Leidy cleared gravel and stones from a wooden sluice wedged in a gully between two slopes. Caked mud-streaked her legs, and dirty water coursed around her feet and along the sluice. The sluice was a plank of wood with roughly cut sides nailed over a metal grill and a red sack. At the far end of the sluice, Leidy’s mother worked. Her gray skirt hung over black rubber boots. Leidy’s younger sister was there too, dressed in denim short-shorts, purple t-shirt, bandana, a rakish smile, looking back at my camera. The younger women were too elegant for the work at the mine.

An hour before, the four of us had hiked the twenty minutes from the river to their mine. We had trailed half a dozen men and boys from a small community in the Chocó, Colombia’s northwest Pacific region of rainforests and rivers. I carried my camera, Leidy a digital music device, one of the boys a blackened pot with a bag of rice inside, and another young man balanced a gasoline-powered water pump on his upper back. The others carried shovels, wooden pans, and metal spikes: the tools of their trade as artisanal gold miners. We had begun at a cobble beach, passed through the jungle, and then came to a wide-open space of sand and mud and gravel that had been dug up by a pair of excavators made in Japan. Below an embankment and beside a large pool of water, a family used streams of water from a pump to cut through gouges left by the excavators—owned by illegal and informal small-scale miners—when they packed upriver to dig out a tunnel and open a new mine. Where gravel met forest, trees peered over a kaleidoscope of purple-grays, red-browns, and silver-blues. On that hike, we followed a capricious path that meandered through a blasted landscape where once had been jungle.
Back in the sluice, with Leidy standing on that wooden plank with the metal grill and red sack between the two slopes held up by the tangled roots of trees now gone, the three women worked with their hands. They chatted and laughed in contagious hope. It was 2010, it was my third visit to such a mine, and all of us—Leidy, her mother and sister clearing the sluice, the young man hauling the pump, the family carving into the earth with their jets of water, the excavators gouging away the tree cover with their buckets, and me asking too many questions and taking too many photographs—we were after gold.

How does a gold rush shape the lives of those who live alongside it? There is no single answer. Dwelling on the hopes and the dreams, the successes and the failures, the strategies and the tactics of those after el oro in the most impoverished region of Latin America’s second-most inequitable country tells unexpected stories of the production, accumulation, and transformation of value. I offer contradictory stories in three parts. In the first, gold is a high-value export commodity, which makes panning the core of a rural livelihood strategy and a complement to subsistence household production. In the second, the metal is embedded in a cash economy, which offers a way for miners from the Chocó and elsewhere to attempt to accumulate a little cash. In the third, it is part of global legal and extra-legal flows of capital in which value undergoes processes of transformation, rather than creation. Together these three parts, which each consist of two chapters, create a study of gold embedded in informal and precarious livelihood strategies.

While there is a large literature on the informal economy, and precariousness has entered the lexicon of social scientists, the colloquial Colombian term for it all is rebusque. In the following pages, I translate rebusque as “shift.” Shift aims to capture the temporary, contingent, creative, and mobile world of informal work indexed by rebusque. My use of shift draws on an older English etymology, rather than the quotidian contemporary meaning. Shift does not mean
working for a set period of time at a factory, but instead describes the feeling in the epigraph, taken from David Sánchez Juliao’s novel *La Flecha*, of moving between forms of unstable work available to the most marginalized populations in Colombia. Shift encompasses various features of *rebusque*. One shifts by one’s own devices to succeed and get on, one shifts to live with difficulty by managing and makeshift-ing and employing evasions and practicing indirect methods through frauds and temporary expedients, and one shifts for oneself to provide for one’s own safety, interests, and livelihoods when there is no outside aid.\(^1\) Shift captures an ontology of informality, a way of thinking about and living through various forms of *rebusque*.

The stories in the following pages come from the work of Leidy and the others I spent time with learning how to mine. My geology is theirs. My knowledge comes from the labor of moving gravel, digging holes, and panning. I mostly learned from people like Leidy, who were the descendants of enslaved men and women who had panned and dug hundreds of years before. This book emerges from the bottom of a mine pit, and it relies as much on insight that can be gained from this work, as it does on rumors and half-truths heard in late-night conversations and read in media accounts. Stories from the mud are not the only stories that could be told.

Downtown Bogotá, the cold, gray, concrete capital of eleven million in the Andes mountains, houses the elegant Gold Museum. Carefully lit and exquisitely curated Indigenous artifacts stand in testament to the skills, metallurgies, and cosmologies of pre-Columbian Indigenous peoples who lived in what is today Colombia. Their descendants still do today. The exhibits draw tourists from around the world to gaze at the carefully wrought statues and figurines, masks and cups, and other objects made of metals mined in the alluvial gravels of the hot lowlands of Colombia. The exhibits make little mention of contemporary miners, however. In 2010, only a few panels in

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\(^1\) *Oxford English Dictionary Online, “Shift.”*
the last room on the top floor dwelt on the livelihoods of those who, like Leidy, were still digging those gravels. While many Black miners in the Chocó still used hand tools, other miners were migrants from other regions who used heavy machinery.

That morning with Leidy, she kept the sluice clear. Water from a rain-filled reservoir rushed along the gulley and pulled sediment, mud, gravel, stones, and pebbles down over the plank with the red sack nailed in place. Over the day, the heavier metals that had lain hidden under the earth would settle to the lowest part of the sluice to be collected later. While I spent much of the next eighteen months clearing sluices, on that particular day with Leidy, I took photographs. That morning at five o’clock I had gone to the village where Leidy had grown up so that I could explain to her neighbors how I had come with the hope of writing a book. Drawing on work from economic anthropology about Andean peasants, I was interested in the way gold was embedded in how people think and talk about their economies. In what I now think of as an awkward and improvised presentation in a one-room school with a dozen men and women squeezed into wooden seats designed for children in the heart of a village of twenty or so houses on a muddy slope above a fast-flowing river, I explained that I wanted to learn to mine in order to write a book. Months later, I realized my accent was strange and my request bizarre. Still, over time people warmed to the idea as they realized I meant it. Free labor. Soon, they were showing me things, asking me to take photographs, and letting me learn to mine. Soon, too, I asked for and received permission for the project from the larger Afro-Colombian peasant organizations in the area.

From September 2010 to April 2012, I spent eighteen months learning to mine. I spent most of my time in one village on a river learning the work. I labored alongside Leidy, Martina, her husband Pedro, their neighbors Don Alfonso and Esteban, and others who were all twenty-first-

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2 Gudeman and Rivera, *Conversations in Colombia*. 


century artisanal miners. I was enthusiastic, if not terribly efficient. I rose before dawn, hauled fuel, dug trenches, and threw stones. I spent a little time underground. I often visited a small-scale operation after the two machines arrived from the mine down river near Leidy’s community to work the lands above Martina and Pedro’s village. I found ways to help. I became proficient in some techniques. Difficult tasks became mundane, even though most of the time I stayed a neophyte. With Martina, I cleared stones from the sluice. The sluice was half a dugout canoe which fed into a plank of wood with the sides nailed over a sack. As Martina and Pedro dumped stones and sand and gravel dug from the pit, I kept the sluice clear. The bateas were their primary tools. Pedro sent a pan full of mud sailing from up from in the pit to pass an empty pan sent sailing down by Martina. I cleared away the stones and gravel left in the sluice by the steady pull of a trickle of water. If I worked slowly, the stones would pile up, and Martina would come over and clear everything in one motion, which left me embarrassed. Over time, I learned some of her tricks. Don’t pick the stones one at a time, scoop them en masse. The work was physical, skillful. This book, in part, is a study of that skilled work, and the freedom that it can give. The pages that follow draw on the time I spent with miners when I worked in their pits. From those labors, I address the diverse economies of Martina and Pedro and others who earn their livelihood using wooden pans and hand tools alongside hunting, fishing, and urban migration and trade and other strategies of rebusque. My focus is on the labor and livelihoods of miners embedded within the broader connections of gold.

My arguments emerge from an apprenticeship in the skilled techniques of mining. I worked

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3 This approach was inspired by various authors who adopted apprenticeship and enskillement and embodiment in their own work by working in a factory, going to the gym, apprenticing in voudou, learning to hand drum, working in the North Atlantic fishery, and learning to box. In each case, these researchers relied on embodied practice and not just participant observation to gain a longer-term enskillement, which provided them a base from which to develop their analysis. See Cooper, “Apprenticeship as Field Method;” Crossley, “The Circuit Trainer’s Habitus”;
to become conversant in the work. Throwing stones, digging, shoveling, and picking gave me insight on what the yellow metal meant, how to find it, and what to do with it. These activities opened a window onto the practicalities and ambiguities of mining. Some tasks became familiar. If familiarity is a necessary step to understanding, learning to mine helped me develop an intimate, practical, and embodied understanding of the work. It also created a space for a camaraderie, mutual trust, and friendship which facilitated my ethnographic endeavor. Quotidian interactions, informal conversations, and deepening relationships created interpersonal feelings of affect. It helped build confidences which are the truck and trade of ethnography. It helped me learn both what is important and what to ask (and not ask) about. It gave me an opportunity to meet miners, and was a ready, intelligible explanation for my presence. It helped me build the human connections and develop the social competencies necessary to live. The fact that I became an enthusiastic, if ultimately incompetent and inexpert miner, helped me become aware of what was important to miners, while also giving me some of the habits required to navigate everyday tasks. In addition, if the men and women who worked at their mines all day assumed the role of skilled experts, I assumed the role of their novice, someone to be taught and protected. This inversion of knowledge and power was notable because, too often, outsiders and visiting researchers would arrive unexpectedly in the late afternoons, just as miners were returning from the bush the most tired and dirty. By working alongside them, by being as tired and as dirty, my research became more legible. Everyone knew what my method was because they saw me doing it. I also read. I read newspapers, magazines, archival documents, websites, and a burgeoning literature on mining in Latin America. Once I had finished fieldwork in 2012, I spent a year reading company reports, financial statements, and websites of companies based in Canada with

Landry, “Moving to Learn”; Lindsay “Hand Drumming”; Palsson “Enskilment at Sea”; Wacquant, “Carnal Connections.”
projects in the Chocó, as well as activists’ reports and newspaper articles.

I had first met Leidy in November 2010, in the town of Paimadó at a workshop organized by a non-governmental organization funded by a European development agency. We had taken a long canoe ride with a dozen others to Paimadó, which was being washed away by illegal dredging operations owned by Brazilian small-scale miners. The national news magazine had covered the story many times, demonizing the dredges and their owners. A decade later, things in Paimadó were far worse. More dredging, more damage, and more stories, which made it, by all accounts, an unfolding environmental disaster.

Most recent accounts focus on the largest mines owned by multinational corporations: issues of corporate social responsibility, social license, social movement opposition, and the damage to the environment are center stage. This is the case in the research on “neo-extractivism” in Latin America. What this literature misses, though, is that much of the gold mined each year comes from what are called small-scale and artisanal operations. After all, this shiny, glittering metallic element has shaped the world for a long time.4

Gold is a financial instrument, a commodity and a holder of wealth. Estimates are that there are about 171,300 tons of it in the world, with 52,000 tons still to be mined worth a total monetary value of US$9 trillion.5 Gold has a role in international finance, with a relationship between investments in gold and stock market collapses. Gold is imagined as a safe investment

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5 Prior, “How Much Gold is There in the World?”
and a place to put money when all else fails. Gold plays a role as a hedge on the center of the international economy. Gold is the commodity currency of choice for metal-heads, libertarians, drug traffickers, and the rest. Prices are set by a handful of banks overlooking the foggy River Thames in the city of London. This book is not about any of that. Instead, it is about what happened when prices reached US$1,900 a Troy ounce in 2011, which smashed records set in the early 1980s, to shape a way of life on a river in western Colombia as thousands of men and machines began to set up jungle camps and as multinational corporations began to explore for new projects.

Focusing either just on large-scale operations or on the ways that gold is used, suffers from three distinct problems. First, it ends up considering not the here and now, but a subjunctive tense—the potential and the future disasters that large-scale projects portend, rather than what is already happening. Considering what a large-scale mine might do is a different task than documenting what artisanal and small-scale mines have done. Yet, in 2012, fears were of future mines, not already existing mines. Second, it ends up taking for granted where the value itself is produced and accumulated in the mining industry, rather than considering how gold embeds in wider relations of trade and finance. Third, it ends up emphasizing the boom-then-bust of resource projects, rather than all of the impacts of a project before they actually come online. Small-scale and artisanal miners reshape landscapes, riverscapes, and lives, even as value in the process can come from under the ground and from the more immaterial global machinations of contemporary capitalism, both legal and illegal. After all, as the following pages show, physical gold is used to launder drug money while the idea of gold supports speculative mining projects.

6 Baur and McDermott, “Is Gold a Safe Haven?” 7 Chrispin, “How is the Price of Gold Set?”
The gulley where Leidy stood in the mud had been worked by the three women because it was a family endeavor. Leidy’s father had died the year before, electrocuted in an accident while he was fixing an electrical transmission line that connected his village through many kilometers of primary rainforest. Leidy kept a picture of him in an open casket in her front room. That morning, where we worked, the excavators had moved on, and the three women were after the little metal that was left behind. While their work had the potential of a lucky strike, mostly it gave them a little extra, which—along with cash transfer payments for mothers brought in by the Colombian government by helicopter from a military base and a shifting rebusque, which consisted of different short-term hustles—helped Leidy to support her family. The three women in the gully were a tiny example of the much larger phenomena that was sweeping their river and the region.

During the heady days of the rising prices in the late 2000s and early 2010s, illegal and informal small-scale operations expanded throughout the Chocó and other regions, including the Lower Cauca, the South of Bolivar, and Nariño. But this mining was often of an altogether different degree than the manual labors of Leidy and her family. The evidence was all around. Talk turned to stories of lucky strikes, easy money, and fortunes made and lost. A parish priest had saved a church from one village before the village itself was erased from the landscape by earth movers owned by outsiders, who may have been invited in by the villagers. Plazas in front of country schools were metamorphosed into holes that became ponds to farm fish. Trucks crawled over the Andes hauling collapsed excavators with yellow signs that read “Wide Load.”

Leidy and her sister and her mother and most of the rest of the population of the Chocó are the descendants of the escaped or manumissioned enslaved men and women brought from Africa to mine in those jungles. The other 10% or so are Indigenous Emberá communities or the
mestizo population. If tales of El Dorado had brought the Spanish to open the veins of Latin America looking for minerals, it was gold from Colombia and silver from Mexico and Potosí which were the basis of the Spanish colonial wealth.\textsuperscript{8} In the same way, mining shaped the settlement patterns of Colonial Colombia. Hundreds of years ago, today’s settled areas were agricultural zones growing food to feed the slave gangs of the mining regions.\textsuperscript{9} In the 2000s, the promise of fast cash lured outsiders to the Chocó from the neighboring provinces of Antioquia to escape violence and find gold and garimpeiro miners from Brazil who had run out of the metal in the Amazon. I heard rumors of Korean, Chinese, and Americans who had lost money in the business of supplying heavy machinery and had turned to digging with excavators.

The scale (and apparent acceptance) of the mining I witnessed used to be the exception. Highly mechanized operations arrived with the Chocó Pacific Mining Company in the middle part of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{10} In the 1960s, in one town, dozens of members of a community came out to protest the New York-based company with machetes because the company wanted to dredge a cemetery.\textsuperscript{11} By 2010, many of the machines I saw were owned by outsiders, and yet had been invited in by local families. What had changed? Why did some families support such endeavors? Why did others not?

When talking about mining it is easy to fall to stereotypes. Illegal miners are the biggest source of profits for armed groups; miners are involved in trafficking cocaine; miners are the cause of an unfolding environmental disaster. The story is more complex, however. By 2013, the miners who used heavy machinery and excavators were occupying an airport and organizing marches against state repression. While their mines were being made illegal, the projects of

\textsuperscript{8} Galeano, Open Veins.
\textsuperscript{9} West, Colonial Placer Mining.
\textsuperscript{10} Daniel de vera
\textsuperscript{11} Escalante, La Minería Del Hambre.
foreign multinational corporations were being supported by the Colombian state. The Chocó had a disaster, as high levels of mercury contamination damaged rivers, fish stocks, and human health, and as poor families opened up their mines to bring in the heavy machines to extract whatever they could.

There may be little that is wholly unique about the ways the boom reshaped the Chocó, however. Similar rushes have occurred around the world. Accounts of the Amazon in the 1980s where thousands descended on remote jungle camps read eerily similarly. Stories from Venezuela in the 1980s tell of illegal miners murdering Indigenous communities and destroying rivers. Peru’s Madre Dios region is another example, as is the way coltan is mined from the fields of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Artisanal and small-scale miners work mines in northern Miramar, while rivers in Indonesia are featured in Hollywood movies. The Discovery Channel has a reality show of miners in the Canadian Yukon and Alaska. There is a global gold rush, which in many places is being demonized. Globally, it is easy to paint all miners with the same brush, making this illegal and informal industry the biggest threat to rivers around the world. But this misses the quotidian lived experience of such mining.

By 2018, millions around the world make a living mixing digging for gold with farming, hunting, slash-and-burn agriculture, temporary work, out-migration, and other activities. Some of the poorest and most marginalized around the world have traded their machetes for shovels to become extractive peasants. The Chocó’s is far from an isolated gold rush, but it is one in which the particular matters. While what was unfolding can be seen as a catastrophic form of uncontrolled illegal and informal extractive activities, the industry also provided a livelihood—like it did for Leidy, her mother, and her sister that afternoon. It is this contradiction which makes

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12 On these various gold rushes, see …
it so urgent to understand the perspectives of the miners themselves.

I take such a perspective in the following pages, but mining is just one part of the story. There are other parts. Rural families have watched their ways of life come under attack from cocaine trafficking, from government corruption, and from illegal logging. The Chocó is a key route for coca production and cocaine shipments from the interior to the Pacific Ocean and north to Central America on their way to the US. In this, the most impoverished region in Colombia, many live on as little as a dollar a day. Access to food is insecure, work is scarce, and flooding, war, natural disaster, and the ongoing search for a livelihood displace people from their territories in riverine valleys to the cities and other areas of highland Colombia. The population of a million or so Black descendants of enslaved women and men brought from Africa and of dozens of Indigenous communities and mestizo settlers have experienced the boom times in different ways. This book is about how the miners (who I knew best) experienced the gold rush.

This book follows six or so “mines”—some worked by Black miners who mix gold production using hand tools and techniques with various livelihood strategies; others worked by miners from other regions of Colombia who deploy heavy machinery and mercury as ways to accumulate cash; others that may or may not be mines at all and are instead used to support money laundering or as speculative investments that can transform value—over six chapters, divided into three parts. Part One dwells on the artisanal production of two mines worked using hand tools and techniques embedded in a dual-household economy. Part Two considers small-scale accumulation, focusing on another mine owned by a Black family who decided to invite in outsiders. Part Three turns to the intersections of gold with forms of value transformation and global connections through cocaine money laundering and stock market speculation. These three parts follow connections out from a rural way of life in the Colombian Pacific to places far beyond the Chocó through the networks of the drug trade and speculative capitalism. Throughout
it all, each chapter always returns to a place and the lived experience of men and women like Leidy and her neighbors, who find a living through their *rebusque*.

Taken together, the stories tell of unexpected resilience—of muddling along and finding creative ways to confront the lack of opportunity through their various forms of *rebusque*. Gold becomes one strategy among others. It is an integral part of place-based livelihood and a way of life that is both supported by and threatened by the arrival of outsider-owned excavators and dredges. The metal offers a path towards a livelihood, even as it is contingent, contradictory and precarious. The path has dramatic economic and environmental consequences, which may be why, for decades, the response of the Colombian governments has been to criminalize certain types of small-scale and artisanal mines. Without downplaying environmental and social costs, in particular, its gendered and racialized impacts where Black women are especially marginalized, the book explores complex forms of livelihood to offer different narratives of living in a gold rush. The first part of the book focuses on artisanal mines, the second on small-scale mines, and the third on a different scale than production and accumulation where the yellow metal facilitates the transformation of value either through gold-based money laundering by narcotraffickers or through speculation by Canadian mining companies.

This book is an account of learning how to mine. It is an ethnography of a gold rush, and it is awash with description and analysis. It draws on real people, actual places, and true happenings, although I have afforded some anonymity to the living and dead. Fictitious names protect the identities of miners, their families, and other non-public figures. Full names, however, are real. While I write about real places—mines, villages, and towns—and while the rivers have their own bends and curves and particularities, they shall remain nameless in a nod towards protecting those who still live there. I have adopted generic terms for villages and rivers and other real places for the same reasons. Events I observed occurred on the river I know best in September
2010, between November 2010 and April 2012, in September 2013, in October 2014, and in May 2017. The dialogue in quotations are translations reconstructed after the fact from jottings, or, in a few cases, from transcriptions of digital recordings of interviews. I took notes immediately after conversations or in the days and weeks that followed them. While I recorded some interviews and conversations with an audio recorder, most dialogue comes from my imperfect rendition made from notes written after the fact.

Photographs open and close each chapter. Each photograph expresses not an illustration of the text, but an additional layer of meaning. Each invites its own story, which serves to enrich the wider interpretations I offer.

The following pages are a revision of my doctoral dissertation. An earlier version of Chapter Three appeared in *The Extractive Industries and Society Journal*, a version of Chapter Five was published as an article in *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, and further reflections appear in an edited volume on the Black social economy.¹⁴

[preface.02]

Figure 4:

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