

The commodification of fetishes:

Telling the difference between natural and synthetic sapphires

ABSTRACT

On the basis of multisited research concerning the international sapphire trade, I discuss what stories told about natural sapphires can reveal about why and how people value these stones. Because the stuff of sapphires (corundum) can be cheaply synthesized in a laboratory, what is perhaps most distinctive and valuable about natural sapphires is their geological origins, a fact that people in the trade recognize and emphasize in their marketing of the gemstones. Demand for natural sapphires is attributable to more than just effective marketing, however. What the stories I cite in this article may reveal best of all are the irreproducible value-adding qualities that are understood by many to be inherent to natural sapphires. [*sapphires, commodities, stories, fetishes, Madagascar*]

Like so many communities around the world today, the northern Malagasy sapphire mining and trading town of Ambondromifehy would not exist were it not for distant consumers. Without international demand for the little stones that come out of the ground around it, this place would look nothing like it does now; there would be no maze of tightly packed huts, no pit-dotted landscape, no children scavenging for gems beneath the floorboards of highwayside trading stands, and certainly no blaring generators, discos, video parlors, or satellite TV. In fact, if foreign consumers stopped buying sapphire jewelry tomorrow, foreign gem traders would stop coming to Ambondromifehy the day after, and the town would collapse as quickly as it first boomed in 1996, in a matter of weeks. Inspired by this simple fact, this article addresses a question for which there is no simple answer: Just what is it about the stones coming out of the ground around Ambondromifehy that makes this place an ongoing concern?

I am not the only person to have puzzled over this question. The sapphire miners and traders in Ambondromifehy with whom I have done research over the past decade have often asked me variations of it. Most of those inquiring have heard stories about how locally mined sapphires are destined, ultimately, for the production of jewelry, but many doubt that this is so, arguing that the bulk of the stones mined and traded locally are too small, plain, and ugly to enjoy such a fate. Surely foreigners are putting them to some other, more practical or nefarious, use. Perhaps sapphires are essential components in nuclear weapons or helicopter navigation systems? Or maybe they are used in the construction of the impenetrable walls of billionaires' houses or in the production of windows for spacecraft?

Elsewhere, I have considered how the speculative biographies of sapphires proposed by Ambondromifehy's miners and traders indicate the important role that speculation plays in the way marginal players in an international trade make sense of their circumstances (Walsh 2004). In this article, I take a more direct approach to my informants' questions. To quote

a question that has often been put to me, just “what are sapphires used for,” anyway? Or, more precisely, to get at the puzzle underlying this question, why do foreigners value these stones as highly as they do? Over the past several years, I have undertaken multisited research concerning the international sapphire trade in an effort to learn as much as I can about the topic, searching out insights at gem and mineral trade shows, marketing seminars, gemological association potlucks, jewelry counters, and New Age bookstores, and on the websites and in publications and promotional materials of gem trade associations, home shopping channels, and self-proclaimed gem hunters. This research has led me to appreciate a fact that Ambondromifehy’s speculators had already guessed at: The business of making marketable consumer items out of little blue stones is complicated, often murky, and dependent, ultimately, on a good deal of storytelling.

The remainder of this article is divided into five parts. In the next section, I refine the focus of my investigation by comparing natural sapphires to other things that they are and are not like. Following that, I offer three sections, each organized around a different kind of story frequently told about natural sapphires. In conclusion, I return to Ambondromifehy and a final comparison that may be the most revealing of all.

What are sapphires (not) like?

Sapphire is the name given to a number of different color varieties of a species of mineral called “corundum.” Although best known as coming in hues of blue, sapphires can also be yellow, pink, green, and orange; red corundum is better known as ruby. Second only to diamonds in hardness, sapphires are among the most highly prized of precious gemstones, blue sapphires, in particular, regularly appearing atop the best-seller lists of jewelers in Europe, Japan, and North America, where the bulk of them are sold (Zrobowski 2007:24). Although they are most famously associated with places such as Kashmir, Australia, Burma–Myanmar, Ceylon–Sri Lanka, and Thailand, sapphires entering the market today are just as likely to be mined in Africa. Madagascar, in particular, has become one of the world’s most important sources of natural sapphires and rubies over the past decade. In addition to the relatively small deposits found around Ambondromifehy, large finds have recently been discovered in other parts of the island.

Given the great number of popular and academic accounts of “follow[ing] the thing” (Marcus 1995) that have appeared since the 1980s (see, e.g., Barndt 2002; Mintz 1985; Roseberry 1996), it is tempting to begin any new one with comparisons. Sapphires, certainly, beg comparison with any number of other things that move around the world. As things that are mined, for example, they share key features

with gold, titanium, nickel, and other minerals exploited in the world’s resource frontiers, yet, unlike these other commodities, sapphires are destined to be evaluated singularly and appreciated in what consumers assume to be a relatively unprocessed state. As any gem trader will attest, every sapphire that comes out of the ground is unique, in which case it might make more sense to compare sapphires to works of art, as many jewelry salespeople do; this would certainly help account for the popularity of museum exhibits featuring spectacular specimens. Who can deny, however, that sapphires are also very much like lumber or rubber in being the fodder of a global industry that transforms naturally occurring raw materials into a narrow range of finished products? For every famous sapphire on display in a museum, there are thousands of pairs of generic sapphire earrings on sale at Wal-Mart jewelry counters. Sapphires are also somewhat like wine in having inspired an aficionado’s jargon that blurs the line between distinctive qualities and distinctive origins (Silverstein 2006), somewhat like oriental carpets in being valued as much for particularities associated with their distant sources as for meeting certain standards of beauty at home (Spooner 1986), and somewhat like heroin in having been linked in recent years to international smuggling and the financing of terrorism (Fielding 2007).

However provocative, such comparisons are problematic because they can quickly lead to unmanageably broad understandings of the very things that social histories or cultural biographies are meant to specify. To begin, then, let me focus on just one, particularly revealing, comparison. Of all the things to which one could compare sapphires from Ambondromifehy, none are as similar in some ways and as different in others as synthetic sapphires, that is, sapphires that have been produced in a lab. The Chatham company, which specializes in the production of what it terms “created” gems and gemstone jewelry, asserts that the only difference between synthetic sapphires and their mined counterparts is that “one [kind] came out of the ground and the other from the laboratory” (Chatham n.d.; cf. Clary 2007). Chemically, optically, and materially, natural and synthetic sapphires are no different from one another, meaning that, as Chatham notes, it takes a “trained gemologist” to tell the difference between them (cf. Kane 2006). This is largely because the means by which natural and synthetic sapphires come into existence are not so different. According to Chatham,

Natural gemstones are crystals formed deep within the earth by heat and pressure. Chatham creates a similar heat and pressure environment using the same natural elements and even some of the natural gemstone as well, nature does the rest over a 10 to 14 month growth cycle. Chatham “creates” the opportunity for crystal growth to occur much as the flower grower does in the hot house. [n.d.]

How are synthetic and natural sapphires different, then? Materially, what is perhaps most significant is that synthetic sapphires routinely exhibit a level of clarity and depth of color that are found in only the rarest and most remarkable natural specimens. Because they are produced under controlled conditions, synthetics just about always come out of the lab looking perfect; indeed, consumers intent on natural sapphires are often advised to be wary of stones that look too good, as they are likely to be synthetics. Another sure sign of a synthetic sapphire is its asking price. Because synthetic sapphires are much easier to produce than natural ones are to source, they also tend to be much cheaper. Even stones produced using the most expensive and time-consuming techniques by companies such as Chatham cost a fraction of the price of natural stones of comparable size, color, and clarity (see Figure 1).

Let me recap: Not only are synthetic sapphires materially identical to their natural counterparts but they also come in just as wide a range of colors, tend to score better on conventional scales of clarity, and cost a fraction of the price. Why, then, is there still a market for natural sapphires? More to the point, in a world in which synthesizing sapphires is possible, why is a place like Ambondromifehy necessary? For the official answers to these questions, one might turn to the American Gem Trade Association (AGTA), an organization that labels itself the “authoritative source on natural colored gemstones” (n.d.b). The AGTA is very clear on what makes natural gemstones so valuable:

Like flowers, colored gemstones come in every hue, tone and saturation. Both are born of Nature and evolve into something exquisite. But unlike flowers whose beauty fades with time, the beauty of colored gemstones is everlasting. Gathered from all corners of the world every colored gemstone is a unique creation that brings with it a rich history that blends the mystery of Nature with the skill of man. [n.d.c]

Whereas Chatham advertising evokes the world of floriculture to stress the naturalness of the process by which synthetic sapphires are produced, the AGTA compares natural gemstones to flowers to evoke associations with “Nature” that could never stick to synthetics. Essentially, the AGTA adopts the two-pronged argument put forward by most natural-gemstone dealers I have met over the past several years: (1) “Real” gemstones come out of the ground, and (2) there is simply no substitute for the “real” thing. And consumers would seem to agree. Recent reports indicate that demand for natural colored gemstones is stronger than ever today, even despite more than a century of competition from synthetics (Beard 2008). This should not be surprising. Much as simulations of nature tend to draw attention to that which they simulate (Hayles 1995), and “counterfeit” collector’s items tend to “enhance” or “exalt” the value of what

has been copied (Jamieson 1999) synthetic sapphires can never shake the unflattering comparisons that come with not being “natural.” Obviously, there is more to sapphires than meets the eye.

At first glance, natural sapphires, and the pieces of jewelry in which most of them end up, appear to be textbook examples of what Arjun Appadurai calls “luxury goods,” that is, goods whose “principal use is *rhetorical* and *social*” and whose consumption is associated with restrictively high prices, an aura of scarcity, “the capacity to signal . . . complex social messages,” the dictates of fashion, and “a high degree of linkage . . . to body, person and personality” (1986:38). Considering natural sapphires in terms of what they become in the hands (and on the fingers) of consumers gets at only part of what makes them so interesting, however. To borrow Webb Keane’s metaphor, a wide range of specific qualities are “bundled” (2005:188) in natural sapphires, not all of which are necessarily significant to end consumers. Thus, in addition to being “natural,” they are durable, colorful, transmutable, and small enough to be smuggled in a shoe, qualities that take on different meaning as the things in which they inhere pass from one handler and country to the next—from miner to patron in Madagascar, trader to processor in Thailand, and jeweler to consumer in Canada—through different “regimes of value” (Appadurai 1986:4). It is not only the ways in which natural sapphires are evaluated that change as they move around the world, however. The stones themselves change too.

Virtually all natural sapphires are “treated” or “enhanced” between the time they leave a source like Ambondromifehy and the time they reach their ultimate consumers. Here I refer not simply to the cutting and polishing that most gemstones undergo before they are mounted in jewelry but also to the various, and some would say fundamentally unnatural (Hughes 1997:135), processes to which they are subjected to improve their appearance. For example, the vast majority of sapphires presented to consumers as “natural” have, in fact, been “cooked,” that is, heated in ovens at high temperatures to bring out colors and degrees of clarity that do not, in fact, occur in them naturally (Pardieu et al. 2006). More controversial are treatments involving the introduction of foreign elements during heating. One recently reported enhancement technique, for example, involves heating near-worthless rough sapphires with beryllium in a procedure that can result in vibrantly colored, and highly prized and priced, “fancy” sapphires (Emmett et al. 2003). Other treatments involve the use of foreign, but hard to detect, materials that can inconspicuously correct a natural sapphire’s internal imperfections, subtly changing its structure in the process—lead-glass filling procedures, for example, that have recently flooded the market with what one commentator dismisses as “bionic baubles” (Federman 2008:34).

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Figure 1. A poster advertising synthetic gemstones at the Tucson Gem and Mineral Fair.

In the face of such treatments and enhancements, many in the natural gemstone industry have advocated the need for full disclosure in all exchanges involving natural sapphires, especially those that bring them to their ultimate consumers. Unfortunately, there is too much advantage to be gained, and money made, from the ignorance of exchange partners and consumers to ensure universal compliance with such calls for transparency. It is not only the possibility of fraud that has people concerned over gemstone treatments and enhancements, however. Voicing the worry of many, Cap Beesley, president of the American Gemological Laboratories (AGL), wonders whether there is “a point at which a material formed within the earth is so processed by man that it can no longer be considered natural” (2008:38). If there is, it does not appear to have been reached yet. Although many advocate applying labels such as *enhanced*, *composite*, or *heated with elements* to treated stones, no one is suggesting that consumers not be told that these stones come originally from the ground and that they are, thus, fundamentally different from synthetics. As the gemologist Sharon Elaine Thompson argues, citing the words of a Toronto jeweler, “customers understand natural to mean a stone that is mined, as opposed to one that is manufactured. While they want a ‘real’ stone . . . for many ‘an enhanced one is really enough’” (2006: 61). Sales numbers seem to bear this perspective out. Over the past decade, as one after another previously unknown treatment has been discovered, the volume of the global trade in natural gemstones has only grown (Beard 2008), a trend that must be at least partly attributable to the fact that what treatments like the ones listed above do most effectively is supply the growing global demand for attractive and low-cost, but still “natural,” sapphires.

Given the worried tone of much of what has been written about the potential impacts that widespread knowledge of gemstone treatments might have, the marketing of treated stones, not surprisingly, tends to focus much more on their origins than on what has been done to them since coming out of the ground. As I argue below, this emphasis on what goes on at the source of natural sapphires draws attention to one of the most interesting, if obvious, features that distinguish these stones from their synthetic alternatives: They are initially procured and not produced by people and, as such, are things that have come into existence quite apart from the social forces that will make commodities of them. As anyone in Ambondromifehy will tell you, natural sapphires were just plain stones long before anyone was willing to pay money for them. Not that this is a secret kept from consumers, however. Indeed, the fact that natural sapphires have come into existence apart from, and not because of, consumer demand for them appears to be among their most valuable features. The further natural sapphires move along the chain of exchanges that take them from sources to consumers, the more likely it is that

claims regarding their distinctiveness and assessments of their value will come to depend on assertions of what they were originally, before they were commodified. This is especially the case whenever consumers are encouraged to consider the relative value of natural stones that have undergone different sorts and degrees of enhancement. No matter how much they might look alike, an unenhanced, two-carat, clear, blue natural sapphire is likely to be worth considerably more than an enhanced one, the general rule being that the more a finished stone retains the essence of what it was at the start, before it came out of the ground and was altered to meet prevailing consumer tastes, the more valuable it is. That noted, it is also the case that any stone with natural origins, no matter how elaborately enhanced, is likely to be worth more than a similar-looking synthetic.

In some cases, accounts of a natural sapphire's origins are backed up by certificates from licensed gemologists or organizations such as the AGTA or AGL. Certification is expensive, however, and simply not an option for most consumers, least of all those who make up the growing market for enhanced, lower-cost natural sapphires. According to one recent report, less than six percent of all colored gemstones sold are certified in this way (Menzie 2006:30). In other words, the all-important origins of the majority of natural sapphires sold in the world today are communicated by little more than sellers' assurances that they are, in fact, what they are said to be. What this means is that, like the relics around which medieval European churches and congregations were built (Geary 1986), the most valuable attributes of natural sapphires—that is, their origins—are as easy to misrepresent as they are impossible to reproduce. In most exchange situations, it is no more difficult to misrepresent a sapphire's source than it is to pass off a sinner's tibia for a saint's; all that is needed in either case is a convincing account of provenance and a receptive audience. One must be careful, however, not to allow the cynicism inspired by the possibility of fraud to distract from the reasons that profit is to be gained from such misrepresentations or that the defrauded can be so reluctant to learn or accept that something they have valued so highly is not, in fact, what they think it is. It is not just that the relic under the altar or the sapphire on the ring is worth more if it has one source and less if it has another. In both cases, understandings of the affective power of these things—their capacity to inspire, arouse wonder, and even cure—are intimately tied to their sources. No wonder, then, that in cases such as these, in which it is the difficult-to-determine origins of things that make them either precious or disposable, stories of sources and sourcing become especially important.

Some might think it odd to stress stories, with all their immaterial associations, in addressing the question of how and why people value natural sapphires. A cursory inquiry at any jewelry counter in the world would likely suggest a very different approach, one that requires attending above

all else to the color, clarity, and other distinctive and sensible qualities of these things. There are, however, good reasons to consider stories as centrally as I do here. As discussed below, stories told about natural sapphires and their sources are key to the functioning of the natural sapphire trade in that they both offer justification for the premium that consumers can expect to pay for these stones and foster indispensable consumer confidence. There is more to these stories than their use as marketing tools, however. For the purposes of this article, what is most intriguing about the stories that follow is the possibility that one might find in them some answers to the question that miners and traders in Ambondromifehy so often put to me: What are (natural) sapphires used for? Queries about the utility of seemingly useless things are commonly premised on the questioner's ignorance of the value-adding stories associated with the things in question. Oftentimes, it is the stories told with and about these things that make them precious.

Spectacular specimens

In June 2007, the Black Star Sapphire of Queensland made its Canadian debut at Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum (ROM). Featured on its own in a case at the center of a small alcove on the museum's third floor, and carefully lit from above to ensure visitors a clear view of the six-pointed star that shines from within, it was by all appearances a remarkable gem. Its story, printed on the walls surrounding it, was remarkable too. The gemstone was originally picked off the ground in Queensland, Australia, by a boy named Roy Spencer in the 1930s. Roy brought it home to his father, Harry, one of the region's earliest miners, who promptly tossed it to the back door, where it remained, serving as a doorstep, until a visiting jeweler remarked on it and bought it for a song in 1947. It was only after careful cutting and polishing that the Black Star Sapphire's distinctive star was revealed and its place in the catalogue of world's-exhibit-worthy gemstones was assured. In a press release announcing the opening of the exhibit, the museum's director noted his pleasure at being able "to showcase the beautiful Black Star of Queensland, and tell its fascinating story. That this exquisite sapphire was once used as a doorstep is remarkable" (ROM 2007).

Of all the stories told about natural sapphires, none circulate as widely as accounts of spectacular specimens like the Black Star Sapphire of Queensland. These are the "one of a kind" priceless or celebrity gems that make the news; stones about which press releases are written and "fascinating stories" told; stones that capture the attention of the public, sometimes even drawing people into museum exhibits and jewelry shops with hopes of partaking in something of their magic. As the story of the Black Star Sapphire indicates, however, the stones in question are also just stones, things that, straight out of the ground, can be in-

conspicuous enough to pass for doorstops. In this section, I discuss the role that stories told about such stones play in making them, and like things, so attractive. I begin with the story of what some consider the most spectacular colored gemstone to appear on the world scene in the past several decades: a natural sapphire from Madagascar.

In the words of its most recent promoters, the epic of the Millennium Sapphire began "eons ago," when

an extraordinary combination of aluminum, oxygen, iron and titanium [took form]. For millions of years, it lay deep within the earth's crust and was subject to enormous heat and pressure. Geological forces such as continental drift and erosion eventually brought the colossal gem to the surface. [And then...] One day in 1995, a lucky miner uncovered the gem in central Madagascar. [Whitmore n.d.:3]

What came out of the ground on that day in 1995 was an opaque sapphire about the size of a rugby ball and weighing almost 18 kilograms. According to the consortium that now owns it, this stone was a once-in-a-lifetime find destined to inspire awe and reverence in gem lovers around the world. To the "lucky miner" who dug it out of the ground, however, it was undoubtedly just a big blue stone that, like all sapphires mined locally at the time, was worth only what a foreigner would pay for it.

As is true of most sapphires sourced in Madagascar, this one's transformation from stone to precious gem began with a trip to Thailand. Wrapped in newspaper within a hand-woven basket, it was first uncrated in the office of the U.S. gem dealer who would be representing it to potential buyers around the world, and from there it was sent on to the Asian Institute of Gemological Sciences (AIGS), an organization that specializes in certifying the origins and properties of gemstones. Wherever it went it is said to have turned the skepticism of those who had heard and doubted rumors of its existence into jaw-dropping awe. With an AIGS certification in hand, the stone's promoters introduced it to the world through a Reuters news story that, along with accompanying images, was taken up by *USA Today*, CNN, NBC, and other media outlets.

Given the size and potential value of this stone, one certification was not going to be enough to satisfy all skeptics. Corroborating reports from gemological labs and institutes in London, New York, and Berne attest both to the stone's subsequent travels and to its owners' pursuit of legitimacy and attention beyond Thailand. It was eventually purchased, still in rough form, by a consortium of U.S. and Asian investors, who entrusted it to the Italian designer Alessio Boschi for enhancement. Over the next two years, Boschi led a team in carving what they called "a tribute to human genius" into the stone: 134 representations of important individuals and milestones in human history. The

newly named Millennium Sapphire was then examined by representatives of the Guinness Book of World Records and certified as the world's largest carved natural sapphire. With this designation, it had its first official public showing in Seattle in 2004 at the launch of a cruise ship called, appropriately enough, the "Sapphire Princess." Here too it attracted a good deal of media attention. And this is where the story ends. My efforts at finding out what has become of the Millennium Sapphire since this 2004 appearance have been met only with unreturned e-mails, disconnected phone lines, and a posting on an online gemological forum answering my inquiry with the suggestion that the stone's current owners have no interest in publicizing the whereabouts of something so valuable (see Figure 2).

Given what little I know about how the story of the Millennium Sapphire ends, readers might well be wondering how I know everything else I have related about it. Every

detail I have recounted here comes from the website established by the consortium that once owned, and possibly still owns, the stone (see Whitmore n.d.). At first glance, this website appears to be a tool for marketing the stone to potential buyers. The prose is as hyperbolic as anything one would find in a flyer for a discount furniture store—the stone is not just big, it is "colossal," "massive," and "mammoth." In its finished, carved, form, it is not only a tribute to human genius but also a work of the same; "it is unique in the history of art and humanity" (Whitmore n.d.:4), boasts the website, and "a dream come true to all who have been touched by it" (n.d.:2). But it is not only words that are on offer here. Also available are links to various news reports concerning the stone, a press kit for people interested in retelling its story, high-resolution images of the final carved stone, and scanned copies of the various certificates and lab reports that attest to the natural origins and world-record

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Figure 2. The homepage of www.millenniumsapphire.com.

status of the stone. To one browsing the website, in other words, it soon becomes apparent that the story just offered is not one so incredible that it begs to be told but, rather, a story that the stone's owners beg people to believe is as incredible as they say. In the end, the awe inspired by the Millennium Sapphire comes not just from the thing itself but from its story—the certified and well-documented account of its origins, discovery, travels, and transformation. Without this story, after all, the Millennium Sapphire would be little more than what it was to the Malagasy miner who discovered it—a big blue stone.

The entrepreneurs who first brought the Millennium Sapphire out of Madagascar reportedly had their own reasons for publicizing this spectacular stone's story. Engaging in a performance that Anna Tsing (2000:118) notes is commonplace in the mining industry today, they intended to use the story of this spectacular find to help raise awareness of and capital for planned mining projects in Madagascar. This is not the only performance in which the Millennium Sapphire has figured, however. In its final known appearance on the Sapphire Princess, it took on a role akin to that commonly played by museum-quality gems like the aforementioned Black Star Sapphire, that is, that of a "rarity," the sort of thing that Peter Pels writes "arous[es] in its spectators . . . a sense of *wonder*, the feeling of being in the presence of the extraordinary, out-of-place, or radically different" (1998:103). Although not all qualities of the Millennium Sapphire apply to all other natural sapphires, its capacity to "arouse wonder" does. The Millennium Sapphire, after all, is not alone in having been made through chance chemical combinations set in motion "eons ago," nor is it alone in having been delivered to the surface by slow-acting geological forces. All natural sapphires are, ultimately, products of the earth that have come into existence independent of human desires or demand for them. As such, much like the collectable mineral specimens discussed by Elizabeth Emma Ferry, they are vessels of "naturalness" (2005:424) that can support a range of associations few other things can. In what other durable, portable, and wearable material form might one possess an index of the awesomeness of natural laws and forces, the seeming timelessness of geological processes, and the endurance of a world oblivious to human desires? No matter that treatments have made high-quality natural sapphires more plentiful than ever. As Pels notes, "'Wonder' is such an easily democratized attitude" (1998:111), a fact no less apparent at the ROM's gift shop than at other retail outlets, like the Nature Company's, that have made a business of bringing natural wonders to the mall-going masses (Price 1995; Smith 1996).

I can only speculate about what will ultimately become of the Millennium Sapphire. Spectacular, well-publicized specimens like this one are just as likely to end up on public display in museums, in jewelry shops, or on cruise ships as in private collections. Guarded under a spotlight, they tell

of a rarity and preciousness that can never be associated with synthetics, drawing attention to qualities that make all natural sapphires so good to think with. A sense of wonder, however, is not all that the people attracted to spectacular specimens are likely to take away. To refer back to a comparison introduced in the previous section, rarities like the Millennium Sapphire commonly play a role like that of the "first-class relics" that attract pilgrims to particular shrines or churches. Although things this precious cannot themselves be owned by just anyone, the people they attract can nonetheless take something of their awesomeness away in the form of lesser, but associated, things. Thus, just as pilgrims are likely to encounter an abundance of "third-class relics" available for purchase in the vicinity of associated first-class relics—such as prayer cards, medals, and bits of cloth that have touched first-class relics or their shrines—visitors to the museums, jewelry shops, and cruise ships in which spectacular specimens are put on display are rarely far from gift shops and showcases featuring natural gemstone jewelry for sale. Indeed, when it comes to spectacular specimens, the line between exhibiting and marketing can get quite blurry. Consider, for example, that following its stint at the Royal Ontario Museum, the Black Star Sapphire of Queensland moved on to a showing at a Harry Winston's jewelry shop in Beverly Hills.

It is not only world-record status that makes a sapphire spectacular, however, and not all widely reported and well-known sapphires are out of consumers' reach. In fact, arguably the most famous sapphire of the past 30 years—the one featured at the center of the engagement ring that Prince Charles gave to Diana Spencer in 1981—was bought at a jewelry shop in London for a mere \$65,000. Although Diana's unconventional choice of an off-the-tray, and not specially designed, sapphire ring was controversial among some royal watchers at the time, it was a boon to the natural sapphire trade. Tens of thousands of brides-to-be, shopping in all price ranges, would follow her example. That the sapphire in question—an 18-carat oval blue—came from Sri Lanka was also widely reported, with predictable effects on demand for similarly sourced stones. More recently, Madagascar's gem trade has felt the benefits of another celebrity engagement. The actor Ben Affleck's widely reported gift of a pink diamond engagement ring to his one-time fiancée Jennifer Lopez in 2003 precipitated a spike in global demand for natural pink gemstones of all sorts, including the pink sapphires that were then just starting to come out of Madagascar (Bilger 2006).

One thing that every spectacular specimen—whether an expensive, store-bought sapphire like the one Diana selected or the near-priceless stone one may find in a museum—is likely to have is an identification report, that is, a well-researched account of what kind of stone it is, where it comes from, and what has been done to it since it came out of the ground. As noted above, however, such reports

are not completed for the vast majority of natural sapphires sold today. Without the extensive expertise and lab facilities of certifying organizations, then, how can traders, jewelers, and consumers be sure that what they are buying is, in fact, what they are being told it is? In the following section, I discuss the significance that stories of “going to the source” can play in fostering the consumer confidence on which the international sapphire trade ultimately depends.

Going to the source

In any issue of *Colored Stone*—a glossy magazine aimed at people in the colored-gemstone industry—the reader is likely to find not only lavishly illustrated surveys of the latest jewelry trends and announcements for upcoming gem and jewelry shows but also words and images reflecting a much less glamorous side of the trade. Consider, for example, a 2006 article entitled “Ruby Boom Town,” by Vincent Pardieu (with Richard Wise), concerning the ruby-rich Andilamena region of southern Madagascar. It begins as follows:

Moramanga Mining Village, Andilamena Region, Madagascar, June 29, 2005

It is 4 a.m., and I can't sleep. It's been two hours since the local nightclub has ceased churning out the pop music that can turn this jungle city into a disco. The neighboring movie theater closed a few hours ago, and the choreographed grunts of the latest Kung Fu movie have faded into darkness.

Still the jungle night in this mining village is far from quiet. In fact, it sounds like a battlefield. By day, this shantytown of 15,000 is the kingdom of men, but the night is ruled by the rats—thousands of them, perhaps millions. In each wooden shack, dozens of rats run over the sleeping bodies of men, women and children. I don't like rats, so I've made a small fire and installed some candles; that way I can at least work and think. [Pardieu and Wise 2006:30]

The article goes on to describe, in nearly equal parts, the colors and qualities of stones coming out of the region and the sorry situation of the people who live there. Thus, the reader learns not only that Moramanga has been a source of much of the highly fissured “ruby star” corundum that has been flooding the Thai market in recent years but also that it is a place of lawlessness, poor sanitation, and rats. In two additional articles in subsequent issues, Pardieu continues in much the same vein, telling stories of his trips to different gemstone mining regions in Madagascar while passing on information of interest to *Colored Stone's* readers.

Stories and images like these do not appear only in *Colored Stone*, nor are the tone and content of Pardieu's work unique within the genre. Articles that combine practical information about gemstone sources with dashes of local color and images of mining work appear in all of

the international gem trade's English-language journals. They also appear on the websites of individual jewelers, industry commentators, and self-proclaimed “gem-hunters” (Bowersox 2004). These accounts are remarkably consistent, telling the stories of one or several men going off the beaten path to the sorts of places that most jewelry consumers would never want to visit. On their travels, these men experience the good, the bad, and the exotic of the gem trade—the thrill of discovering new sources or spectacular specimens, the discomfort of hiking hot jungle trails, and the experience of sleeping with rats or “snacking on deep fried bamboo grubs while bargaining” (Boyd 2003:30) with local traders.

Although such stories may suggest that gem explorers like Pardieu are a good fit with the mountaineers, ecotourists, Peace Corps volunteers, and other adventurers recently profiled in Luis Antonio Vivanco and Robert J. Gordon's *Tarzan Was an Eco-Tourist* (2006), it would be a mistake to see them as nothing more than this. For these men, adventure is simply part of the work they do in and for the natural-gemstone trade. In this, today's gem explorers have much in common with the 19th-century naturalist-explorers who traveled the world collecting specimens for taxidermists and dealers in North America's and Europe's then booming natural-history trades (Barrow 2001) and with the “green-coffeemen” (Jimenez 1995:52) of the early 20th century who sussed out new sources of coffee and potential profit—people whose travel accounts fostered not only demand for certain commodities but also interest and confidence in particular sources. Pardieu, certainly, is no mere adventure tourist or travel writer. On the trip described in his *Colored Stone* trilogy, he traveled to different mining regions in Madagascar to collect samples of rubies and sapphires for the Asian Institute of Gemological Sciences. With the research conducted on these samples, the AIGS would be better able to comment with authority when called on to certify the origins of natural gemstones said to have been sourced in Madagascar, as it had done for the Millennium Sapphire.

It is not only certifying bodies, manufacturers of jewelry, or subscribers to *Colored Stone* who have an interest in what is going on at and coming out of natural gemstone sources. Stories of “going to the source” have, arguably, never before been more important in the marketing of natural gemstones to consumers as well, and for very good reason. As noted previously, certifying a stone's source is time-consuming, expensive, and simply not feasible for the vast majority of natural gemstones consumed today. Establishing the connection between a dealer or retailer and the same source, by contrast, is remarkably easy. “Picture this,” writes the gemologist Richard Hughes in advising jewelers about the importance of going to the source, “As you offer a fine colored gemstone to your client, you pull out a photo album showing you at the very place where such gems are

mined. Even better, you may want to permanently display a photo or two of you at the source. This creates an aura of expertise that clearly sets you apart from your competitors” (Hughes and Koivula 2006). A related strategy is proposed by D. S. Epstein, author of *The Gem Merchant: How to Be One, How to Deal with One*, in his discussion of gemstone “trunk shows” (2003:85)—events at which an independent gem merchant operates through an established jeweler to sell some of his stock. A sure-fire theme for a trunk show, Epstein suggests, is one that stresses a charismatic trader’s connection to gemstone sources. Such a show should be preceded by distribution of promotional material alerting customers of a particular jewelry shop to the impending arrival of “The Man Who Romances the Stone”—he “who goes to the deep dark jungles at the four corners of the earth to retrieve eternal beauty which expresses love and devotion in our hearts” (Epstein 2003:86)—and should culminate with “The Man” in question appearing at the shop, offering stones, expert advice, and stories to its customers. “Ideally,” Epstein advises, “an exciting and exotic ambiance will be created in the store” (2003:90) for the duration of the show through the use of props (flags, handicrafts, etc.), images, videos, maps, and music evocative of the source from which the stones on offer have come. Alternatively, independent jewelers may choose to go to the source themselves, participating in a gemstone tour that offers not just the opportunities for cost saving that can come with buying at the source but also the digital images and video that can be used to publicize their businesses in newspaper articles and TV ads at home. As Jim Fieberg, the operator of a gemstone tour venture in Madagascar, suggests, the stories his jeweler clients take away from such tours enable them to “make the sales process much more fun (and easier) by letting the customer enjoy the travel vicariously.” “Jewelers sell nothing that anyone actually needs,” Fieberg observes, “[it] is always more about the emotion attached to it. And the story of where a stone came from increases the experiential value of the piece” (Buttery 2005).

Stories of going to the source also appear frequently on the TV home shopping channels and websites through which a great deal of natural gemstone jewelry is sold today. During off-shopping hours, for example, the digital shopping channel GemsTV features videos of presenters journeying to Sri Lanka, Madagascar, Thailand, and other exotic locales from which the channel’s all-natural merchandise is sourced. Much as in the written accounts just cited, these travelogues combine accounts of what is so special about natural gemstones sourced in particular parts of the world with comments and images revealing the trying circumstances faced by the people working in these places. GemsTV presenters sometimes even gamely take on the challenges of mining themselves, communicating the difficulties of this work in the manner of investigative journalists. Similarly, the website of the Natural Sap-

phire Company (n.d.) features a page of captioned photos from mining areas in Madagascar on which prospective consumers can find images of landscapes “turned upside-down by . . . seekers of fortune,” the “hand dug” trenches from which Malagasy sapphires come, and the “50lb sacks” of dirt that must be “carried on the backs of young men to the nearest stream [sometimes miles away] for sifting.”

The accounts and images discussed above are not intended by their authors to expose an unattractive and seldom-seen side of the global gemstone trade but, rather, are offered in support of one of the key arguments on which this trade is based: that natural gemstones are rare and hard to procure, and thus worth the premium consumers are expected to pay for them. In stories like these, then, are indications of something quite unlike the labor-hiding fetishization of commodities of which Karl Marx wrote. Here, rather, consumers are encouraged to think about all of the hard work that goes into sourcing gemstones as a way of appreciating, and even fetishizing, these things. Not that stories of going to the source reveal all, however. What such accounts tend not to discuss (and maybe even distract from) is what happens to stones coming from the source, namely, the sometimes-extensive treatments they undergo on their way to consumers. Neither do such stories make the point that going to the source is, in fact, no guarantee of getting what one is after. As Hughes notes, “Unscrupulous traders at mining areas [i.e., sources] often attempt to process synthetic rough so that it resembles nature” (1997:154) and then sell it as “natural,” knowing that the places in which uninformed people least expect to be cheated are also the easiest places in which to pass along fakes.

In a recent *New Yorker* article about Madagascar’s booming gem trade, Burkhard Bilger cites a nameless dealer as claiming that “in the gem business, we have very little sausage. It’s all sizzle” (2006:70), the implication being that the gemstone business depends more on well-crafted hype and easily dazzled consumers than it does on the stuff of gemstones themselves. At this point in my own discussion of the role that stories play in the sapphire trade, some readers might be inclined to agree. As I have related them here, stories of spectacular specimens and of going to the source seem most obviously to be the stuff of effective marketing. These are stories that create precisely the sort of “sizzle” needed to keep the whole natural sapphire trade afloat: the sense that natural sapphires are, in fact, rare and natural wonders sourced through backbreaking work in exotic locales and that, as such, they are fundamentally different from their cheaper, but materially identical, synthetic alternatives. When I began this project, I was certainly prepared to conclude along these lines. As Patricia Spyer notes is often the case with researchers who pose questions about “how and why certain things exercise the immense powers they do over persons and collectivities” (1998:5), I started out with a leaning toward “social

constructionism,” assuming that demand for natural sapphires, like demand for fashion, is “a socially regulated and generated impulse, [and] not an artefact of individual whims or needs” (Appadurai 1986:32). And I was not wrong. As illustrated in the previous pages, the international sapphire trade quite obviously involves a wide range of players in networks of political-economic interrelationship that serve, ultimately, to cater to tastes that are quite obviously socially constructed (Bourdieu 1984). Stopping the analysis here, however, would be a mistake. As Spyer notes, the problem with restricting oneself to social constructionism is that it can “flatten out the passions, energies and motivations with which things are so fiercely invested” (1998:5). Whatever a social constructionist or cynical trader might think, there is more to natural sapphires than just the sizzle surrounding them.

Objects of affection—objects that affect

Roland had come to Ambondromifehy in search of a sapphire; “something special,” he later specified. By the time he made it to the booth in which I was sitting alongside a pair of Malagasy traders, he had attracted a swarm of hawkers, each offering handfuls of stones that they swore were of the highest quality. For the next hour, he stood in the shade of our awning, receiving one stone after another, scrutinizing only those few he did not brush off at a glance, talking all the while. He spoke of his home in France, his current work in one of Madagascar’s increasingly lucrative import businesses, and, mostly, of his ongoing love affair with gemstones. He travels the world, he told me, and everywhere he goes, he keeps his eye out for gemstones. I asked if the sapphire at the center of his ring was one of his finds. He answered with a story. He first saw the sapphire in question years ago in the window of a jewelry shop in Chanthaburi, the center of Thailand’s sapphire industry. It was love at first sight. He entered the shop intent on having it, but after hours of negotiating, the price remained too high for his liking, and he decided he simply could not afford it. He left Thailand soon thereafter, but could not get the sapphire off his mind. He became obsessed with it. When he returned to Thailand the following year, his first stop was that same shop. The shopowner recognized him immediately and, knowing precisely why he had come, brought the stone out of a case before Roland had a chance to ask for it. It was just as he had remembered it. This time he knew not to hesitate, no matter what the cost. He bought the stone, had it mounted on a ring, and has been wearing it faithfully since (see Figure 3).

My first inclination was to dismiss Roland’s story as the romanticized ravings of an obsessive. In the years since, I have heard and read enough accounts like it to know better. Roland is not the only person to have fallen in love with a natural sapphire. Consider, for example, the comments of



Figure 3. The object of Roland’s affection.

the gemologist Richard Wise, author of *Secrets of the Gem Trade*:

They say you never forget your first love. Gemologically speaking, blue sapphire was mine. I remember my first date with a Kashmir . . . ah! That velvety blue that sleepy bedroom glow. It was in Bangkok that I met my first Burmese sapphire, a saucy royal blue, deep hued with just a touch of violet. That vivid saturation gave me a thrill. I didn’t know just how lucky I was; it took me ten years to find another as fine. [2006:163]

Or consider the gemologist Richard Hughes’s assessment of a particular stone from Madagascar:

A short time ago I had the opportunity to view a particularly fine sapphire. . . . Squinting, peering, I was drawn into a silken world spun by powers beyond my imagination—a secret whispered just for me. . . . Call it a signal from the gods, a voice from the heavens, an eruption from hell—epiphany—describe it as you like. I put it thus: at that instant, the sun broke through the clouds, the planets aligned. As I held that sapphire ring in my hand, I witnessed the birth of earth and all creation. I gazed upon Pangaea, saw the continents form, then separate . . . the true majesty of mother nature struck me. [2001:5]

In the “Lover’s Guide to Sapphire,” from which this last excerpt is taken, Hughes reflects on the need for incorporating what he terms “educated emotion” (2001:1) into the appraisal of natural sapphires. “Exceptional gems,” he writes, “grow on you. They are experts at hiding, more interesting with every listen, more exciting with each glimpse. When you gaze at their beauty for hours, days, weeks, years on end without tiring you know you have a fine gem” (Hughes 2001:3) Hughes’s point is that, however important expert appraisals and identification reports have become in the

natural sapphire trade in recent years, there remain value-giving aspects of these stones that are simply undetectable to any but those who desire them. “Your own senses are the final arbitrator,” he advises, “not those of the seller or of the labs. After all, it is you who will reap the benefits of ownership of this wonderful sample of nature’s beauty, not they” (Hughes 2001:5). The point Hughes is getting at here was never clearer to me than when made by a dealer of synthetic stones at the annual Tucson Gem and Mineral Show. When I asked her what makes natural and synthetic sapphires different, she answered, matter-of-factly, that natural stones just “feel different.” She did not mean, as I momentarily imagined, that there was some way of telling one from the other by touch but, rather, that synthetics simply do not have the affective power that naturals do.

In stressing the capacity of sapphires to affect, and even overwhelm, sensuous subjects, stories like these call to mind fetishes, a category of things to which analysts have commonly turned in efforts at making sense of the relationships that some people seem to have with certain objects of the material world. In an influential essay on the history of the concept, William Pietz notes that fetishes “‘naturally’ embody socially significant values that touch one or more individuals in an intensely personal way” (1985:13–14). Like the natural sapphires just described, fetishes are not only things that are deeply embedded in a world of values and meanings but also things whose affective power comes in part from appearing to be inherent and, as such, independent of such social constructions. Inspired largely by Pietz’s approach, Pels describes the affective power of fetishes eloquently, defining fetishism as a process whereby “objects constitute subjects” (1998:101). Fetishism, Pels argues, points to “an aesthetic sensibility in which the direction of mutual influence of human subject and thinglike object can be reversed; in which we cannot only think animistically, of anthropomorphized objects, of a spirit *in* matter, but also fetishistically, of human beings objectified by the spirit *of* the matters they encounter” (1998:101). I am inclined to see such an aesthetic sensibility at work in stories like the ones recounted above. In these accounts, natural sapphires are more than just vessels of whatever it is that affects their beholders. Their power to affect is, rather, seen to be inherent and original—of rather than in them. It is not something that can be synthesized.

Of all the consumers served by the natural sapphire trade today, none value the affective fetishlike qualities of these stones more than those drawn to their purported metaphysical properties. Often grouped under the New Age umbrella, such consumers appreciate particular species and specimens of mineral for much more than their ability to arouse wonder. In their encyclopedic *The Book of Stones: Who They Are and What They Teach*, for example, Robert Simmons and Naisha Ahsian group sapphires among a wide range of conduits of potential “Crystal Al-

lies,” “friendly entities or benevolent energies expressing themselves through . . . stones” (2005:xxvii). Differently colored sapphires, they suggest, have different “energies” based on their “individual vibrational signatures and different spiritual properties” (Simmons and Ahsian 2005:327). Thus, “Blue Sapphire” is “an enhancer of insight, extrasensory perception and mental agility” (Simmons and Ahsian 2005:327), “Yellow Sapphire” can “assist in manifesting any vision one wishes to realize” (2005:328), and “Pink Sapphire . . . stimulates the gentle emotions of love, forgiveness, acceptance and release” (2005:331). One need not be a part of this consumer niche, however, to encounter associations like these. Efforts at linking sapphires with the particular needs, personalities, and life histories of particular consumer-subjects have a long history in the mainstream trade as well (Kunz 1971). Thus, depending on the source consulted, one is likely to be informed that sapphire is the appropriate stone for someone who is born in the month of September, born on a Tuesday, born under the astrological sign Taurus, celebrating a fifth or a 45th wedding anniversary, and so on. A key point to stress is that linkages like these do more than just sell gemstones. In offering opportunities for thinking about what will make one or another kind of stone a good match for a person or occasion, they also offer consumers the means for framing intimate relationships with these things.

It is not always the case, of course, that the person who buys a natural sapphire is the person who will be most affected by it. For example, men commonly buy jewelry featuring natural sapphires to give as gifts to women. Indeed, of all the immaterial and affective qualities associated with natural sapphires, none is more frequently referenced than that which seems intended specifically for this market. As the AGTA puts it, sapphires are “the gem of fidelity” (n.d.a), meaning that a gift of a sapphire is “a pledge of trust, honesty, purity, and loyalty,” and thus especially appropriate when it is the giver’s intention to indicate his commitment to the recipient. When given as gifts in this way, natural sapphires can seem even more obviously fetishlike—not simply for their potential to affect the subjects who give and receive them but because this power can feature so centrally, as fetishes commonly do, in the creation or fostering of social relationships (Graeber 2005). And, as in all exchanges involving sapphires, in gift offerings like these, the origins of what is given can mean even more than the matter of the gift itself. As one trader put it to me when I asked him about the advisability of making a gift of a piece of jewelry featuring a synthetic sapphire: “These things are tokens of love . . . what kind of love do you want in return, real love or fake love?”

In that one of the goals of organizations such as the AGTA is to promote the consumption of colored gemstones by imbuing them with meanings with which they hope consumers will connect, it is tempting to argue that the stories people tell about being affected by natural sapphires

are products of such promotion—that is, that it is the marketing (the buying guides, advertisements, patter of home-shopping-network hosts, pitches of jewelers, etc.) of natural sapphires, and not the things themselves, that lead consumers to value and even fetishize them. Attributing too much influence to the qualities with which natural sapphires are imbued through the process of commodification, however, can distract from the significance of what consumers and marketers alike recognize as being inherent in these things. Maybe the most important point to come out of stories like those recounted above is that the affective, fetishlike, qualities of natural sapphires are, to those they affect, at least, thought to be original—that is, to exist apart from, and prior to, people's attraction to them. In the end, then, analysts of consumer behavior might be better advised to approach natural sapphires as commodified fetishes than as fetishized commodities. They are things to which the features of both commodities and fetishes can be attributed, just not in the way or order famously envisioned by Marx.

In suggesting, as I have here, that natural sapphires are something like fetishes, I realize that I risk falling into the trap, alluded to above, of allowing provocative comparisons to distract from the specifics of the thing(s) at hand. Let me end this section, then, with a point that leads back to the specific place and perspectives with which I began this article. If one accepts, in keeping with Pietz's historical account of the origins of the idea of the fetish in European thought, that fetishes are not distinctive to any "discrete society or culture, but to a cross-cultural situation formed by the ongoing encounter of the value codes of radically different societies" (1985:11) or, even more generally, that in the broadest possible sense fetishes are things that some people value in ways that others find puzzling, then natural sapphires are perhaps never more provocatively fetishlike than when considered from the perspectives of the Malagasy miners and traders whose questions inspired me to undertake the research on which this article is based. To end, I return to these perspectives by telling a story of my own.

"The work of God"

Eric was one of the traders who had asked me about the utility of sapphires in the years before I began the research discussed in this article. During a 2006 visit to Ambondromifehy, I had the chance to answer him. I began by telling him that some of the speculations that he and his fellow miners and traders had advanced were, in fact, true. It turns out, for example, that sapphire is used to make the clear coverings of expensive watches and the windows of the space shuttle. However, these and other industrial uses of sapphire require perfectly clear, colorless, and, therefore, synthetic corundum. Thus, I was also forced to restate to Eric a point that I had made years earlier when he first ques-

tioned me on the topic: Almost all of the sapphires that come from Ambondromifehy are, in fact, intended to be used in the manufacture of jewelry. I went on to stress a point that I was then still grappling with. Sapphires need not come from the ground in places like Ambondromifehy, I told him. They can be produced in laboratories in qualities and quantities unattainable in even the richest mining areas. What is more, such perfectly clear, brilliantly colored synthetic sapphires cost a fraction of what comparable natural stones do. And yet, I concluded, many foreign consumers still prefer the sapphires that come out of the ground. Ambondromifehy would not exist, I stressed, were it not for this fact.

In wording things as I did, I later thought, I was setting Eric up to be as perplexed by all of this as I had become. He was not. In fact, by discussing the existence of synthetic alternatives to locally mined sapphires, I may have clarified things for him. What I took to be the wobbly conceit on which the entire international natural sapphire trade is precariously based, he saw as making perfect sense. By his estimation, foreigners who prefer and are willing to pay more for sapphires that come out of the ground rightly value the "work of God" (*asan'ny zagnahary*) over human-made alternatives. The phrase "asan'ny zagnahary" is one that Malagasy people I have known over the years use to refer to everything from unexpected deaths to unusually shaped tree trunks; events and things that startle or amaze or both; events and things that are obviously not the work of people and over which people have no control; events and things that affect us regardless of our own intentions and desires. These uses in mind, one way of interpreting Eric's assessment of foreign consumers' taste for natural sapphires is as an appreciation of a point that it has taken me some time to come around to myself. Natural sapphires are valued not simply because they are made and taken to represent certain qualities with which consumers connect; they are valued because at least some of these qualities are understood to inhere in them as products of the forces, divine or natural, that brought them into existence. As noted above, their fetishlike capacity to affect and arouse wonder, in particular, is quite simply not something that can be produced in a lab.

I should admit, however, that, at the time of the discussion recounted above, I was struck by Eric's use of the phrase "the work of God" for another reason. In addition to having the associations just noted, "asan'ny zagnahary" is also a phrase that I had heard used by several of the Malagasy guides, guards, and conservation employees with whom I had been working at the time in a related project on the ecotourist trade that has developed around northern Madagascar's protected conservation areas. Echoing Candace Slater's critical perspective on the "Edenic narratives" that have fueled international interest in Amazonia (1995, 2003), several of these keen observers commented

that foreigners come to Madagascar because it is one of the few places left in the world in which they can experience the sort of “authentic” (a term often related to me in French) nature that is no longer available to them in Europe and North America. What these foreigners cannot get at the zoos and botanical gardens at home, some suggested, is the experience of wandering through and wondering at an environment that remains the largely unadulterated “work of God.”

The comparison suggested by these different uses of the Malagasy phrase “the work of God” is too intriguing to ignore. What else, besides inspiring applications of this label, might Madagascar’s natural sapphires and its protected conservation areas have in common? Just how similar are the demands that keep northern Madagascar’s sapphire and ecotourist trades going? It is certainly true that much of what I have written here about how and why people value natural sapphires has parallels in a long list of studies of how and why they value any number of other things deemed “natural,” including the world’s growing number of protected conservation areas (see, e.g., Cronon 1995; Escobar 1999; West et al. 2006; Zerner 2000). To borrow a term from the guides just cited, I might take this comparison a step further and argue that “authenticity” is among the qualities that both ecotourists and natural sapphire consumers seek and find in the Malagasy resources that attract them. Not only is desire for the authentic so clearly an obsession within the sociocultural contexts from which most ecotourists and natural sapphire consumers hail (Lindholm 2008) but authenticity itself is also an idea commonly invoked by analysts to make sense of the desires and choices of tourists and consumers of material culture alike (see, e.g., Bruner 2001; MacCannell 1999; M’Closky 2002; Phillips and Steiner 1999; West and Carrier 2004). It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that the perceived, and always socially constructed, authenticity of Madagascar’s “natural” wonders is all that consumers find desirable about them. However much ecotourist destinations might be planned out with the interests of visitors in mind (West and Carrier 2004) and however much natural sapphires may be enhanced to meet the expectations of the consumers for whom they are intended, there remains something about these places and things that is not socially constructed; something neither derivative nor reproducible, something that might be better termed “original” than “authentic.” Although I am reluctant to argue that such originality indicates, as some have suggested to me, the “work of God” in our world, I am happy to concede that it reflects more than just the work of people.

In arguing this last point, I should stress that I am not being very original. Indeed, in suggesting that there is reason to attend not only to what people make of the places and things they value but also to the features of such places and things that exist regardless of our interventions

and evaluations, I am suggesting a position that has become commonplace in anthropological studies of natural environments and material culture alike. In his introduction to a collection of articles on local understandings of environments, for example, James Carrier takes an analogous position in expressing his concern that strictly “constructivist view[s] of the natural environment” (2004:13) may distract from the fact that “there is [in fact] a natural environment” inhabited by entities “independent of our thought processes” (2004:13). Appadurai seems similarly inclined in his recent discussion of “the thing itself,” stressing that even things with rich social lives have a stubborn and “chaotic materiality” that “resists the global tendency to make [them] instruments of representation, and thus of abstraction and commodification” (2006:21). What I find novel and interesting about the comparison inspired by my informants in Madagascar, however, is the possibility that these two distinct lines of thinking—one, like Carrier’s, related to “natural” and immovable places, and the other, like Appadurai’s, to made and mobile things—can converge when the places and things in question are of a particular sort. Although there is no denying that the value of places like protected conservation areas and things like natural sapphires is socially constructed, it is important to acknowledge that this value is premised ultimately on the equally undeniable fact that such places and things, however much they might be modified by human hands, do not originate with the work of people. What makes such places and things valuable is not simply that they exist “independent of our thought processes” (Carrier 2004:13) but that they appear to have come into existence independent of our demand for them. Ironically, it is this quality of being original—of having a claim to existence outside of, and prior to, a world of human intentions, desire, and labor—that is largely responsible for making commodities of places and things like these (see Figure 4).

What does any of this have to do with Ambondromifehy? How is any of the discussion offered in the preceding paragraphs relevant to the people and circumstances with which I began this article? Let me conclude, as storytellers often do, with a revelatory twist that should help to answer these questions. It turns out that many of the spectacular landscapes, flora, and fauna that have been drawing ecotourists to northern Madagascar in increasing numbers over the past decade and many of the natural sapphires that have been coming out of this region over the same period have more in common than their being of interest to similarly inclined foreign consumers. Often, they can be found in the same contested places. A protected conservation area, the Ankarana Special Reserve, for example, is both one of the region’s most popular ecotourist destinations and one of its richest sources of natural sapphires. This coincidence would not be a problem were it not for the fact that sapphire mining is said to endanger the



Figure 4. On their way to the Ankarana Special Reserve, ecotourists commonly stop in Ambondromifehy to see and buy natural sapphires.

spectacular biodiversity found within the reserve and that it is, thus, not only illegal but also a much maligned threat to the region's burgeoning ecotourist trade and the local people it employs (Walsh 2005). Not that this stops miners, however (Walsh 2003). Mining sapphires inside the reserve may not be legal or sustainable, but so long as foreign consumers keep on buying these stones, it will always be profitable.

Given the circumstances described above, claiming, as I did in the opening sentence of this article, that foreign consumers have made the town of Ambondromifehy the place it is today does not go nearly far enough. The effects of foreign consumer interest in northern Madagascar's original and affective natural wonders—whether natural sapphires or the protected landscapes in which they can be found—have been even more widespread, complicated, and contradictory than readers might reasonably have first assumed. It is not simply the case that such interest has created new sorts of work in the region, making miners of fishermen and ecotour guides of teachers, for example. It has also set apart and precipitated conflict among many of the region's cohabitants, making criminals of some of them and conservationists of others. And what of the value-adding stories through which foreign interest in northern Madagascar's original and affective wonders is communicated and fostered? Whether the "Edenic narratives" that inspire ecotourists to visit the Ankarana Special Reserve or the emotional evaluations inspired by the natural sapphires mined therein, such stories do more than just hide, distract from, or selectively represent the "multilayered and fluid reality" (Slater 1996:114) of people living in Ambondromifehy. As I have attempted to show in this article, such stories play an important part in actually producing these circumstances.

Notes

Acknowledgments. The research on which this article is based was generously funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Early versions of this article were presented at the 2007 meeting of the American Ethnological Society and a 2007 conference hosted by the Centre for Tourism and Cultural Change at Leeds Metropolitan University. I am grateful to the many colleagues who offered comments on these presentations, and to the reviewers enlisted by *AE* to comment on an earlier draft of this version. I am also very grateful to Linda Forman for assistance in pulling the final version together. I owe my greatest thanks to the many gem lovers, experts, and traders who have offered their insights and resources concerning the topics discussed here, and to the many miners, traders, guides, guards, and others I have worked with in Ankarana over the past decade.

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accepted July 7, 2009

final version submitted July 29, 2009

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