so I move not just toward a more embodied understanding of resource nationalism than scholars often adopt, but also a more tangible, “thick” way of understanding the lived experiences of extraction as they shape political environmental imaginations. Putting a human face on the environmental geopolitics of new extractive practices in the post-Soviet world, I analyze scripts of Georgia’s homeland – and the imaginations of state, society, and territory they bear – as expressed to me by the Georgian citizens and communities most directly affected by the Sakdrisi-Madneuli mining complex. In doing so I elaborate how these extractive practices contribute to shaping the geopolitical field surrounding the mine, located within the broader geopolitical culture of the South Caucasus, and
offer an economic and environmental complement to the military and international affairs interest of much mainstream Anglophone geopolitics scholarship of the Caucasus.

To analyze nationalistic imaginations appearing in geopolitical scripts of mining governance in Georgia, the most fruitful research trajectories of the resource nationalism literature supply models for conceptualizing how such resource governance projects may produce new political identifications in relation to the environment. Additionally, examples from throughout the Caucasus suggest that environmental movements in the region since the Soviet Union’s collapse have contributed to national projects (Cheterian 2009) and, as with all national projects, conflicting discourses of national identity have long competed for dominance in shaping Georgia’s future geopolitical course (Jones 2013; Toal 2017).

In the following sections I move toward a more tangible, “thick” way of understanding the lived experiences of extraction and the politics of environmental imaginations. I do so by first briefly outlining some of the primary tensions in Georgian national identification. Putting a human face on the environmental geopolitics of new extractive practices in the post-Soviet world, I then analyze relevant resource imaginaries – and the narratives of state, society, and territory that they bear – as expressed to me during field research. Individual experiences of Georgian citizens drive these imaginaries, imbricated with geopolitical “scripts” of the always-emerging Georgian nation.


The Mashavera Valley presents a rich landscape for such an investigation. The surrounding hills’ soil is especially rich and fertile, and the recent expansion of geological surveys and development of metal mining sites in the region further illustrate the wealth of this
land. At the same time, the landscape is culturally diverse, with a Georgian majority and
significant ethnic minority communities – primarily Armenian and Azeri, with all three
languages spoken in different contexts. Ethnic conflicts have not significantly shaped the area as
in other regions of the South Caucasus, yet political identification remains complex, as in
communities across Georgia.

Contemporary scholars identify Georgian nationalism as a hybrid of primordial ethnic
impulses and civic identification (Cheterian 2011; Chkhartishvili 2013; Metreveli 2016; Nodia
2009). This impulse emerged in part due to Soviet ethnicity policies (Hirsch 2005; Suny 1994)
but also from a strong tradition of national identification that emerged among Tbilisi’s
intelligentsia of the mid-1800s, many of whom were educated in Russian universities and
influenced by European ideals of modern nationalism (Cheterian 2011; Jones 2005; Nodia 2009).
This intellectual elite was multiethnic and multidenominational prior to the nineteenth century,
creating autonomous societies and charities focused on cultural, explicitly nationalist,
engagements (Jones 2005).

The most prominent among these early Georgian nationalists was Ilia Chavchavadze,
often known today as the “father of the Georgian nation” (Chkhartishvili 2013; Jones 2005).
Chavchavadze’s writings have become highly influential in Georgian national thought, and
scholars typically characterize the author’s notion of Georgian identity as comprising “(1)
territory, which Chavchavadze conceptualized as mamuli (i.e. legacy left from fathers), (2)
language, which, according to him, was the expression of the national spirit, and (3) Christian
faith to which, he believed, Georgians’ devotion was unprecedented” (Chkhartishvili 2013: 198).
However, among these three primary components, scholars decipher complexity, especially
considering the territorial and political dimensions of Chavchavadze’s national imagination. For
example, *mamuli* [], alternatively translated to English as “territory” or “fatherland” and widely held as the most vital component of Chavchavadze’s national triad, is not simply empty space for the Georgian people to occupy. Instead, *mamuli* carries a vision of the nation’s location in history, encapsulating “the idea of nation as territorial but also active. It is about doing, pursuing some project, rather than just being there” (Nodia 2009: 89). Such territoriality of a cultural landscape requires active production (Agnew 2015c; Paasi 1998a; Raffestin 2012; Sack 1986; Sassen 2013b), including identification practices, and emerges alongside more complex visions of a national homeland beyond primordial ethnic blood ties (Chkhartishvili 2013). As Chkhartishvili argues,

Eri [], nation] in Chavchavadze’s perceptions was a large-scale fraternity exercising ethnic majority rules. The addressees of Chavchavadze’s nationalist appeals were exclusively ethnic Georgians. On the other hand, Chavchavadze viewed in-groups based on kin identity less powerful than the entities bound by political ties. He tried to cultivate the ideals of civic nationality. He also underlined that law, liberty, and individuality are organizing principles of the nationhood. He longed to make the Georgian identity inclusive and overcome the closeness of ethno-cultural conceptualization of Georgian community. Thus, the matrix chosen by Chavchavadze for conceptualization of the Georgian eri was not strictly ethnic; some principal features of it were indisputably civic. (2013: 202)

This notion of national territories produced through active cultural identification, framed by a balance of both ethnic (blood and soil) and civic (modern and juridical) visions of the Georgian homeland, exist throughout broader scripts of Georgian nationalism from this period (Ozkirimli 2017). Examples abound, for instance, in the works of artist Niko Pirosmani, a national artist whose paintings of Georgian natural landscapes, animals, and rural life spanned the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Pirosmani inscribed scenes of lived landscapes in his works, territories filled with traditional symbols of Georgian national identity: great collective supra feasts with a variety of foods served, traditional Georgian wines and flowers,
rugged wild land that inhabitants have partially tamed, animals both wild and domesticated, multiple ethnic dresses and dancers, and more (Figure 10).

![Image](image.jpg)

*Figure 10: “Mule Bridge,” Niko Pirosmani, pre-1919 (Source: Wikimedia Commons)*

Present in the works of these early Georgian nationalists were multiple components of national identification, used by various political actors to present an emerging Georgian national identity and geopolitical field, balanced between a powerful primordial narrative of ethnic identity and a modern understanding of civic openness (Billig 1995; Ozkirimli 2017). This balance was particularly important for maintaining national identities as the Soviet government implemented its unprecedented nationalities policies in the twentieth century.

Among Soviet republics, Georgia was somewhat unique in that, unlike many, it had a
pre-existing national identity based on the long history of the Georgian kingdom developed by the pre-Soviet Georgian intelligentsia. Yet Georgia at that time was also a diverse, multi-ethnic society, containing divisions within the Georgian nation itself (Goble 2015). Through its vast nationalities policies, the Soviet state tried to create a “great break” with the past, simultaneously attempting to combat Nazi race theories through practice. Within this history, the Georgian political elite attempted resisting the Soviet system’s hierarchy, insisting on determination as an already-developed nation (*natsional’nost’*) rather than a people aspiring toward nationhood (*narodnost’*) during the early Soviet years (Hirsch 2005).

Some scholars contend that nationalism was benign and latent during the Soviet period, as Georgian citizens lacked the ability or motivation for mass protests. Georgian nationalism at this time tended to center primarily around identification through language rather than territory or ethnicity (Jones 2013). Although ethno-nationalist tensions, violence, and territorial wars were hallmarks of the early years following the Soviet empire’s dissolution, the immediate narratives driving Georgian protest, demonstration, and resistance to the Soviet regime in the late 1980s centered not on ethnicity, but rather on Georgian independence from the Soviet system (Cheterian 2011; Goble 2015; Jones 2013). In a way, during the move for independence from the Soviet Union, “for Georgians, the ‘other’ was Moscow itself” (Waal 2010: 131). Indeed as Suny argues, in the late Soviet years, “it may be that nationalist expression was an outlet for a variety of discontents—political, economic, intellectual, and cultural—a kind of political sublimation for activity and expression that was otherwise too dangerous to articulate” (1994: 314).

Among these tensions in-group ethnic divisions *did* exist, and ethnicity was a driving rhetoric of President Gamsakhurdia’s government that led to the South Ossetian War, as well as a significant factor, alongside economic motivating factors, in catalyzing the Abkhaz war (Jones
Jones argues that resistance to Abkhaz separatism was nationally based at least in part but that these tensions were also “generated from above for reasons of strategy or gain rather than ‘ethnicity’” (2013: 219). In short, Georgia’s political elites used ethno-nationalism as a tool for pursuing broader political and economic goals in the post-Soviet period (Jones 2013; Suny 1994; Waal 2010).

Today, ethno-national scripts remain powerful within the Caucasus, and serve as tools for legitimating political claims in a variety of geopolitical scenarios, including in Georgia, and especially by elites and powerful institutions (Areshidze 2007; Geukjian 2011; Goble 2015; Nodia 2009; see also: Koch 2015a). Georgian nationalism takes many forms today, commonly identified both in the resurgence of right-wing political groups (often drawing from the ethnic, blood and soil tradition of Georgian nationalism) and in response to foreign relations in political processes and dimensions of citizenship (following Georgian nationalism’s modern and civic dimensions) (Ó Beacháin and Coene 2014; Svanidze 2018). Yet these complex axes of identification allow for a diversity of imaginations concerning relationships among society, state, and mamuli – land, territory, and cultural landscape imbued with collective memory, individual experience, and historical claims – often given only minimal attention and taken for granted in most assessments of broader Georgian national identifications. Analysts often approach non-militaristic considerations of Georgian territories within national identifications as static or trivial, either as part of aesthetic claims – that “Georgia is located in a compelling physical environment that features scenic mountains and beaches, temperate climate, hospitable people, and fine cuisine” (Toal 2017: 102–3) – or international “branding” projects “linked to hospitality, seaside resorts, delectable wines, healing mineral waters, and a genuinely unique cuisine” (Saunders 2017: 235).
Scholars have given surprisingly little attention to these wider political identifications in relation to the territorial dimensions of resources, resource governance, and broader national projects. As Dijkink notes, geopolitical imaginations or “visions of order are derived from a community and from experiencing an environment (be it city, country, wilderness or island)” (1997: 16). While some scholars have explored these imaginary political dimensions of resource extraction projects, especially from economic perspectives, environmental imaginaries remain relatively under-studied regarding political identification and the emergence of competing national identifications (yet see Graybill 2017, Koch and Perreault 2018).

This relative lacuna in the literature is especially surprising considering the dramatic effects open-pit mining, such as that carried out at the Sakdrisi-Madneuli mining complex, has on surrounding landscapes – environmentally and socially. Widespread use of cyanide in leaching pits, dangerously constructed tailings dams, explosions that send toxic dust into the air, the release of heavy metals into surrounding environments, abusive labor conditions – all these and more are documented results of open-pit mining, especially in locations with weak regulatory systems (Bridge 2004; Peluso 2018; Perreault 2013a; Schoenberger 2016). RMG has adopted all these practices, with serious effects for local populations, as I illustrate below. While RMG employs approximately three thousand people, most of whom are local residents (Rich Metals Group 2014), the surrounding municipalities’ population totaled approximately 75,000 in 2016 (55,000 in the Bolnisi municipality and 20,000 in the Dmanisi municipality) (GeoStat.Ge 2018). These populations bear the effects of mining practices in the region, environmentally, economically, and in terms of their political imaginations.
5. Imagining the Mine, Scripting the Homeland

Mari is an artist, activist, and scholar. Like Kati, she lost her job due to involvement at Sakdrisi. She was trained in art history and museum studies and used to teach sketching and art history at an arts university in Tbilisi. Mari has devoted much of her life to supporting efforts toward preserving cultural heritage. She first became involved with the Sakdrisi movement as a political organizer, staying at the protest encampment for weeks on end and serving as a liaison of sorts with the local police. Because of this vocal involvement, Mari was unable to return to her job at the university, fired for fear of the institution becoming associated with opposition politics. Finding a natural ally in Kati, Mari joined forces with the ex-deputy minister in creating For A Better Environment and has worked with a variety of different local groups to help foster cultural and environmental awareness among communities found near the mine.

One afternoon in July, Mari takes me to meet the staff of the local Bolnisi museum. A small nondescript building along the main street, the museum holds a collection of local artifacts, some dating back to the early Christian settlements in the area from 5th-6th century AD. Entering the dark museum, it takes our eyes a few seconds to adjust from the bright afternoon sun. Dusty glass cases filled with manuscripts, traditional attire, old farm implements and musical instruments, all labeled with yellowing signs, greet us alongside the museum curator’s smiling face. The woman appears professional and friendly, and clearly knows Mari from the several projects on which they have collaborated. I am excited to meet the curator and learn from her expansive local history knowledge. Mari begins explaining the focus of my project and what I am investigating.

When Mari relays that my research is related to the region’s mining operations themselves, however, the smile suddenly vanishes from the curator’s face. As quickly as we are
welcomed in to the museum, we are shooed out, told that they did not want to speak with us and that I was not welcome.

Tight-lipped and flushed, Mari is hurt, confused, and angry by what has just occurred. She explains that RMG had agreed to house the museum’s collection in the brand new Sakdrisi museum the company is constructing on the outskirts of town. These funds will provide the aging museum with funding, job security, and the promise of modern new facilities. Yet Mari feels cheated after spending considerable time cultivating working relationships with these individuals, supplying grant funding for projects, and forming personal connections. This background/context helps me understand the curator’s response, but I feel terrible for serving as an impetus for this degradation of relationships, even if it ends up as only temporary (as I wishfully continue to tell myself it will be). We both feel uncomfortable as we silently get in the car, realizing that a potentially fruitful alliance in our investigation and Mari’s broader political activism has evaporated.

While uncomfortable, this was one of my first direct involvements with the potentially divisive political power the recent expansion of mining practices carries here – shifting political relations, dissolving old alliances, and forming new ones. By tracing the contours of these new political alliances and imaginations, we can discern how they in turn shape the geopolitical fields and possible futures for this place.

Across the meetings and conversations I had in Georgia, the most common themes that emerge are scripts of political identification in relation to the resource extraction activities occurring in the region. These scripts revolve around labeling divisions among society along lines of us and them: Georgians vs. foreigners, locals vs. company, and so forth. They also involve identifying the meanings of places: churches, heritage sites, rutted roads, a polluted river.
Finally, they require defining which practices are acceptable to occur in these places and which are not.

Territorial integrity is important to hegemonic understandings of Georgian nationalism, especially among scholars, yet they do not necessarily consider mamuli – Georgian territory viewed as a lived and inhabited homeland – in its active form, filled with practices and the lives of Georgians. If “belonging is defined in terms of territory, the homeland” in such a way that is “active… about doing, pursuing some project, rather than just being there” (Nodia 2009: 89), then the various ways that citizens experience and imagine mamuli bears important implications for the development of diverse Georgian nationalisms: not just who is included in this national grouping but where, how, and by whom. This differentiation proves important because different scripts of territorial practices and experiences are bound to produce alternative imaginations of the Georgian nation. Of these, I discerned three primary alternative narratives of Georgian nationalisms woven into the discursive and material practices of resource governance, specifically in relation to practices and events surrounding the Madneuli mining complex: (1) increasingly complicated understandings of ethnicity, kin, and proximity; (2) corporate governance of local populations and territory; and (3) degraded environmental and personal health.

Primarily unfolding during Summers 2016 and 2017, the majority of the conversations I include in this analysis are drawn from more than 25 interviews and informal conversations initiated via classic “snowball sampling” (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981) and conducted in the communities surrounding the mining complex (Bolnisi, Kazreti, and Balichebi). Interviews were sporadic and often secretive, which I expected in part, as members of these mining communities regularly feared prolonged interactions with outsiders. People in the region have lost jobs for
speaking to reporters, and securing a steady livelihood is often challenging. For many this fear manifests toward journalists and NGO representatives as much as scholars. In short, these conversations were often fraught and only existed through informants’ generosity. Respondents were both male and female, ranged in age from early twenties to late seventies, and held a variety of occupations (miner, fruit vendor, lab technician, taxi driver, nurse, etc.). At times our discussions took place in the presence of other community members, occasionally becoming group conversations or informal focus groups. I further contextualized this interview analysis with my own ongoing experiences undertaking research in Georgia, including more than 50 other related interviews, participant observation with political activists, and a database of over one thousand associated documents I collected in an Evernote library (news reports, legislation, social media posts, photographs, etc.).

Analysis included transcribing interviews and qualitative coding (codes applied to transcripts, then organized into themes and overarching scripts), using the NVIVO software package. These steps helped me identify the development and complication of standard stories of Georgian national identification as I saw them unfold in the communities surrounding the Madneuli mining complex. Here my focus was not on distinct, constructed, and inherited heuristics of ethnic/civic divides but on the “shared social metaphors” (Allina-Pisano 2009: 69) circulating through informal political life in this region. My purpose was to categorize discursive practices along various axes of political identification. I isolate the most prevalent categories of political identification that emerged from these interviews – all in some way revolving around imaginations of the Georgian homeland – and represent them here.
5.1. Complicating Standard Stories

And it’s like a name that is tied with Balichebi. Since 1821, so we are first to cut forest and to make settlement there. I am very proud of this because there is a church that was built by my ancestors, and it is also a cultural heritage monument now and I have this feeling… I wish with my hands to protect my land and to survive the environment of my village, and so I am fighting for it. (Interview 34, Labor organizer, Woman, in Georgian)

In opposition to our museum hosts, Dali’s initial warmth only grows when she finds out that we wish to discuss mining operations in the region. Dali has been a vocal organizer against the mining company’s activities, helping lead a large strike of mine employees around the same time as the protests against the destruction of the Sakdrisi archaeological site. These protests achieved only moderate success in pursuit of their demands for better working conditions and pay, and RMG disbanded the local union as a result.

We meet Dali this afternoon in the one open restaurant in downtown Kazreti. She offers to order *khinkali* for us, and we say no thank you, just coffee… but in line with Georgian hospitality norms she goes ahead and orders mountains of food for us anyway: salad, bread, cheese, pickles, fried potatoes, *khachapuri, khinkali*… She is making a statement of generosity, welcoming us to her community as guests. Dali continued:

I love everything here, each stone, because it is connected to my history, to my family. My great grandmothers lived here and established the settlement, and I know there’s a terrible ecological situation here but I do not want to relocate anywhere. (Interview 34)

Dali expresses her attachment to this place as emerging from her familial history and community heritage. She is also a member of the Patriotic Alliance party, the recently ascendant nationalistic right-wing party in the Georgian political landscape, and others I have spoken with who know her suspect she is preparing to run for local office. This feels right to us as she speaks and gestures like a politician – looking everyone directly in the eye, stressing her points with emphatic and deliberate hand motions. Running alongside Dali’s narrative of local heritage and
personal emotions driving her history of resistance to the mining company are brief references to her nationalistic party affiliations and how the party has helped support the local people in their efforts to understand the impacts of mining practices on the lives of Georgian populations.

Drawing from the stories of Dali and others, the first localized and contested imagination of the Georgian homeland I identify circulating throughout the Mashavera is that of complicated standard stories of Georgian nationalism. These connect kin-like relations of community to more complicated, abstract forms of ethnic identification and with the physical territory itself. For example, Dali expresses her attachment to this place as emerging from her familial history and community heritage. She is also a locally prominent member of the Patriotic Alliance party, which to an extent has helped support local efforts to deal with the impacts of mining. Dali’s political positioning, which draws together personal and local narratives of familial, environmental, and “patriotic” connectivity, are indicative of the ways scripts of Georgian nationalism are complicated here by local experience. These interlaced scripts do not exist outside or separate from ethnic versus civic distinctions but reveal the complexity of the political identifications that connect belonging and place. These imaginations emerge not only from vague ideas of ancient blood ties but also from personal experiences of kin and kin-like connectivity among individuals and with the land and territory itself.

Connections of cultural heritage are felt along different lines with different places, although narratives of cultural heritage tend to be much more personally oriented in the communities surrounding these sites (Herb 1999). In line with standard stories of primordial, ethnically-tinged national identity, one informant stated that “Bolnisi is very rich with cultural heritage. We have a church from the fifth century called Sioni, and at Dmanisi there is this
finding of the ancient people. And we take care of the people there” (Interview 30, Retired hydroelectric engineer, Man, in Georgian).

Yet more often, the narratives of cultural heritage invoked run along lines of personal connection. Another informant found connection to this collective history through his sons’ experiences: “Sakdrisi was a monument for future generations. My sons were working on an archaeological project there… for mining it did not need to be blown up, and I was very fond of this place” (Interview 38, Former mine employee and natural gas specialist, Man, in Georgian).

As seen here, vague primordial or prehistoric imaginations are at times personalized through more specific, tangible connections of burial and ancient ceremony, present in residents’ lives in ways that are still vague, but more personal. Another informant shared his personal imagination of what had occurred at the destruction of Sakdrisi, saying “Who are gone by this huge machinery and the bones of my ancestors, and I feel saddened that I’m separated… we cannot forget these people who made this act against culture” (Interview 37, Taxi driver, Man, in Georgian). These scripts connecting individuals with wrongs committed against ancient ancestors suggest that some local residents view both the state and mining company alike as producing cultural violence against the Georgian nation, turning such personal connections as Dali’s attachment to “each stone” into more collective and general forms of belonging to Georgian national identity.

This tension between individual and collective also emerges in the imaginations of activist leaders of the Davatiani youth group of the Georgian Orthodox church, who also helped spearhead much of the civic protest against RMG Gold’s destructive actions of at the Sakdrisi site. For example, the group’s leader contended in an interview that “Sakdrisi was like already a cultural heritage not only in Georgia, but a world cultural heritage” (Interview 57). The
imagination expressed here is that Sakdrisi’s cultural heritage belongs to the entire world, but specifically to members of the Christian faith and especially to Georgians as the keepers of this heritage:

it had a really huge and really deep history, it’s a big working culture that you have in Georgia and the big tradition. It was kind of a civilization you know, the beginning of. It’s a big plus for a country if you have such big, deep roots in history and cultural history… the issue is like a message to the entire world, that Georgia had a really deep roots in the culture, and civilization.

In this expression, the youth organization of the most influential institution in Georgia implements this positioning of Georgia as an ancient Christian nation as an instrument for legitimating an ethno-religious primordial nationalism and, as a result, supporting an ethno-national view of Georgian territory while performing a contemporary Georgian “branding imagination” (see [Saunders 2017] for expansion of this concept in other political contexts). As the leader stated, “you have to prove your history. And the history of the country helps. To make strong kind of promotion for your country” such that “you became proud and you would like to keep that story and to tell it for generations in the future, ancestors” (Interview 57).

Such sentiments of ancient ancestral and ethnic connections to the Georgian homeland prove common in the Mashavera Valley but become even more personalized, experienced as connections with specific family members and locations via more complex, kin-like relations. Individual respondents disclosed feeling “quite attached to this land” (Interview 34), or that this area “is my blood and my body, and I love it very much. It’s everything here for me, it’s my life” (Interview 37). As another informant said, “I love Bolnisi because I was born here; it’s my land. I never want to live someplace [else]” (Interview 32, Local resident, Woman, in Georgian). This connection to the land and territory emerges from broader Georgian national narratives, simultaneously joining ideas of belonging and territory across scales throughout these mining communities: from the Georgian national body to the bodies of individuals, their families, and
the land itself. Residents feel these national connections personally such that locals express that “I love my homeland, it’s like a Georgian tradition to be attached to your land… My ancestors are here” (Interview 42, RMG Machinist, Man, in Georgian) and that “It is painful for me what is painful for my country. And I am glad for what is good for my country” (Interview 31, Engineer, Man, in Georgian). This embodied scaling of identity works in other directions as well, at times expanding out to global humanity as “Sakdrisi was already a cultural heritage not only in Georgia, but a world cultural heritage” (Interview 57, Youth Patriarchate leader, Man, in English).

Such ethno-cultural and nationalist political identifications, implementing ambiguities among local, personal and vague, collective imaginations, emerge as divisions and complications of the standard ethno-national and civic scripts of Georgian national identity. Respondents also identified the importance of “foreigners” in the mining company’s structure and profits. Local respondents commonly express uncertainty about the mining company’s ownership, cycling among claims that Russian, Georgian, and European interests control the operations. They claim that there are some secret connections between the ruling Georgian Dream party and see other countries as profiting from the destruction of Georgian territory. These narratives of foreign connection often stand in for other geopolitical scripts as these nationalistic, oppositional identifications are deployed to criticize the mine. As one local informant expressed:

Yeah a lot of people outside of Georgia benefited, mainly Russia benefited from it, and everything that is mined here goes outside, but [there is] no benefit for us, just the name. We live in this rich area but [there is] no benefit for people. (Interview 17/18, RMG miner and retired miner, Men, in Georgian)

In line with such sentiments, a scholar in Tbilisi said “Yes, I know, the Russians blew it up. Along with many other things” (Interview 7, Independent scholar, Man, in English), while a political activist claimed, “The Russians blew it up!... I am for nationalization of mines, and all
of these factories and companies who are working on mines and resources, I think so, but only
democratic nationalization, not governmental” (Interview 9, Environmental activist, Man, in
English). Such imaginations of the mining activities as attributable to Russians enroll claims
about Georgia as the victim of contemporary Russian imperialism (Jones 2013; Toal 2017),
extracting value from the Georgian people not just through territorial occupation but also through
environmental degradation and the destruction of cultural heritage.

Some residents support mining activities, thanks to the jobs provided, as evidenced in
some interviews and through the existence of counter-protests when supporters of cultural
heritage tried to block the expansion of mining operations at Sakdrisi. One respondent shared
that he supported the mining because it supplied jobs and that environmental activists “like to
exaggerate the situation” (Interview 31). Another respondent agreed, at least to an extent:

that what should we do if there is no mining, working? What [should] each family [do] if
there is no mining, there is no income at all? They should not stop but they somehow
should think about improving ecological conditions. If there is any other possibility
to work, yes, of course, we should stop working here, the mining. But there is nothing in
Georgia, only production. (Interview 37)

These various identifications are not necessarily running against other ethnic and civic
definitions of national identity but are productive of new iterations of them. This occurs through
an injection of new tensions intersecting with previously existing ethnic tensions and definitions
of who “we Georgians” are. These relations are not always antagonistic: many actually envision
ethnic groups as living peacefully side by side, presenting diversity and close community in a
multicultural society as a positive, civic national value (Interview 13, Engineer/construction
worker, Man, in Georgian; Interview 30). Political imaginations of the Georgian homeland as
related to resource extraction produce a diversity of new tensions connected to national
identification as an axis of belonging and difference alongside economic development. As Nino
showed, Georgian national identification does not simply manifest as either primordial and ethnic or modern and civic but rather in complicated arrangements of these geopolitical imaginations: sometimes as historically complex visions of an ancient identity existing in a globalized world and in varying degrees of social proximity from the personal to the collective to the global.

5.2. Political Alienation in a Neoliberal Homeland

There are not many kids here, and they are not employed because there are not many possibilities. For example, I have three kids, and this one [Dato gestures toward his teenage son who is sitting quietly in the opposite corner of the room] he sings really well, he has all the awards and everything, but I cannot send him to Tbilisi or a company because I can’t afford… and the pension is like… it’s a misery what the government gives you for pension…

As he always does when discussing these topics, Dato becomes increasingly animated as he makes his points, getting red in the face, hitting his knee with a rolled-up paper, and waving his arms above his head. Although he is mostly retired, Dato is a construction engineer by trade, specializing in designing civil buildings, but his sun-burnt face and rough hands betray that he is no office-bound engineer or designer.

I have a small company for doing projects, but there’s so many problems always that my nerves are not in a good condition. If you’re educated you have less possibilities than if you’re not really educated. Before, in the Soviet times, we lived in the developed socialist society, and now we live in the undeveloped slavery. A lot of industry doesn’t work, people are not employed, and instead of giving and helping people financially, giving money and loans, everything is sold. It is very hard to find a job, everything is sold, everything belongs to somebody. That’s the big problem, that people do not have the employment. It doesn’t matter to the government. I don’t care who comes, they make the whole country like beggars. (Interview 13)

When I first met Dato a year ago in 2016, we had a brief conversation about the need for international NGOs to leave alone what he termed the “traditional cultural values” of “the Georgian people.” On this afternoon, however, he was particularly animated about the influence
and changes that the mining company had brought to his community. Seeing such patterns as part of a broader trend in the country and nostalgic for the structure and security he experienced under the Soviet regime, Dato expressed what became an important theme of my conversations: that the neoliberal shift toward corporate-oriented governance across nearly all sectors of Georgian society and economy produced new views of Georgia as a nation of “beggars” and “slaves” living on degraded territory and left to the whims of international capital (see Figure 11). Therefore, the second localized imagination of the homeland expressed here is of political alienation in a neoliberal homeland.

![Labor organizing poster, “Kazreti – you don’t deserve the bad reality!”](source: Invisible Labor Center, 2017)

These scripts of political identification contain economic dimensions beyond class and emerge from experiences of neoliberal corporate activities in the region. They more clearly align with ideas of shifting territorial control and a national imagined identity defined and bounded by experiences of degraded rights exchanged for national economic development. Capital
development trends here have changed individual experiences of citizenship and civic nationalism, with many, like Dato, feeling left behind in terms of economic security and personal fulfillment in their homeland and, as a result, alienated from their collective national identifications. As Dato nostalgically explained,

> We have everything like land, air, sea, lake, but nothing is for us. So not for us, but for who? I do not know for whom it is, but not for me. My concern is that it is very difficult to live here, quite complicated even if you are working a lot. If you make agricultural work, if you grow products and you don’t have a proper irrigation system, it’s not a good product. Besides if you even have a good product there’s no market you can sell it. The only possibility you have is either to work as a farmer and to have wine, you drink and then you become an alcoholic because you don’t have any other possibility to work, and we should have work! It’s not honorable to work anymore because we feel degraded, disrespected. I am like an animal, like a cow who is fed by the patron, trying to eat and nothing more. I am not a realized person here. (Interview 13)

Dato is not alone in his feelings. Respondents throughout the Valley persistently echoed his sentiment of abandonment and alienation. These reactions surfaced as RMG essentially gained *de facto* sovereignty over much of the region, as the local government holds diminishing influence over all aspects of local governance – from budget expenditures to party politics – and the central government continues transferring autonomy to specific corporate interests. This power shift proves especially problematic for local citizens, whose only real opportunities for employment relate to the mining industry. As another informant explained, “the main problem is that the whole economy of Bolnisi is in Kazreti [the mine]. And it’s a good source of income, but the state does not interfere in the correct manner” (Interview 32).

One outcome of this corporate-controlled political reality is that individuals feel they are not provided for, separated from their homeland’s environment and left behind by collective institutions: the Georgian state, local government, and the mining company alike. The same informant argued that “we have gold here. And there’s no effect of this gold on us, except high prices for electricity, and dust, no health insurance, nothing” (Interview 32). Other respondents
echoed these sentiments, with statements like “These people should have a lot of services for free, and they should get like everything possible, but for people there’s nothing really” (Interview 15/16, Retired HR worker at mine/Home maker, Women, in Georgian). Residents specifically spoke of unmet needs such as trash collection, stable electricity and heat, and the provision of health services for a sickening population. Still others saw the source of this neglect as stemming from the government’s relinquishing control to the company, such that “Now it’s some sort of clan groups or gathering, some group containing several people that are kind of ruling. They have the power, and they don’t take any care of the local population or local community at all” (Interview 34). As a result, there are widespread feelings that “we are slaves here” (Interview 32).

A key part of this narrative is a general perception that Georgian society has been left behind and impoverished by the state (Interview 6, International NGO leader, Man, in English). This imagination emerges clearly in scripts circulating through communities near the Madneuli complex, as well as in certain elite circles in Tbilisi. These scripts include how “we have no government” and “democracy, here and now, is slavery” (Interview 38); that “there are no measures by the state side to improve the environmental situation, only the tendencies to hide everything” (Interview 1, NGO leader and former Culture Minister, Woman, in English); and that “the state should take responsibility, somehow, to regulate the situation here. I blame mainly the state, not the company. We are dying here because of dust and because of being just left alone, against our problems” (Interview 37).

Here we see the political effects appearing from the institutional de-coupling of the Georgian state and homeland. The decentralization of power from the government toward the mining company means that many services for which citizens hope are never provided,
producing feelings of isolation and alienation within this territory. These scripts of abandonment by the central government exist alongside feelings of attachment to the national homeland yet produce negative visions of corporations controlling both Georgian society and territory: a nation of “beggars” and “slaves” living in a poisoned homeland controlled by “foreigners.”

5.3. *Imagining a Poisoned Homeland and People*

I have a personal example, the vineyards which actually just completely died, everything, and I had to cut it all off. And my family had peach plantations, huge territories. My grandfather worked in the peach plantations, and I remember they were beautiful. It’s nonexistent now. I spoke with environmentalists who actually said that the peaches and the vineyards [died] because this situation when the soil is polluted, the air is polluted, because the grapes get the minerals and everything essential to be able to grow from the soil, and these peaches, this kind of [stone] fruit, are the most affected. And there is also a big thing about potatoes from Bolnisi, they were famous before, the good potatoes should grow here, but now it is not healthy! For example, they took the tests from the river, and all the potato plantations where their irrigation is from the river water, so all this dirty water gets in to the soil, and then where potatoes grow, so...

*And do people still eat the potatoes?*

Of course, of course! Yeah, there is no other way, I mean, I have some way of handling, where I leave the potatoes in the water for a long period of time, but… when you are in hell, what do you do? You have to close your eyes!

*(Interview 12, Local NGO coordinator, Woman, in English)*

Eka sits in the Bolnisi office where she works part time as an environmental coordinator and journalist, relaying stories of her family’s experiences with pollution from the mines. She speaks softly, becoming especially quiet when speaking of the potential harms they might encounter – she has known too many people that have suffered and died from cancer and pulmonary diseases, and fears for her loved ones. The trend of feeling alienated and left behind detailed above is especially acute in relation to health care and exposure to dangerous pollution, toxic dust, and other environmental hazards, yet there is also a powerful sense of loss that permeates these conversations of environmental health. This loss is not just of residents’ bodily
health but of a component of collective heritage, replaced with a sense of belonging to a population increasingly identifying as poisoned, endangered, and devalued – just how Eka and her community view the territory in which they live.

If citizens like Eka experience (1) complications of common stories about ethno-nationalism and territory, as well as (2) alienation in the face of political economic arrangements, then a third and final imagination of the Georgian homeland connects experiences of toxicity to (3) new national imaginations of environment and territory. Here, new definitions of belonging appear alongside new forms of environmental governance, shaping local political economies and ecosystems in the Mashavera Valley. These emergent environmental imaginations draw from notions of civic belonging, stemming not just from the health of residents’ bodies but from the quality of territory and the shifting spatialities of society, state, and territory as citizens express love for a “poisoned country” (see Figure 12). As noted, the

Figure 12: “okros pasi (the price of gold),” Bolnisi graffiti
(Photo credit: Author, 2017)
country’s natural and agricultural wealth is an important component of the Georgian national project (Toal 2017), as part of mamuli, the lived national territory and Georgian homeland (Nodia 2009). However, popular geopolitical scripts among local populations refer to this homeland as destroyed, tarnished, or “poisoned,” fueling narratives of loss and alienation from national identity.

This connection between environmental health and national identity is often taken for granted in everyday discussions of Georgian nationalism, providing a crucial component of national identifications in common discourse. Georgian pride and love of the country’s beautiful rugged landscape is typically only surpassed by similar feelings for traditions of high-quality agricultural products, wine, hunting, and fishing. I witnessed a prime example of the inculcation of these national performances when, during Independence Day celebrations on Tbilisi’s main

Figure 13: Children and fruit map at Georgian Independence Day celebration, Rustaveli Avenue, Tbilisi, Georgia (Photo credit: Author, 2017)
avenue in May 2017, I stumbled across a display of a Georgian map – including occupied territories – with each region presented in emblematic agricultural products and surrounded by children eager to have their photograph taken (see Figure 13).

In line with sentiments expressed by Eka, residents of Madneuli’s mining communities widely believe the region’s extractive industries severely damage fruit and other agricultural products — a fear confirmed by a number of soil and agricultural analyses by various international affiliations (Avkopashvili et al. 2017; CENN 2014; Felix-Henningsen and Urushadze 2012; Matchavariani and Kalandadze 2012; Tchelidze et al. 2003). The toxins found in produce, water, and dust generate a variety of regional public health concerns, including increased rates of cancer, cardiovascular disease, pregnancy loss, and others (which I explore further in Chapter 5). For example, fruit irrigated with water from the Mashavera River, which flows past the two mines currently working in the region, contain dangerously high heavy metal levels. As one informant concisely stated, regretting the area’s gradual erosion of environmental, agricultural, and public health, “everything was wonderful until they started to dig for gold” (Interview 45, Farmer and fruit vendor, Woman, in Georgian).

Local citizens expressed alternating feelings of nostalgic pride and sadness at the degradation of produce quality, fish populations, and poisoned fields in nearly every conversation I had, almost always linked to mining activities in the region. One key finding from interviews and conversations with regional inhabitants is that, while local generally view the destruction of cultural heritage sites as problematic, they seem to care far more about the pressures and often-frightening effects of a deteriorating material environment typically relied upon for livelihoods. For example, one individual told me that:

Yeah it’s very rich with cultural heritage. But the company purchased a bigger amount of land here, so they decide whatever they want to do. And, of course, it is

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better to work in mining in a way that does not damage environment and culture, but to consider that our economic situation is in very bad conditions and that we have bigger import than export and it’s very important that the company operate. And the main thing is that it’s really damaging environment, it’s hell, and they’re making it an open carrier and it’s better to use different methods. (Interview 30)

Another stated she was against the mining practices “because even during the communist times…, the nature was degrading. It has to be closed and protected, and it cannot be like this, where people keep dying” (Interview 13).

However, respondents quite often narrated these deteriorating environments in terms of lost heritage, reflecting ideas of national and cultural identity due to the strong discursive connection between Georgian nationalisms and land, territory, and mamuli, generating a new collective identity around these visions of deteriorating components of a national homeland.

Points of local pride – ranging from delicious produce (cherries, grapes, potatoes, etc.) and hearty fish to clean water and fresh air – cropped up in nearly every conversation I had with local inhabitants over the span of several summers. However, this pride was often expressed in terms of nostalgia and loss, frequently linked to mining activities in the region: “the ore makes everything worse” (Interview 54, Kazreti market owner, Man, in Georgian) and “everything is poisoned… now I am not using this land anymore” (Interview 31). Citizens throughout the region shared perceptions of the local territory and agricultural produce as poisoned, affecting local livelihoods and changing this region’s place within national imaginations. For example, one informant, repeating a common local story, told me:

there’s already this problem that when you sell goods from Bolnisi, Dmanisi, even Madneuli in the city [Tbilisi] and in different municipalities, they don’t buy these products anymore. They already have problems selling their products because it’s contaminated. Yes, potatoes, cucumbers, anything that is watered, it is already becoming dangerous and people don’t like to buy it much (Interview 32)

When such rumors characterize a place, residents can experience tangible effects on their livelihoods, especially as these rumors emerge from observations made by residents, visitors, and
specialists alike. Residents shared many anecdotes involving links between polluted water quality and the loss of iconic local products that, when scaled up, contribute to narratives of national identification. One woman explained that:

we have this mining, this gold mining, but it’s worse, I mean, we suffer. The vineyards are dead. The harvests… You can see this one day when they put it in the river. You have to see the color of the river, and it’s not worth anything, I mean you cannot water plants here. Sometimes it’s red color. Some days it’s like kind of black, or it’s yellow color. So you cannot use it for the agriculture, for irrigation, so what is the use of that? I remember before there was very good fish. But OK, forget about it, there are no frogs now, even frogs die. And we had such good fish, very tasty. (Interview 17)

Citizens like this woman and many others felt disappointment at such environmental changes that produced feelings of identification and a loss of something loved, but they were also experienced bodily as people fell ill (Interview 17; Interview 12).

It is crucial to understand that these environmental damages produced public health problems for the population. The connections among poisoned territories, poisoned foods and environments, and poisoned people drove emerging dimensions of national political identification through visions of the Georgian homeland today:

The products that they have here, everything is intoxicated and it affects our lives. There’s already even a very high level of oncological diseases. I am not using these products, and it’s quite difficult to eat, because the local is not good. (Interview 32)

As Nino explained, “the situation is very bad. Only yesterday there were five people dead, five burial ceremonies, and this is mainly [due to] heart and breast cancer. And all children have this thyroid problem” (Interview 34). One key informant, knowledgeable of the village in which other specialists had conducted research on the poisoning of local water and agricultural stocks, stated that “In Bolnisi there are many birth defects. There is no proper data or research, but people think it is because they drink the water and live close to the [mining] area” (Interview 3, NGO Mining researcher, Woman, in English). As Kati explained, these occurrences stem from
the fact that “there is really just no management of environmental issues,” which the state is “just ignoring,” “just invisible” (Interview 1).

Many people throughout the region shared these perceptions of local territory and produce as poisoned, affecting local livelihoods and changing this region’s location within national imaginations. These complex environmental scripts revealed that local citizens considered territory not just in terms of spatial extent but of quality and experience. Such visions shaped how local residents navigated understanding the mining complex at Madneuli, the Georgian national homeland, and the relationships among them.

6. Conclusion: Mining the homeland

As I have shown in this chapter, political scripts circulating through communities affected by mining practices at Madneuli and Sakdrisi demonstrate how people here imagined and narrated the Georgian state, society, corporations, and qualities of the homeland, as well as how these various political entities related to one another and to the local environment.

Through this analysis, I identify three primary alternative political visions of these relationships woven into the practices of resource governance: (1) increasingly complicated understandings of ethnicity, kin, and proximity; (2) corporate governance of local populations and territory producing alienation from the homeland; and (3) the deterioration of that homeland through degraded environmental and personal health. These imaginations emerge as especially significant as people incorporate them into specifically political scripts about environmental governance, showing how citizens understand local territory not just in terms of spatial extent, but of quality and experience. I define these scripts by implementing a thick, localized perspective toward geopolitical discourse as experienced in everyday life near mining
complexes. Doing so reveals contrasting visions of Georgia’s homeland, envisioned as lived territory and cultural landscape, or mamuli. Within these visions, the Georgian homeland is filled with resources – gold and copper in the Mashavera, but also a variety of others including water and forests (Quinn 2017) – increasingly imbued with political significance, both in terms of uneven economic development and related to diminished visions of Georgian nationhood and its spatial arrangements.

My analysis finds shifting relationships of sovereignty among the Georgian state, society, and de facto corporate enclaves as experienced by political actors in this small region. The findings I present here illustrate several ways in which the expansion of international capital through a significant resource extraction project alters the political imaginations of citizens living in close proximity. Some community members benefit from these incursions while others suffer, meaning that people experience these shifts unevenly. These inequalities emerge in the context of previously existing political alliances, divisions, and dynamic ecological realities, creating new contours of a localized geopolitical field. The varying narratives of resources, nation, and territory I heard along the Mashavera River suggest that scholars of resource nationalism might productively broaden the analytical scope of their research further to allow even more space for competing visions of various national homelands to crystallize.

In this way, documenting the political effects of mining the Georgian homeland reveals one facet of how the country’s territorial arrangements are simultaneously contested and legitimated outside military conflicts, shaping localized political geographies and how people imagine their national identification and relations to the Georgian state, civil society, and the territory of their homeland. These findings are particularly consequential in Georgia as the government’s market orientation, including toward the environment, continues to expand while
consolidating power in recent elections. In the next chapter I investigate the material and political effects of these transformations, within Georgia’s state borders and beyond.
Chapter V – Extractive Archipelagos: Embedded borderings of the Georgian mining industry

The Universe has as many different centers as there are living beings in it.


1. Introduction: Political Borders in the Mashavera

The sounds of strumming guitars and traditional vocal harmonies echoed through the small, shabby tent community under gray April skies. Those huddled around the edge of the group shared anxious and somewhat excited glances as television cameras interviewed some of the more vocal members: students, archaeologists, ex-officials, religious youth, journalists, self-proclaimed patriots. Meanwhile, Mari worked with other protestors to build a crude watch tower, flying the flags of Georgia and the Georgian Orthodox Church and sitting atop the hill to keep an eye on the archaeological site across the road even after the television cameras left (Georgian Broadcaster 2014b, 2014c; see Figure 14). The hills in sight would no longer exist several years later, deconstructed by dynamite, heavy machinery, and chemical solutions – but for now Mari, Kati, Niko, George, and the others remained hopeful they could block the formation of a new mine, save this piece of Georgian and world heritage, and help stem the pollution flowing through the valley. Their vigilance and unity in 2014 functioned as a boundary of accountability for the Rich Metals Group (RMG), yet their position was not unchallenged.

Earlier, a film crew secretly broached the border of RMG’s territory with a television camera, until the company’s security guards found them filming the archaeological site at the top of the hill. The reporter refused to leave, precipitating a scuffle. Other guards arrived at the protest camp in large, black SUVs trying to intimidate the protestors. Four large men approached George, himself a tall and rather imposing figure, asking for his first and last name before
leaving as quickly as they arrived, offering no further explanation for their actions (Interview 57). Other guards came to know Mari by name and constantly tried to pressure her into disbanding the group (personal communication, Interview 36).

These moments of conflict stemmed from interactions along the territorial edges under RMG’s control, shaping and defining its borders in the process. Yet disputes related to the proposed mine extended beyond encounters between corporate authority and protestors. Tense political divisions and borders of multiple types scored the Mashavera Valley in the months before RMG blew up the Sakdrisi archaeological site at the end of 2014 – edges still forming and re-forming today.

For example, the local labor union organized a full-scale strike against RMG in February 2014, demanding improved labor conditions, increased wages, and reliable health care and grinding mining operations to a halt throughout RMG’s territory. Mine laborers clashed with people protesting RMG’s expansion to the Sakdrisi site, forcing police officers and security guards to intervene and prevent a descent into further violence (Georgian Broadcaster 2014d;
Protestors joined hands to form a human barrier symbolizing their efforts to protect the ancient mine’s cultural heritage (Georgian Broadcaster 2014d; see Figure 16).

These diverse conflicts produced a local political geography of shifting and temporary spatial borders as different social groups made distinct claims on these spaces, striving to define and control territory, people, and resources: who could go where, do what, and under whose authority. Yet how do these isolated events and disputes connect to broader and ongoing socio-material trends in the Mashavera Valley, across Georgia, and throughout the South Caucasus?

In the preceding chapters (4 and 5) I have illustrated two primary ways in which metal mining produces new social and material geographies – through the uneven political geographies of rent extraction and through shifting imaginations of a political homeland. In this penultimate
chapter, I illustrate how practices, experiences, and imaginations of mining develop at and across multiple scales. This assemblage of dividing and bordering forces together produce new political geographies of boundedness and connectivity. As I develop here, analyzing environmental politics through a lens of borderings – practices that produce borders – allows us to consider diverse events – cultural heritage protests, ongoing environmental damages, and uneven economic developments – within one framework of spatial powers.

As outlined previously, the Georgian government auctions off territorially delimited extraction licenses to the highest bidder, defining this resource governance regime’s extent and granting the winners effective autonomy over the designation and use of all resources found inside those territorial boundaries. I argue here that, while the country’s border disputes with Russia are dynamic, militaristic, and highly visible, this system of licenses – rarely marked on maps or the landscape, granted little government oversight, and imbued with corrupt
relationships – presents one component of a series of sub-state bordering practices in Georgia. In this way Georgia’s Sakdrisi-Madneuli gold and copper mining complex provides an opportunity to advance recent work on the political territoriality of mining practices and their effects on ecosystems and human bodies (Emel et al. 2011; Hecht 2018; Peluso 2017; Perreault 2013b; Vela-Almeida 2018). In this chapter I show how the socio-political and material forces of these mining practices produce their own unique borderings and political geographies, both internal to and across state borders. In doing so these mining practices reshape multi-scalar connections (and disconnections) among disparate localities. Such developments produce what I term an extractive archipelago, re-shaping the contours of state power, territorial control, and dispossessed peoples’ claims to citizenship – visible in the post-Soviet South Caucasus but also extending to and producing new spaces throughout the former Soviet Union.

To make this argument, I examine the work that sub-state socio-material boundaries do in the world as they produce this particular resource regime at and across local, regional, and international scales. This analysis explains localized events in relation to the complex political, economic, and territorial networks of environmental and mining governance here. My focus on sub-state borders in their historical and geographic context seeks to “unflatten” views of environmental governance (Bridge and Perreault 2009) in two ways. First, it offers scholars the opportunity to refine the analytical categories we use in our frameworks without sacrificing their explanatory power (e.g. government, capital, etc.). Second, this perspective illustrates the diverse and intersecting ways in which socio-material relations produce environmental injustice, dispossession, and disenfranchisement. I hope this focus may also help reshape geopolitical imaginations of the region, often still exoticized and caricatured by western powers and scholars alike, and illuminate the lived experiences of political contestation producing these spaces.
The remainder of this chapter proceeds as follows. First, I review key findings from related literatures of environmental governance, border studies, and a broadly defined political geography. Together, this scholarship affords the tools necessary to analyze the series of sub-state borders sustaining Georgia’s metal mining resource regime and constituting broader extractive archipelagos across the region. I next offer three examples of sub-state borders produced in the Mashavera Valley, each operating through a different dimension of power and directly related to the political imaginations I explored in the previous chapter: (1) digital divides and environmental access (geoeconomic relations); (2) toxic frontiers (biopolitical relations); and (3) contours of citizenship (geopolitical relations). Together these borders produce one political “island” within a particular post-Soviet extractive archipelago: varyingly bound from and connected to their surrounding socio-material environments through multiple dimensions yet also linked with other similar corporate-owned extractive jurisdictions across disparate contexts. In the concluding section, I reflect on some implications of my findings for understanding political geographies of the environment across the post-Soviet region.

2. Toward Extractive Archipelagos

Mining practices supply economic foundations for many societies around the world yet also have long and well-documented histories of negative political, environmental, and social effects. Open-cast gold and copper mining can produce particularly contentious outcomes, especially when under-regulated, as in Georgia (and as I illustrate through this dissertation). However, these effects also produce diverse types of divisions on the landscape and in people’s everyday experiences of the Mashavera Valley as: people live in toxic environments, quietly coming into contact with heavy metals in the water supply, agricultural products, or poisonous
dust; federal, local, and company law enforcement officials ambiguously share official authority and jurisdiction; and the mining company compensates laborers inequitably after disbanding the local labor union. Stakeholders experience the effects of such socio-spatial divisions in highly uneven ways, establishing a range of shifting spatial exclusions as actors and institutions struggle for control over, and governance of, environmental resources (Holtermann 2014; Nixon 2011; Sandlos and Keeling 2016).

As explored earlier (Chapter 4), political ecologists have granted special attention to such contested spatial divisions of environmental governance. Drawing from a range of intellectual traditions including Marxist and post-structural approaches, political ecologists have dealt with these issues of authority and divisive environmental governance by analyzing power relations through environmental knowledges, property relations, and social divisions along lines of political subjectivity – including class, race, gender, citizenship, and others (Bebbington 2012; Birkenholtz 2008; Bulkeley 2005; Himley 2008; McCarthy 2005b; Perreault and Valdivia 2010; Reed and Bruyneel 2010; Robbins 2006; Robertson 2015; Valdivia 2008, 2015). However, the concept of borders remains under-examined within political ecology and environmental governance traditions.

In this section I explain what an analytical focus on borders and practices of bordering contributes to the way we understand extractive political ecologies, especially the political geographies of metal mining in Georgia. As I outline below, “disaggregating” the units of political analysis (Bridge et al. 2015; Kotsadam et al. 2017; Ó Tuathail 2010) allows us to study spatial divisions of all sorts as they shape our diverse political ecologies across various scales. I follow contemporary political geographers in focusing on political practices of exclusion and inclusion beyond static visions of “state,” “territory,” and “society” to better assess the
networked, yet profoundly uneven, geographies of extractive corporations’ expanding power throughout the former Soviet Union. I do so by theorizing the emergence of *extractive archipelagos* produced through socio-material networks of embedded borderings, allowing me to analyze three distinct sets of bordering practices that render a large swath of the Mashavera Valley a metaphorical island within one of these networked chains.

My approach provides expanded opportunities to investigate how cross-scalar boundaries produce political geographies of the environment that connect and bound “operational spaces” (Sassen 2018) of resource extraction. Such boundaries might otherwise remain invisible from any single scalar focus, yet it is these operational borderings which define and produce extractive archipelagos. Studying networks of bordered extractive spaces – metaphorical islands in an extractive archipelago – moves toward what Huber calls an “ecology of politics” by expanding the terms of analysis beyond those objects typically flagged as “natural” or of “the state” within a particular resource regime (2015; Marston and Perreault 2017). While I illuminate this perspective’s utility in post-Soviet space, corollary bordering patterns occur across the planet, taking different forms in different geohistorical contexts.

2.1. *Environmental Governance, Territory, and Borders*

In a way, environmental governance is *all about* the formation of borders and boundaries as it encompasses “the production of social order via the administration of nature” (Bridge and Perreault 2009: 477). Environmental governance functions through the production of socio-material divisions, boundaries of power, and authority at a variety of scales as people relate to environments and resources in diverse ways. Environmental governance therefore necessitates contests over where, who, and what actors produce and locate political authority. The emergent
nature of environmental governance leads Gavin Bridge (2014) to highlight the contingent and socially constructed nature of the two related categories “resource” and “state” as central to environmental governance analyses. These categories often emerge together (Bridge 2014; see also: Harris 2012; Mitchell 1991b; Painter 2006), reinforcing hegemonic relationships of environmental subjectivity while simultaneously opening room for resistance and contestation, and producing a variety of shifting socio-material boundaries (Birkenholtz 2008; Bridge 2014; Ekers 2009; Li 2007).

However, environmental governance practices are as much about divisions of authority and control “between subnational jurisdictions, between stakeholder groups in decision-making processes and wider society” as they are “between nations” and states, as many “realist” scholars in international relations and political science often assume (Reed and Bruyneel 2010: 651). Valdivia’s investigation of political mobilizations around oil production in Ecuador presents just one example of the complexity such social divisions carry within environmental governance regimes. She demonstrates how actors experience — and, perhaps just as importantly, imagine — the diverse ways petroleum extraction has become a key vector for mediating and defining citizenship for many in Ecuador (Valdivia 2008). Yet citizenship, as a marker of inclusion, rights, and responsibilities, always involves defining an “out” group in opposition to those “in” the umbrella of citizenship, producing political borders within societies rather than just between them. Such divisions profoundly shape the lives and experiences of those bounded within definitions of citizenship (Balibar 2015; Barnett and Low 2004; Ehrkamp and Jacobsen 2015; Marston and Mitchell 2004; Ong 2006a; Staeheli 2011), an especially fraught tension when linking valuable resources and vulnerable societies.
A lack of explicit attention to such diverse borderings in environmental governance is even more surprising, considering how many distinct forms of socio-spatial divisions political ecologists and related nature-society scholars do consider. For example, political ecologists have granted significant analytical attention to property relations as political-economic divisions of space, controlling who has access to resources and can extract surplus value from them (see Ch. 4; see also: Agrawal 2001; Blomley 2008; Mansfield 2004; Parenti 2015; Peluso 2018; Prudham 2015; Ribot and Peluso 2003; Robertson and Wainwright 2013; Sikor and Lund 2009). Yet property is only one form of bordering practice involved in environmental governance.

Related to yet distinct from property relations, territoriality has gained prominence as a key analytic within environmental governance scholarship, especially as it shapes resource extraction regimes – though these analyses often maintain a statist focus (Rasmussen and Lund 2018; Vela-Almeida 2018; Watts 2018). This broader resource territory literature has granted increased attention to metal mining in recent years, including for gold and copper (Allen 2017; Côte and Korf 2018; D’Angelo and Pijpers 2018; Peluso 2018; Perreault 2018; Schoenberger 2016; Spiegel 2014; Wooden 2017). This work demonstrates how narratives surrounding mining activities reinforce spatial imaginaries of state territory, such as in neo-extractive political economies like Ecuador and Bolivia, serving as a tool for enforcing state dominance (Marston and Perreault 2017; Vela-Almeida 2018). Similar socio-spatial formulations of mining governance seek to deal with the mining industry’s complexity of physical space, social relations of state and sovereignty, and various political formations emerging in relation to the “minescapes” of extractive projects (Brown and Spiegel 2017; Ey and Sherval 2016; Spiegel 2014). Poncian, for example, argues that such narratives connecting resources and national identity can prove useful for enhancing political divisions within Tanzanian society, revealing
the socio-spatial fractures that may emerge in extractive regimes (2019). Nationalistic narratives and territorial partitions facilitate the circulation and accumulation of capital within these political complexities from the colonial period to the present, as capital simultaneously bolsters relations of citizenship and the sovereign state system (Emel et al. 2011).

Actual mineral governance practices around the world therefore reveal the contingency and variation of territorial extent, state sovereignty, and socio-spatial division in relation to corporate and other powerful actors engaged in resource governance and extraction (Bridge 2014; Emel et al. 2011; Ong 2006a). These governance practices demonstrate that “other institutions and territorial forms – the clan or community, for example – co-exist with those of the state” (Bridge 2014: 7). Therefore, the multi-scalar analyses I undertake here might better capture the complexity of environmental governance in “neoliberal environments” or otherwise (Castree 2007; Himley 2008). The literature especially supports such a perspective, given recent trends in political ecology toward increasingly “disaggregating and denaturalizing analytical units” (Bridge et al. 2015). These efforts include the expansion of broader feminist political ecologies (Rocheleau et al. 2013; Sundberg 2015b) and widespread agreement that environmental governance extends across scales and networks to enroll a variety of political actors through different means and capacities (Bridge and Perreault 2009; Bulkeley 2005; Huber 2015; Le Billon 2015; Neumann 2009; Robbins 2008; Sayre 2005, 2015; Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003; Zimmerer and Bassett 2003).

Like Georgia, extractive regimes in the former Soviet Union and other formerly socialist spaces increasingly exhibit such diverse and multi-scalar political ecological dynamics. For example, state actors, members of civil society, and corporate interests in Kyrgyzstan compete for access to and control of gold mining territory through protests, government repression, and
either investing capital or not (Doolot and Heathershaw 2015; Wooden 2017). Jackson and Myadar draw from research surrounding Mongolia’s Oyu Tolgoi mining complex to demonstrate how mining practices – explosive, dust-producing, and bound to infrastructural networks of transportation, energy generation, etc. – produce varying socio-material distances and borders between people, newly enclosed territories, and shifting relations between the Mongolian state, nation, and foreign capital (Jackson 2015a; Myadar and Jackson 2018). Koch and Perreault illustrate how mineral resources serve as prime vectors for shifting state power and patterns of de-/re-centralization in Kazakhstan since the Soviet Union’s collapse, while also fueling popular imaginations of Kazakh nationalism (2018). Together, this global set of case studies demonstrates how mining practices are profoundly and recursively bound up with broader socio-political and material forces, producing their own unique borders and political geographies internal to and across state territories – despite the continued prevalence of statist analytical frameworks within prominent political ecology and environmental governance research projects (Harris 2012, 2017; Parenti 2015; Robertson 2015; Robertson and Wainwright 2013).

Political geographers have long argued for more grounded documentation and analysis of the complexity, ephemerality, and transformation of such boundaries beyond the state (including more-than-human boundaries both capillary and material, e.g. watershed boundaries) beyond mere identification and critique (Newman and Paasi 1998; Robbins 2008). In the following section I undertake a closer examination of this scholarship and the analytical directions its proponents may suggest.

2.2. Multi-scalar Borders Beyond the State

As noted already, Georgia’s Mashavera Valley is filled with various political dividing and bordering practices related to mining, re-shaping power relations throughout the local region.
If borders are under-examined and theorized within environmental governance studies, what insights might political geographers offer for richer visions of socio-spatial divisions and frameworks for analyzing political contours in the environment?

Findings from the literature on mining and territory in island contexts over the past two decades are especially pertinent to my argument. For example, Anna Tsing illustrates how the practices of “wild miners” consume both state and Indigenous land in Indonesia (Tsing 2003). Nancy Peluso reveals how small-scale gold mining there produces new territorial formations outside the state’s purview, “making the above- and-underground spaces into territories within resource frontiers” (2018: 401). Allen explains how mining practices in Melanesia generate militaristic violence and produce “ungovernable” landscapes, as new territorial formations crystalize power relations in extractive industries (2017). Georgia’s gold and copper industry relies on extraction from a valley rather than an island, yet the territorial issues of boundedness and connectivity necessary to understand these extractive island contexts illuminate the political dimensions of bordering produced by mining practices.

Post-structural approaches to political geographies of borders and boundaries often draw inspiration from Foucault’s analyses of power and spatiality, proving especially fruitful here. Key to Foucault’s broader project is a focus on political practices over pre-defined categories like “the state” and “territory” (Foucault 2008: 79, 2009: 277; Lemke 2007). This move from studying predefined analytical categories to the practices that produce state and territorial effects represents a key contribution of political geography scholarship over the past three decades (Allen 2003, 2004; Koch 2015b; Mitchell 1990, 1991b, 1991a, 1999, 2002, 2009; Murphy 2013; Paasi 1997, 1998a, 2009; Painter 2006, 2010). Political geographers today consider political borders in a similar manner, as most scholars have long abandoned traditional approaches
toward borders as static and discrete phenomena to focus on the “dynamism of borders and bordering practices” (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2009: 586).

Border scholars have long dealt with the complexity of border-making processes, convincingly illustrating how practices that construct and legitimate state territorial borders are crucial to global and regional geopolitics (Agnew 2015c; Jones 2009; Megoran 2017; Murphy 2013, 2015; Newman 2006; Newman and Paasi 1998; Sassen 2013b, 2018). Border research in political geography argues explicitly for borders’ continued centrality to political geographies of both exclusion and inclusion, despite widespread critiques that the world is now functionally “borderless,” empirics demonstrating the profound importance of transnational socio-spatial connection to the global economy, and the much maligned “end of history” (Koch 2014; Newman 2006; Newman and Paasi 1998; Paasi 2009; see also: Fukuyama 1989, 2018).

This perspective has given rise to a rich body of work in geography and political science scholarship on the former Soviet Union. Numerous important findings regarding the political work of borders emerge from within these sprawling and interrelated literatures considering borders and territories, critical geopolitics, and dissident IR, including the central role identity narratives and performances play in constructing, legitimating, and reinforcing such exclusive borders (Dalby and Ó Tuathail 1998; Herb 2004; Jones 2009; Kaiser 2012; Sharp 2007). Borders and the territories they bound bear rich political histories, shaped over time by contingent social forces that simultaneously structure the spaces in which they exist – dynamics readily apparent across the borders of former Soviet space from Ukraine (Brown 2005) to Central Asia’s Ferghana Valley (Megoran 2017) and Finland (Paasi 1998b).

Paasi’s work is especially emblematic of this perspective, illustrating the work such political borders do in the world. Paasi uses his ongoing historical research of the Finnish-
Russian border to conceptualize borders as social processes produced through political practices and given material form: knowledges, narratives, discourses, and institutions (1998b). In short, for Paasi, “Boundaries are expressions of power relations” (1998b: 82), regardless of the scale at which they unfold. Pointing to examples beyond explicit state borders – including gated communities, green belts inside cities, and property relations more broadly – Paasi argues that “Boundedness and territory are thus important processes embedded in the production and reproduction of social relations on various scales” (2009: 215). Understanding the way socio-material and spatial divisions (e.g., the state or state territory as political effects) emerge and become both institutionalized and reproduced requires investigating the everyday practices and spatial imaginaries that shape social life – what Paasi calls “spatial socialization” (Koch 2015b; Neep 2017; Paasi 1997, 2009: 226). This socio-spatial consciousness “is reproduced in everyday life, but it cannot be reduced to that alone” (Paasi 2009: 228), “existing on various spatial scales” (229) as bordering practices class and mark diverse people, things, ideas, and spaces from international borders to urban contexts and beyond (Koch 2014).

Crucially, these spatial imaginations are not just “mental acts and discourses as identity is often understood” (Paasi 2010a: 15) but also occur through material practices both economic and political. Koch illustrates the simultaneously mental and material nature of spatial imaginations through a brief analysis of the Soviet nationalities policies, implemented in part through passport designations and Central Asian political subjects’ adoption of multiple identities (Kazakh, Soviet, etc.), in part due to the material benefits afforded by such designations (2015b).

Discursive and institutional practices produce borders at multiple distinct yet interacting scales, bearing material effects in the world and shaping future socio-material political formations (Agnew 2008; Laine 2016). Viewing borders from this disaggregated perspective
does not mean that larger-scale phenomenon such as state borders lack importance or relevance. Too many profound examples exist to argue for such a “borderless” perspective in any convincing way, especially given the multiple migration, security, and human vulnerability crises these relations produce along so many of the world’s interstate borders (Boyce 2016; Foxall 2018; Johnson and Jones 2018; Jones 2012; Mahanty 2017; Vaughan-Williams 2015). Instead, "a state boundary or a municipal boundary is designed to separate the space controlled by members of a social group or a territorial community and to limit the rights to this territory of those who do not belong to the group" (Kolossov 2005: 618). Border scholars illustrate that these disparate forms of bordering work through fundamentally similar mechanisms of differentiation, division, and control. Such diverse and disaggregated perspectives allow us to explore the lived experiences and effects of “the global roundaboutness of power” (Allen 2004: 19), acknowledging power’s capillary nature as well as its uneven concentration and extension through certain territorial actors and institutions – corporations, governments, celebrities – over others (Allen 2011; Koch 2016a; Massey 2004).

In short, states or governments are not the only entities to produce borders, but rather ordinary people do as well through their everyday practices living within borderlands and territories. Investigating these “localized,” “embodied,” and “lived” geopolitics (Dowler and Sharp 2001: 2001; Hyndman 2004; Megoran 2006, 2017; Ó Tuathail 2010; Secor 2001; Sharp 2007) requires a “spatially curious account of the whereabouts of power” (Allen 2004: 25) that considers representational practices, popular spatial imaginaries, and practices of resource extraction simultaneously material and rhetorical. According to Etienne Balibar, these bordering practices may represent the space of politics and power itself (1998), such that “borders are perhaps even constitutive of political life” (Vaughan-Williams 2009: 1). My analysis traces
where the Mashavera Valley’s sub-state boundaries lie, how they are produced, and what effects they generate.

Yet if borders generate power’s spatiality, as Balibar contends, and if both bordering practices and environmental governance enroll a diverse actors doing many things in many places beyond “state space” (Brenner 1999, 2004; Brenner et al. 2003; Brenner and Elden 2009; Moisio and Paasi 2013a), what kinds of practices and spaces might be included in these disaggregated political geographies of extraction? It is to this question I turn next.

2.3. Toward Extractive Archipelagos: Uneven networks of Embedded Borderings

Bordering practices exist as central to political geographies, especially in the former Soviet Union, where histories of contested territory still shape political struggles today. Yet in their recent book *Dictators Without Borders* (2017), Alex Cooley and John Heathershaw contend that Central Asian autocracies and wealthy elites consolidate power in part by operating *sans frontiers*, both “across” and “beyond” borders (2017). Heathershaw et al. suggest that this expansion of power through practices extending beyond the typical Westphalian state-container view of sovereignty increasingly represents a defining characteristic of state power across Central Eurasia – including through gold, copper, and other metal mining operations across the broad region (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017; Doolot and Heathershaw 2015; Heathershaw and Schatz 2017). However, scholars have undertaken little work connecting these global networks of bordering practices to localized, material experiences beyond those of local political elites, representatives of global capital, or other powerful actors.

As the borders literature informs us – and as seen at Sakdrisi in 2014 – a range of actors including state and local governments, members of civil society, corporations, and religious
officials demarcate and control space in complicated and overlapping ways. Aihwa Ong and Saskia Sassen use a range of market reform case studies across southeast Asian (Ong) and broader globalized markets (Sassen) to show how such manifold political practices and relations draw internal borders within states, producing “structural holes” or gradations in state sovereignty and citizenship. These borders often exist unmarked on the landscape and often lack the territorial trappings or visible markers that typically reinforce and legitimate state borders (Ong 2006a, 2007; Sassen 2013b; Sassen and Ong 2014; see also: Ong 1999, 2011; Sassen 2008, 2013a, 2018). Resource governance regimes have their own socio-spatial organizations within these complex political geographies, including similar structural holes (Bridge 2014; Emel et al. 2011; Marston and Perreault 2017; Robertson 2015; Valdivia 2008, 2015), suggesting important avenues for resource political geography scholarship which I expand upon in the remainder of this chapter.

Following political geography’s long history of engaging such questions and phenomena (Agnew 1994, 2005; Brenner 2004; Elden 2009: 201; Murphy 2013; Paasi 1997; Painter 2010; Raffestin 2012; Sack 1986), Saskia Sassen has made important contributions to recent efforts to theorize territory and globalization (2008, 2013b, 2018). Sassen defines territory as “a capability with embedded logics of power and of claim-making,” including informal jurisdictions “beyond that of the national territorial state” (2013b: 23). These “operational spaces” emerge from “embedded borderings,” divisions enforced by non-state actors and internal to – yet separate from – Westphalian state space (Sassen 2018). Sassen engages a wide range of cases to demonstrate how these embedded borderings increasingly shape the international political order, including through WTO trade agreements, the ICC, Fairtrade designations, informal movements of forced migrants, private “dark pool” trading networks, commodity chain development, land
grabs, and debt systems (2008, 2009, 2013b, 2013a, 2018; Sassen and Aneesh 2017; Sassen and Ong 2014; Sassen and Torino 2017). In short, these borderings bear significance because they do real work in the world, producing spaces beyond what scholars might typically consider as either individual imaginary space or the highly institutionalized space of the “territorial trap” (Agnew 1994, 2015a; Glassman 1999). Yet, importantly, these embedded borderings do not erase or make irrelevant the state space in which they exist.

Sassen rather argues the opposite, that “For today’s globalizing dynamics to have the transformative capacities they evince entails far deeper imbrications with the national—whether governments, firms, legal systems, or citizens—than prevailing analyses allow us to recognize” (2008: 1). While parallel spaces exist through systems of illegality such as blatant fraud and organized crime, these legally recognized operational spaces present new relations of state power in the interstate system (Sassen 2013b), re-shaping the contours of global economic relations through local political practices. Such networks posit mining pits as wormholes of deep time (Bridge 2013), but also of space (Neep 2017), suggesting the possibility of connecting “global assemblages” within and across regional formations (Ong 2011; Ong and Collier 2004; Tsing 2005). As Sassen explains:

The overall outcome is a multiplication of systemic edges that encompass operational spaces inside national sovereign territories yet connecting across multiple such territories. Neither those enclosed operational spaces nor the geographies that connect them across the world are part of traditional national borders or the formal interstate system. They can benefit from the deregulations and privatizations that underlie the global system, but they are not necessarily marked or made visible by these familiar innovations of the global system. They operate through other channels and construct their own geographies. (2018: 13)

Sassen’s disaggregated, practice-oriented perspective offers a flexible analytical tool, yet in many ways this approach only presents a general approach to territoriality, borderings, and spatial politics. In the rest of this chapter, I develop and extend an analytical metaphor for
distinguishing and investigating such spaces as they relate to specific political practices of environmental governance and resource extraction: an extractive archipelago.

The “archipelago” metaphor is perhaps most widely associated with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s powerful publication of The Gulag Archipelago referenced in this chapter’s epigraph (Solzhenitsyn 1974). Though typically used to describe an island chain’s physical geography, human geographers in recent years have adopted this metaphor to varying effect while considering urban contexts and environments (Bakker 2003; Meeteren and Bassens 2016), detention spaces (Mountz 2011, 2015; Vaughan-Williams 2009) and political island environments (Kirsch 2016; Pugh 2013; Stratford et al. 2011; Wilford 2010), among others.

However, in each of these uses, the metaphor specifically classifies multiple related areas as simultaneously bounded and distinct, yet geographically distant. For example, some political geographers conceptualize Russia’s “near abroad” of periphery states, including several de facto states and occupied territories, as a “geopolitical archipelago of dependencies” (Toal 2017; see also: Suslov 2018b), mirroring similar and characteristic center-periphery political relations across each unique polity. Scholars have even used the archipelagic vision of bounded, connected spaces to analyze mining sectors (Jackson 2016). These include questioning the gulag system’s archipelagic nature (distinctly bordered from the rest of society, as some define it) by studying the historically fluid social dynamics of an Arctic coal mining town originally established as a prison camp complex (Barenberg 2014). Yet, in these cases and others, political geographers’ use of the archipelago metaphor, while powerful, often relies on flattened views of boundedness and borders.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Foucault again provides useful guidance for this metaphor, drawing inspiration from Solzhenitsyn’s revelations to shape his own analyses of incarceration
(1977a, 2007a; Plamper 2002). Foucault points toward the diverse political technologies that shape society, in similar fashion to the way intersecting geophysical forces produce island archipelagos. In Foucault’s assessment of governing technologies, “Society is an archipelago of powers” (2007c: 156) comprising more than one “family of technologies of power” (2007c: 160) overlapping, intersecting, and shaping one another into a “mesh of the net” (2007c: 158). These political networks of interconnected technologies and spaces rest upon relations of boundedness, defining who and what is governed, how, and by whom. Even in Solzhenitsyn’s iconic narrative, we see not just the formation of the Soviet gulag’s political spaces but that these essentially comprise various forms of divisive borderings (border practices), embedded within Soviet state space yet separate from it (Sassen 2018). These include defining who is brought into the legal system, how people are restricted and transported to these spaces, and so on (Solzhenitsyn 1974).

Borders scholars similarly demonstrate how the boundaries of state territories increasingly unite multiple intersecting forces and political technologies – for example of geopower and biopower or, as some define these terms, securing territories while governing populations and individual bodies (Dillon 2007; Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero 2008; Johnson and Jones 2018; Makarychev 2018; Makarychev and Yatsyk 2017, 2018; Vaughan-Williams 2009, 2015). Drawing from his analysis of a “global archipelago” of military camps, Vaughan-Williams contends that this analytical move “unties an analysis of the operation of sovereign power from the territorial confines of the state and relocates such an analysis in the context of a global terrain that spans ‘domestic’ and ‘international’ space” (2009: 117).

Recent scholarship of Central Asia and the Caucasus reveals and explores the intimate role such complex political borderings play within the region’s geopolitics, highlighting how stories, narratives, and informal practices shape and legitimate these multi-scalar political
boundaries (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017; Megoran 2017), including those of local and informal varieties (Hoffmann 2017; Smolnik and Weiss 2017). The region also has a long history of mining and resource extraction that to date remains relatively under-studied outside a few large projects such as Kyrgyzstan’s Kumtor gold mine (Doolot and Heathershaw 2015; Varshalomidze 2014; Wooden 2017). This lacuna is especially surprising, as mining provided a key economic and ideological driver of the Soviet Union, building large-scale industries throughout Soviet controlled territory and causing widespread environmental degradation in the name of building the Soviet body politic (Josephson 2002, 2013; Kotkin 1997). However, mines also served as biopolitical technologies within Stalin’s state-sponsored archipelago of death and suffering as targets of gulag camp labor (Applebaum 2004; Barenberg 2014; Plamper 2002; Prozorov 2013, 2014). These diverse relations suggest the contemporary resource extraction archipelagos in the former Soviet Union are not merely flat networks of equal actants (Latour 1987; see also Lave 2015) but rather contoured networks of uneven capital accumulation, environmental violence, and political control.

Viewing metal mining as an intersecting archipelago of divisive and embedded borderings is especially productive as it allows us to trace the actual socio-material practices producing the everyday territories of mining governance. In doing so I do not intend to minimize or counter the significance of global, transnational political networks of finance and crime. In fact, the same types of secretive, off-shore, transnational financial networks Doolot and Heathershaw demonstrate as foundational to gold mining industries in Kyrgyzstan and throughout the region (2015) fuel the extractive regime in Georgia (see Chapter 3). I instead develop and extend Heathershaw et al.’s call “to get beyond the perceived binary division between domestic affairs and foreign affairs” (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017: 25). Local
political practices crucially operate to uphold these transnational political assemblages (Ong and Collier 2004; Sassen 2008, 2018; Sassen and Ong 2014), binding together “hybrid and polyvalent forms of statehood” (Heathershaw and Schatz 2017: 7) in Central Eurasia with global political and economic networks. Analyzing mining from this perspective expands and refines scholars’ ability to assess and explain the production of environmental injustices – not just in the formerly Soviet world, but in any context where extractive practices produce new political geographies of inequality, boundedness, and connectivity. Doing so reveals the extractive industries’ significance for understanding the cross-scalar nature of contemporary Central Eurasian power geometries, moving political ecologists and political geographers alike toward a more flexible “ecology of politics” (Huber 2015). I now analyze several such embedded borderings within the Mashavera Valley.

3. Bordering the Mine

Each of the three categories of mining practices I analyzed here correspond to different forms of power relations in the region: geoeconomic, biopolitical, and geopolitical. However, I also recognize that these powers and practices hardly ever work in isolation and in fact often rely upon another to exist. I instead use the above categories as heuristic guides based on the dominant role each plays within a set of bordering practices, acknowledging these relations’ potential heterogeneity and contingency within society’s archipelago of powers. In doing so I analyze how different bordering practices in the Mashavera Valley re-shape the political contours of state, society, and territory as they converge in the mining industry there.

My analysis explores diverse socio-material divisions as identified through interviews and contextualized with broader public opinion polls, ecological data, and economic statistics to consider how these localized effects fit within broader political patterns of bounding and
connectivity. In doing so I aim to limit the influence of scalar analytical assumptions (local vs. national vs. global), instead looking at specific practices that may connect phenomena across disparate spaces and scales – or not.

This extractive regime emerges from a history of socio-political networks and the political imaginations of diverse actors, as I develop in Chapters 3 and 4. I presently argue that such political relations produce a range of socio-material, sub-state borders shaping environmental governance throughout the region and in extractive “archipelagos” reaching across the former Soviet Union, enrolling the Mashavera Valley as one such “island.” As I illustrate here, these extractive islands are bound from their surrounding socio-material environments in multiple ways. Yet in other ways these sub-state regions stay connected to other “external” spaces – from the rest of the Kvemo Kartli district to foreign mines, offshore financial institutions and beyond. The mining practices of actors related to the GeoProMining corporation and its affiliates (including RMG and other corporations identified in Chapter 3) connect these political islands via the history of corporate ownership, access, and control in the region (see Figure 17). While my research has not yet extended to other sites within this archipelago, my analysis here offers an important window into how these islands may develop while building a model for my future research.
Figure 17: GeoProMining archipelago
(Map credit: Author; Sources: USGS, MiningAtlas, Esri, NOAA)
These diverse bordering practices (and general forms of power) produce exclusive forms of environmental injustice and inequity, which I outline in the following sub-sections: (1) unequal levels of socio-economic access (geoeconomic), (2) exposure to toxic plumes (biopolitical), and (3) contours of degraded political citizenship (geopolitical).

3.1. Digital Divides and Economic Access

Relations of economic access and exclusion provide a primary dimension of political bordering in environmental governance. Scholars often view these relations in terms of property, as a bundle of rights and access to resources (Ribot and Peluso 2003). Yet property relations also intersect with other political forces such as shifting political imaginaries, policy histories, and international relations (as illustrated in the previous two chapters). Social scientists sometimes refer to this intersection of geographic and political economic division as geoeconomic power.

Some “realist” scholars view geoeconomics as a set of instruments states either utilize or don’t, leveraging economic policies like sanctions or energy provision as political tools within international relations (Luttwak 1990; Vihma 2018a, 2018b). Yet others see geoeconomics as a more discursive set of political practices also embedded within everyday life (Casolo and Doshi 2013; Lee et al. 2018, 2018; Moisio 2018; Moisio and Paasi 2013b; Sparke 2018a, 2018b; Williams and Massaro 2013), including virtual and cyber practices (Jessop and Sum 2018). A geoeconomics perspective often considers commerce and trade within national security and foreign policy frameworks, yet adopting a more critical lens toward these relations reveals the economic imaginaries’ importance for shaping political spaces and borderings (Moisio 2018), including the territoriality of state space to include market relations and control (Cowen and Smith 2009; Moisio and Paasi 2013b). Moisio and Paasi use the Finnish welfare state’s historic
evolution to illustrate how scholars can fruitfully investigate such developments by tracing shifts in political rationalities and governmental techniques as the Finnish government considered economic markets in relation to the state’s populations and territories (2013b). Importantly, these rationalities and techniques operate both within and beyond Finnish state space, suggesting that geoeconomic borderings can exist across scales and spaces, both transnationally and locally.

Sub-state, embedded geoeconomic shifts are clearly evident in recent reforms of the Georgian mining industry (see Chapter 4). Driven by calls to open markets and decrease regulation, the Georgian government sells off long-term extraction licenses to the highest bidder. A leading official at the Georgian National Environmental Agency (NEA) told me that anyone can purchase these licenses, as long as you have money to pay for them: “this is transparent, and everyone can bid… everyone can submit their starting point… you can bid also! [referring to me and laughing] You have to register, it’s a very simple procedure… anyone can register” (Interview 60). Such claims prove interesting because of Georgia’s broader attitudes toward foreign land ownership – recently producing a moratorium on the sale of agricultural land to foreign individuals or companies (TI Georgia 2017) as part of a broader regional trend (Mustafayev 2018) – but also because the geoeconomic situation unfolding here is somewhat more complex than this official suggests.

Under the Law of Georgia on License and Permit Fees, the minimum cost for a mineral extraction license is 200 GEL, or about USD$84 (The Parliament of Georgia 2005), but they of course sell for significantly more. However, not only are figures and maps illustrating the license areas’ territorial divisions not accessible, and financially out of reach for most entities other than corporate investors, but access to these auctions and the entire resource license portal are kept behind the simplest of digital-age borders: a username and password bottleneck that the agency
must grant (see Figure 18). The agency demarcates licenses via mapping software, but keeps these spatial data sequestered behind both digital lock and key. Monopolistic tendencies enhance these exclusive divisions as the momentum of Georgia’s libertarian market forces allow powerful actors to entrench their relative economic positions at the expense of others. Walters identifies such digital borders (specifically internet firewalls) as non-linear, non-geographical, and non-territorial borderings (2006), suggesting that such digital divisions can exist as powerful social boundaries.

Yet these digital divides do not exist merely in flat, de-territorialized cyberspace. Once issued, these extraction licenses confer *de facto* territorial sovereignty to the license winners, almost exclusively corporate, as they essentially self-regulate their exploration, development, and extraction of natural resources (Interviews 3, 20, 27, 50). The license for the region around the Sakdrisi-Madneuli mine complex is set for 30 years, but the NEA may grant these licenses.
for up to 100 years, and companies can typically extend them under the same conditions when the leasing term ends (Interviews 20, 50, 60). Crucially, this governance system is also set up so that the licensee assesses and defines what resources are present in that territory and then has the authority to develop those resources as long as the operations remain aligned with their proposed extraction plan (RMG Gold Ltd. 2013). These plans bear little government scrutiny and are infrequently rejected, meaning that extractive corporations have effective sovereignty over a portion of state territory – a textbook example of a “structural hole” in state sovereignty and a radical shift in territorial governance as these borderings become embedded in and shift “state space” (Ong 2006a, 2007; Sassen 2013b, 2018).

The mines themselves are strikingly visible, as are the many practices that produce the smaller borders of everyday life around them – enormous holes in the earth, explosions, armed guard houses. Yet it is often unclear exactly where RMG (the current owners of GeoProMining’s original license; see Chapter 3) and other corporations like it in Georgia, often at least partly foreign-owned, possess the right to explore, designate, and extract resources as these borders are rarely marked on maps or landscapes. For example, I was only able to recreate the borders of this exploration and extraction license by photographing a map on the wall of a PR representative for the company during an interview in his office (with their permission, Interview 21). I then had to georeference my image and compare it to a map found in a British investor promotional presentation just to determine the mining company’s jurisdictional borders (Noricum Gold 2018). While this investor map is freely available online, it neither supplies detailed spatial information nor allows any access or control to citizens even if they could access these data. The power to define these geoeconomic borderings within the Mashavera Valley lies squarely with corporate interests. These variably visible and invisible borders deny locals the capacity to
compete and defend their individual interests while the government relinquishes a portion of territorial sovereignty in exchange for resource rents – especially compelling as RMG accrues nationally significant profits.

These fiscal and digital elements together create a system of embedded borderings constructed as inherently exclusive – a digital division shaping economic access to the material world. Access is crucial to any property regime, and as Georgia’s system of extraction licenses emerges from the country’s post-Soviet property reforms (USAID 2010), this new political regime establishes a distinct “bundle of rights” for the owners of global capital. This regime does so at local populations’ exclusion, who have no method or means to access either rights or data related to these spaces (Blomley 2015; Peluso 2018; Ribot and Peluso 2003). Such de jure and de facto borderings produce highly uneven state-society relations indicative of post-Soviet political space, with capital accumulating to state-connected actors, often to the detriment of local livelihoods and resilience.

Meanwhile, the geoeconomic effects of this governance system on the ground are striking. Local citizens experience these exclusive divisions in various everyday forms. For example, mining’s local dominance in the valley erases alternative economic opportunities and other livelihood options (Interviews 14, 30, 48, 54), such that “these people are afraid that they will lose jobs” (Interview 14). While most people in the region work either in the mines or as farmers, grazing lands are converted to open pits (Interview 37/38) and a local man who previously worked as a state veterinarian estimates “there were approximately seven hundred livestock [here], but only seventy left in town now because we lost all the fields… I had eight to ten livestock but now only keep one because there are no more fields” (Interview 38).

Meanwhile, poverty remains widespread (Interviews 12, 14, 34, 39); as a local labor organizer
claims, "it is just impossible to live here, totally impossible... and the company did not take any care" (Interview 34). These geoeconomic borderings produce diverse socio-spatial effects in people’s lives, often with ambiguity and uncertainty. For example, unless citizens possess intimate (and accurate) knowledge of corporate activities, you can (and I have) walk toward the edge of corporate territory and have no way of knowing when you have entered this new political space by passing within the boundary of the extractive license territory.

Importantly, however, these geoeconomic borderings stemming from mining’s effects also intersect with other social divisions, shaping broader geoeconomic contours within the country and across the region. Some of the most reliable data on these broader social borders come from recurring surveys issued by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC). For example, and as might be expected, higher education levels tend to produce more secure household economic situations in Georgia. Yet rural Georgian populations as in the Mashavera Valley are two to three times less likely than urban populations to have achieved any education beyond secondary school, patterns exacerbated in communities lacking diverse economic opportunities such as Kazreti and Balichebi.

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16 The Caucasus Barometer is an opinion survey used widely by scholars of the South Caucasus. While CRRC administers forms of the survey in all three countries of the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia), I only analyze findings from the Georgia survey here. The Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) typically administers the Barometer once a year, though this is not perfectly regular due to the country’s often-unpredictable political circumstances. The survey population includes adults 18 years and older living throughout the country but excludes populations living in territories affected by military conflict (South Ossetia and Abkhazia). Sample sizes average between 2,000-2,500 respondents selected via multi-stage cluster sampling with preliminary stratification. The 2017 survey achieved a sample size of 2,379 respondents during fieldwork conducted from September 22 to October 10, 2017, with a 58% response rate. Researchers conducted interviews in Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian. The principal investigator was Dr. Tinatin Zurabishvili, who serves as the Caucasus Barometer Project Coordinator. All errors of analysis and interpretation are the author’s sole responsibility.

17 Caucasus Barometer 2017: When asked “Which of the following statements best describes the current economic situation of your household?” (ECONSTN), potential responses include: (1) Money is not enough for food; (2) Money is enough for food only, but not for clothes; (3) Money is enough for food and clothes, but not enough for expensive durables like a refrigerator or washing machine; (4) We can afford to buy some expensive durables like a refrigerator or washing machine; (5) We can afford to buy anything we need; or (6) DK/RA.

18 Caucasus Barometer 2017: (RESPDU * SETTYPE)
Resulting from these uneven patterns of development, education, security, and opportunity, respondents across all regions in Georgia overwhelmingly found unemployment the country’s most pressing issue (51-60%), with poverty second (13-14%) and Georgia’s unsolved territorial conflicts, often discussed by foreign policy analysts as the most dire situation facing the country, in third (4-8%). This finding aligns with other public opinion surveys, including one by the National Democratic Institute (NDI Georgia). “Jobs” consistently rank as the most important national issue over time, with rising prices/inflation, poverty, territorial integrity, and affordable healthcare all vying for second place (from May 2009 to April 2015) and with most respondents thinking all these issues have either remained static or gotten worse since October 2012. In 2014 and 2015, during a turbulent time in Georgian politics when the Sakdrisi protests were unfolding amid rapid political turnover in the government, the NDI poll saw the number of Georgians who thought the country was going in the right direction slip below those who thought it was not changing at all or going in the wrong direction – the first time such a shift occurred since May 2009, the year after Russia invaded South Ossetia. Yet those living in more economically secure households were increasingly likely to find problems beyond economic development more significant for the country.

These links among uneven economic development, dispossession, and political imaginations resulting from them establish the divisive socio-spatialization of geoeconomic borderings that bound this mining “island.” For instance, Tbilisi is clearly the country’s primate economic powerhouse, perennially adding close to half the country’s gross value added since

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19 Caucasus Barometer 2017: (IMPISS1 * SETTYPE)
20 The CRRC administers the NDI public attitude surveys several times each year and is also accessible via caucasusbarometer.org.
21 Caucasus Barometer 2017: (IMPISS1 * ECONSTN)
2006 (GeoStat.Ge 2018). However, Kvemo Kartli (the region where the Mashavera Valley is located, along with the industrial center of Rustavi) is in the top half of Georgia’s other regions by the same metric. It is second only to Tbilisi in production value of industry, providing approximately a third of the region’s aggregate value produced, more than twice the next closest sector (agriculture, hunting, forestry, and fishing combined) – the most industry dominant economy in Georgia (GeoStat.Ge 2018).

The mining industry’s dominance in surrounding districts provides a key force within these geoeconomic borderings, both regionally and in local communities. For example, among Georgia’s rural populations those working for state or medium to large private companies like RMG comprise a small minority of the population.22 These employed rural respondents tend to be more economically secure, though not by much.23 At the same time, the region has historically had the second highest or highest monthly salaries among industrial employees in the country, along with high levels of fixed asset investment (GeoStat.Ge 2018). While unemployment levels in Kvemo Kartli are lower than in most other regions, national unemployment levels slowly decrease across the country as these benefits are distributed unevenly, with Kvemo Kartli generally missing out on such developments (GeoStat.Ge 2018). In short, the region around the Sakdrisi-Madneuli mining complex is particularly vulnerable economically, though those getting employment in the mines are among Georgia’s more secure populations, exacerbating the uneven effects of uneven economic development in this region.

22 While rural areas experience higher rates of poverty and economic need, divisions of economic security actually appear relatively similar across the country. Survey results generally show similar trends in class divisions among settlement types, with relatively similar numbers of households struggling to afford food and/or clothing across rural (57%), urban (51%), and capital regions (46%) (ECONSTN * SETTYPE). However, rural populations do suffer greater rates of poverty with nearly half (44%) of households relying on self-employment or subsistence farming (compared to 13-19% in urban and capital districts) (WORKTYP * SETTYPE).

23 Caucasus Barometer 2017: (WORKTYP * ECONSTN)
Analysts at CRRC have determined that such economic deprivations (along with corollary trends along divisions of age, education, and settlement type) in Georgia tend to elicit nostalgia for the Soviet Union (CRRC 2017), a trend I experienced directly in the Mashavera. Such nostalgia connects to political opinions of how Georgia should align itself internationally – for instance toward the Russian-dominated Eurasian Union or the European Union and NATO – in part shaping one of the most significant ongoing political debates in the country and South Caucasus region. At the same time, the Georgian government’s ongoing balancing act to allow under-regulated foreign corporations to control increasingly large areas of state territory at the expense of Georgian well-being suggests that the government continues to flag itself as “open for business” to foreign capital, undertaking significant “realist” geoeconomic signaling within a broader geopolitical condition (Toal 2017: 13).

While none of these findings offer a clear, singular reality in Georgian political geographies, they do suggest several important dynamics underlying and driving the region’s geoeconomic divisions. Uneven economic development nationally, with sputtering and uneven industrial expansion in Kvemo Kartli focused primarily in the Mashavera Valley and Rustavi, has left much of the region’s population behind, especially in its rural industrial districts, as briefly illustrated in the preceding pages. Such economic divisions and borders produce similar divisions in political imaginations, at least in part driving political opinion in this hybrid democracy within a tumultuous region. Some of these effects manifest as new relations between society and state, which I explore further in the closing section of this analysis.

Uneven economic access levels in the Mashavera Valley produce diverse socio-economic, spatial, and territorial divisions – or more simply, geoeconomic borderings – all filtered through a digital bottleneck and producing real effects on residents’ livelihoods and well-
being. These geoeconomic borders often bear great political weight despite their often-diffuse
effects. As a result, their socio-spatial effects might seem subtle – until, that is, people
experience these economic dispossessions directly in everyday life or view them in the context of
the pollution obviously visible in streams leading from the mine. This intersection leads to the
second set of bordering practices I highlight in the Mashavera Valley: the creation of toxic
frontiers.

3.2. Toxic Frontiers: Poisoned Lands, Poisoned Bodies

Geoeconomic relations do not supply the only political bordering forces in extractive
landscapes like the Mashavera Valley. Socio-spatial divisions also emerge from the intimate
connections and embodied experiences of such extractive environments. These sites of extraction
exist as “portals, worm-holes between two worlds in which time and space work differently.
Underground lies a world of ‘natural production,’ the deep-time processes beyond human
control” that create the resources we value, while “Above-ground and freed from geological
fixity” these resources become “thrown into a tumultuous world of ‘social production,’ a surface
world of mobility and change” (Bridge 2013: 43). Bridge argues that our surface world of social
relations is not merely distinct from the underground and the biophysical but intrinsically
connected as mining practices turn portions of the earth inside-out. In many ways the two worlds
of under- and above-ground become one and the same as extractive industries produce new
ecologies in the social world humans bring them into. These ecologies affect not only the
biophysical environment independent of human experience but also our bodies and health, often
in uneven and politically contentious ways (Brubaker 2017).

Illness and healthcare provision therefore provide a crucial nexus between geopolitical
and biopolitical governing logics by extending the state’s territorial reach and providing care for
citizens as embodied political subjects—profoundly demonstrating how territories and populations become intimately entwined as “vital” objects of liberal democratic government (Collier and Lakoff 2015; Foucault 2008, 2009; Kearns 2014; Kivelä and Moisio 2017; Legg 2005; Lemke 2018; Rabinow and Rose 2006). Such biopolitical borderings enroll diverse bodies and environments, both embodied and material, and emerge from experiences of health at scales both personal and public (Smith et al. 2016). For example, Braun analyzes global security issues related to the emergence and spread of infectious diseases to illustrate how our molecularized understanding of life reveals governmentality and sovereignty as intimately entwined, as “biopolitics has merged with geopolitics” and “the government of ‘life’ has revealed itself to be intimately related to the exercise and extension of sovereign power” (2011: 390). These powerful imbrications resonate with mining-affected communities around the world, as memories and imaginations of health and sickness shape contemporary visions of extractive landscapes and the authorities governing them (Auyero and Swistun 2009; Legg 2007; Perreault 2018).

Divisions in environmental health experiences generate the most visceral form of political bordering in the Mashavera valley—its ongoing poisoning. These biopolitical relations produce crucial borders between potentials for health or illness, in the process offering powerful vectors of socio-spatialization defining this political island.

As with the geoeconomic borderings outlined above, the Mashavera’s localized biopolitical divisions exist within broader socio-spatial borders throughout Georgia. Regardless of region, about half the country’s population rates their health as “fair,” with the capital region the healthiest (37% responding “Good” or “Very good” versus 27% in rural regions) and rural areas the least (24% responding “Poor” or “Very poor” versus 15% in the capital).24 Perhaps...
unsurprisingly, those who live in rural areas and are self-employed, run their own business without employees, or work in household production or farming a land plot – like the majority of people living in the Mashavera, aside from those working in the mines – are the least healthy in the country. As suggested by scholars investigating intersections of biopolitics and geoeconomics through healthcare (Kivelä and Moisio 2017), boundaries of economic access as explored above also align with public health divisions in Georgia. For example, household economic security seems most directly related to experiences of health among all variables I consider. 43% of respondents who say money is not enough for food report their health as “poor” or “very poor,” while only 6% of those who can afford to buy anything they need report the same (with negligible numbers reporting “very poor”).

Figure 19: Soviet archival footage of original Madneuli copper processing
(Source: Georgian National Archives)

25 Caucasus Barometer 2017: (HLTHRAT * WORKTYP)
26 Caucasus Barometer 2017: (HLTHRAT * ECONSTN)
These biopolitical borderings intensify in the context of environmental degradation due to existing and expanding mining practices in the region. While mining has taken place here since the Soviet regime first opened the Madneuli mine in the 1970s (see Figure 19), the introduction and intensification of foreign investment in the venture have produced a rapid operational expansion in the region, with a number of economically promising deposits under exploration within the license area (see Figure 20). Open-pit mining as RMG practices here uses a cyanide solution to leach gold and copper out of crushed rock for further processing and extraction (Interview 21). However, the geologic origins of such deposits mean other metals often exist alongside these valuable commodities, considered waste within the political economy of a project. At the Sakdrisi-Madneuli complex, these toxic heavy metals include zinc, cadmium, and mercury, all of which come out of the rock along with gold and copper as the cyanide solution washes over them (Interview 26; see also: Avkopashvili et al. 2017; Felix-Henningsen and Urushadze 2012; Matchavariani and Kalandadze 2012).

Figure 20: Noricum license expansion map
(Source: Noricum Gold, Fair Use)
These heavy metals and other poisons leak into the valley’s water supplies, where irrigation pipes distribute the poisonous materials – what some call mining’s “residues” (Hecht 2018) or “excrement” (Perreault 2013a) – over farm fields throughout this valley, part of Georgia’s agricultural heartland (see Chapter 4). There is little monitoring of these residual leaks, and RMG typically does not share what information does exist with local residents. As a result, the constantly shifting toxic frontier of polluted space is powerfully invisible – often undetectable without specialized equipment yet particularly dangerous and divisive (Rasmussen and Lund 2018; Tsing 2003; Watts 2018).

Under certain conditions water can dissolve the heavy metals released by mining, leaching into groundwater, taken up by vegetation and in turn absorbed by animals – including humans – when consuming those plants (Felix-Henningsen et al. 2010; Matchavariani and Kalandadze 2012; Melikadze et al. 2006). For instance, tiered mountains of flotation residues have accumulated in the decades since the mine first opened. The metal sulfides they contain oxidize when exposed to the atmosphere, forming sulfuric acid and causing further dissolution of heavy metals. These acidic materials inhibit plant growth, promoting instability and erosion of wastes into the Kazretula river, which flows into the Mashavera. This water flows throughout the valley in a system of irrigation pipes and ditches, supplying both nourishment and toxins to living things throughout the valley. The humus-rich soils typically found throughout the Mashavera Valley are thick and fertile, having prominent levels of clay and organic matter. This soil is ideal for promoting the storage of those dissolved heavy metals, as well as their uptake into plant material (Felix-Henningsen et al. 2010; Felix-Henningsen and Urushadze 2012; 27 The most common soil types in the valley include these Chernozem and Kastanozem deposits (Avkopashvili et al. 2017; Felix-Henningsen and Urushadze 2012).
Several teams of soil scientists, including joint Georgian and German efforts, have surveyed the valley and determined that nearly all tested plots of irrigated land exceeded EU standards for precautionary values of copper, zinc, and cadmium, with 21-82% of different agricultural land types (grazing land, vineyards, etc.) requiring immediate action. Field experiments confirm that leafy vegetables efficiently absorb these heavy metals and only become further poisoned when washed in water from the Mashavera River. Livestock also exhibit this pattern as they drink from irrigation channels and eat irrigated grass, accumulating heavy metals in their meat and milk. Such forms of direct exposure also occur frequently as people drink and wash clothes in the river water (Felix-Henningsen and Urushadze 2012; Matchavariani and Kalandadze 2012).

Figure 21: Toxic heavy metal pollution downstream from Sakdrisi
(Photo credit: Martha Swann-Quinn, 2017)
These slow leaks occasionally become spectacular, such as when a tailings dam broke in the midst of a labor dispute when employees at RMG Copper and RMG Gold went on strike in February 2014, with hundreds of people rallying in Kazreti (EMC 2014). The dam released unknown volumes of waste into the river, turning the Mashavera River various shades of orange and wreaking havoc on the local ecology (see Figure 21 for a smaller scale example). Corporate responses to these alternatively fast and slow toxic leaks are themselves bordered, as the mining company tries to keep away journalists and other inquisitive people (including me and my research assistants).

RMG’s legally dubious waste management system provides the most obvious source for such exclusions. Article 47 of the Law of Georgia “On Subsoil” ensures the “security of life and health of the population” over corporate activities in the country (The Parliament of Georgia 1996), while article 14 clearly states, "The right to use subsoil may be recognised as void:... if life and health of people working or residing in the area where works related to the use of subsoil are carried out are endangered as a result of the use of subsoil" (The Parliament of Georgia 1996). However, such promises of environmental governance clearly go unfulfilled and produce dangerous biopolitical borderings within the region.

As these toxins accumulate throughout local lands (see [Perreault 2013a] for an example of similar effects in Bolivian mining communities), fields become unproductive, fruits and vegetables have drastically increased levels of toxins, and people do not know whether or not they are consuming dangerous foods (Interviews 12, 14, 24, 31, 47, 56). Families often have little opportunity for alternative forms of subsistence as they rely on farming for both income and sustenance. Heavy metal toxins collect in bodies through agriculture and consumption, respiration of poisoned dust blown throughout the valley (see Figure 22), and exposure of people
working in the mines (ASTDR 2004; Järup 2003). These various exposures cause significantly higher rates of cardiovascular disease and cancer in the Mashavera’s surrounding communities than experienced by people across the rest of Kvemo Kartli (see Figures 23a/b & 24a/b below). These unequal health experiences generate widespread imaginations of a poisoned population (see Chapter 4).

Scholars should always consider such health data in the context of their own limitations, yet these rates come from government monitoring organizations and align with Georgia’s annual CDC reports. According to official data from the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resource

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28 Here specifically as they relate to the timing of the national health care system’s establishment and different statistical monitoring techniques, as explained to me by a consultant at the Georgian National Center for Disease Control (Interview 51).
Figures 23a and 23b: Malignant tumors in Bolnisi compared to rest of administrative region (Kvemo Kartli), First time diagnoses and total ill (Sources: National Centre for Disease Control and Public Health of Georgia; Caucasus Environmental NGO Network (CENN))
Figures 24a and 24b: Cardiovascular diseases in Bolnisi compared to rest of administrative region (Kvemo Kartli), First time diagnoses and total ill
(Sources: National Centre for Disease Control and Public Health of Georgia; Caucasus Environmental NGO Network (CENN))
Protection, Kvemo Kartli has Georgia’s highest rate of air pollution stemming from the region’s industrial development (GeoStat.Ge 2018). Per capita, related cardiovascular diseases in Bolnisi are more commonly diagnosed and widespread than in the rest of Kvemo Kartli, and malignant tumors follow similar patterns, also killing more people.

Meanwhile, these toxins accumulate in bodies unevenly, as heavy metals like those found in the ecosystems surrounding the Sakdrisi and Madneuli mining sites – including cadmium, copper, zinc, mercury, and lead – tend to collect in the soft tissues of women and children’s bodies in higher concentrations (Jaishankar et al. 2014; Järup 2003; National Research Council 2000; Rzymski et al. 2015), reinforcing gendered divisions in Georgian society. Scientists and public health experts increasingly link these toxic materials to a range of reproductive health issues in women globally, including breast cancer, endometriosis, and miscarriage (Rzymski et al. 2015). Respondents anecdotally report rampant cases of miscarriage throughout the Mashavera Valley, as well as stories of women electing to abort pregnancies rather than deal with the potential health consequences (Interviews 34, 37/38, 43, 44, 50, 51) – a stark example of biopolitical government stemming from uneven and divisive borderings of environmental health. These uneven experiences divide the Valley’s inhabitants from the rest of the country, re-shaping their opportunities, political imaginations, bodies, and lives.

As just one example of the effects brought to these communities by their toxic environments and inadequate healthcare provisioning, a man living just south of the Soviet-era pit in Balichebi had worked in the mine during the Soviet period and told me that “When my daughter-in-law became pregnant, we were worried about her health and made them leave”

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29 Statistics related to pregnancy loss and other related afflictions in the region are minimal and unreliable due to socio-cultural factors marking these topics as relatively taboo.
Several other local respondents expressed similar fears or experiences as they became comfortable during our conversations. For example, an elderly woman in Bolnisi has a grandson who married someone from Kazreti, and she “had a miscarriage, and it was proved that it was caused by high radiation [sic – toxic exposure]. But finally, she got pregnant and… she made it up to eight-nine months. And then the child was born dead, and she survives” (Interview 18).

The same man who made his pregnant daughter leave home also told my research assistants and myself his wife’s story. The man’s wife was present as he spoke, quietly preparing and sharing a lunch of fried trout with us and their friends in their cool living room, silently nodding throughout the story. Though he had worked in the mine, the man trained as a veterinarian and rarely looked up from his hands while quietly speaking of his inability to help treat his wife’s health conditions: “She is fifty-five, has cancer of the breast and uterus, and had three surgeries in one day. They removed her uterus, cut her breast, and removed part going down to the back. Nobody knows in the world how cancer appears… but I blame the ecological condition here in Balichebi” (Interview 38). This man’s parents also worked at the mine, and both suffered from illnesses attributed to toxic dust exposure, sacrifices only acknowledged by the company with a medal for years of service.

Looking ahead from a past and present imagined as increasingly poisoned and deadly, such sentiments carry imaginations of a dire future (Auyero and Swistun 2009). Community members throughout the valley share such losses – often ambiguously diagnosed, unevenly treated, and unfamiliar to people from outside this political island – leaving many feeling helpless, frightened, or angry. Yet, as one respondent steadfastly expressed, “If you lose hope for the future, then there is no means for life, so I hope for a better future” (Interview 37).
Meanwhile, access to healthcare and screenings that might help move local communities toward “a better future” remain limited. Few doctors work locally, and healthcare often remains prohibitively expensive, even if employment at the mine supplies a family member with health insurance. RMG only offers free clinics sporadically, if at all, as confirmed by discussions with multiple individuals, including a local nurse (Interview 43) and a doctor at the Alexandre Aladashvili Clinic in Tbilisi, which ran one of these infrequent clinics (Interview 44) (and who quickly hurried us out of the office after realizing what I hoped to discuss).

In addition to these toxins’ visceral and embodied consequences, farmers often hope to sell their harvested products throughout the country, yet the poisoned goods have garnered a bad reputation and prove less desirable and more difficult to sell at regional markets (Interviews 3, 12, 14, 68; Felix-Henningsen and Urushadze 2012). Many feel the company’s owners “get the maximum profit to get people on the minimum” (Interview 12) as “the vegetables and products are not clean, not ecologically clean” (Interview 14). Again, these local biopolitical borderings of poisoned and healthy environments appear from the context of broader health disparities across Georgia, exacerbating the effects of geoeconomic borders diffused throughout the Valley. Rural populations mirror country-wide patterns that those employed by corporations or the state report better health on average. For example, roughly 32% of rural inhabitants who are self-employed or run their own business without employees report “poor” or “very poor” health while those employed by a company or the state experience poor health rates of 8%-20%.30 Health experiences are generally poorer in Georgia’s rural regions, with economic divides driving even starker inequities. For example, 59% of those rural populations surveyed who said they did not have enough money to purchase food reported their health as poor or very poor, while only 9%

30 Caucasus Barometer 2017: (HLTHRAT * WORKTYP)
of those who could afford to buy anything they needed reported the same. This pattern is mirrored along educational levels, with those having less than a secondary education experiencing rates of 45%-58% “poor”/“very poor” health and those with some higher education less than 25%. As the geoeconomic borders in the Mashavera Valley shift, so too do the lived biopolitical borders in relation to the rest of Georgia.

In these ways, the Mashavera Valley presents a textbook case of a structural hole in state space as human bodies variably cross toxic frontiers, dispossessed of health through the accumulation of toxins (Nixon 2011; Perreault 2013a). Such uncertain biopolitical borderings have immense consequences for individual lives, livelihoods, health, and political subjectivity. Scholars find such changes in political subjectivity throughout post-Soviet spaces poisoned by nuclear radioactivity (Brown 2013; Petryna 2013; Stawkowski 2016), Latin American extractive environments facing “toxic uncertainty” (Auyero and Swistun 2009: 144), and others, further illustrating the potential significance of environmental shifts for political identification trends. Yet these divisions of political subjectivity extend beyond the geoeconomic and biopolitical to include broader geopolitical relations of sovereignty and citizenship among state, society, corporations, and related entities across formerly Soviet space. Such bordering practices lead me to a third form of political bordering via mining practices in the Valley, the region’s shifting contours of citizenship.

3.3. Contours of Citizenship

Drawing together the biopolitical and geoeconomic borders present in this case, health services ideally illustrate the multiple ways citizens experience and imagine their relations to

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31 Caucasus Barometer 2017: (HLTHRAT * ECONSTN)
32 Caucasus Barometer 2017: (HLTHRAT * RESPEDU)
state institutions. For instance, a “popular, lived citizenship” (Staeheli 2011: 397) can emerge through experiences of illness and healthcare as state policies intersect with non-state spaces of local health provisions. These relations contribute to connective geopolitical imaginations of how individuals fit within broader political bodies. Yet myriad other lived relations between state actors and society may also exhibit such citizenship dimensions. In this final section, I consider the contoured experiences of citizenship in the Mashavera Valley as inhabitants navigate borderings of service provision, health care, participation in local elections, and broader relations among corporate interests, the Georgian government, and the Georgian body politic.

Political geographers typically characterize citizenship as a particular political subjectivity based on relations of rights and responsibilities between individuals and states that also underpin modern geopolitical imaginations (Vaughan-Williams 2009). Citizenship therefore comprises both a political status and a membership relation within geopolitical imaginations, each defined by multi-scalar borders – social, physical, and contested in diverse sites and places, including beyond state spaces (Staeheli 2011). People may enroll many diverse factors in relations of citizenship, including economic resource development (Valdivia 2008) and biological experience (Petryna 2013).

Lynn Staeheli explains how citizenship develops through the construction of various political borders, leaving diverse, fractured, and at times conflicting relationships as some people gain access to certain opportunities over others, and others do not:

it is important to explore the ways in which institutions and a broad range of agents function in terms of the resources and barriers they construct. Political opportunity structures are an amalgam of many different institutions, only some of which are part of the state apparatus. Importantly, political opportunity structures are networked, in that they intersect and overlap with structures in multiple locations or that have developed with respect to a variety of issues,
at times producing “multiple citizenships… that mean citizenship is always a fragmented status” (2011: 396–7).

Many scholars adopt this disaggregated view of citizenship to explain how mutations of citizenship and sovereignty emerge as contingent (Elden 2006; Mahanty 2017), graduated (Ong 2006a), fractured (Quinn 2017), and fragmented (Lund 2011) through diverse and often mundane experiences of political inclusion and exclusion (Ong 2006a; Staeheli et al. 2012) – including in relation to mining practices (Vogel 2018). Citizenship, like all bordering practices, exists not only in the sphere of formal politics but also within “ordinary” and banal spaces beyond state purview (Barnett and Scott 2007; Ehrkamp and Jacobsen 2015; Secor 2004; Staeheli et al. 2012), including through environmental practices, systems, and subjectivities (Barnett and Scott 2007; Latta 2014; Nagel and Staeheli 2016; Valdivia 2008).

The presumed geographic isomorphisms between democratic states and the extension of rights underlying many classic definitions of citizenship (Barnett and Low 2004) therefore prove unstable and contradictory as visible in the subs-state political borderings within the Mashavera Valley. Political actors, especially those citizens living amid intensifying patterns of globalization and capital expansion, actively construct citizenship in different places and periods through contingent interactions among institutions, embodied practices, and broader socio-spatial relations (Koch 2016b; Marston and Mitchell 2004). Some scholars have even introduced the possibility of “post-national citizenship” through transnational networks of commerce and communication (Balibar 2015; Sassen 2008) – especially when citizens feel enough dispossessed of rights and security to claim “we have no government,” as one respondent in the Mashavera succinctly told me (Interview 38).
Rather than the rights and security citizenship is often presumed to afford, such reworkings of citizenship regimes can produce feelings of fear and insecurity, structured through exclusive relationships among state, civil society, and market forces (Staeheli 2018). These varying formations of exclusion and inclusion can cause direct violence in individual’s lives, such that Balibar defines citizenship as the explicit and spatial “political regulation of this violence” by those political actors in positions of power (Balibar 2015: 73; Foucault 1986; Koch 2015c). As evident in the Mashavera Valley, citizens experience these manifold political violences in diverse ways as people lose livelihoods and access to voting rights or feel left behind by the government because they don’t speak Georgian as an ethnic minority. The region’s shifting political economy, altered by the introduction and expansion of global capital, produces a range of shifting political subjectivities and identifications beyond the state (see Chapter 4). However, these political imaginations and experiences also entail diminished citizenship forms, producing a range of exclusive borderings connected to both material needs and feelings of fear: the provision of social welfare, safe environments, governmental representation, and others.

Borderings of citizenship in the Mashavera Valley vary with experience, yet several key dimensions surface from my analysis. First, feelings of abandonment by the government (like those I describe below) can emerge from seemingly banal interactions with state actors and objects such as through infrastructure and service provision (Kelly-Richards and Banister 2017; Secor 2007). For example, struggles to access consistent trash collection and water provision, taxes and utilities perceived as prohibitively expensive, crumbling transportation infrastructure, and other restrictive challenges lead some citizens living in the mining territory to feel excluded from rights to government assistance (Interviews 16, 32, 33, 34, 37). Such experiences leave some citizens asking, “I mean, how should people survive?” (Interview 16), or stating that “the
state should take responsibility, somehow, to regulate the situation here. I blame mainly the state not the company. We are dying here because of dust and being just left alone, against our problems” (Interview 37). Others feel that the mining company also bears responsibility for meeting these needs and dealing with the mines’ toxic effects, saying, “they have a lot of money and they should do something to protect the ecological situation here” (Interview 32). However, the company often does little to help these communities, focusing on their publicly visible image instead.

Second, expectations of and disappointments in state actors also manifest in citizens’ support for one party over another in moments of crisis. For example, referencing a major mining labor strike (before RMG disbanded the local union), a former mine employee shared that:

we actually had hope when we started the strike because the new [Georgian Dream] government came, and we did a lot to support them in making that change… So, we were thinking they would support us. But even the newly chosen human rights ombudsmen was not allowed to attend the mediation sessions during the strike. (Interview 42)

These hopes and expectations of rights and political support are not isolated, and people often expressed these alongside disappointment when those expectations went unmet: “people suffer. We live with the hope… If government changes, we wish for better changes, but they’ve never been very good changes, so…” (Interview 18). These expectations stemmed in part from experiences with Georgia’s regressive flat tax system, implemented and sustained by powerful libertarian-leaning politicians (Invest in Georgia 2018; Japaridze 2017; The Parliament of Georgia 2012b). In this system the central government controls revenue flows and distributes funds to the local government, though citizens feel they are consistently paying more than the benefits they receive are worth. These geoeconomic inequities dictate that “the local government is not deciding anything, everything is dependent on the central government – they decide and
take the side of the company” (Interview 33), leaving local government officials and citizens effectively removed from state space on this extractive “island.”

Third, RMG financially supports some community development by occasionally supplying materials and renovations for local schools and partially supporting local sports teams (Interviews 3, 14, 33). However, the company seems more focused on international image management in Tbilisi and abroad, contributing sponsorship to large concert festivals; the 2011 production of a Hollywood film about the 2008 Russo-Georgian War (*5 Days of War [5 Days in August]* starring Andy Garcia, Heather Graham, and Val Kilmer); and the Georgian national rugby and football teams while battling local government over partially funding local sports teams (Interview 14). As one citizen succinctly said, “They do their best to improve their public image, because lots of people complain about them, but still, they do less, and they damage more, much more” (Interview 3). Such relations show the corporate practices’ powerful effects, leaving local citizens feeling abandoned by the company and failing to provide minimal public services in search of a profit margin – part of the Georgian government’s “open for business” mentality. This geopolitical messaging draws corporate and state interests closer together, partially bolstering expectations of alternative local and corporate citizenghips while abandoning local populations. As illustrated above, citizens also feel their national government has done the same, undercutting their own citizenship in exchange for meager geopolitical branding, geoeconomic strength for some institutions over others, and the health of many living in the valley.

These divisive and exclusive political borderings do not just exist in citizens’ subjective experiences of security or geopolitical imaginations of how Georgian society relates to the government and corporations. Rather, these power relations intersect with the other biopolitical
and geoeconomic borders developing in the region, taking territorial form through processes of socio-spatialization. As one retired mine employee explained:

It’s like a fear strategy… Because there’s no work and a lot of people are not employed, they manipulate people and then, because every second family has someone who is ill with cancer, still the family member has to beg and their connections to go and work in this damn mine to be able to get a little bit of pay to help the sick family member. Imagine how tragic that is, it’s still happening… they’re manipulating people saying, like, See, if we close down you will not have a job and you will die. (Interview 18)

As explained earlier, neither the local government nor the mining company typically supplies medical aid or health care to mine employees, despite providing some medical insurance (Interview 34). Any free health clinics offered on occasion almost always take place in Tbilisi, outside the Valley’s communities, often unannounced and in extremely limited numbers (Interview 42/43), such that “four years ago, they made a medical check, checking for cancer for the local population, but they did not give us any kind of results” (Interview 42). Some residents acknowledge society’s need to take responsibility for local environmental troubles as “the people have responsibility to take care of their environment” (Interview 32), but many citizens feel helpless and dispossessed of the ability to act on their own behalf. Some feel this especially strongly as their families remain threatened by illness, leaving ambiguous what rights or obligations might exist to either fix the underlying problems or cope with the realities of disease and death.

These fluctuations in citizenship relations appear within broader geopolitical trends, as with the other bordering processes outlined above, including how Georgians imagine their relationship to the state, what kind of democracy Georgia is and should be, and how and what these changes might mean for Georgia’s position within networks of global international relations. For example, and as outlined above, rural areas of Georgia tend to experience higher poverty rates, with less secure employment and inferior experiences of health. However, rural
populations also express greater support for Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union over the EU and NATO and have much different views of Georgia’s contemporary political discourse than those living in more urban areas. Rural populations like those surrounding the Sakdrisi-Madneuli mining complex are somewhat more likely to feel ambivalent about whether “good citizenship” involves supporting the government on every occasion\textsuperscript{33} while significantly less likely to feel it is important for good citizens to be critical toward the government (48% stating it is either “somewhat” or “extremely important”) versus in the capital, Tbilisi (71%).\textsuperscript{34} At the same time, during my research I encountered rumors that one of Georgia’s political parties had manipulated the borders of voting districts in the Mashavera to block certain anti-mining leaders from running for Parliament (Interviews 32, 34, 72). Even more recently, election observer groups documented multiple cases of vote buying in the district during the 2018 presidential election (Transparency International Georgia 2018). These corruptions of the democratic process suggest that such borderings and experiences of citizenship might shape formal politics at both local and national scales.

Eroding democratic institutions in this way resonates with views expressed in public opinion polls regarding whether Georgia is even a democracy today and citizens’ imagination of their place within that democracy. Urban populations are much more likely to think the country is either not a democracy or a democracy with major problems (66% and 61% in capital and urban regions, respectively, vs 50% in rural), while those outside the capital are more likely not to take a position on the question (13% and 16% in urban and rural regions, respectively, vs 3% \textsuperscript{33} Caucasus Barometer 2017: (ICITGOV * SETTYPE)
\textsuperscript{34} Caucasus Barometer 2017: (ICITOPP * SETTYPE)
This finding suggests increased political distance between citizens and the government in rural regions such as the Mashavera Valley.

NDI public opinion polls support these findings, with responses suggesting a majority of Georgian citizens feel “Georgia is a democracy already but there is still room for improvement” (CRRC 2018b). At the same time, a separate CRRC survey conducted in 2017 investigated public perceptions of Georgia’s aspirations to EU integration and related values. It found that Tbilisi residents are much less likely to support Russia or membership to the Eurasian Union (14% strongly / 24% somewhat) than other urban (21% / 29%) or rural (25% / 34%) regions, with less variation in support for NATO and the EU across the regions.

While these geopolitical imaginations of Georgia’s place in the global order might seem removed from localized relations of citizenship, they in fact relate closely. For example, a detailed plan for implementing the EU-Georgia Association Agreement as it relates to environmental governance and actions to combat climate change drives many related decisions by the Georgian government. “Waste Management” has seen some of the slowest movement among the Agreement’s nine different action categories, with approximately half the activities either not yet begun or jettisoned completely. Central activities of this effort have stalled, including development of a draft law on mining waste, intended to begin in 2017 (Gogaladze and Jülich 2016). While foreign security analysts offer endless speculation about Georgia’s geopolitical positioning and state of allegiance to either the EU or the Eurasian Economic Union

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35 Caucasus Barometer 2017: (CNTRDEM * SETTYPE)

36 The Knowledge of and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia survey followed a similar methodology to the Caucasus Barometer survey. The 2017 survey achieved a sample size of 2,258 respondents during fieldwork conducted from May 9 to May 31, 2017 with a 61% response rate. Researchers conducted interviews in Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian.

37 CRRC EU Survey 2017: (EUHELPBST * SETTYPE)

38 Responses range from 68% / 72% in urban regions to 71% / 76% in rural and 75% / 78% in the capital (CRRC EU Survey 2017: NATOMEMV * SETTYPE).
(EEU) and the country’s seemingly futile attempts to join NATO, these lapses and shortcomings in implementing the Agreement establish roadblocks to increased integration. Therefore, what might appear to some as a relatively insignificant lapse of environmental waste management at the local level becomes a harmful bordering practice that both drives distance between citizens and the state and contributes to broader shifts in geopolitical scripts regarding Georgia’s position and strength within international relations.

Localized mutations in the imaginations and experiences of citizenship are in no way responsible for Georgia’s rapid transitions of government control in recent years, but they do contribute one important piece of that puzzle and indicate broader political-economic changes in Georgia. This transition presents a key component of the move toward corporate interests and informal governance over classic liberal democratic notions of state/society relations, shifts that are only speeding up in Georgia today (Collier and Way 2004; Japaridze 2017; Lebanidze and Kakachia 2017; Schueth 2012). These trends contribute to broader geopolitical shifts in how Georgia orients itself regionally and globally, yet at the local level this is all only possible through diverse geoeconomic, biopolitical, and geopolitical borderings, as capital investment produces new forms of popular, lived citizenships within this political archipelagic island. As I have laid out here, people’s experiences with citizenship near the Sakdrisi-Madneuli mining complex produce a final political dimension of bordering in the valley. Shifting experiences and imaginations of state-society relations not only leave people feeling abandoned by powerful actors here but also shift how they see Georgia vis-a-vis contemporary geopolitical landscape. Together these entwined and contingent bordering practices produce the political island of the Mashavera Valley within the broader corporate archipelago of GeoProMining.
4. Conclusion: Extractive Archipelagos

Cases from around the world illustrate how territorial control remains key to resource governance (Alatout 2006; Emel et al. 2011; Peluso 2018; Uitermark 2018), not least within the mining sector. These scholars illustrate how resource governance is profoundly geopolitical as controlling extractive territories requires imagining, scripting, and struggling over space (Dalby 2014; Le Billon 2004, 2013; O’Lear 2018). Yet many environmental governance scholars have yet to widely adopt advances in theorizing territory, territoriality, and political geography more broadly – a missed opportunity considering spatial practices’ centrality in controlling resources, as visible in the Mashavera Valley.

For example, visions of a coherent, a priori state permeate many analyses of extractive territories (Harris 2017; Parenti 2015). For instance, numerous scholars have examined resource “frontiers,” often framing their findings in binary terms: state vs. non-state, formal vs. informal, legal vs. illegal, states and “shadow” states, and so forth (Cons and Eilenberg 2019; Côte and Korf 2018; Peluso 2018; Rasmussen and Lund 2018; Tsing 2003; Watts 2018), leaving little room to consider the diverse socio-material relations that may produce the resource “frontiers” I see more productively as fluid borderings.

As just one example, in the most recent iteration of his long-standing work on insurgency groups and mineral extraction in Nigeria, Michael Watts theorizes these social spaces as “frontiers” of state authority and capitalism, rather than in relation to more general bordering practices as I propose here. However, while citing prominent political geographers’ work on frontier spaces, his analysis considers that "the border is an international boundary on a map" (Watts 2018: 479) while contending that "frontiers must be defined precisely in relation to the presence, capabilities and interests of the state" (Watts 2018: 480). Opposing borders and
frontiers as Watts does obscures more than it reveals by presupposing that non-state areas lack authority, despite his acknowledgement that other forms of authority beyond the state (“customary institutions, religion, civic” [Watts 2018: 480]) may also exist.

Diverse bordering practices in the Mashavera Valley produce an equal diversity of political borders and boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, coexisting in ways not mutually exclusive and as part of larger global “land grabbing” patterns (Sassen 2009, 2013a). Examples of such divisive mining practices prevail in the Mashavera Valley, instituting and reinforcing sub-state borders internal to state territory, including explosions, large plumes of dust, precarious labor conditions, and the erosion of infrastructure such as roads and other utilities, to name just a few. Recognizing the generative bordering practices of these dispossessive exclusions can help reveal less obvious forms of political violence related to metal mining.

Of course, government actors in the Ministry of Environment and Natural Protection may have different capacities to influence and control spaces than a subsistence farmer living downstream from a mine – a difficult argument to contest from even the most radically flattened view of political geography (Leitner and Miller 2007; Marston et al. 2005; Meehan et al. 2013; Shaw et al. 2010; Woodward et al. 2010). Yet scholars surrender revealing opportunities to understand how Georgian citizens experience the threat and authority to use violence by considering sovereign power – the right to “take life or let live” (Foucault 2003: 241) – as embodied in soldiers navigating Georgian tanks toward the border of South Ossetia (Toal 2017), yet not in RMG guards holding machine guns along a dusty road outside Kazreti. Analysts risk ignoring the political complexity central to many environmental injustices of capitalist development when they identify biopower – the right to “make live and let die” (Foucault 2003: 241) – in the Georgian government’s “welfare regimes,” the fluctuating efforts to provide
utilities and education to citizens (Collier and Way 2004), yet not in local Bolnisi politicians’ and RMG officials alike in potential complicity obscuring important ecological health monitoring data from local populations. Investigating political subjectivity within the standard “territorial trap” framings (Agnew 1994, 2015a) – such as nation, state, and territory (Suny 1993, 1994, 2000) – overlooks alternative dimensions and experiences, like health and global economic connectivity, manifest as central to identification within the Mashavera Valley.

In this chapter I have illustrated how a series of embedded borderings produces the fluid, shifting socio-material boundaries of one island in an extractive archipelago, each operating via different forms of power relations. This constellation of powers shifts relations among state, society, and corporate interests through experiences that exist across scales. I therefore extend arguments in both political ecology and political geography research by illustrating how powerful actors in the Georgian mining industry build and preserve authority through borders – not necessarily of the Westphalian national variety, but at sub-state scales and through informal practices both symbolic and material. As I argue, a series of exclusions and dispossessions produce these localized borders, which draw together material extractive practices, localized ecologies, and a multi-scalar politics of uneven access to resources within Georgia’s specific historic and geographic context. These dispossessive localized borders evolve along several related power axes: (1) unequal levels of socio-economic access (geoeconomic), (2) exposure to toxic plumes (biopolitical), and (3) contours of degraded political citizenship (geopolitical). I use the Georgian gold and copper mining industry to illustrate the importance of local politics to both supporting and contesting these international, trans-boundary political assemblages, revealing how the Mashavera Valley has become an island within a broader political archipelago. The sub-state borders instituted through these local power relations form power
geometries that only exist in relation to other places and global spaces -- both offshore and on – as boundedness, dis/connection, and scale remain key to understanding the archipelago metaphor.

Governing life and territory in relation to gold mining illuminates how lived experience shapes both local political orders and broader geopolitical relations. The uneven borderings citizens experience produce new divisions among both local and foreign elites, yet also, and at times even more importantly, among unevenly dispossessed laborers, localized political subjectivities, and degraded local environments. Such divisions stem from pre-existing social and political differentiation and continue to unfold in new, contingent ways. These patterns evolve as international corporate interests influence shifting forms of graduated, de facto sovereignty in this Georgian region – but always in the context of the region’s complex, historicized political geographies. Such governmental complexities produce diverse borders across scales. In turn, citizens living here experience various forms of dispossession unevenly, shaping the lives of, and power relations among, those in the region.

In some ways my findings mirror Foucault’s historical analysis of city planning and security, demonstrating how disciplinary and sovereignty regimes may exist within a polity simultaneously (2009) and produce a meshed “topology” as powers are arranged, connected, and combined (Collier 2009: 89; Lemke 2011: 31). Biopolitics (or other powers) often operate as just one power within a broader political apparatus or assemblage of various technologies governing environments (Braun 2014; Foucault 2009; Legg 2011; Massumi 2009). Therefore, territory is neither just a geopolitical object (Falah et al. 2006; Lee et al. 2018; Novak 2011; O’Loughlin et al. 1998) nor an area or boundary where geopower and biopower intersect, as several political geographers recently argue (Johnson and Jones 2018; Makarychev 2018; Vaughan-Williams
Instead, territory is power’s object generally—geopolitics, biopolitics, necropolitics, geoeconomics, truth power, and so forth, working in different contingent combinations in different contexts.

I address the combined powers at a particular time and place as centrally important, along with how people narrate and imagine them, and what effect they have on the people and things they govern. I thus argue that governing mineral resources enrolls territory within a broader government of people and things (“men and things” in Foucault’s original formulation [2009: 96]), a resource regime comprising multiple intersecting powers. The Sakdrisi case presents an opportunity to analyze how diverse powers and forces converge in a specific post-Soviet geo-historic context to shape new resource geographies.

I therefore view territory as a malleable resource, an effect of diverse power relations. Yet the people and resources located within distinct territories may also share malleable properties. Understanding the way diverse elements interact to shape new political geographies remains central to understanding how the planet’s material environments become enrolled in our collective experiences and socio-spatial struggles.

While distinct from the militaristic borders and violence scholars might typically focus on in other Georgian and Central Eurasian contexts, these embedded, sub-state borders within extractive industries actually present crucial mechanisms for shaping contemporary power geometries in Central Eurasia: from the Aliyev family’s domination of the gold mining sector in Azerbaijan to trends toward resource nationalism in countries throughout Central Asia, and including the other sites in the GeoProMining extractive archipelago.39 These manifold tensions

39 Analyses of these other spaces is beyond the scope of my dissertation yet offer new research tracks I plan to pursue in the future.
become especially important when considering the “crony capitalism” or “vulture capitalism” of many formerly Soviet economies, eroding democratic systems if not outright acting as “dictators without borders” (Cooley & Heathershaw, 2017; Harvey, 2003). Such divisions continue unfolding here as international corporate interests influence shifting forms of graduated, *de facto* citizenship and sovereignty in southern Georgia (Ong 2006a; Sassen 2013b).
Chapter VI – Malleable Territories: The Politics and Effects of Mining Governance

1. Introduction

A teenage boy quietly watches us while also keeping an eye on his sheep grazing among the low scrub. He clearly appears unsurprised at our presence, yet neither does he seem fully comfortable with us. He looks on as I skirt an overgrown rock pile whose orientation appears not-quite-natural. We have a sweeping river valley view while walking back toward Thomas’s SUV, and I realize this may be the final time I will see the Sakdrisi and Madneuli mines in person this trip. I began my research several years earlier, reading about the protests just down the valley as various groups disputed the Mashavera landscape’s meaning and its future. Yet these lonely stones in a shaggy field are the closest I will ever get to the ancient practices discovered at Sakdrisi that started the whole political conflict.

My guide, Thomas, is a German archaeologist who has worked on the grassy plateau for years. Thomas heads the research department at the Deutsches Bergbau-Museum in Bochum, Germany and, as an expert on the history of settlement and mineral extraction in the region, was a key player in the debate over Sakdrisi’s significance. I play devil’s advocate as we approach the car, asking why he still cares so much about the place even though its central site is now gone. He pauses, hands in pockets, and stares at the sandy rutted truck tracks crossing our path.

Thomas’ words echo in my ears again: “If you do not research the past, the future is already lost.”

I have shadowed Thomas and the collaborative Georgian and German archaeology team he works with here during these final days of my latest research trip to Georgia, hoping to learn more about their research and how they view the region’s ongoing political dynamics. I have spent several days speaking with them in offices at the Georgian National Museum, traveling to
their field site as new friends, and touring the settlement excavation here on the Dzedvebi Plateau. Thomas explains the rocks I had just walked past were part of a small burial site on the prehistoric town’s edge, found on this raised outcrop above intersecting rivers and a series of rich volcanic metal deposits. Pre-modern people built the small settlement almost six thousand years earlier, yet it was just one location in a network extending across the valley, the greater Caucasus, and millennia.

The Sakdrisi site was known by Soviet geologists, yet more recent archaeological efforts following the Soviet collapse have revealed the site’s significance in the global history of social differentiation and stratification. The small prehistoric society’s history echoes contemporary social divisions. Specialized labor practices appeared as settlers discovered the deposits and developed technology to extract the materials more intensively. Gold accumulated meaning for the people living here, and a system of social relations appeared alongside gold’s potential significance.

While Georgian national identity discourses claim deep roots to the Kura-Araxes society that settled here as an “ancient people,” the archaeological record supports alternate human histories, connections, turmoil, and territory. Yet these mining sites do carry significance for human history as the archaeological record reveals how the Kura people were located within broader networks and potentially represent a key node in the earliest gold markets. Thomas and his colleagues continue finding evidence of smelting in nearby settlements that are more than a thousand years older than the Sakdrisi mine, yet Sakdrisi re-oriented this society’s place in their broader social relations. Chemical testing finds gold from Sakdrisi in jewelry hoards from western Azerbaijan and suggests trade potentially expanding to modern Turkey, Bulgaria, and beyond.
As we step up into Thomas’s SUV, he shares that today he sees the mine as a monument to political struggles and alliances among locals, elites, and foreign interests on multiple sides. He and his colleagues seek to understand how an ancient people began working with materials for a commercial interest and how that socio-natural relationship shaped the region’s history – dynamics still unfolding on the landscape today as the boy and his sheep wander down the hill, toward the Madneuli mining pit and their evening work.

In this dissertation I have analyzed the contemporary political geographies surrounding industrial metal extraction in the former Soviet Republic of Georgia. Struggles over the Mashavera Valley’s future took new and unexpected directions when Thomas, Irene, and their team members began excavating the Sakdrisi site years ago, alerting the world to gold’s presence and offering a new material resource over which people would again struggle to ascribe meaning. In tracing the region’s geographies, I follow post-structural scholars of power and the environment to understand the practices governing natural resources here and their uneven spatial and socio-material effects. In doing so I illustrate how resource governance geographies emerge from broad and uneven networks joining people, practices, places, and historically embedded meaning systems – enrolling the imaginations of archaeologists, herders, miners, ecologists, politicians, reporters, students, farmers, and scholars. The varied governing powers operating here produce new geographies that rely on competing geopolitical imaginations, experiences of environmental health and economic development, and the territorial effects produced by these intersecting powers.

Following my introduction to the case in Chapter 1, the ensuing chapters progress through my argument’s various dimensions. Chapter 2 develops my focus on events and political
assemblages, while Chapter 3 presents my argument concerning regimes of valuation and rent through Sakdrisi’s recent post-Soviet history and unique resource regime. Chapter 4 argues that Georgia’s resource governance system is changing local populations’ geopolitical imaginations by employing a popular, lived geopolitics framing toward discourses circulating through the Mashavera Valley. Chapter 5 investigates the diverse sub-state borderings unfolding in southern Georgia, revealing the new territory effect of an extractive archipelago reaching across the former Soviet Union’s different corners.

I conclude here by briefly outlining two primary intellectual areas to which my dissertation research contributes: (1) a renewed and revised consideration of tracing socio-environmental events, and (2) the diverse ways localized geopolitics of the environment re-shape post-Soviet territories.

2. event-Ful Ecologies

Some nature-society scholars view what others term “event ecology” in a negative light (Robbins 2004). These critiques often emerge in response to Andrew Vayda and Bradley Walters’ work, which claims that focusing on events in ecological research allows researchers to consider political factors through what they term “progressive contextualization” (Vayda 1983). Vayda and Walters frame political ecology as a field committed to a priori assumptions and explanations of political economic inequality and injustice, rather than true intellectual and ecological curiosity. Their analytical approach essentially involves following “common sense” and “logic” to consider power relations in ecologies “whenever they are seen in the course of research to be interesting and relevant to explaining particular environmental events” (Vayda and Walters 1999: 177; see also: Ocampo-Raeder 2010; Vayda 2011; Walters and Vayda 2009).

Vayda and Walters’s critics primarily focus on their ad hoc and apolitical claims, emphasizing
that all contemporary ecologies and scholars’ investigations of them are inevitably political, at least to some degree (Robbins 2004: 205–7, 2012; Watts and Peet 2004).

Through my dissertation I offer an alternative vision of event ecologies, or what I term here event-ful ecologies. I follow the work of several human geographers, such as Derek Gregory’s analysis of war-torn Baghdad as an “event-ful” city (2010), to analyze resource extraction’s political geographies in southern Georgia as a series of (small “e”) events that bear traceable genealogies. Their contemporary histories and geographies do not simply follow my own “common sense” as an omniscient researcher but rather the discourses, imaginations, and material flows relating people to natural resources and to one another.

Acknowledging the diverse powers driving event-ful ecologies allows explanation and connection of events without sacrificing notions of responsibility or agency (Lave 2015). In the three empirical chapters, I specifically illustrate how my approach might help overcome what I and others hold as a major shortcoming in political ecology’s classic “chains of explanation” thesis: its distinct scalar assumptions with minimal theorization regarding the connections across and between scales (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; see also Robbins 2004: 212). This view, which Donna Haraway similarly describes as “tentacular thinking” (2016) or Dianne Rocheleau might categorize as “webs of relation” (2008), allows us to sidestep the rigid scalar assumptions often infusing nature-society scholarship and identify “scale effects” in geographic research.

My approach has thus led me to address a series of spatio-temporal events striated by uneven socio-material geographies to answer my dissertation’s broader research questions. These include:

1. How do protesters and supporters of the Sakdrisi gold mine and other mining projects in Georgia develop their claims in the debate over the territories’ futures, including their particular geopolitical and ecological narratives, imaginations, and identities?
2. *In what ways do non-state actors shape geopolitical narratives and practices at the site of conflict?*

3. *How do non-state actors’ perspectives compare to broader political attitudes about territory, political identity, and natural resources in Georgia’s transitioning society?*

4. *What does the Sakdrisi mining project mean for people living here, and how has its expansion transpired?*

These initial research questions thus led me to ask secondary questions as well, directly related to the events surrounding Sakdrisi:

1. *How did Sakdrisi’s destruction unfold in relation to the complex political, economic, and environmental dimensions existing throughout Georgian territory?*

2. *Why did prolonged protests fail in this emerging democracy?*

In addressing these questions, I have developed an event-ful ecology perspective that is readily applicable to other cases and embraces the political nature of ecologies, as well as our research of them. In this approach I advocate for analyzing an ecological event’s generative politics and resultant effects, identifying and interrogating the practices producing that phenomena.

For example, the murky tangle of responsibility for Russian actors’ interference in the 2016 US election, a political event the scale of which is not yet fully known, has led to increased imposition of sanctions on Russian actors by the US government. One clear example of the cross-scalar connections resulting from this practice presents itself in the Russian governments’ gold hoarding from 2014 until the present day – tripling its reserves in recent years (Syrmopoulos 2018) – to move away from the US dollar and counter sanction effects alongside global economic uncertainty (Burden 2018; Critchlow 2014; Doff 2018; Frost 2018; Gulf-Times 2017; Holmes 2018; Korsunskaya 2018; Kottasová 2018; Marsh 2016; Martin 2018; RT International 2018). Russia’s centralized demand for gold has also generated gold mining expansions throughout Russian territory and the entire former Soviet Union. These moves occur alongside increased related economic activity (states purchasing mining company shares, large-
scale joint investments, corporate consolidation, etc.) to best capitalize on metal extraction’s regional intensification (Bloomberg 2017; Reuters 2017b, 2017a, 2018). Some report that Russian gold mining companies plan to double production in coming years, putting the Russian government on pace to hold the world’s second largest gold reserves (ZeroHedge 2018). Tracing post-Soviet mining industries’ tentacular, relational webs – putting mining events in geographic and historic context – may improve scholars’ ability to connect practical and formal geopolitical practices to the lived and popular geopolitics emerging as local ecologies and economies alike weather sanctions and their secondary effects.

Political geographies of the environment therefore exist as “event-ful,” not just because they have histories like that leading to Sakdrisi’s destruction, but because socio-spatial relations drive those histories and can help explain their forms. The political geographies of mining sites extend beyond the “hole in the ground” (Bridge 2009; Huber 2017a) to encompass contested spaces, places, and socio-material networks. Unraveling their diverse relations requires assessing discursive socio-material power relations that surround and produce natural resources. The various political technologies involved with the complex geographies unfolding across the region in relation to sanctions – military intervention, adoption denials, economic sanctions, media manipulation, implementation of global legal structures – all appear from intersecting political technologies: geopolitical, geoeconomic, biopolitical, truth power, etc. Through my research I illustrate one way to investigate environmental governing technologies by adopting Paul Veyne’s view that “What is made, the object, is explained by what went into its making at each moment of history” (1997: 160–1).

Doreen Massey argued that scholars should not give particular scales analytical privilege over others in a particular context, as doing so might unfairly or unnecessarily place blame on
various actors and groups (1991, 2005). As I have illustrated in this dissertation, smaller-scale events can have as much significance as more massive and obvious ones, including within the Georgian metal mining industry’s event-ful ecologies. Tracing these connections can prove difficult without viewing events at all scales through similarly flexible framings. Rather than trying to divine an event’s significance and focus only on that single moment – a highly political act in itself (Badiou 2013; Colwell 1997; McWhorter 1994; Shaw 2012; Wagner-Pacifici 2017; Žižek 2014) – I demonstrate how focusing on relational webs and the series of events comprising the Mashavera’s political geographies may work toward better deciphering their causes. Doing so, I hope, may help generate solutions toward naming, knowing, and remedying manifold political injustices.

My dissertation offers one example of how scholars might undertake such an event-oriented research focus. This lens allows me to address territorial issues beyond the most explosive and apparent events of the Westphalian international order, presenting a fuller picture of spatial struggles throughout Georgia’s post-Soviet spaces. My dissertation has therefore examined political geographies related to the Sakdrisi-Madneuli mining complex to develop alternative understandings of Eurasian territory and geopolitics – not just in terms of bombs dropped or borders marked, as in projects of state militarism, but also as spaces of cultural heritage, economic opportunities, and changing environments. This revised vision leads me to see territory as profoundly malleable, which I address more deeply in the following section.

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Early the next morning, Thomas and I awake at 3:30 to drive back to Tbilisi so he can catch a return flight to Germany. The short trip has revealed much about how the region’s archaeology fits within the political events surrounding Sakdrisi and mining in the region more
generally, yet I have trouble sorting through my thoughts and findings during the following week after returning from the Dzedvebi Plateau. I returned to my apartment in Tbilisi, made a cup of coffee, turned on the shower, and listened to the news on my phone to catch up on the weekend’s events. It is the first time I hear about the now infamous Trump Tower meeting back in the US, and though this provides a media obsession for years, my attention is quickly diverted by a notification on my phone. My grandfather is not doing well, and a week later he will have passed away before I can return home.

Sorting through diverse events is never easy or straightforward. Doing so involves personal commitments and emotions, social relations and economic trends, frustrations, dead-ends, and false moments of clarity. It is a process simultaneously personal, political, relational, and processual. Yet tracing life’s event-ful, geographic threads offers a unique opportunity – to follow potential paths along which we may walk with research partners, connecting over the experiences we share and learning from those we don’t.

3. Malleable Territories: The Politics and Effects of Mining Governance

I titled my dissertation *Malleable Territories* to highlight territory’s flexible and governable nature, especially as it relates to mineral governance and mining – the government of people and things. Territories exist as effects of diverse power relations, both intentional and unexpected. The “territory effect” proves key to territory’s nature, emerging not as preformed objects but from the intersecting powers that govern resource regimes (Brenner and Elden 2009; Fletcher 2017; Marston and Perreault 2017) like Georgia’s concession system and its manifold effects.

Such political effects may appear from intentional use of governing technologies, yet they may also exist free from human intentionality and in turn shape new and unexpected
practices, power relations, and effects. Through my dissertation’s findings I view territory as foundationally *malleable*: pliable to an extent, yet also bearing diverse spatial effects beyond any potential intentionality. However, I see these effects as indicative not just of new experiences for those living in territories under shifting powers but also of broader changes unfolding in both Georgia’s political milieu and that of the former Soviet Union more broadly.

Territorial disputes present geopolitical challenges to many former Soviet states, especially in the South Caucasus. Georgia, for example, is well known among scholars and foreign policy experts for its contested territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, in focusing on these sites of armed conflict following the Soviet Union’s collapse, international analysts tend to overlook smaller, more diffuse territorial conflicts over a range of political issues such as those unfolding around Sakdrisi. My dissertation investigates the case of resource extraction in Georgia to illuminate how these smaller-scale conflicts become increasingly relevant to the everyday lives of Georgians, broader political-economic stability, and governmental transformations in the South Caucasus. More broadly, my research advances the political geography literature by probing specific interactions among territory, sovereignty, and the environment in an emerging democracy of global geopolitical significance – a lived and localized geopolitics (Ó Tuathail 2010; Toal 2017) of the diverse ways people engage and govern material resources they deem valuable.

As Georgia pursues further European integration and transitions to a market-oriented economy, struggles over natural resources produce diverse territorial conflicts, of which Sakdrisi is a prime example. The Mashavera Valley now exists as one of many sites throughout post-Soviet space where citizens increasingly protest resource extraction practices that profoundly alter both the borders and internal qualities of state territories. My analysis of territorial struggle
here illustrates how the cultural politics of identification and subject formation serve as key drivers of territorial claims, environmental geopolitics, and resource governance geographies at the sub-national scale. This perspective allows scholars to better understand how non-state actors – protesters, corporations, local communities, regions, international economic alliances – shape global political processes in diverse ways. Such distinctions allow scholars to examine sub-national territorial conflicts from a multi-scalar perspective and to understand how new forms of governance emerge across the former Soviet Union; not necessarily fueling dramatic political violence but producing other forms of embodied violence while contributing to shifting cultural politics in formerly Soviet environments.

In my dissertation I have specifically analyzed how resource and mining governance in Georgia has evolved through new practices simultaneously governing people, territory, and resources. These new practices manifest through changing regimes of property and rent, not as necessarily corrupt practices but as a movement of patronal relations from centralized government networks to de- and re-centralized corporate networks (Chapter 3). The new resource governance regime of laws, norms, and practices here has begun profoundly changing the experiences and political imaginations of those living in or close to the territories controlled by those corporate networks. Such practices clearly shift relations among state, society, and corporate interests in the process, generating new political spaces of historically embedded identification, alienation, and illness of both people and ecosystems (Chapter 4). These political imaginations, practices, and experiences produce new sub-state borderings internal to yet distinct from Georgian “state space.” Such borderings define a metaphorical political island within an archipelago of related extraction sites throughout the former Soviet Union (Chapter 5).
The broader politics and effects of mining governance unfolding in Georgia unite these findings as libertarian policies re-regulate economic relations. Such shifts allow re-consolidation of power not just in a semi-democratic government, but in partnership with corporate entities. I see this less as a corruption of democratic or capitalist practices and more as a re-formation of authoritarian power regimes within post-Soviet space. Together these findings illustrate how environmental struggles and practices of resource governance may contribute to shifting power geometries beyond merely flattened narratives of state territory, global capitalism, or post-Soviet corruption omni-present in standard international relations analyses.

Some scholars define similar de- and re-centralized forms of power as distinctly neoliberal (Castree 2008; Harvey 2007a; Heynen et al. 2007a; McCarthy 2005a; Ribot et al. 2006). However, my research cracks open these analytical perspectives to illustrate how Georgia’s resource governance system is distinctly iliberal despite the government’s positioning as free market and friendly to business. Specifically, decentralized and free-market governing practices typically designated neoliberal exist alongside “illiberal practices” that present “primarily a human rights problem” (Glasius 2018b: 517) in Georgia. At times these illiberal practices also exist alongside “authoritarian practices” which “primarily constitute a threat to democratic processes” (Glasius 2018b: 517). As I have illustrated, the Georgian metal mining industry relies on authoritarian practices of centralizing power and limiting citizens’ democratic involvement. Such practices produce illiberal consequences as corporate interests erode human rights for some within this political island while benefitting others through embodied experiences, structural exclusions, and “slow violences” (Nixon 2011).

Scholars such as Ian Bruff have defined these relations as “authoritarian neoliberalism,” a set of practices through which “neoliberalism’s authoritarian tendencies… have come to the fore
through the shift *toward* constitutional and legal mechanisms and the move *away* from seeking consent for hegemonic projects” (2014: 116). The spectrum of practices involved in the relations he describes relate to both authoritarian government institutions and the transformations of life under such regimes, from homes to workplaces to urban public spaces and beyond (Bruff and Tansel 2019). Bruff’s analysis aligns with other efforts to move beyond categorizations of post-Soviet countries in different states of “transition” to democracy, instead focusing on the forms that emerge outside a binary between “authoritarian” and “democratic” – leaving “diminished” or “competitive authoritarianism” (Goode 2019; Levitsky and Way 2002, 2010). My dissertation diverges from Bruff’s perspective to focus less on their definition as neoliberal and more on the emergence of centralized power relations and patronal networks that cross borders and scales to form such new governing arrangements. I have not focused explicitly on such authoritarian practices in this research, yet in the future I hope to address more directly how such re-centralizations might change our collective notions of corporate activity and representative democracy in hybrid regimes such as Georgia.

The Mashavera Valley has emerged as a central node in the political economy and localized geopolitics of Georgian resource governance. People enrolled in these networks of relations experience the politics and effects of new governing regimes in visceral, embodied ways, joining broader regional geopolitical relations with the lived experiences of this landscape – a lived geopolitics of people, resources, and *malleable territories*. 
Figure 25: Selling roadside produce in the Mashavera Valley  
(Photo credit: Martha Swann-Quinn, 2017)

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A butcher uses his small handheld mop to shoo flies from the pig’s head resting on his open-air wooden display block. The market smells of coriander, dill, and other traditional herbs and spices familiar to anyone who has spent time in Georgia. Vendors pile the seasonings high in barrels between cheese wheels and drying *churchkhela* fruit and nut strings. I have just crossed Queen Tamar Avenue from my apartment to Tbilisi’s largest open-air market, commonly just called The Bazaar, and begin looking for the perfect small gifts to bring home to my family before flying out later that night. This is my fifth trip to Georgia in six years, and, despite feeling like a second home, my senses still invariably carry me away every time I come to this sprawling corner of the neighborhood.
Amid the many distractions, I realize my hand is inadvertently tapping out a rhythm on my bag strap. I can’t identify the melody until the car, weaving slowly through the crowded market and emitting a familiar bass line, is close enough for me to hear the song’s jangly, percussive piano I hadn’t even been aware of recognizing – Kendrick Lamar’s “Humble.” The album was released just a few months earlier, but the song’s mix of American social commentary and manufactured cool is unescapable even in Tbilisi’s traditional commerce hub.

The taxis parked in the main square typically blare more traditional, polyphonic Georgian music, yet such small, surprising reminders of the relations among local lives and global connections are everywhere in my research – banal yet “humbling” reminders that even after six years my assumptions regarding people I care about and respect deeply never remain immune from essentialization or prejudicial assumption. Such cues inspire me to keep pushing my research to look beyond the local and to identify important connections that might exist beyond what I find immediately present in the local environments and events surrounding the communities in the Mashavera River Valley: Kazreti, Bolnisi, Balichebi, and the rest – to try to move past what Divya Tolia-Kelly might call “surface geographies” (2013) toward better and more enlivened explanations of our lived political geographies, both embodied and corporate.

I hand the herb salesman several coins, say “didi madloba” with a smile, and return home to return home. The people and things I encounter today might be my last in Georgia for this year, but I pack my bags and look forward to returning someday soon – promising myself I will do everything I can to stay below the surface, moving forward through our shared territories.
Appendix i – IRB Approved Interview Module

Research Question Modules for Interviews*

*Please note: The order of these questions is preliminary, but the modules will remain consistent

Demographic Identifiers

Gender.
Age.
Nationality.
List education history. Indicate type of school, secondary school, and university you attended as applicable.
Occupation (or former occupation if retired/pensioner)
Where were you born?
Where do you currently reside? For how long?

Research Question 1

How do protesters and supporters of [Sakdrisi / NYCO] and other mining projects develop their claims in the debate over those territory’s futures, including their particular geopolitical and ecological narratives, imaginations, and identities?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>What I Hope to Learn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who are the the important groups or individuals involved in mining governance in [Georgia / New York], and why are they important?</td>
<td>A rough social map of key players involved in these conflicts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you see as [insert respondent’s institution]’s role in mining governance?</td>
<td>An ‘insider’ perspective on actions of the institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What policies or regulations does [insert institution] operate under?</td>
<td>An ‘insider’ perspective on the de jure / de facto legal framework in which the institution operates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What arguments do supporters of the [RMG / NYCO] project make in defense of its development? What arguments do those in opposition make against it?</td>
<td>A purposive sampling of the narratives and imaginations mobilized in these conflicts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How would you characterize the perspectives and activities of local actors in relation to [the license auction / ‘land swap’] issue?

Based on the purposive sampling of the previous question, I would also like to understand how the respondent imagines those activities connect with the broader dynamics of the issue.

Who is more influential in this debate, state or non-state actors? Why?

Similar to the previous question, but trying to ascertain how the respondent might think about this in the framing of state power.

Do you support or oppose the mining activities happening near Bolnisi / Lewis? Why?

Personal / individual perspective to deepen and humanize this conflict.

What would constitute environmental or social damage in this region of Georgia / New York?

Trying to ascertain how the respondent conceptualizes the environmental and/or social stakes of this conflict.

In your own words, what does heritage, cultural or otherwise, look like in Georgia / New York?

Trying to ascertain how the respondent conceptualizes the idea of collective heritage in context.

In what ways might this project be an international one (or why not)? How?

Individual participants will likely have various understandings of how these local conflicts connect to broader international processes that will be important to dissect.

Research Question 2

In what ways do state and non-state actors shape these narratives at the site of conflict?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>What I Hope to Learn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How has the expansion of mining activity through [the license auction / ‘land swap’] progressed?</td>
<td>A rough historical mapping of key events in these conflicts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What has resistance to the [RMG / NYCO] project consisted of? Support?</td>
<td>Same as the question above but focused on piecing together the various political perspectives involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What projects or initiatives related to mining does [insert institution] work with? How were they developed, and how are they implemented?</td>
<td>An ‘insider’ perspective on history of the institution’s activities as they relate to mining issues at the research site</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What is RMG’s / NYCO’s role in the local community?

What would the ‘success’ of either side in this conflict look like? How would I know that they had achieved their goals?

In the context of actions and political narratives, trying to unravel political dynamics among non-state actors

Trying to ascertain how the respondent conceptualizes the idea of success in these conflicts

**Research Question 3**

*How do these actors’ perspectives compare to broader political attitudes about territory, political identity, and natural resources in [the Republic of Georgia’s / New York State’s] transitioning political situation and across their respective social settings?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>What I Hope to Learn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is this debate indicative of any broader political shifts in [the Republic of Georgia / New York State]? If so, what are they, and if not, why is that?</td>
<td>An understanding of how the respondent might imagine this local conflict connected to broader geopolitical dynamics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you define the concept ‘territory’?</td>
<td>Trying to ascertain how the respondent conceptualizes the idea of territory in social context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your own words, what is the difference between private and public land, and why (or why not) is this important to you?</td>
<td>Trying to ascertain how the respondent conceptualizes the idea of territory in social context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you see as the political outcomes of this conflict for [the Republic of Georgia / New York State]?</td>
<td>An understanding of how the respondent might imagine the local outcomes of this conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you expect to see happen at this mining site in the next ten years?</td>
<td>A different take on ascertaining how the respondent imagines individual action fitting in to broader, historical trends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think I am missing in my questions here? What else should I know about this?</td>
<td>Help keep my scope of inquiry fresh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Vita

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EDUCATION

PhD, Geography, Syracuse University  May 2019
Dissertation title – Malleable Territories: The Politics and Effects of Mining Governance in Post-Soviet Georgia
Committee – Drs. Natalie Koch (Advisor), Tom Perreault, Jamie Winders, Matt Huber, Jessica Graybill (Colgate University), Brian Taylor (Chair)

MA, Geography, University of Arizona  May 2013
Thesis title – Exceptional Forests: Forest governance, state structure, and territory in the Republic of Georgia
Committee – Drs. Beth Mitchneck (Advisor), Paul Robbins, Tracey Osborne

BA, Geography, Colgate University  May 2007
Summa Cum Laude, with Honors and High Distinction, Dean’s List, Film & Media Studies minor
Thesis title – A Drop in the Wave: Individual and Global Perceptions of Transformation in the Post-Socialist Albanian Diaspora

PUBLICATIONS

Journal Articles


Book Chapters


Reviews, Reports, and Edited Volumes


**TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

_Syracuse University_

**AY 2018-2019**
- **Teaching Associate**
  - Global Community, MAX 132

**Summer 2018**
- **Instructor of Record**
  - Mapping Today: Technology and Spatial Thinking, GEO 108

**AY 2017-2018**
- **Instructor of Record**
  - World Cultures, GEO 272

**AY 2016-2017**
- **Teaching Associate**
  - Global Community, MAX 132

**Spring 2016**
- **Teaching Assistant**
  - Mapping 2.0: Understanding Spatial Thinking, GEO 100

**Fall 2015**
- **Teaching Assistant**
  - Principles of GIS, GEO 683-383

**Fall 2014**
- **Instructor of Record**
  - World Cultures, GEO 272

**Spring 2014**
- **Teaching Assistant**
  - Cities of the World, GEO 200

**Fall 2013**
- **Teaching Assistant**
  - World Cultures, GEO 272

_University of Arizona_

**Spring 2012**
- **Lead Teaching Assistant**
  - Human Geography & Global Systems, GEOG 150

**Falls 2011, 2012**
- **Teaching Assistant**
  - GIS for Natural and Social Sciences, GEOG 617-417

_Colgate University_

**2006-2007**
- **Teaching Assistant**
  - Introduction to Photography, ARTS 241

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**GRANTS, FELLOWSHIPS, AND AWARDS**

*External:*

2017  
Field Research Travel Award, Eurasia Specialty Group, Association of American Geographers ($250)  
Graduate/Postdoctoral Fellowship, American Research Institute of the South Caucasus ($1500)

2016  
Public Humanities Fellowship, New York Council for the Humanities ($8000)

2013  
*Emmy Award for Outstanding Cinematography - Documentary and Long Form,* Academy of Television Arts & Sciences; “Untamed Americas,” National Geographic Television, Associate Producer  
Graduate Fellowship, American Research Institute of the South Caucasus ($1500)

2011  
*Emmy Awards for Outstanding Cinematography - Nature and Outstanding Music & Sound,* Academy of Television Arts & Sciences; “Great Migrations,” National Geographic Television, Segment Producer and Associate Producer

2007  
National Geographic Society Geography Internship

*Internal:*

2018  
People’s Choice Award, Syracuse University 3-Minute Thesis Competition  
Geography Department Summer Research Fund ($2335)

2017  
Geography Department Summer Research Fund ($4000)

2016  
Roscoe Martin Graduate Student Dissertation Research Support, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs ($1000)  
Geography Department Summer Research Fund ($3500)

2015  
Syracuse University Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award  
Moynihan Institute Center for European Studies Summer Research Grant, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs ($1500)

2006  
Colgate University Social Science Undergraduate Research Grant ($2000)

**PRESENTATIONS, INVITED LECTURES, AND ORGANIZED WORKSHOPS**

2019  

2018  


“Extracting Eurasia: Power, nature, and space in regional context.” Session organizer at American Association of Geographers annual meeting, New Orleans, LA. April 12.


2017


“Precious Earth: Stories of Mining and Political Change in the Adirondack Mountains.” Public Humanities Fellowship invited presentation, Syracuse University Humanities Center, Syracuse, NY. April 28.


2016


2015


2014


“Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies Public Political Ecology Workshop.” Co-led workshop on public political ecology with Dr. Tracey Osborne, New Haven, CT. November 14.

“Forest governance and state structure in the Republic of Georgia.” ARISC Georgia Graduate Fellow Presentation, at the Georgian Geographic Society, Tbilisi, Georgia. 7 August.


“Making Sense – A creative exploration of sensing the world.” Session organizer / discussant at American Association of Geographers annual meeting, Los Angeles, CA. April 12.

“Return to Sender: International Return Migration Between Russia and Georgia.” Presented research from NSF funded research project ‘People, Power, and Conflict in the Eurasian Migration System’ with Dr. Beth Mitchneck at the Kennan Institute at the Wilson Center conference titled Labor Migration in Eurasia: Links to Global Migration and Human Security Trends, Washington, DC. September 21.


“Media and the Academy Brown Bag.” Invited co-leader on panel for fellow graduate students at the University of Arizona, focus on methods and strategies for using media in geographic research and engaging with media outlets to help with research dissemination, Tucson, AZ. May 2.


RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Six months of preliminary and primary research on the Georgian mining sector; performing semi-structured interviews, collaborating with activists, and collecting additional data resources.

Summers 2012, 2013 MA thesis research
Four months of field research consisting of semi-structured interviews with key players in the Georgian forestry sector.

Fall 2011 – Spring 2013 Research assistant
Working under Dr. Beth Mitchneck at the University of Arizona with research team of four on NSF funded research project “People, Power, and Conflict in the Eurasian Migration System”.

Fall 2011 – present Public Political Ecology Lab
Film and edit video interviews with prominent political ecologists, assist with website creation, work with small team under Dr. Tracey Osborne at the University of Arizona.
Aug 2006 – May 2007  
*Undergraduate senior research project in Geography*
Honors thesis on summer’s work in Albania. Perform conversational narrative analyses focused on theories of migration, development and cultural identity.

Spring 2007  
*Upstate Institute Research, Colgate University*
Established a working database of functional job descriptions at the Madison County Social Services Department for state government research.

Summer 2006  
*Shala Valley Project / Balkans Peace Park Project, Albania*
Field GIS technician for archeological survey project while also collaboratively assisting with the development of a trans-boundary peace park in Albanian highlands.

**PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS**
- Association of American Geographers (AAG)
  - Cultural and Political Ecology Specialty Group
  - Energy and Environment Specialty Group
  - Political Geography Specialty Group
  - Eurasian Specialty Group
  - Geographic Information Science and Systems Specialty Group
  - Animal Geographies Specialty Group
  - Coastal and Marine Specialty Group
- Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN)
- Central Eurasian Studies Society (CESS)

**MANUSCRIPT REVIEWER**
- *Capitalism Nature Socialism*
- *Demokratizatsiya*
- *Polar Geography*

**SERVICE**

AY 2017-2019  
Student Board Member, American Association of Geographers Eurasian Specialty Group

AY 2016-2017  
Future Professoriate Program Coordinator
Coordinator of the Geography Department’s Future Professoriate Program branch, organizing annual GeoFest event and departmental FPP events for graduate students.

Spring 2015  
Graduate Admissions Committee, Geography Department, Syracuse University
Graduate representative to department admissions committee, reviewing applications and contributing to admissions and funding decisions.
Fall 2013-Present
Future Professoriate Program Member
Member of student professional development association within the Syracuse University Geography Department

AY 2012-2013
Editor, you are here: the journal of creative geography
Co-Editor for issue titled “Making Sense – A creative exploration of sensing the world,”

AY 2011-2012
Assistant Editor, you are here: the journal of creative geography
Editorial staff for issue titled “Suspensions: Spaces between illness and health,”

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

August 2007 – January 2012
National Geographic Television, Natural History Unit – Washington, DC
Various positions including Segment Producer, Associate Producer, Field Producer, Lead Researcher, Media Manager, and Series Coordinator on high profile wildlife documentaries / series

- Untamed Americas (2012)
  o Winner of 2013 Emmy award for cinematography
  o Best Natural History Film award at 2012 Banff Mountain Film Festival
  o In this television series narrated by Josh Brolin and comprising four, hour-long episodes, we tell stories of wildlife survival and conservation throughout the Americas, from the most remote regions to our urban backyards.
  o For further information, see http://www.natgeotv.com/int/untamed-americas

- Sea Strikers (2011)
  o In this one hour special, we use high-speed photography to investigate the biomechanics of fish jaw structure and behavior in high-speed, pelagic predators.
  o For further information, see http://natgeotv.com/asia/sea-strikers

- Great Migrations (2010)
  o Winner of two Emmy awards in 2011 for cinematography and music/sound design
  o The National Geographic Society’s largest project to date.
  o A cross-platform multimedia initiative with world-wide synchronous release, a paired cover story with the National Geographic Magazine, and multiple citizen science events.
  o Working alongside and in consultation with top animal migration scholars (including E.O. Wilson and scientists from the Max Planck Institute, WCS, WWF, and more), narrated by Alec Baldwin, and comprising seven diverse hours of programming, our team tells stories of animal migrations around the planet.
  o For further information, see http://www.nationalgeographic.com.au/tv/great-migrations/

- Moose: Titans of the North (2008)
This one hour special documents the lives of moose populations, explaining basic ecology, biology, and interactions with human populations.

For further information, see http://tvblogs.nationalgeographic.com/2010/07/22/moose-titans-of-the-north/

**LANGUAGE**

Limited working proficiency in Georgian (reading, writing, speaking)

**TECHNICAL PROFICIENCIES**

- ESRI ArcGIS suite
- SPSS
- STATA
- NVIVO
- Apple Final Cut Pro
- Adobe Premiere / Photoshop

**REFERENCES**

Dr. Natalie Koch: Associate Professor and Dissertation Advisor, Syracuse University
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