Dear Agrarian Studies Friends,

As with all the colloquium papers, what I am sending is a snapshot of a work in progress. It is a draft of one of a series of three articles that build on my doctoral fieldwork. After finishing revisions, I plan to seek publication in a suitable journal. The other two papers explore gold-based money laundering and rural subsistence production. This paper addresses the relationship between artisanal and small-scale miners. Unfortunately, the paper's title has changed from what I sent you earlier. Nonetheless, the themes I address remain similar. As it is still very much a work in flux, I look forward to your comments, questions, and reflections. In particular: What is unclear? What warrants further elaboration? What are other directions you think I might take the paper? Finally, I would appreciate any of your suggestions for further reading.

Best,

Daniel

"If I am going to drown, at least I will save my hat": Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining in the Chocó, Colombia

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Abstract: As world gold prices rose between 2002 and 2012, Afro-descendant artisanal miners in the Chocó department of Colombia were confronted by a gold rush of illegal small-scale mining. In this article, I examine the ways artisanal miners mediate their relationships with newly arrived small-scale miners. I show that while conventional wisdom suggests these relationships are coercive, artisanal miners sometimes invite outsiders onto their land. The reasons they do this include familial pressure, profit sharing, high gold prices, access to gold, and a desire to minimize danger. Thus, this article shows that though these arrangements often produce worse than expected outcomes, the relationships between artisanal miners and small-scale miners are not simply coercive.

Keywords: Small-scale and artisanal gold mining; Afro-descendant communities; the Chocó; Colombia.

"Do you want to go in?" Esteban[2] asked with a grin. I peered into the dark mineshaft, "To help?" "Noooo," he replied. The "o" rose and faded slowly. He added, "To see what is inside?" His teasing goaded me in. The walls were a mixture of sand, dirt, gravel, small pebbles, and stones embedded in a dense blue-gray earth. The color indicated the presence of gold. The earth caked our boots and left our skin gray. Water dripped from the walls. It flowed over the bedrock floor and down the tunnel to a depression in the entrance where Esteban's son Marco bailed it. The water flowed into the hollow as fast as he could remove it. Esteban, Marco and others like them called the bedrock the 'skull of the earth.'

The bedrock was a barely perceptibly sloping floor. As Esteban and I went deeper, candles replaced the reassuring daylight of the tunnel entrance, the temperature rose, and I began to sweat profusely. Esteban, his mother, a brother, an uncle, their wives, and their children worked here with excitement born of the fact the mine was producing gold. This extended family had dug the winding tunnel 20-meters underground over six months. They dug to follow the gold into the hillside.

Illustration 1: Map of Colombia

Thousands of rural Afro-descendant artisanal miners in the northwest Colombian Pacific department[3] of the Chocó use similar techniques. Like Esteban's family, they dig tunnels or pits and work the rich alluvial gravels near the rivers that flow from the western Cordillera of the Colombian Andes north or southwest through the Chocó's thick forests into either the Caribbean or the Pacific.

Six months later, Esteban's family and panned for gold at the same location. The tunnel, however, was gone. In its place, a misty morning sun revealed four large excavators. Two brothers from the neighboring region of Antioquia owned the machines. They had removed the entire hillside down to the bedrock in order to open up the area where the tunnel had been. This small-scale mine was a highly mechanized operation, consisting of the excavators, a three-story metal classifier, and two truck motors—their diesel power provided water to the mine. With the help of these machines, the twelve migrant workers employed by the two brothers had the same job as the artisanal miners: dig down to the bedrock and wash for gold. But, while Esteban's family used gravity to sort gold from the earth, these small-scale miners used the toxic mercury.

Hundreds of small-scale mining operations began to arrive to the Chocó in 2008 from other regions of Colombia, especially Antioquia. These new arrivals cleared trees, mined gold, and carved large brown and gray scars in the forest landscape. World gold prices increased 400% between 2002 and 2012. Over the same period, there was an explosive growth in small-scale and artisanal gold mining. Seccatore et al. (2014) estimate that the sector employs 16 million people around the world. Hilton (2002, p. 1) defines artisanal mining as "intense labor activity located in remote and isolated sites using rudimentary techniques and low technological knowledge, low degree of mechanization, and low levels of environmental, health and safety awareness." This

definition applies to the work of Afro-descendant miners in the Chocó.[7] Often, small-scale miners worked land that Afro-descendant families like Esteban's had once mined using artisanal techniques. In this article, I consider why Afro-descendant artisanal miners sometimes welcomed small-scale miners onto their family land.

Specifically, I address why Esteban and his family asked small-scale miners to work their land. I draw on eighteen months' ethnographic fieldwork laboring as an artisanal and small-scale gold miner. I worked—unpaid—with the artisanal and small-scale miners in Esteban's village. I did what miners did. I woke up before dawn, threw stones until early afternoon, moved water, hauled fuel, dug trenches, spent brief periods underground, and generally tried to be helpful. I was an enthusiastic learner and developed a proficiency in small aspects of mining. Tasks, which initially seemed exceedingly difficult, became mundane. I became skilled at the rapid movements needed to remove stones quickly enough to be useful. Clearing stones and gravel from sluices was physically demanding work. Its monotony required patience. I never, however, mastered the other aspects of mining; I stayed a student. Still, through this labor-based ethnography, I gained an appreciation for different kinds of gold mining.

This methodology provided me with access to artisanal and small-scale miners in one of Colombia's poorest and most conflicted regions. At first, I focused on the physically demanding techniques of gold mining using wooden pans and hand tools. This work gave to Esteban's family and other miners their livelihoods. The money they earned selling flecks of gold complemented their subsistence gardening, hunting, and fishing. Later, I found that artisanal and small-scale miners interacted in ways that complicated standard narratives of illegal mining in the Chocó. In this article, I contend artisanal miners invited small-scale miners to work their land

for several reasons including pressure from family, profit sharing, high gold prices, greater access to gold, and concern over dangerous working conditions.

To understand these reasons, I draw on and contribute to two literatures: The first is the recent work on the new extractivism and community mine conflicts in Latin America (cf. Bebbington et al., 2008; Bebbington & Bury, 2014; Gudynas, 2010). The second is the growing literature on small-scale and artisanal mining (cf. Hilson, 2002; Hilson & McQuilken, 2014; Seccatore, Veiga, Origliasso, Marin, & De, Giorgi, 2014; Siegel, 2013; Verbrugge, 2014). In the context of a global boom in artisanal and small-scale mining and community mine conflicts across Latin America, this article offers an ethnographic account of gold mining in the Chocó.

I begin by describing how Afro-descendant communities in the Colombian Pacific have legally recognize collective land tenure. I show that despite this legal recognition in practice extended family kinship groups own lots (*lotes*), including gardens, fruit stands, and gold mines. These extended family kinship groups often invite small-scale miners onto their lots, sometimes against the wishes of the broader community. Second, I address the ways individual households labor in reciprocal work groups to extract gold. While artisanal miners share profits only among themselves, small-scale miners pay extended family groups a percentage of the gold they extract. In consequence, many family members forcibly displaced to the city by war support small-scale miners because they will receive a share of the profit. Next, I show how high gold prices meant artisanal miners wanted to quickly extract the gold that they felt was on their land. Fourth, I show how because artisanal miners rely on physically demanding extraction techniques, they are often happy to invite small-scale miners to access gold they could not get any other way. Finally, I show how artisanal miners prefer to shift dangerous mine work onto outsiders. I conclude by

reflecting on how the reality of these partnerships often fell short of the desires of the Afro-descendant miners, which underscores an ultimately unequal dynamic between artisanal and small-scale miners.

The Literature on Latin America Extractivism and Small-Scale and Artisanal Mining

Commodity prices rose around the world between 2002 and 2014. In part, this resulted in rapid growth in the number of resource extraction projects linked to ideas of national development across Latin America. Some countries pursued state-led mining and hydrocarbon projects. Others adopted legal regimes that promoted foreign direct investment in large-scale projects. Gudynas (2008, 2010) calls this linkage between resource extraction and national development policies the 'new extractivism.' The term describes the latest twist in a long history of Latin American states depending on natural resource exports. In this, Gudynas is part of a growing literature that has engaged with the continent's growth in extractive industries (cf. North, Patroni, & Clark, 2006).

Numerous scholars have described resource projects creating conflicts with nearby communities. Many scholars focus on conflicts between mining companies based on Canadian stock markets and Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and peasant communities in different countries. Bebbington et al. (2008) describe two such mining conflicts. The first is a Canadian exploration project in Ecuador. The second is a large-scale mine in Peru. In both cases, some community members supported mining, while others oppose it. Bebbington and Bury (2014) conduct an overview of similar community and mine conflicts across the continent. They describe community struggles over mineral and hydrocarbons in many countries, with the notable exceptions of Brazil, Chile, Venezuela, and Colombia. Helwege (2015) offers a similar broad

survey of conflicts between communities and mines across the continent. She focuses on the barriers impeding the resolution of these conflicts. She argues their solutions lie in recognizing the rights of mine-affected communities.

There are many community mine conflicts in Colombia.[6] Each has generated an extensive literature that engages with concerns over prior consultation; free, prior, and informed consent; and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Weitzner (2011) describes processes of prior and informed consent with Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities. While Suescun et al. (2015) address perceptions from professionals in Latin America that see CSR as at best a tentatively positive solution to community mine conflicts. McNeish and Logan (2012) bring together work on hydrocarbon projects around the world. They suggest the impacts of extractive projects are not universally positive or negative, but rather depend on institutional frameworks. Nonetheless, in Colombia, most of the projects that have generated the most concern over prior and informed consent and CSR from community members, their allies, and outside observers have yet to produce any gold.

In the case of an earlier resource boom in Indonesia in the 1990s, Tsing (2000, 2004) brilliantly unpacks the future orientation of mining. She conducts a postmortem of the Bre-X scandal. The Calgary-based Canadian company Bre-X committed a massive investment fraud based on a proposed mine in the jungles of Borneo. It claimed to have found one of the world's largest gold deposits. The deposits never existed, insiders faked the core samples, and the mine itself was nothing more than potentiality Yet, it contributed to what Tsing calls the economy of appearances at the core of international speculation and investment. Luning (2014) notes this future-orientation is characteristic of many proposed large-scale mining projects. By this, she

means that mining engenders both hopes and fears in supporters and critics alike. Welker (2009) describes community relationships to a mining company through her description of transnational advocacy networks in Indonesia. Here, these future possibilities and dangers of mining generate community support and opposition. The boom in resource extraction in Latin America and Colombia has this future orientation; in this context, I offer an ethnographic account of community relationships with actually existing mining.

The Chocó hosts several Canadian junior mining company exploration projects and yet the small-scale mining industry has a much greater day-to-day impact—though it receives far less discussion. While Wegenast and Basedau (2013) address the relationship between Canadian junior mining companies and artisanal and small-scale mining in Mali, they do not address community relationships with small-scale mining. Little work that focuses on community relationships with mining explores these relationships with small-scale gold mining. This is important because while the Colombian government has encouraged foreign investment in the mining sector, almost all existing gold mining in the country is artisanal and small-scale. The 2010–2014 National Development Plan called on large-scale mining to become one of the pillars of the economy (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2010). Colombia criminalized its pre-existing small-scale mining industries with legislative reforms in 2001. Vélez-Torres (2014) describes this as a shift in the government's extractivist agenda. She shows how the state supports a neoliberal extractivism by foreign multinationals and ethnic territorial rights, yet opposes small-scale mining. Vélez-Torres and Varela (2014) argue the state extractivist project of promoting foreign multinational mining firms contrasted another form of more paternalistic capitalism undertaken by small-scale operations. They describe the violent results in the

community of La Toma in the Cauca, where small-scale mining brought violence associated with armed actors that hurt Afro-descendant artisanal mining communities.

For more than half a century, Colombia has been home to a complex armed conflict between left-wing guerrillas, right-wing paramilitary, and the state. Government officials report that gold is now more profitable for Colombia's armed actors than cocaine (Willis, 2013). Idrobo et al. (2014) quantify the effects of illegal small-scale mining on the conflict across Colombia. Drawing on official sources, they find a relationship between small-scale mining, an increase in homicides, and the presence of armed groups. Women feel the impacts of the conflict most because it disarticulates rural livelihood strategies (e.g. Tovar-Restrepo and Irazábal, 2014). Cohen (2014) gives a fine-grained analysis of gender relations among miners in the Lower Cauca region of Antioquia, the most important mining area. Brazeal (2014) observes that some of the accounts of emerald mining in Colombia repeat tropes of traveling into the 'heart of darkness'—an observation that applies to journalistic accounts of small-scale mining (cf. Hoyos, 2012; Semana, 2013). Nonetheless, much of the literature on small-scale mining in Colombia fails to address the nuances of the daily relationships between artisanal and small-scale miners and instead relies on a narrative of coercive violence.

The burgeoning literature on artisanal and small-scale mining in different parts of Africa suggests another approach. Seccatore et al. (2014) estimate that artisanal and small-scale miners produce between 380 and 450 tonnes of gold a year globally. Nyame and Grant (2014) draw on interviews and participant observation to explore some of the decision making of small-scale and artisanal miners in northern Ghana. They describe agreements with local people and communities alongside the violence, armed actors, and conflicts that coexist with mining. They

argue these informal and highly physically demanding forms of mineral extraction play a role in the region's economic development. Working in Ghana, Hilson and James (2014) reflect on the importance of formalizing this economy because of the possibility for it to reduce poverty. Gamu et al. (2015) provide a meta-analysis of 52 articles over fifteen years, and find no evidence of universal impacts of extractive industries on poverty. Hilson and McQuilken (2014) argue public policy debates around small-scale and artisanal mining draw on generalizations about the sector. Spiegel (2014) describes the Zimbabwean government's crackdown on small-scale miners, in which the government imprisoned tens of thousands miners. In Madagascar, Andrew Walsh (2012) discusses the relationships between artisanal sapphire mining and eco-tourism. He links environmental protection discourses and artisanal mining to the commodification of stones and landscapes. Verbrugge (2014) addresses relationships between elite miners and other kinds of miners in the Philippines. Spiegel (2014) describes two gold mines in Cambodia. He argues about a need to consider mining as a form of land usage more than mere relationships of industrial labor. Inspired by this work, I offer in this article an analysis of small-scale and artisanal mining in Colombia from an ethnographic perspective.

McNeish (2013) uses ethnographic work in Bolivia to describe a police attack on Indigenous protests over a mining project. He explores the tense relationship between state support of extractivism and Indigenous resistance. The article questions many contemporary discussions of Indigeneity, which take for granted their opposition to resource extraction. He reminds us that earlier ethnographic work showed that Indigenous communities had long histories with extractivism. In her classic ethnographic account, Nash (1993 [1979]) describes Bolivian tin miners and how they mediated their labor with the supernatural. Taussig (1980)

explored rural capitalism and the devil with Colombian sugarcane cutters and Bolivian miners. Later, Taussig (2004) explored similar themes in relation to the small-scale and artisanal mining in the Southern Pacific region of Colombia. Nash and Taussig provide a foundation for the anthropological literature on mining, which Ballard and Banks (2003) and Godoy (1985) review.

Some of the literature on the Chocó engages with these relationships between rural Afro-descendant communities and mining. While Jaramillo (2014) provides insights into the challenges faced by Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities in the Chocó from the impacts of war and natural resource extraction, there is a space for more discussion of community mine relationships. Luning (2014) explores the Green Gold project of the Dutch based Good Gold Campaign, a fair trade gold project with artisanal Afro-descendant mining communities in the Chocó. She argued the project relied on the idea that small is beautiful and trapped artisanal miners in arduous working conditions. There remains, nonetheless, space for more engagement with those labor conditions.

John-Andrew McNeish and Owen Logan (2012) point out the need for empirically grounded work on resource extraction. Often, analysis about mining in Latin America focuses on narratives in which communities oppose mining. In Colombia, similar narratives link small-scale mining to the country's ongoing conflict. In this article, I use labor-based ethnography to offer an additional analysis of artisanal and small-scale mining without disputing these narratives. I adopt the perspective of the growing literature on small-scale and artisanal mining in Africa by addressing relationships between artisanal and small-scale miners on an actually existing mine. Rather than addressing future mining projects, CSR, and prior and informed consent, I focus on the practice of artisanal and small-scale mining. Despite the fact that Colombia has encouraged

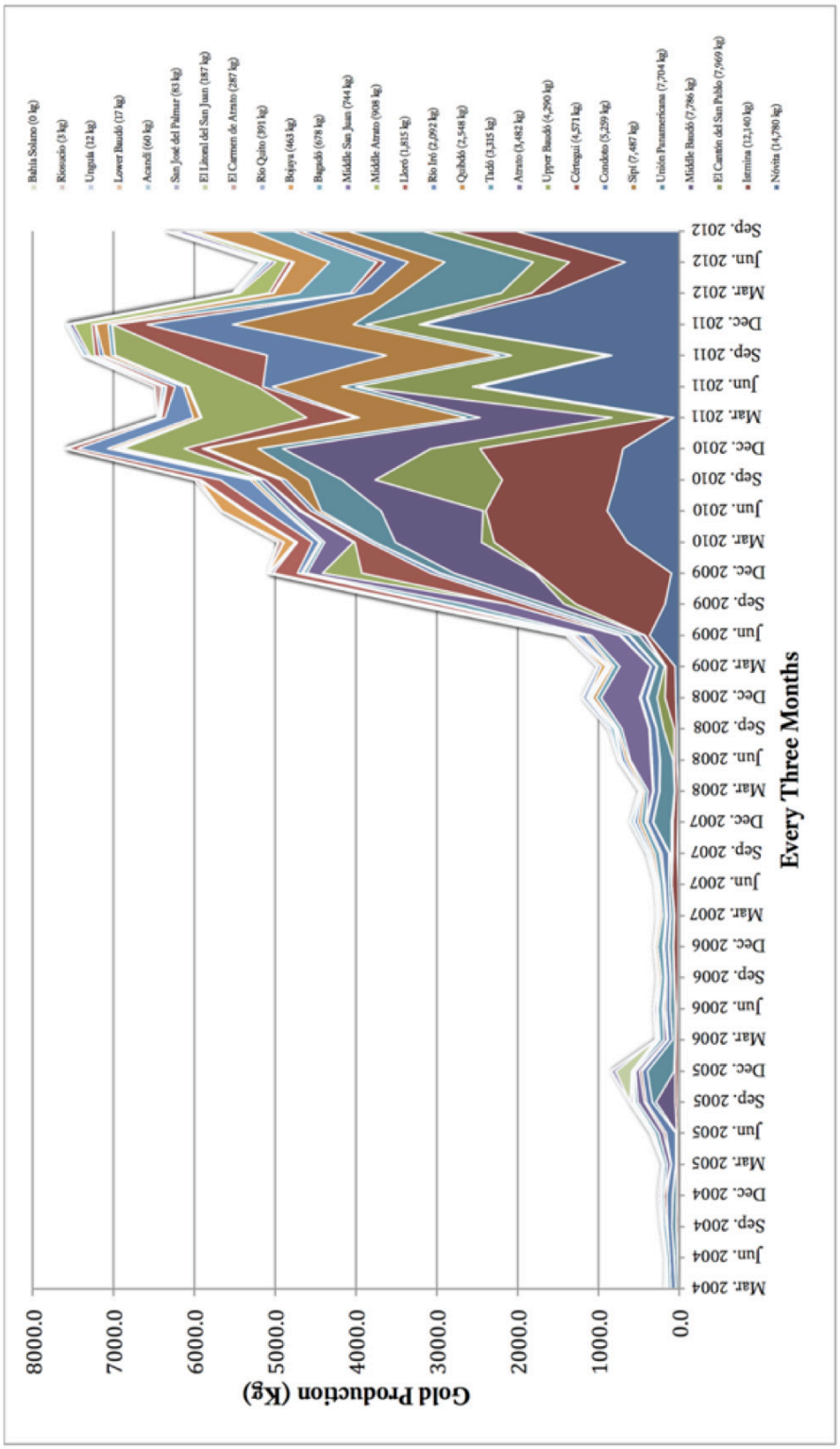
foreign direct investment in mining, most miners remain small-scale and artisanal. While much of the analysis of large-scale mining relies on narratives of exploration and expropriation, little of the recent literature engages with the perspectives of other kinds of miners. In this article, I explore Afro-descendant artisanal gold miners' decision-making processes to better understand their relationships to small-scale miners. Like McNeish (2013), I problematize facile narratives of community mine opposition based on ethnic identity to explore why artisanal miners ask excavators onto their land.[4]

Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining in the Chocó

While outsider owned, small-scale, highly mechanized, informal, and illegal gold mining has existed there since the 1980s, gold production increased markedly in the Chocó in 2008 (See Illustration 2). According to official government figures, gold production rose 2,000% over a three-month period in some municipalities (SIMCO, 2013). Gold became a billion dollar industry essentially overnight. That year, the Chocó—one of Colombia's poorest departments with some of the highest levels of malnutrition and violence—became Colombia's second largest gold producer (SIMCO, 2013). Much of this small-scale mining happened on mines where Afro-descendant miners had worked.

The workers on the small-scale mines came to the scattered mining camps amid thick and hilly tropical forests to seek their fortunes. There, many found bad wages, insecure conditions, and dangerous work. They used large excavators and floating dredges that destroyed wide swaths of forest and reshaped rivers. They also used mercury to extract gold. The resulting contamination from the toxic heavy metal affected human health and the environment. While the Chocó's population is 90% Afro-descendant, most small-scale mining operations were owned by

Illustration 2: Municipal Gold Production in the Chocó (2004–2012)



outsider. While some came from Brazil, most were *paisas* from the Lower Cauca mining region of the neighboring department of Antioquia. Although the Colombian term *paisa* generally refers to someone from Antioquia or the western Coffee producing departments (cf. Roldán, 2004; Appelbaum, 2003), in the Chocó the term colloquially describes any white or *mestizo* person not from the Chocó. Rural Afro-descendant people used the term *paisa to* describe small-scale miners, settlers, other migrants, and me—a white Canadian anthropologist.

In the Chocó, activists and church officials were concerned over the relationship between artisanal and small-scale miners. A Catholic Priest answered my question about why artisanal miners let small-scale miners onto their land by saying that miners say, "If I am going to drown, at least I will save my hat. The excavators might exploit me, but at least I get a little before I die. If they are going to come with legal businesses and finish everything anyway, then at least I can get a share first by bringing in the excavators." In the Priest's explanation, miners saw themselves as threatened by inevitable large-scale projects supported by the Colombian government. In the face of this inevitability, the Priest said miners believed inviting the excavators offered a chance to save something. People felt, the Priest suggested, that if they waited too long, someone else would exploit their land without their consent.

Another common perception among activists was the artisanal miners were coerced, or faced the threat of violence if they did not let small-scale miners onto their land. While I have no doubt there are many cases where this occurs—and that armed actors often pressure locals to let small-scale mining operations onto their land—it was not the case in my own ethnographic experience. While I worked only on a few mines, coercion was not the most useful word to describe the relationship between artisanal and small-scale miners. On the one hand, the

guerrillas supported some communities in opposing mining on their land, even as they extorted small-scale miners in other communities. In addition, Esteban and his family were excited with the arrival of the excavators to their family mine. In the weeks before the miners arrived, Esteban spoke of their negotiations and their percentages. The family saw the arrival of small-scale miners as an opportunity. In the remainder of the article, I dwell on why they invited two *paisa* brothers with their four excavators to work their mine. This takes me back to the Esteban's mine.

Land Tenure: Family Lots in Collective Territory

I followed Esteban along the tunnel's gentle curve to the left. The candles cast a small circle of light amid the gloom. Esteban and his family had been laboring for weeks in short shifts working slowly to extend the tunnel into the hillside. As my eyes adjusted, the dim shapes of the workers sharpened and became clear. One such shape, Esteban's 17-year-old nephew Ernesto, loaded an old wheelbarrow with a mixture of material piled on the bedrock. He pushed the load out of the tunnel and brought it to a small temporary pond 20-meters from the entrance. By the water, he skillfully spun and rocked the material in a pan. This was how he checked the blue earth for gold. With Ernesto outside the tunnel, Esteban began to fill another wheelbarrow with earth. When he was done, his son Marco stopped bailing water for a moment and pushed that wheelbarrow out to join Ernesto by the pond. Sofía, Esteban's mother and their grandmother, watched them both. She worked barefoot—for comfort.

Still in the mine and deeper, I watched Esteban's uncle Rodrigo work with a pick, a scraper, and his hands to fill a pan with material. He used these tools to break up the material and piled it for the others to carry out. Moving past him, I passed the last of the candlelight. The temperature rose further, and my body soaked itself with sweat. In the darkness, I saw a faint

outline of Esteban's brother, 'The Chief,' crouched and picking at the wall with a metal bar. The darkness and dancing shadows made his work hard to follow. He raised the long metal bar and smashed it down on the tunnel wall to loosen the stones. He used a metal claw to scrape the loosened material into a pan for Rodrigo. Soon, 'The Chief' stopped picking the wall here to take someone else's job: bailing the water, filling a wheelbarrow, pushing it out, or washing for gold. Each person took turns at each task for short half-hour shifts. Uncomfortable and claustrophobic, I left the tunnel with the next wheelbarrow.

Outside, near where Ernesto and Marco had been panning, I asked Sofía, "How long have you been working here?" She replied, "I have worked the mine for forty years. I raised my kids here. Now, I collaborate with my grandchildren." While she had worked this area for decades, and most recently with her grandson Ernesto, her sons, grandchildren, and brother had come together to extend the tunnel together for only six months. They knew the mine had more gold, but they were getting worried by the dangers of extending the tunnel much further. It was already very deep, and they knew that mine accidents were common.

Even as they still mined, Esteban, 'The Chief,' and Rodrigo were excited to be negotiating with two *paisa* cousins from Antioquia who had four excavators. Esteban, 'The Chief', and Rodrigo wanted to bring the machines back to their family mine to remove the entire hillside and dig down to the level of the bedrock. The three saw the excavators of José and Geraldo as opportunities extract the gold they could not reach with their own labor. Even though the family wanted the excavators, other people in the village did not think it was a good idea. It was, however, a family decision.

Many scholars have focused on the importance of collective territory for Afro-descendant

black communities (*comunidades negras*) in the Colombian Pacific. Black communities gained culturally based collective ethnic territorial rights following constitutional reforms in 1991 (Asher, 2009; Escobar, 2008). During the 1990s and 2000s, the Colombian state recognized collective, inalienable, and non-transferable legal ownership of collective territory by black communities. Over this period, hundreds of communities formed community councils across the Pacific region. While hundreds of such councils received collective title, many members of these communities still understood land as owned by family descent groups.

Family owners—like Sofía, her sons, and her grandchildren—were the people descended from the person or couple who had first opened the land. This act of opening the bush (*abriendo monte*) gave that original couple and their descendants a locally recognized claim to a lot. A lot refers to an area of bush, garden, or mine of perhaps a hectare or more in size. While there were no physical markers, maps, or deeds, people living near the river had a shared system to identify these lots. A ridge or a stand of fruit trees might mark the boundaries. A streambed could divide one lot from another. The lots were not contiguous, but were scattered along the river. A family might have a mine lot on one curve of the river, and then another with sugarcane a kilometer upstream. The river's geography, the soil conditions, the places that people worked, and kinship relations over time all shaped this pattern of lots. The physical settlement patterns of Afro-descendant families used to better reflect this land tenure system. Over the last twenty years, many families had left their lots and moved into small villages, but there were still some examples of scattered family-oriented settlement pattern.[8]

People moved into villages—or further afield to the city—because of flooding and forced displacement by paramilitary and guerrilla forces,. In Esteban's village, the owners of about ten

houses remained while the other half of the population had left for the city. Some of this was permanent—as people forcibly displaced to escape rural violence or terror induced by the threat of violence—but people also moved permanently in search of work in the city. Despite the massive migration, even absent families retained a locally recognized claim to their lots. Some people regularly returned to their family lots to plant crops, pick fruit, and to mine. The people who remained respected the family lots of the people who had left. When I asked Esteban why he did not visit neighboring lots, he said, "It is not my family's." When I asked whose lot it was, he said they had displaced down river to the city.

Lot ownership was collective at the level of the extended family. An extended family consists of blood relations of the children and grandchildren of the people who opened a particular lot. It did not extend through marriage, or to a broader collectivity community—although in some cases, the 'community' and the 'family' were the same. Still, people saw the question of what to do with these lots as family decisions. While black communities with legally recognized collective territories which often—but not always—opposed mining, at the level of family things were more complicated. While the collective titles provided a difficult to enforce legal protection from outsiders interested in logging or mining within the territory of the collective title, sometimes family members wanted the logging or mining to take place. It was intra-household family dynamics that shaped decisions on whether or not to bring in *paisa* miners. Within an extended family, there could diverse pressures to bring in miners. Different members of a family might or might not want to let outsiders onto their land. Some might wish small-scale miners to come, others might oppose. An important aspect of this was pressure from family members who had displaced to the city because artisanal-miners shared gold based on

reciprocal work groups, while small-scale miners shared profits based on lot ownership.

Labor-Based Profit Sharing and Lot-Based Profit Sharing

When I first arrived to the village with the idea of learning how to mine gold, nobody wanted my help. Esteban, for example, kept putting off when I could start because he did not want to pay me for my—admittedly dubious—labor contribution. When I explained I did not want payment, he saw my presence with better humor. Despite the fact that some of their extended family had come together in the months before the excavators came to work the tunnel, artisanal miners generally worked in immediate family groups. They share mine profits based on their household labor contribution, rather than based on the extended-family descent groups that owned the lots. Esteban would have felt obliged to share profits from the mine with me, but did not want to because the mine was so productive.

The previous year, Esteban, his wife, and their two sons had worked the hilltop far above the tunnel. There the concentration of gold was diffuse. While there was no single vein to follow, they used a diesel powered water pump to provide a high-pressure stream of water. This let them wash large swaths of the hillside over a sluice. Far below them, Sofía and her grandson Ernesto worked using pans and shovels in the area where the tunnel would be. Esteban's uncle Rodrigo and his brother 'The Chief' worked with their own households on other mines further up-river. In each case, the different household provided their own labor, and the profits stayed within the households. Only when it became clear that Sofía and Ernesto had found a vein into the hillside, did the four households come together to dig the tunnel.

As with the ownership of lots, artisanal miners did not mine gold as a community. While there were reciprocal community labor relations, e.g. undertaking construction projects like

rebuilding houses after floods, or repairing churches and schools, household production was at the level of the family. Afro-descendent miners shared gold with the people who contributed to its extraction. Like gardening, hunting, and fishing, artisanal mining was a household activity. Even when Esteban and the other households came together in the tunnel, they shared profits not with the extended family of dozens of other nephews, nieces, and sibling who had ownership claims to the lot, but with the households who actually worked in the tunnel.

When small-scale miners came onto a family's land, they neatly reversed this labor-based profit sharing. The small-scale miners with their excavators paid between 10% and 16% of gross-profits before mine expenses, e.g. diesel costs, machinery costs, labor costs, taxes, and extortion to armed groups, etc., to the co-owners (*co-dueños*). The co-owners were the members of the entire extended kinship family descent group who had a claim to a lot. The small-scale miners paid this percentage to the co-owners, and not merely people who had been working the mine.

Before the excavators arrived, I asked Marco what he would do when they got here. With a big grin, he said, "Nothing." His smile came from this contrast between a labor-based profit sharing and a lot-based profit sharing. In the former, he had to work hard underground. In the latter, he would receive a share of profits for doing nothing. This also applied to people who had a claim to the land, although they no longer lived there. While family members who displaced because of the conflict or to find work could not claim a share of the gold mined by artisanal miners, they could receive a share of what the small-scale miner found. Nevertheless, there were many examples of family members who had come back to the community to make sure they received their share of the mine. This might not be much money. Dividing 16% between a hundred extended family members might be the equivalent of a few-hundred dollars per person.

Another reason Esteban's family invited the excavators to mine their land was pressure from family members who lived in the city and who wanted a share of the gold while prices were high.

High Gold Prices and Subsistence Production

World gold prices broke records in 2011 when prices reached almost $2,000 a troy ounce. In the community, conversations regularly turned to these high prices. Esteban and his neighbours spent increasing amounts of time mining. While this was one of many activities they engaged in, it was their main source of cash. While Afro-descendant miners also garden, hunt, fish, and did other rural subsistence activities, one of the few ways they could make money was selling gold. Until the 1980s, people did sell their agricultural products in local towns on market days. They used to bring bananas, plantain, raw-sugar (*panela*), fruits, rice, etc. into town to sell. More recently, with urban prices for food too low, they could not compete with cheaper imports. Instead, they engaged in subsistence activities for household consumption and mined for cash.[9]

Artisanal miners sold gold in various ways. For people who could not easily travel, they traded gold in small-amounts to their neighbors. Those who could travel to nearby towns on Sunday mornings paid for supplies of cheese, crackers, rice, and oil with gold. In many small towns, shopkeepers had scales on their storefronts that indicated they accepted gold as payment. The most successful miners travelled to the nearest capital of Quibdó or Istmina where they sold gold at dedicated gold buying and selling pawnshops (*compra-ventas*). Whatever the first step, the gold buyers ultimately sold onto Medellín based foundries. The prices people received reflected the world price. Aware of the rapid rise in the price of gold over the decade, people worked increasingly hard at mining.

Mining comes in waves. In the 1980s and 1990s gold prices were low. Esteban and most men his age worked in logging. One of his neighbours remembered that holding a chainsaw all day and hauling lumber was much harder work than mining. Esteban worried gold prices might fall again, as had occurred in the past. If that happened, his son said that coca would come. With gold prices so high though, Esteban and his family wanted to get the gold they had on their land out.

Artisanal miners understood gold as a form of savings, their *ahorros*. They often had a small amount of jewelry, earrings, rings, and gold dust folded into paper envelopes which they kept in safe places. The *golds* (*oritos*) and the gold in the ground were their savings (*ahorros*). People understood gold as God given. Alberto Rivera and Stephen Gudeman (1990) describe peasants in the Colombian Andes as having a physiocratic understanding of wealth. Andean peasants saw the forests near their farms as their savings. By leaving their trees in the ground, they were building their savings. When they needed money, they could cut the trees and sell the timber. In a similar way, Afro-descendant miners understood the earth as providing wealth. Their mines were their savings. As gold prices rose and people were displaced, many wanted to withdraw their savings.

In an interview, a Catholic Priest elaborated the logic. He explained miners felt a *need* to get the gold out:

> If someone comes with machinery, they [artisanal miners] might say, 'We need the miners [small-scale miners with excavators] because we cannot leave the gold in the earth. We need to get the gold out.' It happens a lot. People here have no money and no jobs. But, they have their savings. When the excavators come they feel they have to get the gold out. They think, 'Today, we will get the gold out.' They ask, 'If we get everything out now, then we do not have to ask what they left us. We know they took everything out.' By doing that, they finish their savings.

The Priest saw the excavators as part of a broader gold rush mentality. When a family invited excavators to mine, they hoped to withdraw their savings while prices were high. For those who had been displaced, it was also a way of withdrawing their savings while they could—while there was heavy machinery to do it. The excavators solved the problem of speed in relation to high prices and the problem of access. When they felt there was gold twenty meters underground, they turned to *paisas* with their excavators to get gold they could not access any other way.

Small-Scale Mining as a Means to Access Gold

Ximena told me she used to carry stones on her back. The added weight helped her dive down to the river bottom where she collected mud and gravel in a wooden pan to carry back to shore. When she ran out of breath, she brought the pan ashore to wash. She explained that the stones let people get underwater to mine gold they could not mine other way. Working deep underwater was dangerous, and she said many women who held their breath too long lost their lives. More recently, men began to dive with compressors mounted on mini-dredges for the same reason and with the same consequences: It let them gain access, yet made the work dangerous.

I followed Julio. He was carrying diving gear from his village to a small mini-dredge he owned. He had in his arms a gray wetsuit with a peeling outer shell, a weighted belt, a black plastic diver's mask, a thin yellow rubber breathing tube, and a chewed-up mouthpiece. People called it a mini-dredges because it was mini in comparison to the massive dredging platforms some small-scale miners used. Julio had built the machine out of a metal platform about two-meters square attached to four large floating orange fiberglass pontoons. The machine had a motor at the back. It had a long sluice box on a 20-degree angle. It had a second motor attached

to a small gray air-compressor that filled a blue tank. A long thin air tube connected the tank to a diver underwater. Mini-dredges needed two people: one under water to mine and the other on the machine to watch the motor and air compressor. My plan for the day was to watch Julio and his partner dredge a stream.

In the morning, Julio's partner crouched in the water, which flowed cold and clear. He gently moved a thick tube that sucked up the riverbed. As he worked, he threw larger stones onto a pile on the shore. A deep hole emerged slowly at the bottom of the stream. From the shore, the task seemed almost easy because they used a suction tube to mine. The basic technique was using the tube to dig down to the bedrock in the middle of stream. As they went, they washed the material over the sluice on the mini-dredge. The suction worked in the following manner. The diesel-powered pump forced the water in one end of a thick tube. The tube connected to a steel cylinder that forced the water to double back at a 90-degree angle. The suction from the water doubling back created a powerful force that pulled water and gravel into the hole at the end of the metal cylinder. It steadily pulled sand, gravel, and small stones up from the bottom of the river and dumped the material onto the sluice on the mini-dredge. The machine worked so well, and the water and stones came out with such force, that a thick plastic cover kept the material from flying into the air.

In the afternoon, Julio switched places with his partner. As the day progressed, the hole that had been ankle deep became two-meters deep. Julio was so deep underwater that I could only see his feet. He passed stones up by holding them aloft over his head for his partner to take. He breathed through the air tube. The only signs of life were the bubbles floating from the depths. Julio's partner watched the motor and the air pump. Whenever Julio came up from the

water, they exchanged hand signals. I watched them work. I counted the ripples that came off the vibrating pontoon. The rain had been heavy for the last three weeks, which had left the river too swollen to work in. When the water was lower, they worked the river and not this small stream.

The mini-dredge allowed Julio and his partner to get gold they could not extract any other way. Generally, artisanal miners do not use much machinery. It is a labor intensive and low-tech form of production. They rely on wooden pans, metal spikes, and scrapers. They use networks of sluice gates. This technique has been employed since the Spanish colonial period (c.f. West, 1952a; 1952b; Friedemann, 1974). One proponent of small-scale mining I interviewed described artisanal miners as mining just like the slaves did because they used the same techniques. While artisanal miners rely on human labor and hand tools, they sometimes used diesel-powered water pumps. Although they often dug networks of trenches that stored rainwater to wash for gold, the pumps let them remove dangerous overhangs and access gold when there was no rain. For example, in the months before they started digging the tunnel, Esteban and his immediate family used a pump on top of the hill. They used the high-pressure hose to cut into the hillside and wash the heavy clay over a sluice. There was nowhere they could have put a reservoir to provide water to wash the hill, so they used the pump.

Far below where Esteban was working, his nephew Ernesto and his mother Sofía were working using shovels and picks. After they hit a vein in the base of the hillside and began to work a depression into a tunnel the other families came. While they extended the tunnel for six months, it was always makeshift. They could only extend it so far. If Esteban and his family had kept working using the water pump in the hill above, it might have taken years to reach the bedrock. As they dug deeper the tunnel was getting more dangerous. Esteban, his brother, and

uncle began to negotiate with two *paisa* cousins José and Geraldo. They wanted the excavators to remove the hillside and get down to the bedrock. Bringing in the heavy machinery was the only way they could access the gold they knew was there. While it would finish a mine that had supported their family for forty years, it would mean they could get the gold out.

When I was watching Julio, he came up from the water pit and looked around. I said, "Good-bye. See you tomorrow." He replied, "God willing." He and other Afro-descendant miners regularly used this expression, literally translated as "If God wishes it" ("*Si Dios quiere*"). The phrase provides insight into the unpredictability of mine work. While the mini-dredge and the tunnel let Julio and Esteban's family access gold, the work was remarkably dangerous. While miners never discussed accidents while working, because they felt they had to have positive thoughts lest the gold disappear, accidents were common.

Dangerous Mines: Tunnels and Tubes

On a porch in the village, I talked with a friend of Esteban's from up river. As we talked, two brothers walked by carrying a homemade mini-dredge on their shoulders. Its pontoons were made from battered rusting oil drums rather than fiberglass. My companion began to tell me about his own diving. He explained that he had a business partner (*socio*), and they co-owned a mini-dredge. They used to work the river. One afternoon, when he had been working on the surface all morning, his partner took the second shift underwater in the afternoon. He had insisted on working two shifts back to back because he said needed to make extra money to send his son to high school. The pit they were digging underwater branched out horizontally a few meters below the riverbed. They were making a tunnel horizontally above the bedrock in the mud below the river bottom when disaster struck. A tree that had fallen into the river upstream

floated over the hole and snagged on the pit in the river bottom. The tree trapped the diver and its branches snapped the fragile rubber breathing tube. The tube quickly filled with water, and the trapped diver drowned. Esteban's friend explained that it happened so quickly. He did not go diving any more. But, for his partner who had wanted to work the extra shift and send his son to school, he would have died. He said, "You should never take someone else's spot in the mine. It should have been me underwater. Terrible accidents happen when someone gets greedy. I have never been diving since."

Listening to us talk, another man said, "People behave strangely for gold, especially young people. Gold and hard liquor have the same result: They make people lose their restraints. Sometimes, when three or four mini-dredges mine the same spot, it gets dangerous. If a mine has gold, someone might murder the other miners. You can kill someone easily. You put poison in their air tube or cut it. You call it an accident. How would anyone know? Mining is a dangerous business."

This was also the case for the tunnel that Esteban's family was digging. In the shelter of Esteban's bar, a wooden building made of palm leaves and plastic, I talked with Alejandro. He was in his early sixties. Many years ago, he had worked deep underground in a tunnel. It was a tunnel similar to the one Esteban and his family had been digging. People called the technique digging a *gauche*. Alejandro explained that once when he was digging underground he had come across a tunnel made by his ancestors. They had tunneled underneath the river to get gold. They had left behind the old workings. As he had been digging, he breached the wall of that ancient tunnel. Water quickly flooded into his tunnel, and he almost died. He escaped by crawling backwards and making it to the surface.

If mines often give gold, there were dozens of stories of mines taking people in similar circumstances: underground cave-ins and floods, underwater accidents, or landslides. A gravel embankment might suddenly give way and trap everyone below. I heard dozens of examples of people being buried alive, drowned, or being crushed. Gold makes people lose their inhibitions. Like a drunk and a gambler, a miner might take dangerous risks. As people dug, shoveled, dove, and dredged, washing gravels over their sluices deep in the forests, rivers, and tunnels, there was always this danger. While gold likes deep places, deep places can be dangerous. Mines sometimes give gold, but only in exchange for lives. Excavators made things safer. Esteban and his family invited the excavators onto their land to get gold they could not get any other way and to shift the danger onto someone else.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored why artisanal gold miners in the Chocó see sometimes themselves as inviting small-scale excavators onto their land. I offer additional narratives on gold mining in Afro-descendant communities. While Afro-descendant artisanal miners may pursue small-scale mining operations because they feel "something is better than nothing" or because of a purely coercive relationship and threat of violence, I have explored five additional reasons.

First, I showed that despite a legal recognition of rural Afro-descendant black communities owning collective territory, within those legal boundaries people recognized lots as being owned by extended family descent groups. The decision to bring in small-scale miners onto a lot hinged not on community decisions, but on the extended family. Next, I showed that artisanal mining is not a collective endeavor, but rather a form of household production. Households reciprocal labor groups shared profits among themselves. Small-scale miners,

however, paid a percentage to the extended family co-owners of a lot. In areas where violence has displaced many people, small-scale miners gave displaced people a chance to get a share of the gold on their lots. Third, I showed that while artisanal miners survived by subsisting on gardening, hunting, and fishing, they engaged in gold mining to earn cash. The rapid increase in world gold prices meant there were more outsiders mining, and people saw these small-scale miners as a means to extract gold quickly and withdraw their savings. Next, I showed that while artisanal gold miners relied on traditional extraction techniques, they sometimes used technology to access to gold they could not access any other way. Small-scale miners allowed the extraction of gold artisanal miners could not reach any other way. Lastly, I showed that artisanal mining is a dangerous activity, and people see small-scale miners as safer. Esteban and his family working 20-meters underground in a pitch-black tunnel lit with dim candles saw excavators as a safer alternative. Just as mini-dredges were a safer form of diving than tying a stone to one's back, and water pumps allowed miners to work when there was no rain, small-scale miners allowed people to get gold out more safely.

Esteban and his family saw letting miners onto their land as a logical decision. To not do so would be a failure to not take advantage of what they saw as an opportunity. It was the extended family's decision. Many family members came back to the village to get their share. They were able to get gold out quickly, while prices were high. They were able to access gold that they could not access themselves. They did not need to tunnel underground in dangerous conditions. Indeed, the family was excited about the arrival of the *paisa* small-scale miners.

Drawing on an analysis based on mine work, I have shown some of the nuances of the relationships between artisanal and small-scale miners. My contribution has been to show why a

family of Afro-descendant artisanal gold miners invited *paisa* small-scale miners to mine their family's lot. I have examined some of the factors that artisanal miners considered by discussing local ideas of land, labor, profit, access, and risk. By addressing these factors, I have shown that while small-scale mining certainly brings negative environmental and social consequences, it also needs to be understood in relation to Afro-descendant miners.

In the context of a resource extraction boom in Latin America and concerns over community mine conflicts, I have provided an ethnographic account of mining in the Chocó. By engaging with the perspectives of gold miners themselves, I have shown some of the ways miners in the Chocó make decisions. This fills a gap in the literature to suggest some understandings of why artisanal miners might invite excavators onto their land. Nonetheless, I conclude by noting the hopes of Esteban and his family were not realized.

The two *paisa* cousins José and Geraldo were often grumpy. They were not finding as much gold as they had hoped. Geraldo complained about having to pay everyone: 16% to Esteban and his family as co-owners; 2% permission money to the village's Afro-descendant community council to travel through the territory; protection money to the paramilitary forces and the guerrilla present in the area; money to the police and soldiers; and royalties to the municipality. The costs of machinery, repairs, spare parts, diesel fuel, food for the twelve male workers and the three female cooks, and wages for the mechanics, drivers, cooks, and washerwomen all added up. The mine was not producing enough gold. Geraldo lamented his debts piling up to money lenders. He had not paid anyone wages for months. Despite the hopes of Esteban and his family, their mine never produced as much gold as they thought it would. It did not produce enough for the two brothers to even cover their costs or pay their debts. There

was always a tantalizing hope, but even in a good week the tennis-ball-sized hunks of gold mixed with mercury were not enough.

When I returned to the village in 2013 to report some of my findings from my dissertation, I found that Geraldo, José, and all the mine workers had left suddenly one night. They left the excavators worth hundreds of thousands of dollars rusting in the forests. They had never paid the 2% to the Afro-descendant community council. They still owed Esteban and his family money. They still owed the guerrilla money, which was why they had left so suddenly. Esteban had invested most of the money from the mine in a bar that had served the mine workers. Many workers had left without paying their drinking debts. The family mine was a moonscape of left over gravels. When I asked Esteban if he was happy that the small-scale miners had come to mine his family's lot, he scowled and refused to answer my question.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Esteban, Marco, Ernesto, Sofía, 'The Chief', Rodrigo, Ximena, Julio, Giraldo, and José, as well as dozens of other artisanal and small-scale miners with whom I spend eighteen months learning how to gold mine. A Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Doctoral Fellowship, an Ontario Graduate Scholarship, and support from the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Carleton University helped me complete this research. A SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellowship and the Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University gave me time for writing.

Notes

1. Daniel Tubb (daniel.tubb@yale.edu) holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology with a specialization in Political Economy from Carleton University. He is a Visiting Postdoctoral Fellow at Yale University's Program in Agrarian Studies.

2. All names are pseudonyms.

3. A department is a Colombian administrative region equivalent to a state or province.

4. In this article, I leave aside the practice of artisanal gold mining and subsistence production for future work.

5. In focusing on artisanal and small-scale miners, I bracket other issues, including the nexus between gold, the illegal economy, and money laundering; the transnational networks of small-scale mining; the relationship between homicides, armed actors, and small-scale mining; the gendered dynamics mining; and large-scale multinational projects in the Chocó. I point interested readers to my dissertation (Tubb, 2014).

6. Over the last five years examples of mining conflicts in Colombia include the Marmató Mine in Caldas owned by the mining company Gran Colombia Gold; the Santurbán project owned by the Canadian company EcoOro; the Mandé Norte project in the Chocó owned by the US-based Murial Mining; projects in the Chocó and Antioquia owned by Continental Gold; and La Colosa in Tolima owned by AngloGold Ashanti (cf.. MiningWatch Canada & Viva, 2009).

7. Veiga (2013) distinguishes between scales, legal status, and techniques of small-scale and artisanal mining. He provides the categories: micro-scale (under 5 tonnes of ore a day), small-scale (5–300 tonnes), medium-scale (300–1000 tonnes), and large-scale (1000+ tonnes); legal or illegal; and manual or semi-mechanized. While I adopt the terms as they were used in the Chocó, following Veiga's nomenclature Afro-descendant artisanal mining would refer to the micro-scale, legal, manual mining done by Afro-descendent people. What I describe as small-scale mining by *paisa* and Brazilian owned excavators and dredges would refer to medium-scale, illegal, mechanized mining operations.

8. An older man, in his late 60s, had his small house on stilts in his garden ten minutes up river from the village by dugout canoe. Although most of the wooden houses by the river were gone, he preferred to stay on his lot by the river. He visited his daughter in the village regularly, but prefered his gardens. Many people used to live like him in wooden homes built on stilts near their gardens, mines, and family lots. Another house stood slightly back from the beach. The owner had built it on top of the platform on four posts, with wooden walls, two small windows, and a corrugated metal roof. A young man, his wife, and two young children lived in the house. In front, on a gravel beach, he had two wooden dugout canoes that he used to navigate with a long pole. He had a large wooden boat with a small nine-horsepower motor for trips to town. Behind the house, he had planted a garden, including a small plot of sugarcane, corn, a banana stand, and yucca trees. In the forests, he had fruit trees. He said that below it all the earth had gold.

9. Afro-descendant people call this constellation of activities their fixed (*fijo*), and the other activities like out migration and informal waged labor their hustle (*rebusque*).

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