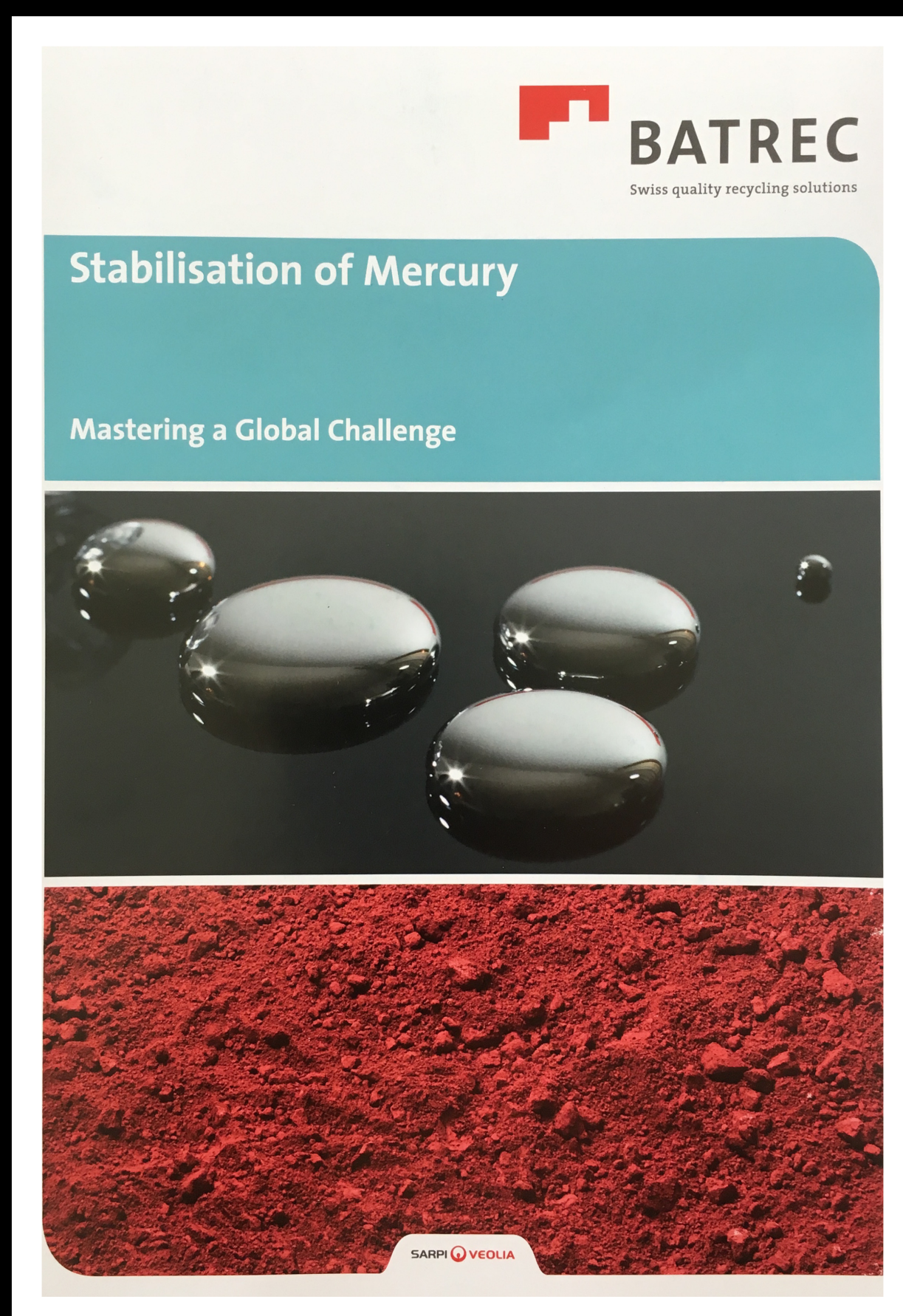


# Mercury's Multivalences



## Caption

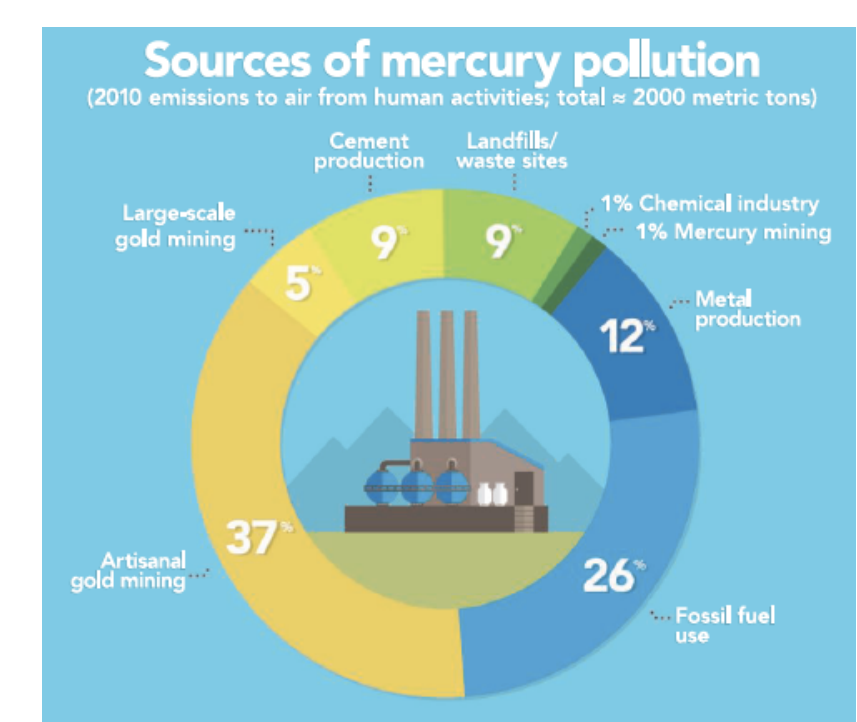
The Swiss company Batrec provides remediation services for mercury or quicksilver contamination, transforming quicksilver liquid into vibrantly red and “stable” cinnabar. Where to store this cinnabar then becomes the next question. One of Batrec’s main clients is the Peruvian government. On May 23, 2016, Peru issued a State of Emergency in Madre de Dios due to mercury contamination. An estimated 40% (48,000) of the population was affected. Peru is also the 6th largest “producer” of gold in the world. This number does not account, however, for the approximately 25-30% of Peru’s overall export of gold coming out of Madre de Dios. Here, there is a strong affinity for “el mercurio,” seen as a strong male element. The harvesting of gold needs the alchemical interaction with mercury. That quicksilver, the male element, “grabs” the gold particles, harnessing them into an amalgam, makes the human affinity for the heavy metal that much stronger. The association of male strength with both the virility of the bull and to the matador’s ability to “matar” (to kill) and thus prove themselves stronger than the bull, fed men’s affinity for the lithe liquid. The image is a powerful and a necessary energizing one because work in the mines is grueling if not fatal.

## Design Statement

This image employs montage to illustrate how to think about global toxicants, such as mercury, in their multiple and shifting forms and valences. My intent with the design of this montage is to keep the affinities and curious sensibilities of mercury left open, using these juxtaposed images—as valences—to draw out how artisanal gold miners, indigenous communities (intermingled or the same), and sex-workers (a companion industry to natural resource extraction around the globe) contribute to epidemiological toxicity and 2) the kinds of “toxic” or volatile assets of neo-colonial resource extraction.

## Project Statement

In this essay, my fleet-footed toxic figure is mercury in its multivalent forms, carrying a “charge” of environmental racism and “slow violence.” Artisanal and small-scale gold-mining (ASGM) have become the top sources for anthropogenic mercury contamination, beating out fossil fuels. The 2013 Minamata Treaty recommends eradicating ASGM, which pits brown bodies laboring in the mines against white collar corporations that offer “clean(er)” mining strategies. Mercury’s ability to move through the body, pass the blood-brain barrier, swim through amniotic fluid, and change the body chemistry of all living organisms does not immediately register as a threat for gold miners. The toxic effects take time to become visible. In this essay I trace quicksilver’s toxic circulation through an interactive global map: with images of cinnabar, of liquid mercury, of advertisements, and of an artisanal mining site.



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<https://tinyurl.com/y6n78zay>