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REVIEWS

TO THE EDITORS:

The December 2013 issue of *AHR* contains a profoundly dishonest review by Lance van Sittert of my book *Being Nuclear: Africans and the Global Uranium Trade*. After a misleading summary of the book's argument, van Sittert devotes the majority of his space to misrepresenting my research methods. He accuses me of engaging in neocolonial extractive practices equivalent to those of multinational mining companies, and concludes with a flailing attack on European and American historians of Africa.

I cannot let these egregious errors and accusations remain unanswered in the profession's American journal of record. I begin by presenting my book's arguments. I then turn to correcting some of the review's other errors.

Being Nuclear has four overarching aims. First, it shows how the history of African uranium production forces us to rethink not just the "nuclear age," but also the meaning and use of the "nuclear" as a political, cultural, and technoscientific category. Second, it explores how Africans—from national leaders to ordinary mine-workers—became technological and political actors in late colonial and postcolonial times. Third, it examines the dialectical production of knowledge and ignorance in transnational context. Fourth, it studies relationships between technology and power in several African countries in order to analyze the multiple technopolitical arrangements and practices that govern industrial development.

In any given year of the Cold War era, African ore supplied 20–50 percent of the Western world's uranium. I contend that this African uranium—as both political object and material substance—shaped global conceptions, meanings, and uses of the "nuclear" in crucial ways. The "nuclear" was never a simple category with clear technical parameters and national boundaries. Scholars have had difficulty seeing its contingent nature, I suggest, because of their overwhelming focus on the dominant symbols of the "nuclear age": bombs and reactors, whose nuclear qualities seem uncontested even amidst bitter fights over their political, military, or moral legitimacy. Focusing on African uranium mining shows that nuclearity—a term I introduce to describe how things come to be treated as "nuclear" *in practice*—proves rarely to have been a matter of consensus. The tale begins with the Congolese ore that fueled the Hiroshima bomb in 1945, and ends with the Nigérien yellowcake that did not go to Iraq in 2002. The bulk of the analysis, however, focuses on South Africa, Madagascar, Gabon, and Namibia. In a narrative that shifts between specific mines and sites of international knowledge production and exchange, I examine uranium mining *in* these places and the flow of uranium *from* these places.

The first part of the book examines the transnational trade in African uranium in order to understand how a "market value" for uranium was technopolitically constituted through industrial plants, international cartels, brokers, treaties, sales contracts, and more. Beginning in the 1960s, governments, utilities, and the mining industry debated the characteristics—and sometimes the very existence—of "the uranium market." Turning uranium into a commodity required stripping it of nuclearity. Far from being "effortlessly bested . . . by the usual suspects," as van Sittert asserts, state officials in Africa sought sovereignty over their natural resources by constructing a value for their uranium that was simultaneously economic and political—and by combining these values in ways that challenged the "international" agreements and structures put in place by more powerful nations. Postcolonial power relationships were deeply entangled with the technopolitics of uranium markets in ways that differed by time and place.

In the book's second part, I consider how and when uranium mining has been understood to involve "nu-

clear” hazards by historicizing and locating nuclearity within the technologies, practices, and imaginaries of occupational health and safety. Technopolitical differences in nuclear and epidemiological expertise produced a range of ways of defining, measuring, and controlling radiation exposure. Temporal and geographic differences in the practices and structures of colonial and postcolonial power, furthermore, shaped how the principles of radiation protection were applied in practice, and thus the perceptibility—or imperceptibility—of radiation exposure. In analyzing these complexities, I also explore how workers in Madagascar, Gabon, Namibia, and South Africa imagined, experienced, and politicized their own exposures, and how they related radiation hazards to more conventional and tangible dangers such as floods or rock falls. It is true, as van Sittert points out, that I don’t provide detailed biographies of the workers in question. That was never my aim. There are many rich social histories and ethnographies of mining communities, and I rely on these for my analysis and understanding. (Van Sittert tries to turn this reliance into a weakness, rather than accepting it as homage to South Africa’s rich historiographical tradition.) My aim, instead, was to uncover the complex, varied ways in which workers in these different countries became—or failed to become—technopolitical agents in a transnational industry, as well as the consequences for their lives and health.

Van Sittert’s attack on my method begins with a contradiction that should have alerted the *AHR* editors to his intellectual dishonesty. He dismissively notes the twenty-six archival collections that I consulted for the project, then falsely claims that my arguments are built primarily on interviews rather than archives. Even a cursory glance at the footnotes reveals the deep archival foundation of my claims. A more sustained examination shows that many nuances in my arguments emerged by placing interviews and archives in dialogue. As I note in the book, neither interviews nor documents offer an unmediated window on history. Using either type of source requires historians to understand the circumstances of their production, as well as their intended audiences.

In a particularly perverse move, van Sittert tries to use my first book, *The Radiance of France*, to attack the methods underpinning *Being Nuclear*. He claims that my “attitude to African mining archives is shockingly cavalier,” especially by comparison to my previous work in France. Yet—as I state clearly in the methodological appendix—my approach to researching African uranium was nearly identical to my approach to researching French nuclear power. In both cases, I faced secretive institutions that actively sought to keep their records from public view. In both, I interviewed workers, managers, and technical experts to discern patterns and narratives invisible in the written record. Neither book provides detailed biographies of these human actors. In both cases, my main archival sources consisted of uncatalogued, disorganized collections located on industrial sites, buried in dusty closets. Implying that I

assumed Africa was a continent without archives, van Sittert sarcastically wonders whether I’d written mine companies in advance of arriving. Of course I wrote—they would never have let me onsite otherwise. But anyone who has conducted comparable research knows that one does not persuade such corporations to provide access to documentation with written queries. One needs to show up in person, to painstakingly explain why documents that managers consider outdated rubbish actually have historical value. This is equally true for French nuclear reactors and for Gabonese uranium mines.

Van Sittert makes a special point of deriding my approach to the mine archive in Gabon, accusing me of neocolonial plunder akin to that of the mining industry. I assume the absurdity of this comparison is plain to most readers. He lambasts me for not single-handedly preserving the archive myself. In fact, I did my best to persuade the mine director to keep and organize that collection. But the company was never going to let me manage (or even influence) such preservation. When the mine finally did shut down, some (unknown) portion of those documents were kept . . . and sent to Areva headquarters in France, where they are now utterly inaccessible to researchers. Should I have declined to use these documents simply because they weren’t pre-organized into a tidy collection and because the company might not, in the future, preserve them for others to see? If historians limited themselves to documentation made permanently and publicly accessible by powerful institutions, our discipline would be mightily impoverished.

Van Sittert’s unprofessional review is damaging not only to me, but also to historians in North America, Europe, and even South Africa—as well as to *AHR*’s own credibility. His final two paragraphs directly insult Africanists based in Europe and America, singling out the AHA’s Martin A. Klein Prize committee for particular scorn. By claiming to speak for African people, archives, and history, furthermore, van Sittert conveys the deeply misleading impression that he represents the view of the South African academy. I must assure historians of other regions (including the vast majority of AHA members) that nothing could be further from the truth. The South African scholars I have worked with have demonstrated unparalleled intellectual generosity. I couldn’t have done this research without their support and insight. *Being Nuclear* was co-published by Wits University Press, South Africa’s leading academic press, a fact omitted by both van Sittert and *AHR*.

I can only hope that readers will choose to judge for themselves.

GABRIELLE HECHT
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TO THE EDITORS:

We write to express our deep concern over the *AHR*’s irresponsible decision to publish Lance van Sittert’s of-

fensive and very nearly libelous review of Gabrielle Hecht's *Being Nuclear: Africans and the Global Uranium Trade*. Under normal circumstances a reviewer's opinion is a subject of debate, and Hecht's book has been so widely acclaimed that it may seem unnecessary to object to a single review. But *AHR* is a journal of record across the discipline, and few of your readers will be aware that the opinions offered in that review are tendentious in the extreme. Van Sittert accuses Hecht of undertaking "glancing" research—but in fact it is this review that is frivolous, trivializing, and destructive. Left unchallenged, the review may also be very damaging to the emerging historiography of science and technology on the African continent.

The review fails to present any serious discussion of the themes and arguments of the book, which are detailed across a continental field, including many regions, sites, and economies that have so far been completely neglected. Hecht offers histories of uranium mining and trading in Gabon, Madagascar, Namibia, Niger, and South Africa, and a careful reconstruction of the global political systems that framed the politics of "being nuclear" in each region and period. These histories are built on an exhaustive review of the existing (published and unpublished) scholarship in French and in English, including a comprehensive engagement with the South African research. *Being Nuclear* is also built on years of fieldwork in some twenty-six archival collections—many of them obscure and difficult, some of them never before accessible—unearthing a paper trail for an industry by no means disposed to archival preservation. Hecht details her research process in the preface and an appendix titled "Primary Sources and the Invisibility of History." Her discussion provides an exceptional model for transparent self-reflection about research in non-traditional archives. Her intrepid work has brought a whole field of economic and social life to light for the first time.

Van Sittert turns all this on its head, presenting Hecht's careful, difficult, and strikingly unusual research as "shockingly cavalier" "opportunistic pillaging." In a jaw-dropping display of tortured logic, he dismisses the entire documentary foundation of the book in a single sentence and leaps to the bizarre conclusion that the book is "built instead on a foundation of 138 interviews." To van Sittert, the book's receipt of the AHA's Martin A. Klein Prize in African History is evidence not of depth and originality, but of the "manufacture of scholarship in the academies of Europe and North America." The first claim is demonstrably false; it amounts to intellectual fraud. The second impugns not only the four prize committees, in four different fields, that have lauded *Being Nuclear*, but also the entire field of African historical studies.

Perhaps even more ridiculous is van Sittert's declaration that the book disrespects Africans and participates in a systematic process of denying South African scholars scholarly status. This absurd suggestion should embarrass its author; anyone who opens the book's footnotes will instantly see that the very opposite is

true. Van Sittert fails to engage with Hecht's rich and powerful discussion of African mineworkers in the face of dismissive colonial and postcolonial states; it is thus he, not Hecht, who demonstrates disregard for the Africans he presumes to represent. *Being Nuclear* takes unusual care to review and acknowledge existing scholarship, much of it South African, on mining, mining diseases, and the local and global political movements that formed around them.

Van Sittert purports to offer a serious consideration of the scholarly history of science and technology on the African continent. In fact his review is merely a crude and lazy hatchet job. It is astonishing that *AHR* saw fit to print it.

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LANCE VAN SITTERT RESPONDS:

The review, unlike the author and her defenders, made no claim to speak on behalf of either "Africans" or South African historians. The review also acknowledged the archival work done, stating both the number of archives used and pages read. When there are 138 interviews in a study, 119 of them with African miners, it is fair to assume that they are doing significant work in the argument and that labor is a key focus. Where

there was no local mine archive, as in Madagascar, or no systematic working of the mine archive, as in Gabon, the interviews with miners are arguably even more important. If these “Africans” were not a central concern of the book, then why are they explicitly mentioned in its subtitle, and why is a Nigerien miner on the cover? (Why, for that matter, put a Nigerien miner on the cover of a book which did no fieldwork in Niger and for which no Nigerien miners were actually interviewed?)

The review drew a simple analogy between the neo-colonial political economy of African mining and historical research, suggesting that both are foreign-dominated extractive industries excavating cheap raw material for industrial or intellectual manufacture in the global north. As evidence of the latter, the review noted the asymmetry in research between the author’s earlier history of the French nuclear industry and her history of the nuclear industries of Gabon, Madagascar, Namibia, Niger, and South Africa; her brief and long-ago fieldwork in Gabon and Madagascar (one month apiece in July–August 1998); the social anonymity of her African informants; the unknown current provenance of their interviews and her treatment of the Mounana mine archive in Gabon (it might also have mentioned the complete absence of fieldwork in Niger). Only in South Africa–Namibia, the review suggested, did the presence of a national academy manufacturing its own histories necessitate a much greater investment

in research production. This created a second asymmetry internal to the book whereby four-fifths of the African archives and two-thirds of the interviews with African miners were located in South Africa–Namibia.

The overreaction to this analogy in tone, language, and numbers, by the author and her defenders, suggests that the analogy was either fundamentally wrong or uncomfortably accurate. If the former were the case, then one would reasonably expect to be set robustly right as to why the self-evident asymmetry in research between one European and five African nuclear industries was justified; why two months’ fieldwork fifteen years ago was sufficient to write the labor histories of two African mining industries; why the personal biographies of the 119 African miners and the present form, ownership, location, and custody of their interviews was irrelevant; and why the failure to systematically work or digitize a condemned African mine archive to which the author was given unrestricted access is of no consequence. No such defense is offered on any of these fronts by either the author or her many defenders. Rather, they engage in ad hominem character assassination of the analogist and denunciations of the *AHR* for publishing the analogy. Readers can draw their own conclusions.

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