Dear Agrarian Studies Readers,

Please find attached a really early draft of Chapter 3 of the book project I am working on. I wouldn’t normally share something at this stage, but I couldn’t resist as the feedback is so helpful. Despite the rough edges, I look forward to comments.

Since I’ve not included contextualization, here is a brief blurb on the book: The book title is: *Shift: An Ethnography of Mining, Movement, and Place in the Colombian Pacific*. The book is a place-based multi-scalar ethnography of gold in the Chocó through the movement of people, commodities, and capital. Afro-Colombian and migrant miners survive through ‘shift.’ Shift, an English rendition of the idiomatic Colombian term *rebusque*, is a metaphor for one aspect of a diverse livelihood strategy. Shift emerges, in this instance, in the everyday encounters between artisanal and migrant gold miners. People move to find work in gold mining. This book develops an ethnography of gold in the Colombian Pacific by moving from the work of Afro-Colombian artisanal miners, to the work of migrant *paisa* small-scale miners and the flows of capital and commodities that entangle them. This book draws upon the craft of miners who used techniques ranging from hand tools to heavy machinery.

This is the chapter on “shift work”, and is about a migrant *paisa ‘*small-scale’ excavator gold mine in the Chocó.

Chronological the text follows two days at an excavator mine, told backwards in time from the final wash, through the labor of five mine workers engaged in different tasks to mine gold and move diesel fuel around. Then, halfway, the chronology reverses and it moves forward again. The structural model, which may not work, is of an accordion opening and closing.

The analytical objective is to show ‘shift work’ through mine work and the different motivations of the workers at the mine. It’s also an attempt to weave analysis through ethnographic description. Comments on this, and all other matters would be most appreciated.

Keep in mind, I mention a couple people off hand (Esteban, who is the subject of the previous chapter on artisanal gold mining, and Pedro who is the subject of the first chapter).

All names are pseudonyms; all events happened and are reconstructed from field notes and/or my dissertation. Albeit, I have written myself out of each scene because the story is not about me.

On length, the chapter budget is 11,000 words. At present, it is a couple hundred words too long, and still lacks a lot of analytical polish.

I’m sure there are typos.

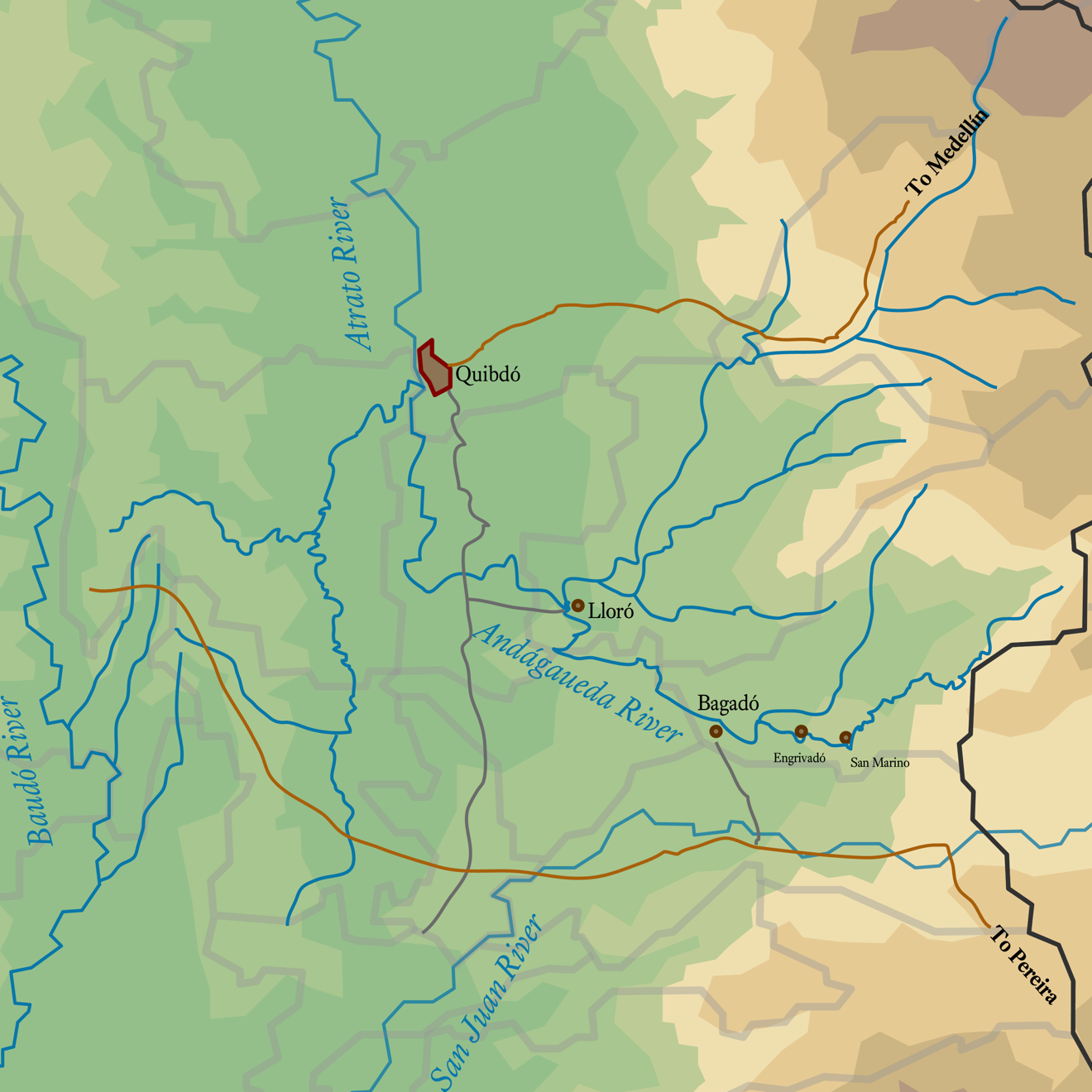
Kind regards,

Daniel

**The Colombian Pacific**



The Upper Atrato River and the Upper San Juan River



# 3. Shift Work

**“Fast money,” the dirt-bike driver yelled over his shoulder, looking backwards at his passenger as they wove through the traffic.** Stick out an arm at any intersection in Quibdó, the bustling capital of the Chocó province in northwest Colombia, and someone will stop to give a ride. The two-wheeled unregulated taxi service is the fastest mode of transport. Dirt bike drivers—many young men from other parts of Colombia who migrated over the Andes for work—have created an anarchistic rapid transit system. They take passengers through the city for the price of two cups of a coffee, when there’s fuel. When there’s no fuel, because the guerrilla blockaded the highway or because a landslide covered the roads, the price becomes five times a cup of coffee. Without fuel, the transport system stops, the lights go out in communities that rely on generators for electricity, and the powerful engines that move excavators and pump water for the gold miners shudder to a stop.

“How do you make any money?” the passenger had yelled to the dirt-bike-taxi driver.

The driver had answered, “I came here from the Caribbean. I took a loan and bought a dirt bike. With luck, I’ll give two dozen rides a day. I’ll pay the daily-quota; I’ll buy fuel; and I’ll have some pesos. It’s easy in the Chocó, because of the fast money.”

Dirt-bike-taxi drivers follow the dream of fast money crossing the Andes from one part of Colombia to another. Other migrants take the same route and hawk goods on the street, sell knock-off designer clothes in remote villages, or work in construction. The coca pickers follow the harvest; the loggers cut hardwoods; and miners come for the gold. All hope for fast money.

Mine work is like factory work, in some ways: A factory transforms raw materials into widgets for sale; an informal mine transforms the landscape into gold. Both consume vast quantities of energy: electricity on the assembly line, diesel on the mine. The miner works not on a factory floor, however, but on a landscape dotted with machines. An informal, and heavily criminalized, small-scale excavator gold mine might employ a half dozen men and women—the owner, washer, driver, assistant, muleteer, foreman, and cook—in prospecting, refueling, digging, spraying, and washing for gold. These mineworkers might find a lucky strike, but as often as not they find nothing. Unlike a factory, however, many workers stay. Why stay at a mine that produces so little gold? A mine without gold is like a losing lottery ticket, worth little more than hope. Many miners stay—even when the mining code criminalizes their work, the multinationals have title to their mines, and the military impounds their machines—because mining is their *rebusque*.

## The Shift

***Rebusque* is an idiomatic Colombian term that describes a precarious livelihood strategy.** It is the way millions of the urban and rural poor survive outside of formal employment: the dirt-bike-taxi driver; the settler who moves to the southern jungle to plant coca; the coca picker who leaves their homes to harvest the coca crop for a season; the peasant who returns decade after decade to pick coffee in Western Antioquia; the hustler who sells electronics on a street corner; the healer who left the Putumayo to sell herbs and medicines in the markets; a young *paisa* women who comes over the mountains from Pereira to dance in the mine camps for a week or two; the “mules” who leave from airports for the north with cocaine in their bellies; the loggers who make trails in the jungle; and the gold miners at their machines. Each has their own *rebusque*.[[1]](#footnote-2) The best English rendition of *rebusque* is a neologism: shift.

Shift is a brand new word for a way of living that is old, yet for a brief period after the Second World War in some parts of North America, Western Europe, and Japan a different labor practice became routine: good stable formal employment. Blue-collar workers organized unions and won better labor conditions, job security, old age pensions, and health insurance. In mid-century Colombia, young men and women could find work in the booming textile industry in Medellín. Company unions and paternalistic employers created a rising standard of living, infrastructure improvement, and stable work. The Pató Consolidated Mining Company in the Lower Cauca and the Chocó Pacific Mining Company in the Chocó did the same in the mining regions of the Lower Cauca River and the San Juan with their company towns and schools for the children of the workers. In the town of Andágoya, on the San Juan river near Istmina, the mighty Chocó Pacific employed hundreds of people in a segregated workforce: North Americans and foreigner employees had their tennis courts and screened in porches on one side of the river; on the other side of the river a black town. Men could find unions jobs with good pay and pensions on the electric gold mining dredges. The good jobs did not last.

The reasons are well known: In North America and Europe, the downsizers, the outsourcers, and the forty-year neoliberal war on working people gutted a manufacturing base and destroyed millions of jobs. Wages have remained stagnant, and the few remaining provisions of the welfare state had been under sustained attack for years. In Medellín, the textile industry, once the pride of Colombia, imploded. Colombian companies could not compete with foreign textile manufacturers: Most folded. The few which survived, modernized their equipment and fired their workers. Just as the city’s industrial base disappeared, the urban population grew by hundreds of thousands, as people migrated to Medellín to look for work and escape war in rural areas.

In the Chocó, the Colombian government nationalized the US owned Chocó Pacific Company in 197?. Gold prices fell, political pressure grew, and gold production declined, so much that the nationalized Chocó Pacific went bankrupt in the early 1980s. While a handful of aging former workers in mining towns on the San Juan and Atrato river still receive a small pension eviscerated by inflation, there have been few employment opportunities in the Chocó for three generations. The good jobs evaporated long ago.

The cocaine boom brought another kind of work, however. The debt crisis, which crushed the rest of Latin America in the 1980s, did not hit Colombia quiet as hard. As the textile industry slowed, the Medellín Cartel and the infamous Pablo Escobar began to ship cocaine from Latin America to North America. The money flowed back to Medellí, which for thirty years has experienced a cocaine-fueled construction boom. In those early years, violence spiraled out of control: The image is of young men from the slums of Medellín who became mobile *sicario* assassins fighting Pablo Escobar’s war against extradition on the backs of dirt-bikes. The homicide rate in Medellín spiked at 349 per 100,000; just over half the 2015 mortality rate in Syria.

The state responded in different ways: By the 2000s, the national governments had militarized the country with a policy of democratic security. The city governments in Medellín and Bogotá were creating urban public space and emblematic infrastructure projects in long ignored urban slums of Medellín and Bogotá. They promoted new sectors: the knowledge economy, international tourism, and health care. Medellín became the plastic surgery capital of the continent. The investment in public space and *tourist*scapes, closed other economies. Selling lottery tickets in the street, vending food from homemade stands, begging on buses, selling at open air markets, driving dirt-bike taxis, and other forms of shift became harder.

In the Chocó, the people who still had some land and the skill moved between subsistence swidden agriculture, logging, migrant work, and gold mining. Some left the jungle for the city to work as security guards and nannies; just as some left the city for the jungle to work in mining: One way to understand this movement of people is to turn to the lives of some gold miners who survive through shift work.

## The Work

**If ‘shift work’ had a soundtrack, it would be *vallenato* music: The fast folk genre traditional to the Caribbean is heavy on the accordion and was popularized across Colombia in the 1980s.**[[2]](#footnote-3) Mineworkers, truckers, loggers, and other working men and women listen to *vallenato* music and drink and dance in the bars and canteens across Colombia. Listeners know the songs as they are about to start from the first few bars of bellows of an accordion. New songs like “*Amor de lejos, feliz a los cuatro*” (“Love at a distance, the four are happy”) are as popular as classics. The accordion player is the star, but *vallenato* singer tell songs as folk ballads. The words set to music are about the hopes and the dreams and the lives and the livelihoods people who move to find work: “*Mi muchacho*” (“My Little Boy”), “*Al arriero*” (“The Muleteer”) and hundreds of others all tell stories—romanticized fiction to be sure—of people who move to find work. One classic singer on heavy rotation is Diomendez Días with “*La Plata*” (“The Money”):

*Si la vida fuera estable todo el tiempo,  
yo no bebería ni malgastaría la plata.*

If life were stable all the time,  
I would not drink nor would waste my money.

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**José washed for gold on a sun-drenched Friday afternoon.** He wore the plastic wraparound sunglasses, blue sports t-shirt, red gym shorts, and gray knee-high soccer socks of a younger man. José bent over the bottom sluice box—a large rectangular steel box about three meters long, a meter wide, and 50 centimeters deep. In his bare hands he held a spoon.

José owned two large excavators, which worked in pairs: One excavator ripped gravel and stones from the ground; the other dumped the material into a two-story rusty metal classifier made of three sluice boxes stacked on angles one on top of the other like a game of snakes and ladders. The classifier had a wide opening on the top, a maw, which received the stones and gravel. An old truck motor forced a high-pressure stream of water through a tube and into the maw of the classifier. A washer, in this case Carlos who had come to the river from a village five-hours away, aimed the tube and washed the material into the classifier and over the three sluice boxes.

José had come to join his brother Geraldo and mine gold in the Chocó in 2008. Geraldo had left the Lower Cauca in Antioquia for the San Juan in 2004. He moved to get away from government repression and extortion from the paramilitaries. He opened a gold buying-and-selling shop in Istmina. Geraldo bought gold from miners who came in from the jungle, and he sold the gold to refineries in Medellín. He soon began to make high-interest loans to gold miners who needed cash for fuel or machines. Geraldo repossessed an excavator when a loan went bad. He turned to mining and asked his brother to join him when he could not sell the machine. His gamble on gold went well for a few years as prices rose, but then finding gold became harder.

Liquid mercury, the color of silver, spilled around the black rubber boots of José and pooled in the bottom of the sluice box. José scooped the mercury with the spoon to collect the dollops of silvery liquid and gold caught in a metal ‘riffle’ at the bottom of the sluice box. This way of collecting gold seems ingenious. The sluice box rests on a 20-degree angle; the water and sediment and gravel flow over the riffle—a metal grillwork on the bottom of the sluice. The little flecks of gold bond to the much heavier drops of mercury that nestle into the holes made by the grillwork. Water washes away the stones and gravel, and the gold and mercury leave a buttery amalgam. Once José had spooned all the liquid mercury and the gold amalgam into a bowl, he poured it through a dishcloth stretched tight over another bowl. The mercury dripped through the cloth leaving behind a solid mass. José removed the dishcloth; twisted it around the mass; and flicked it into the air: Drops of mercury glittered to the ground. Left behind, a now solid misshapen yellowish lump. José would later use a blowtorch to vaporize the remaining mercury in the lump. The flame would turn the mercury into a gas, which would settle on the hair, skin, and clothes of José and his neighbors. José boasted that heavy metal poisoning did not worry him because he had experienced no ill effects in 27 years as a miner. After José vaporized the mercury, all that would remain would be the ball of solid gold: the production of the mine for five days.

In 2011, Geraldo and José began to negotiate with the family of Esteban to come to the village. They arrived in May. They had spent the previous three years working a mine in a village down the river for three good years. Like most small-scale miners, they lacked the mining titles, the environmental assessment reports, and the technical studies mandated by law: They were illegal. Newspapers estimated, in what might be hyperbole, that eight hundred excavators and 50 dredges worked on 350 illegal mines on the San Juan River and the Atrató River.[[3]](#footnote-4) Many miners had come from the Lower Cauca, where the Colombian government has arrested mine workers, levied fines on the owners, and dynamited machinery. Many had decided, like Geraldo had, to run away from the state and the paramilitary and come to the Chocó. They loaded their excavators onto flatbed trucks and hauled them over the Andes and into the jungles of the Chocó. They also came, like Geraldo, to make money from gold.

José and Geraldo and thousands more shifted from one mining region to another to find work in the rich gravels of the Chocó and to get away from conflict. Millions of Colombians have done the same thing for the same reasons. Many left their homes to travel to escape violence: They are the forcibly displaced, internally displaced persons—or refugees if they had never left the country. Colombia has the one of the highest numbers of displaced people—Internally Displaced People to use the legal jargon favored by the human rights organizations and the international observers—in the world, outside of the wars in the Middle East. Although there is a distinction between people forced from their homes because of a war and those who look to leave to find work: There is no choice in the former. Life often blurs that boundary between the two. Language matters, too. The similarity between “they displaced me because of violence” (*me desplazó*) and the reflexive term “I moved” (*me desplazo*) is subtle. In the latter, the mover has some agency. In the former, the displaced person has no agency. In the former, a sense of “displaced because of violence” puts agency in the hands of the aggressor. While the distinction has legal weight—the forcibly displaced can claim a little state support—it has a moral weight too. Some people do not want to identify themselves as victims of forced displacement.

Despite the fact that José and Geraldo left the Lower Cauca to escape violence and extortion by the paramilitary, they would not consider themselves ‘forcibly displaced.’ They had decided to leave. Their shift, however, was not the same as a family who left one region for another to look for work: Geraldo had brought enough capital to start a cash for gold shop in Istmina. Many of the workers who followed him, did not see themselves as forcibly displaced either. They had come to find work. They had come to find unstable, underpaid, and dangerous shift work, but they did see themselves as making the decision to come—even when they left violence, they had displaced themselves. Their shift was an economic migration mixed with forced displaced: When state support fails, as it so often does, people turn to shift work.

Describing what José and Geraldo did as shift—even as they were the owners of heavy machinery—does not require romanticizing them, nor downplaying the devastating impacts of their machines on the environment, on health, and on communities where they worked, but it does require recognizing the diverse reasons people move. Men with guns who roam the countryside dressed in camouflage regularly extort communities and businesses and impose their law. The government has spent billions more on soldiers, helicopter gunships, and jet bombers than on hospitals and school. People move to find work; sometimes they have no luck.

Geraldo watched from behind dark sunglasses as José finished the wash in the bottom of the last sluice of the classifier. Geraldo frowned. A ball of gold and mercury the size of a small tennis ball would not cover his costs. He was losing money.

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**Carlos’s green t-shirt, black jeans, and rubber boots was streaked with mud at 2 o’clock in the Friday morning.** He was a fastidious dresser, normally, but the spray of the gold mine had covered him in mud. He carried a flashlight in his left hand and a round wooden bowl to pan for gold in his right. He had climbed into the bottom of mine pit by jumping from stone to stone lest he lose a boot in the mud. The pit was the size of a house, with sloping gravel banks gouged into the earth by the teeth of an orange excavator. An excavator worked on top of one of the banks. A tungsten tinged floodlight hung behind the machine’s cab and illuminated the bottom of the mine pit. Raindrops glittered mid-air; stones cast shadows; the steady rain made the darkness beyond the light deeper. Carlos bent forward; filled the wooden bowl with sediment; and swirled and rocked and panned to check for gold. He finished. He looked up, and he made a hand motion to David, the driver of the excavator, “No gold.”

Carlos had come to find a steady wage. He planned to use his pay from the job as a washer at the mine to build a house for his family and to start a small business. Carlos liked to tinker with machines. The plan was to open a garage to fix dirt-bikes in the front of the new house. He had come to the mine to work for a few months to save enough money to build the house and start the dirt-bike garage. He had come to the village not for gold, but the promise of regular pay and steady work.

The work? The job of the washer was the hardest at the mine. He did not check for gold most of the time, but stood on a wooden platform perched on the metal frame of the classifier. The classifier had two stories. Each story was made of metal sluice boxes on an incline lined up one on top of the other. A lamp hung from above Carlos’s head and illuminated the maw—a sloping metal tray the length and width of a man lying prone with an opening on one end—of the classifier below his feet. The excavator dumped stones and gravel and mud and sediment and sand into the maw.

Carlos washed the material down through the opening into the classifier using a high-pressure stream of water. Washing was simple enough, but the work itself required a practical skill as a washer and the physical energy and stamina to work most of the night. Carlos had tricks to keep up with the excavator. He steadied a black six-inch rubber tube with his left hand. He aimed a metal nozzle with his right hand; he directed a jet of water at the bottom of the maw; and he drew a slow sideways figure-eight motion. It was like doing a painting with a fire house a few feet from a concrete canvas. The water pressure forced the hose skyward. Carlos tied the hose down with twine and had to fight to keep the nozzle aimed into the maw with all his body weight. The sideways figure eight pattern cut away the material so that the water could wash the sediments into the classifier. He had about a minute before David made the next dump. If Carlos did the figure eight too slow or too fast, the material would build up. If he aimed the hose at a stone at the wrong angle, the water would ricochet into the air and hit the driver in the face in the open cab of the excavator. To control the flow of the water and to prevent this ricochet, Carlos used his index finger to adjust the flow of water from the nozzle. The task of keeping up with the took skill with the hose and the anticipation of knowing where to direct the water.

The work was hard. The water pressure peeled away the skin on the index finger of his right hand. Carlos wore an apron made of a black plastic tied over his front, which protected him a little from the spray. The shaking was worse than the skin off his finger and the mud. The waves of vibration invaded his spine as the water on stone and stone on metal rattled him to the core. The work left him exhausted.

Inside the contraption, after Carlos had washed the material into the classifier, high-pressure water showered over the stone, the sand, and the gravel. A metal grill separated out stones from the other sediments and ejected them behind the machine. The rest of the thick gray sludge flowed over the sluice boxes layered one on top of the other. The heavier specks of gold in the sludge were trapped in the mercury-laced bottom. The sediments and the water flowed out of the classifier over a series of seven mercury laced sluices and then on to a stream and the half-kilometer trip to the river.

Carlos had first come to the river four years before to find a job. At the time, there was a gold rush and five or six dozen excavators worked the length of the river. Carlos had found a job as an assistant at a mine near the village. That first season, he had met Eva, Pedro’s daughter, and they began a relationship. Eva had not graduated high school when they started dating, and when she got pregnant she never graduated. At first, Pedro disliked Carlos. But, over time, he warmed to his good humored and quick witted new son-in-law. Carlos and Eva had initially moved to Carlos home village five-hours distance, but they returned often to visit. They had come back for six months for two reasons: Eva wanted to complete her high school diploma through a distance education program. Her mother looked after her kids while she studied. Carlos, Eva, and their children stayed at Pedro and Martina’s home. Carlos wanted to make some money to build a house on the little land he owned. Carlos worked for a few weeks with Pedro at the family mine, but then got a job with the excavators. The promised wages were better money than what Pedro’s mine would give. He planned to save the money to build the house and open a dirt-bike garage. The promise of the wages made up for the working conditions, the hours, and the constant vibrations.

Carlos preferred the ‘night shift.’ It was “*más sabroso*”— tastier—he said. There were no bosses, and at night the hot sun was gone—the daytime heat often rose to 35 degrees Celsius. The nighttime air was comfortable. The darkness made the rhythm of work slower, too. Nobody watched the workers at night: The Foreman might be in the village asleep, or in town bringing fuel. Geraldo and José slept. The workers took more opportunities for breaks. They set the rhythm of their own work. The assistant might dwell on checking the motor by the river; the dinner break might extend a little; and in the hours before dawn at the end of the night everyone found a spot to nap for an hour. The darkness gave the workers some freedom.

The ‘day shift’ had none of the freedom: Carlos could see from his perch: the mid-morning wisps of fog floating over the landscape; the green forests that stretched into the distance; the sun which silhouetted the distant Andes; the muddy trails gouged into the earth; the gray stones piled over the ten football fields of the mine; the weeds which struggled out of the gravel; the three excavators which worked in the middle distance; the teeth marks they gouged into the hillsides; the streams which carried sediments to the river; the reservoir which filled slowly with water pumped by a truck engine built in Japan; the aluminum tubes that snaked to the classifier; the lumbering excavator which dumped gravel into the classifier where he stood.

Carlos had found his shift in unregulated and illegal employment at a mine. Carlos, as a mine worker, had none of the social security payments, the union membership, the taxes, and the bank account that came with legal employment. It was, for him, however, a supplementary activity. He saw it as what he had to do to get a more stable income: His goal was a dirt-bike garage. Carlos had come to save some money. The work was hard, dangerous, and had no respect, but it promised a good wage.

Carlos survived through shift. Shift is what someone does outside of the fixed: The shift is often a complement to another stable, reliable, and steady salaried employment, or an addition to a rural subsistence livelihood. Teachers, community leaders, and itinerant merchants all sold clothing, cologne, makeup, and perfume from mail order catalogs to students, families, and villagers in rural areas. A teacher earns his or her salary, and so the mail order catalog is a little extra income: a shift. Carlos had no fixed, though. He wanted one, with his idea of a dirt-bike garage. Carlos had moved to find mine work, because he hoped it would be temporary. The job was temporary; Carlos was fired a few days later.

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**David—tall, well-muscled, and in his late twenties—began to move the excavator just after Carlos had signaled “No-gold.”** The orange Hitachi machine stretched and bent and dug and grasped and lifted and twisted and dumped all night, while David sat dry in the cab. He had paused the machine in the early morning darkness to wait for Carlos to signal. David sat in a comfortable seat in the cab, stayed relatively dry and clean throughout, watched videos on his smartphone, and kept the skin on his fingers. The cab squatted on rusting caterpillar treads; the engine thundered a wall of noise into the night; and the flood lamp cast shadows. A metal boom reached out from the machine and attached to a second metal boom which then connected to the bucket. A powerful hydraulic system let David control the boom and bucket with a deft flick of his hands on joysticks. Carlos could twist the machine through 360 degrees of motion and the boom and bucket across almost 180 degrees to dig gravel.

David’s shift? David had left a Medellín slum for the Chocó. All he could hope for in Medellín was a short life in a street gang or a job as a security guard. David had no interest in working the night shift for minimum wage, so he had left. The wages at the mine were better than he could hope for anywhere else, and the there was always a chance of much more with a share of the wash: Without a good wash, however, David was just digging holes in the jungle.

A hiker who came across David during the day would see sunlight glinting off the metal hydraulics of the excavator. The machine worked to level the hillside down to the bedrock and dig a pit. A second machines worked alongside David at classifier owned by Geraldo, and two more worked at José’s classifier. One of the four excavators, more than a decade old, often sat frozen because it broke down a lot. Meta, the assistant, often had to pump lubricant into its holes to try and repair it. David drove the three-year old excavator. Drivers are almost always men, and they are self-confident.

Excavator operations have the same techniques as artisanal miners: Dig to the bedrock and wash for gold. The machines work alone or in pairs: One works lower than the other. The first digs down and dumps material into a pile. The second pivots on its mobile caterpillar treads to dump the piles of gravel into the classifier. The drivers repeat the digging and dumping hundreds of times a day. While the machines destroy forests, cause erosion, sediment the rivers, contaminate the land and water with mercury and diesel, they also provide employment. David, perhaps, slowed and paused at 4 o’clock in the morning as the rain pounded on. He slept in the cab, while Carlos and the assistant slept in the shelter as best they could. The night shift ended when the sun rose at 5 o’clock in the morning. The workers would walk back to the village and shower.

Why did David come to mine gold? Shift is the creative ways someone might earn a livelihood in the urban and rural margins: David could have begged, done street performances, performed on a public buses, sold cheap goods on the street, hawked food—fruit, fried snacks, or hamburgers—in public spaces to find an income. David moved to the frontier, like other settlers and itinerant workers who travel throughout Colombia, to find shift work.

Why use this new word shift though? Why not describe David as an itinerant worker or a migrant or a traveler or a gypsy or a wanderer or a drifter or a vagrant? Paying attention to the terms that people use and the ideas embedded in the terms is important: Shift might be thought of as describing the informal economy of *rebusque*, but how to define *rebusque*? The prefix “re” comes from the Latin for “sending something backward” or “repeating” and the Spanish for “intensifying” and “opposition or resistance,” while *busque* comes from the verb “to search.” *Rebusque* might be rendered in English as an intense “re-search” in the sense of a cyclical, creative, and intense searching, but not academic inquiry. The widespread use of *rebusque* has many meanings in Colombia. As a noun, *rebusque* means the “temporary work that someone does to complement a stable work;” or “casual and ingenious solution to a difficulty.” As a verb *rebuscar* means “to collect the fruit left in the fields, particularly in the vineyards, after harvest;” “to search with zeal and sacrifice to solve a problem;” or “to *rebuscar* to find a good job.” As a reflexive verb *rebuscarse* means “to find it for oneself” (“*rebuscar se las*”); “to ingeniously solve the daily difficulties of quotidian survival” (“*rebuscar se la vida*”); or “to contrive to confront and overcome daily difficulties.”[[4]](#footnote-5)

*Rebusque*, is not merely the domain of the poor, downtrodden, and disposable, though. David had come for the money; his shift work earned a million pesos a month, about $555. He didn’t have to pay for food or housing. He, like all the workers, took a share of every wash as well. He wanted a big strike, so he could buy his own excavator. This plan and the wages were falling through, however.

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**Meta—fit, thin, and, at eighteen, in full possession of the self-confidence that comes with youth, a job, and the promise of a steady wage—began to haul jugs of diesel fuel the Thursday afternoon before the night shift.** Each jug was made of hard plastic: dark blue, orange, or battered white. Each held 5-gallons of liquid and reached up to the knee. The caps were plastic, with a bag threaded to keep water out. A full jug is heavy, but not too difficult to move. Perhaps Meta’s shoulders locked from the weight of the plastic fuel jugs. He had taken off his shirt because of the heat. He carried one jug in each hand from the pile where Felipe, the muleteer, had dumped them to a plastic shelter about a hundred yards away over a path made of wooden planks over mud, which was too unstable for the mules. Felipe had brought the fuel to the mine on the backs of four lanky mules up a gravel road carved into the jungle by excavators the half kilometer to the river; and when the mules couldn’t make the whole trip because of the mud, Meta had to haul them one by one the last few hundred meters. As Meta worked, a heavy rain began to fall. What had been a sunny day changed in a moment as clouds broke into rain.

It was Meta’s first season in the Chocó. Most workers at the mine had been doing it for years. He had come to make money, too. Meta was the assistant. His work was the odd jobs: lubricate the excavators, carry food, watch the motor that pumped water to the classifier; and carry fuel the hundred yards or so to a shelter or a machine.

The fuel was the lifeblood of the mine. The excavators would stop and the pumps would sputter to a halt if they ran out of diesel fuel. Everything ran on fuel. Geraldo and José spent thousands of dollars a day to feed their excavators, their truck engines, their water pumps, their boat engines, and their generator in the village.

Meta was not Meta’s real name. The nickname came from a department in eastern Colombia with the lowland plains close to Venezuela: Cattle country. A strange nickname because Meta too was from a Medellín slum. The *paisa* had taken a twelve-hour bus ride over the mountains to find work—one more young man seeking his fortunes in the Chocó’s mines; just as young men had done for decades. Gold attracted people to the jungle mines because of the chance for good wages and a lucky strike.

The assistant earned little respect from the other workers, but the work was easy enough. He could dawdle while carrying food, grab a nap in the shade, make calls on a cellphone from a spot in the jungle; chat with the women who did all the cooking or flirt with the washerwomen. All of the mine workers were men, but two women worked in the village.

The two women had taken over a house, whose owner, Esteban’s niece, had lived in town for years. The first woman—tall, older, with wavy hair, and a no-nonsense disposition—worked as the cook and managed food expenses. She used the front room of the cinderblock house for food storage, and the back room for the kitchen. Large propane tanks connected to metal cooking elements; where she made massive pots of rice alongside pressure cookers. Meals varied: rice and beans with salt beef; limpid fried potatoes and fatty pork rinds; cans of spam with lentils; salted fish; sardines from a can; mayonnaise coleslaw; boiled cassava and plantain. Breakfast was *arepa*—a thick toasted corn tortilla—with margarine and fried eggs. The cook made large jugs of panela sweated lemonade. The workers did not pay for meals—José and Geraldo did. The cook sold large bottles of soda pop, razors, soap, detergent, and bags of junk food. Nobody had money to pay, so she sold from her small company store on credit. Behind the kitchen, benches and tables sat under the tarpaulin roof: The workers, when not working, congregated there for meals and to chat and gossip and complain. The second woman cleaned the laundry for all the men. She was late middle age, but younger than the cook.

Meta rented a wooden hut in the village where he slept. Don Alfonso had built the hut for storage—it was a not very large box on stilts. But, the ‘hut’ was just big enough for a bed and a bit of privacy. Over the six months, Meta spent in the village, he and María, one of the girls who lived in the village, started a relationship. One of the many liaisons between young *paisa* miners and black girls. It might end in a small family, but would more likely end when Meta left for the city, perhaps leaving María with an unwanted child. Soldiers and police did the thing. Unwanted pregnancies, STDs, and other social ills were common. Perhaps, their relationship would work out—after all, Carlos and Eva had met in the exact same situation and they had formed a small family—or perhaps Meta would leave. The couple seemed happy enough for a while.

Meta often carried stacks of pink plastic containers of food from the canteen the half hour walk to the mine workers who were on shift. Meta had left the city, like so many young man often did, to find work. Sometimes the work was legal; sometimes it was not. But, the work did offer a kind of hope: Would it work out? Meta, like David. Had come from the city. Others, like Carlos, came from rural areas. They came to make money in during a bonanza on the frontier. Why render their *rebusque* with the English word shift?

Finding a good rendition into English for *rebusque* is tricky. The verb to hustle is one candidate. It connotes the attempt to get ahead through any means. While its flexibility with legality is appropriate to shift, it implies a certain immorality, that *rebusque* does not. *Rebusque* implies hard work. *To glean*, as in picking over of left over crops by peasants in Europe in the middle ages is another translation. *Rebusque* implies a sense of surviving on the dregs of capitalist accumulation, but gleaners seem to lose their agency, while *rebusque* at its core is creative.

Before Meta could fill the machines with diesel, he had to clean the fuel because the fuel had become dirty with leaves and water. The shelter was made of four poles of wood with thick black plastic sheets tied down on four corners. Meta unscrewed the cap of each jug; he threw aside the plastic bags threaded between cap and jug to keep out spray from the river; he took the jug inside the shelter; and he poured the contents of jug through a white sheet covering one of two metal drums. The sheet trapped the leaves and gunk, but the real problem was the water.

A pipe at a slight angle halfway down from the top of the first drum connected it to the second. As the diesel settled to the bottom of the drum on the right, the fuel flowed through the angled pipe into the tank on the left. The process left the water in the right drum and the diesel in the left drum. Meta refilled the now empty jugs with the fuel from the second drum. The drums filtered water the fuel because the heavier water sank to the bottom of one of the drums and the lighter fuel floated to the top and flowed into the drum. How had the water gotten into the jugs in the first place?

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**Felipe—the tall, handsome, light skinned, and black-haired muleteer—helped the Foreman unload the jugs from the large metal hulled boat on the beach down by the river in the scorching noon sun of the Thursday.** Felipe sported a thick, but neatly trimmed, beard and a large *vueltiao* hat placed the jugs in neat rows on the gravelly sandy beach. He had quick smiles, ready jokes, and an aura of confidence.

The beach was beside a stream that flowed into the river. On one side of the water, the jungle and a ten-minute walk to the village. On the other side, a gravel beach the length of the canoe wide. The beach was below a leveled platform carved into a the earth three meters of the water. A truck engine and water pump sat metal skids on the beach as the bottom of the cliff. On top of the cliff, the muleteer had built a small wooden hut over months. Behind the hut, Felipe had gardens of plantain and cassava and a plastic shelter for his four mules.

Felipe had five daughters, who lived with their two mothers in the Lower Cauca two days bus travel away. Felipe had grown coca on his farm there for years; he had invested 25 million pesos ($14,000) into the venture before the coca economy fell apart. He spat on the ground and explained: President Uribe had been elected in 2002 and the police began to destroy the coca crop. The coca boom turned to bust. Felipe had to leave the area to find work. He traveled to Urabá on the Caribbean at first, but found nothing. He travelled to the Chocó next, and found a job with José and Geraldo, who where his cousins through marriage. Felipe wired some money to his daughters every month.

Felipe had two tasks. The main one was to carry the jugs of fuel up the beach and placed them under a tree, where he had tied his four mules. The four mules—with names like Dólar and Juana—were his pride. The animals were tall, short grey haired, and lean. He believed in science, and he injected his animals with vitamins so they would stay healthy. He fed them cane molasses mixed with grain bought in town. Each mule had a cloth over its back with a wooden frame on top. Felipe lashed the jugs to the wooden frame with a rope with a fluidity: a jug to each side, balanced so they did not fall off, and a third on top tied in place. Felipe loaded the mules; patted their backs; scratched their necks; and whispered in their ears.

Felipe was a muleteer, an *arriero*—one of Colombia’s oldest professions: Mules have brought supplies across the country for centuries. While mule trains no longer crisscross the country with supplies for the city—*tractor*mulas, tractor-trailers, do that—in the lowland jungles and the high mountains, mule trains still transport gasoline to the jungle camps. Felipe was the son of a muleteer from Antioquia. The another kind of *arriero*, one who travelled internationally with a white cargo on the inside, was an end of the business which had never interested Felipe.

Felipe had loaded the four mules with 12 jugs of gasoline, about a fifth of the total. He slapped the first mule on the ass and made a noise with his mouth. He and the mules started up the track into the jungle. There were three trails to the mine: The logging trail everyone used from the village; the track that an excavator had cut from the mine to the river to bring a pump; and to the mine from the river were the excavators had first entered.

Getting the excavators into the mine was a challenge. There were three ways to do it: Some waited for water levels to fall and travel on the edge of the dry river bed; some floated the excavators on a metal pontoon to bring the machines up a river; some forced a path through the jungle by driving over valleys, ravines, and trees to create a ‘miner’s road.’ Most excavators on the river had come in that way, leaving a trail of caterpillar treads in the red earth.

The mules hauled the fuel the half-kilometer from the river to the mine. The mule train walked up the track, along one of the caterpillar treads through the jungle. Felipe made the trip a dozen times a day to haul the fuel from the river to the mine. Felipe made motions at the animals, called them, and slapped them. His days were steady: load, hike, and unload. Repeat. The animal’s stayed in single file sure-footed as they made the twenty-minute walk from the river to the mine.

Felipe’s other task was to watch the motor pump on the beach: It was an engine from the cab of a tractor-trailer. The motor had been removed from a truck cab and attached to metal skids. The motor ran twenty-four hours a day to power a pump. The pump moved river water through aluminum tubes that followed a gravel track into the jungle up to a large reservoir that had been dug near the mine. Felipe other jobs, and the reason he lived by the river, was to watch the river water level. The water might rise or fall a meter or two in a night. If it did, Felipe would signal by pulling on a long string with a bell through the jungle. Then an excavator would come down through the mud to lift the motor from the skids using a heavy chain.

Felipe had built a *ranchito* to live in. The building started out as a bed—Felipe had slept under a bug net over two planks the width of man a few feet off the ground supported by four posts. The bed was at the edge of the cliff, on top of the platform three meters above the tractor-trailer motor. It would have been easy to roll off the plank, over the cliff, and into the river. Felipe never did. Over a few months, Felipe built walls and a roof over his bed. He nailed planks to the wall on a frame. He dug three posts—a tree trunk about six inches in circumference with the branches removed—into the ground for each side. He placed a post at six feet intervals. He made the wall with planks. The roof with more planks stacked on top of an A-frame, insulated from the heat with palm fronds kept in place by a green plastic tarpaulin stretched on top for weather proofing. Felipe had given it his own touch. A wide veranda out front over what had been his bed and what became a bench and hooks to hang tools. A temporary home in the jungle. It was almost exactly like what some of the older men on the river would have built when they were younger: homesteads on the river for themselves and their families.

Felipe had come with his mules to the Chocó. He joined the mining camp. He was a *paisa* migrant to the Chocó to look for work. Others—vendors, traders, miners, and coca growers—had come to. People came because there was little way to make cash from other urban and rural pursuits: There was too much crowding, violence had pushed people off of the land, and opportunities in the city were hard. Felipe shifted between activities.

Felipe watched the river and the pump. Behind his hut, alongside the mules he raised a dozen chickens. He filled plastic troughs with feed for the chickens every day. He had used a machete to clear a large area for plantain. Felipe had made the area, about a quarter the size of a tennis court and planted a handful of plantain and cassava plants. The chickens picked the area behind the *ranchito*; they slept in two plastic-covered shelters. He planned to sell the chickens to Geraldo and José for the kitchen for a little extra money: Felipe hadn’t been paid either.

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**The Foreman piloted the red, rusted, flat-bottomed, large metal hulled boat on the Thursday morning.** The boat took the turns wide, the prow high in the air, the engines low in the water. The spray and the wind whipped at the Foreman’s hair as the boat took wide turns around the curve of the river. The Foreman had left the village a few hours before to the town, where he had filled the five dozen empty 5-gallon jugs with diesel fuel. The Foreman came to town most days with empty jugs and returned to the village with full jugs. The Foreman decided the work schedule; he disciplined the workers; he paid them when there was money; and he ordered the wash every few days. His was a stressful job, but had a possibility of good money. His wife was with him; she lived in a house in the village and sent money to her family.

The Foreman made the trip to the nearest town during daylight hours, mostly, and sometimes during pre-dawn heavy rainstorms when no other boats were on the water. Sometimes stopping to leave packages in the edge of the forest. Who were the packages for? Other people in the forests. The shift connects legal and illegal activities in Colombia.

Mine work is different from the picking coffee; which is different from the picking coca; which is different from smuggling cocaine. But, to the workers these jobs were connected: They were all shift.

The metal boat was large and clumsy, but with a 45-horsepower Yamaha engine. The powerful engine cut the trip between the town and the village by a third. The boat and the diesel jugs reeked of diesel. It was not the largest boat on the river: The navy sometimes docked patrol boats with many stories, high caliber machine guns, and camouflaged hulls. The metal boat was not the fastest, either: The two-engine speed boat that made a daily was much faster. But, the long metal boat was fast enough. The Foreman filled jugs of diesel in town. Tanker trucks brought diesel to the river every few days. In the town, the Foreman filled five dozen plastic jugs every day and brought them to a beach on the river near the mine.

One could keep following that commodity chain of backwards. Getting fuel to the mine involved intermediaries all the way back. Tankers moved fuel from Istmina to the town on the river; tankers brought fuel over the mountains to Istmina from Pereira. All that fuel for the mines to keep the machines running so the mine could wash for gold.

## The Money

**The contents of the second sluice box belonged to the Foreman.** He had the prerogative to decide when to do the wash, and while José and Geraldo had the most valuable sluice box at the bottom of the classifier, the Foreman had the second. Other than the sluice box of the co-owners, this second box had the highest earning potential. All the gold trapped in the first belonged to José and Geraldo and the 16 percent to Esteban’s extended family of mother, brothers, aunts, uncles, children, and nephews and nieces, all descended from his grandparents. That first sluice box was where the money came to pay the gasoline, to pay the guerrilla, and the police.

The Foreman had brought his wife to the village. She spent her days in the village, not working. She was a short, gregarious, and extroverted woman, who was the opposite of her husband. She called her ailing mother every day and worried about her mother’s health. She was from the Lower Cauca. Her husband had worked for decades in the rivers on the Lower Cauca. That region has a history of mining, older even than the Chocó. The town of Segovia was a mining town in the 16th century. The Foreman—and the owners and the workers—had brought the work camps, the labor and gender relations, the mine practices and the techniques, and the heavy machinery from the Lower Cauca. At the core, was a share of the wash: The wash, the sluice boxes on the ground, were the lottery ticket for everyone.

Many workers had come from the Lower Cauca where they had been miners. Some had come to the Chocó to send money back home. Some had stayed to find work, despite no pay. Many hoped a bonanza was just around the corner. The potential was there.

The Foreman had a difficult role: It was his job to make sure the mine worked. The responsibility to produce: When the wash went well, he had a good income. When the wash went badly, he did badly. It was a stressful position and he rarely smiled.

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**The contents of the fourth sluice box belonged to Felipe.** He took apart the third metal sluice: He shook the material into a plastic tub; he took care not to lose any gravel; he washed the burlap sacks three times so that none of the gold or mercury could escape; he folded them as he finished; he laughed as he held up the sack for a photograph: He called out “Mi *rebusque”*—“My shift.”

The bottom of the sluice trapped the mercury. The water flowed from the pump through the classifier and over a series of three sluices. The sediments and mud flowed from the machine to the river over a series of seven metal sluices. Their order mattered because each yielded a smaller amount of gold. Felipe was almost giddy: He laughed and joked, and drops of silver mercury glittered in the water and on the mud and gravel. The heavy metal distracted no one, however. The gold they were finding was a complement to their wage.

Washing the dregs of what came out of the mine was what Felipe called his *rebusque*. It was the possibility to make tens of millions of pesos in a few days that kept people at the mine. The wash had been poor—not terrible but not good. The workers at the mine where washing the other three sluices. The gold left in the classifier would augment their fixed salary.

It was an economy of boom or bust. A gold rush heavy with possibility, but most mines produced a little. Yet, everyone had heard stories. This chance to win mattered. It was why people were giddy while they washed.

Felipe sent money to his daughters back in Antioquia. The countryside is filled with an infrastructure to send money even to remotest and most rural area. It is a shift economy and economy movement—of internal remittances that must be at least as important to some communities as any kind of international remittances. People move to find work, and they send money home. Felipe was a muleteer, and he moved with the miners to find work.

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**Meta watched the fuel flow from one rusting drum of fuel to another, while Geraldo watched him**. Gerlado explained that Meta had to wash the diesel fuel because the truck drivers who borough the fuel to town siphoned some off it away, and replaced the siphoned diesel with water.

The state regulates diesel, gasoline, and kerosene because fuel—along with cement and coca leaves—are the key ingredient to make coca paste. Workers make the paste by chopping up coca leaves and then mixing in cement for the lime and the fuel. The chemicals draw the active ingredient of cocaine out of the leaves. One kilogram of cocaine requires between 280 and 325 liters of fuel. Economists estimate the chemical process accounts for perhaps 1.5% of gasoline consumption and 2% of cement production in Colombia.[[5]](#footnote-6) The gold miners could get permission to transport large quantities of fuel into the Chocó, armed groups controlled the shipments and diverted some to drug production. To pay extortion, the truck drivers replaced fuel with water: José and Geraldo had Meta clean the diesel so the water would not destroy the engines.

Meta hoped for fast money at the mine. On his time off, he wore nice clothes and carried around a small speaker which he played music from a USB stick. Perhaps he sent money home to his family, maybe he was hoping for money or the chance to try a different job at the mine with more prestige and better wages. Miners migrate to the Chocó because gold promises fast cash, which other pursuits lack, and because violence pushes them from their homes.

Meta had shifted from a life in the city to try and find work as a miner. The pay was better than what he might have found in the city; and the work was hard, but respectable in the way that physical work can still be. Did he have an alternative? A gang in Medellín? Picking coca to the south? Maybe he would try that, another season.

When Meta had cleaned the fuel, he refilled the jugs, and carried the jugs to the excavators and the pumps where he refilled the machinery. There was a steady rhythm to the work. Each day, there was fuel to haul and clean, food to deliver, and machinery to lubricate. He climbed onto the excavators to re-grease the machinery and pump in lubricant. He napped in the shade, while nobody watched. He chatted by the river as he checked the motor. Meta was often in high spirits: He had recently brought a large cheap Chinese smartphone with a touchscreen, which was an inexpensive copy of a more expensive fruit flavored model.

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**David’s plans were not working out because he had not been paid either.** David had come to the village from Medellín for a steady wage as a driver. The mine was illegal, but for David, the work honest: Difficult because machines broke down often; dangerous because conflicts were common; monotonous because there was nothing to do when a machine broke down; boring because music videos on a smartphones brought only a little diversion; and frustrating because wages had been unpaid for months. The driver had it good, however. The position was respected. Others aspired to be the driver because the work was repetitive, but not onerous. David stayed because it was too hard to The possibility was that they would strike it big.

David’s job as the excavator driver was dangerous: an expensive accident or a landslide. Accidents were common. A carcass of an excavator sat beside the river frozen, rusted, and gutted for parts. Why did David stay at the mine digging holes in the jungle? David’s *shift* was a strategy that people engage in to make a living, to survive, to find a form of upward mobility and fast money. The wash might be far higher, any timer. Stories were common of fortunes made. A *vallenato* player in Medellín who made an incredible amount of money in a few weeks with excavators. The wash was their compliment to their wage—often a small compliment, but like a lottery ticket it might be an unexpected windfall. They stood to make a lot of money—or none. They knew exactly how the mine was doing when they did the wash? The wash might increase their wage just by a couple hundred thousand pesos. $50 or $100. Or, it might be a lot more. It was that potential for a bonanza. From a workers perspective, mine work was one of the few avenues of upward mobility—work that promised an alternative to poverty.

David knew the costs of running the machines, David knew the earth, and he knew the washes had been bad for weeks. The wash, which was a complement to his promised wage, was almost non-existent. There was enough gold for him to want to stay, but not enough to make the stay worthwile.

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Carlos was fired by the Foreman not because Carlos was a bad worker—he wasn’t because Carlos was fast and careful. The Foreman fired Carlos because of money. Carlos worked at the mine for a wage: His wage was supposed to be 700,000 pesos a month. When Carlos had worked with Pedro—not for Pedro, but *with* Pedro—he had been able to clear between about 400,000 pesos or about $200. The work as a washer was far harder working with Pedro, but the promised wage was double. It was good money compared to whatever else Carlos could have gotten. The twelve-hour shifts were steady: One week on the night shift, and one week on the day shift. The problem? José and Geraldo owed back wages for for months. Working six days a week for just above minimum wage is one thing; doing it for nothing is another. Carlos, who was new, had never received any pay.

Carlos, who could not abide working for nothing, complained to the Foreman. The Foreman had nothing to pay him with, or, at least, said he didn’t. One of them got angry first, probably the Foreman. The Foreman might not have liked Carlos’s independence or his habit of speaking his mind. Voices rose, and the Foreman fired Carlos.

Carlos lost his job, but he had alternatives to mine work. He, Eva, and their family could rely on Pedro for food. Carlos could go back to working with Pedro at their mine. The potential income was lower, but it was more certain. Everyone worked, and everyone got their share. Carlos demanded his back wages because he had an alliterative. It was because Carlos could rely on Pedro for food and work, that he had an outspokenness and self-confidence that the other workers lacked. He had an alternative to the wage labor. He could mine for cash with Pedro.

After Carlos calmed down, he went to talk with Geraldo. Geraldo, who was in charge, often gave in on small issues, but remained firm on the big ones. Gerlado didn’t have the money to pay everyone, but he paid Carlos for the work he had done.

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**Geraldo complained about his costs.** He was often easygoing, but was in a dark mood because the ball of gold from the sluice was too small. He had to pay $1,000 a day in diesel and wages and other expenses. 16 percent to Esteban and his family as co-owners; 2 percent permission money to the village’s Afro-descendant community council to travel through the territory; protection money to the paramilitary forces and the guerrillas present in the area; taxes to the municipality; money to the police and soldiers to leave him alone, repairs to the machinery; the food for the workers and the cooks; and the wages. In total, more than a $1,000 a day. The mine did not produce enough gold. Geraldo had debts piling up. He had not paid wages for months. Yet, the mine offered hope: It sometimes produced a ball of gold the size of a fist that was worth thousands of dollars.

Where did Geraldo spend his money? People said he had a car and a house in the city. Others said the money went to his girlfriend. The wife of the Foreman gossiped about the girl: Had Geraldo bought a plastic surgeons’ scalpel to lift and tuck and add curves where there had been none. She straightened her hair every day and had dyed it blond. She had copied a Colombian beauty queen, but was too short.

José worked in a sector the state was attempting to shut down. The shift had its own creativity. An official might engage in shift when they sell favors or pocket part of the municipal budget; a police officer might accept bribes from small-scale miners; a guerrilla who charges protection money to small-scale miners in their territory; a soldier who assassinates kids and claims them as combat kills. These are *rebusque*, a “side hustle” to a fixed employment, that offers a form of upward mobility.

Still, more a year after their morning wash, Geraldo and José fled. They left the excavators rusting in the jungle; they could not pay back the money lenders they had borrowed from; they never paid the 2 percent to the community council; they still owed money to Esteban and his family; and they owed back wage to all the workers.

## Workers on the Frontier

The workers at the mine repeated a cycle of work. The work had its rhythms, which repeated every day. Sometimes the miners found a lot of gold. Sometimes they found just a little. Most workers stayed, but some left to try something else. Some hoped to buy an excavator. Some had come to out of the way places to earn a little money. These different laborers adopted their strategies of shift. Some engaged in shift work outside of the fixed, yet hoped to find a fixed. People sought to find their fixed in a home, a food stand, a permanent job, or a mine of their own. Miners who came to the Chocó to shift, might have hoped to make a fortune. Some just came to get a share of the fast money.

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A skinny, middle-aged miner stood behind the classifier down beyond the sluices. He hoped to make the two-day bus ride home to visit his family in time for the New Year.

“Nobody can afford to leave,” he complained. “Geraldo hasn’t paid anyone for months.”

The miner complained that in the Lower Cauca the mines often had ten or more excavators; but here there were just a few old ones. There the machines were in good repair; here they broke down often. There the excavators had enough fuel; here fuel was a challenge. There the workers were busy seven days a week; here the workers were lucky if they had a week without a breakdown. There the workers were paid every two weeks; here the workers were not even paid.

“There they did not find anything either,” he said, “but at least they paid us on time. Not like here. It was better where I used to work.”

How could a mine pay its workers without producing any gold? When José and Geraldo did not mine enough gold, it was a disaster. But, a mine without gold need not always be a disaster.

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1. For testimonials of *rebusque*, see Alfredo Molano (1996a; 1996b; 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Peter Wade (2000) describes the *tropicalization* of the musical tastes of Colombia and the popularization of vallenato music. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. See Hernández Cifuentes 2012a, 2012b; Ronderos, 2011; *Semana* 2013a. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. For definitions, see Vox (2003) and the Real Academia Española (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. On fuel use for cocaine production in Colombia, see Mejia & Rico 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)