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

An hour before, the four of us had hiked the twenty minutes from the river to their mine. We had trailed half a dozen men and boys from a small community in the Chocó, Colombia’s northwest Pacific region of rain forests and rivers. I carried my camera, Leidy a digital music player, and one of the boys a blackened pot with a bag of rice inside; another young man balanced a gasoline-powered water pump on his upper back. The others carried shovels, wooden pans, and metal spikes—the tools of their trade as artisanal gold miners. We had begun at a cobble beach, passed through the jungle, and then come to a wide-open space of sand and mud and gravel that had been dug up by a pair of excavators made in Japan. Below an embankment and beside a large pool, a family used streams of water from a pump to cut through gouges left by the excavators, owned by illegal and informal small-scale miners who had packed up and gone upriver to mine away a hillside above a productive tunnel and start a new excavator mine. Where gravel met forest, trees peered over a kaleidoscope of purple-grays, red-browns, and silver-blues. On that hike, we followed a capricious path that meandered through a blasted landscape that once had been jungle.

Back in the sluice, with Leidy standing on that wooden plank with the metal grill and the red sack between the two slopes held up by the tangled roots of trees long gone, the three women worked with their hands. They
chatted and laughed in contagious hope. It was 2010, my third visit to such a mine, and all of us—Leidy, her mother and sister clearing the sluice, the young man hauling the pump, the family carving into the earth with their jets of water, the workers gouging away the tree cover with excavators, and I, asking too many questions and taking too many photographs—were after gold.

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

While there is a large literature on the informal economy, and “precariousness” has entered the lexicon of social scientists, the colloquial Colombian term for it all is rebusque, translated here as “shifting.” This word aims to capture the temporary, contingent, creative, and mobile world of informal work represented by rebusque. My use of it draws on an older English etymology, rather than the quotidian contemporary meaning. “Shifting,” as I use it, does not mean working for a set period at a factory but instead references the odd jobs and short-term hustles of the many rebusques described in the epigraph taken from Colombian writer David Sánchez Juliao’s short story “The Arrow,” which itself is about the various forms of informal work that a failed boxer employs. Rebusque refers to the many forms of unstable work available to the most marginalized populations in Colombia. Shifting encompasses various features of rebusque. One shifts by one’s own devices to succeed and get on, one shifts to live with difficulty by managing and makeshifting and employing evasions and practicing indirect methods through frauds and temporary expedients, and one shifts for oneself to provide for one’s own safety, interests, and livelihoods when there is no outside aid. Shifting captures the ontology of informal work, and a way of thinking about and living through various forms of rebusque.
The stories in the following pages come from the work of Leidy and the others like her whom I spent time with learning how to mine. My geology is theirs. My knowledge comes from the labor of moving gravel, digging holes, and panning. I learned mostly from people like Leidy who were the descendants of enslaved men and women brought from Africa who had panned for gold hundreds of years before. This book emerges from the bottom of a mine pit, and it relies as much on the insight that can be gained from this work as it does on rumors and half-truths heard in late-night conversations, read in media accounts, and gathered from other sources. Stories from the mud are not the only stories that could be told of gold.

Downtown Bogotá, the cold, gray, concrete capital of over ten million in the Andes Mountains, houses the elegant Gold Museum. Carefully lit and exquisitely curated artifacts stand in testament to the skills, metallurgies, and cosmologies of pre-Columbian Indigenous peoples who lived in what is today Colombia. Their descendants still do. The exhibits draw tourists from around the world to gaze at the carefully wrought statues and figurines, masks, cups, and other objects made of metals mined in the alluvial gravel of the hot lowlands of Colombia. The exhibits make little mention of contemporary miners, however. In 2010, just a few panels in the last room on the top floor dwelt on the lives of those who, like Leidy, were still digging for gold. While many Black miners in the Chocó still used hand tools, other miners were migrants from different regions who used heavy machinery.

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

From September 2010 to April 2012, I spent most of my time in one village on a river learning the work. I labored alongside Leidy, Martina, her husband Pedro, their neighbors Don Alfonso and Esteban, and others who were all twenty-first-century artisanal miners. I was enthusiastic, if not terribly efficient. I rose before dawn, hauled fuel, dug trenches, and threw stones. I spent a little time underground. I often visited a small-scale operation after the two excavators arrived from the mine downriver near Leidy’s community to work the lands above Martina and Pedro’s village.

I found ways to help. I became proficient in some techniques. Difficult tasks became mundane, even though most of the time I stayed a neophyte. With Martina, I cleared stones from the sluice. The sluice was half a dugout canoe, which fed into a plank of wood with the sides nailed over a sack. As Martina and Pedro dumped stones and sand and gravel dug from the pit, I kept the sluice clear. Their *bateas* were the primary tools. Pedro sent wooden pans full of mud sailing up from the bottom of the pit to pass the empty pans sent sailing down by Martina. I cleared away the stones and gravel left in the sluice by the steady pull of a trickle of water. If I worked slowly, the stones would pile up and Martina would come over and clear everything in one motion, which left me embarrassed. Over time, I learned some of her tricks. Do not pick the stones one at a time, scoop them *en masse*. The work was physical and skillful.

This book, in part, is a study of that skilled work, and the freedom that it can give. The pages that follow draw on the time I spent working with miners. From those labors, I address the diverse economies of Martina and Pedro and others who earn their livelihood using wooden pans and hand tools alongside hunting, fishing, urban migration and trade, and other shifting livelihood strategies of *rebusque*. My focus is on the labor and livelihoods of miners embedded within the broader connections of gold.

My arguments emerge from an apprenticeship in the skilled techniques of mining. I labored to become conversant in mine work. Throwing stones, digging, shoveling, and picking gave me insight on what the yellow metal meant, how to find it, and what to do with it. These activities opened a window onto the practicalities and ambiguities of mining. Some tasks became familiar. If familiarity is a necessary step to understanding, learning to mine helped me develop an intimate, practical, and embodied understanding of the work. It also created a space for a mutual trust and friendship that
facilitated my ethnographic endeavor. Quotidian interactions, informal conversations, and deepening relationships created friendships. Learning to mine helped build confidences, which are the truck and trade of ethnography. It helped me learn both what is important and what to ask (and not ask). It gave me an opportunity to meet miners, and was a ready, intelligible explanation for my presence. It helped me build human connections and develop social competencies.

The fact that I became an enthusiastic, if ultimately incompetent and inexpert, miner, helped me become aware of what was important to miners, while also giving me some of the habits required to navigate everyday tasks. In addition, if the men and women who worked at their mines all day assumed the role of skilled experts, I assumed the role of their novice, someone to be taught and protected. This temporary inversion of knowledge and power was notable because, too often, outsiders and visiting researchers would arrive unexpectedly in the late afternoons, just as miners were returning from the bush the most tired and dirty. By working alongside them, by being as tired and as dirty, my research became more legible. Everyone knew what my method was because they saw me doing it.

My ethnographic participant observation was not enough, however. I also read. I read newspapers, magazines, archival documents, websites, and a burgeoning literature on mining in Latin America and beyond. Once I had finished my fieldwork in 2012, I spent a year reading corporate reports, financial statements, and websites of companies based in Canada with projects in the Chocó, as well as activists’ reports and newspaper articles. I studied and mapped gold mining statistics. I followed my intuition to reach a new understanding of a gold rush.

I first met Leidy in November 2010 in the town of Paimadó at a workshop organized by a nongovernmental organization funded by a European development agency. We had taken a long motor launch with a dozen others to Paimadó, which was being washed away by illegal dredging operations owned by Brazilian small-scale miners. A national news magazine had covered the story many times, demonizing the dredges and their owners. A decade later, things in Paimadó are far worse: more dredging, more damage, and more stories, which make the situation out to be, by all accounts, an unfolding environmental disaster. Many recent accounts of mining focus on the largest mines owned by multinational corporations; issues of corporate social responsibility, social license, social movement opposition, and the damage to the environment are center stage. This is also the case in the research on “neo-extractivism” in Latin America. What this literature misses, though, is that much of the gold mined each year comes from what
are called artisanal and small-scale mining operations, the former being the kind of miners who were washing away Paimadó as they dredged for gold. This is a global phenomenon. 

That shiny, glittering metallic element has shaped the world for a long time. Gold is a financial instrument, a commodity, and a holder of wealth. Some estimates are that there are about 171,300 metric tons of gold in the world worth about $8 trillion, with 52,000 metric tons still to be mined. Gold has a role in international finance, with a relationship between investments in gold and stock market collapses. Gold is imagined as a safe investment and a place to put money when all else fails. Gold plays a role as a hedge at the center of the international economy. Gold is the commodity currency of choice for “metal-heads” (speculators), libertarians, drug traffickers, and the rest. Prices are set by a handful of banks overlooking the foggy River Thames in the City of London.

This book is not about any of that. Instead, it is about what happened when prices reached $1,900 a troy ounce in 2011, which smashed records set in the early 1980s, and reshaped a way of life on a river in western Colombia, as thousands of men and machines began to set up jungle camps and as multinational corporations sought out new projects.

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

The gulley where Leidy stood in the mud had been worked by the three women because it was a family endeavor. Leidy’s father had died the year before, electrocuted in an accident while he was fixing a high-voltage transmission line that connected his village through many kilometers of rain
forests. In her front room, Leidy kept a photograph of her father lying in an open casket. That morning, where we worked, the excavators had moved on, and the three women were after the little metal that was left behind. While their work had the potential of a lucky strike, mostly it gave them a little extra cash, which helped Leidy support her family. She relied on this money, along with cash transfer payments for single mothers brought in by the Colombian government by helicopter from a military base and her rebusque consisting of different short-term hustles. The three women in the gully were a tiny example of the much larger phenomenon that was sweeping their river and the region.

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

Leidy, her sister, her mother, and much of the rest of the population of the Chocó were the descendants of the escaped or manumitted enslaved men and women brought from Africa to mine in those jungles. The other 10 percent or so were Indigenous Embera communities or the mestizo population. If tales of El Dorado had brought the Spanish to open the veins of Latin America looking for minerals, it was gold from Colombia and silver from Mexico and Potosí that were the basis of Spanish colonial wealth. In the same way, mining shaped the settlement patterns of colonial Colombia, because hundreds of years ago contemporary urban areas were agricultural zones growing food to feed slave gangs in mining regions. More recently, the story is similar. In the 2000s, the promise of fast cash lured outsiders to the Chocó from the neighboring province of Antioquia to escape violence and find gold. Garimpeiro miners from Brazil who had run out of easy metal in the Amazon came as well. I heard rumors of Koreans, Chinese, and Americans who had lost money in the business of supplying heavy machinery and had turned to digging with excavators.

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

When talking about mining, it is easy to resort to stereotypes: illegal miners are the biggest source of profits for armed groups; miners are involved in trafficking cocaine; miners are the cause of an unfolding environmental disaster. The story is more complex, however. By 2013, the miners who used heavy machinery and excavators were occupying an airport and organizing marches against state repression. While their mines were being made illegal, the projects of foreign multinational corporations were being supported by the Colombian state. Still, the Chocó was in fact experiencing a disaster, as mercury contamination damaged rivers, fish stocks, and human health, and as poor families opened up their lands to bring in the heavy machines to extract whatever they could.

There may be little that is unique about the ways the boom reshaped the Chocó, however. Similar rushes have occurred around the world.\textsuperscript{12} Accounts of the Amazon in the 1980s, where thousands descended on remote jungle camps, read eerily similarly. Stories from Venezuela in the 1980s and late 2010s tell of illegal miners destroying rivers and Indigenous communities. Peru’s Madre de Dios region is another example, as is the way coltan is mined from the fields of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Artisanal and small-scale miners work in northern Myanmar and West Africa, while rivers in Indonesia are featured in Hollywood movies.\textsuperscript{13} The Discovery Channel has a reality show about miners in the Canadian Yukon and Alaska. There is a global gold rush, which in many places is being demonized. Globally, it is easy to paint all miners with the same brush, making this illegal and informal industry the biggest threat to rivers around the world. But this misses the quotidian lived experience of such mining.

By 2018, millions around the world made a living mixing digging for gold with farming, hunting, slash-and-burn agriculture, temporary work, out-migration, and other activities. Some of the poorest and most marginalized around the world have traded their machetes for shovels to become what specialist on gender and community livelihoods Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt calls extractive peasants.\textsuperscript{14} While the Chocó’s is far from an isolated gold rush, it is one in which the particular matters. While what was unfolding can be seen as a catastrophic form of uncontrolled illegal and informal extractive activities, the industry also provided a livelihood for Leidy, her mother, and
her sister that afternoon. It is this contradiction that makes it so urgent to understand the perspectives of the miners themselves.

I take such a perspective in the following pages, but mining is just one part of the story. There are other parts. Rural families have watched their ways of life come under attack from cocaine trafficking, from government corruption, and from illegal logging. The Chocó is a key route for coca production and cocaine shipments from the interior to the Pacific Ocean and north to Central America on their way to the United States. In this, the most impoverished region in Colombia, many live on as little as a dollar a day. Access to food is insecure, work is scarce, and flooding, war, natural disaster, and the ongoing search for a livelihood displace people from their territories in riverine valleys to the cities and other areas of highland Colombia. The population of 350,000 Black descendants of enslaved women and men brought from Africa and of dozens of Indigenous communities and mestizo settlers has experienced the boom times in diverse ways. This book is about how the miners (whom I knew best) experienced the gold rush.

This book follows six or so mines over six chapters, divided into three parts. Some mines were worked by Black families who mixed gold production using hand tools and manual techniques with various livelihood strategies. Other mines were worked by men and women from other regions of Colombia, who deployed heavy machinery and mercury as a way to accumulate cash. Still other mines may or may not have been worked at all, as they were instead used to support money laundering or speculative investments. Part 1 dwells on the artisanal production of two mines worked using hand tools and manual techniques embedded in what I call a dual household economy. Part 2 considers small-scale accumulation, focusing on a mine owned by a Black family who decided to invite in outsiders in an attempt to get rich quick. Part 3 turns to the global connections of gold, with forms of value transformation through cocaine money laundering and stock market speculation. These three parts follow connections out from a rural way of life in the Colombian Pacific to places far beyond the Chocó, through the networks of the drug trade and speculative capitalism. Throughout it all, each chapter always returns to a place and the lived experience of men and women like Leidy and her neighbors who find their shifting livelihoods through rebusque.

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

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

Photographs open and close each chapter. The photographs are my own, and I did not collaborate with anyone. During my fieldwork, I often had a camera with me, and photography and video was something I spent energy on. However, as I began to draft these pages, I realized I had time to learn to write well, but not also to master photography. Of the photographs I have not used, some served as memory aids for the writing. Of the photographs I have used, each expresses not just an illustration of the text but an additional layer of meaning. Some invite their own stories, and all serve to enrich interpretations of shifting livelihoods and gold mining in the Chocó.