

Muddled Times: Temporality and Gold Mining in Colombia and Venezuela

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Abstract

In current social theorising there is a burgeoning interest in the ‘afterlife’ of resource extraction. In this chapter, we maintain that while the assumption of a post-extractive afterlife might grasp certain social and extractive dynamics of mining areas, it is not necessarily indicative of how people in mining sites themselves conceive of being in time. To this end, we explore how different temporal experiences coincide and converge with one another in two informal gold-mining regions in Colombia and Venezuela. In particular, we reveal that during our fieldwork in these regions the extractive present was imagined as an afterlife and/or a thing of the past. In other words, miners who were extracting in the present nevertheless experienced and described their work through tropes of anteriority (of being stuck in an earlier time) and posteriority (of being stuck after history). In the gold rush of the Venezuelan Arco Minero region, miners encountered their ongoing mining practices as if having descended into a messy hereafter they had never imagined becoming part of. In the Colombian Chocó region, residents of post-boom towns and villages returned to pre-boom extractive practices, and described these practices as the tragic aftermath of a rich gold rush, while simultaneously relating them to pre-boom years of poverty. We couple both cases to highlight how lived experiences in present-day gold country cannot be analysed without considering previous booms and busts, as one resource frontier’s life is often another frontier’s afterlife. We present ‘muddled times’ as an alternative way to conceive of the temporality of the gold mine.

1 Time and Again

In current social theorising on human ecologies and the exploitation of land and people, there is a burgeoning interest in the ‘afterlife of destruction’ (Gordillo, 2014), with scholars wrestling with the question of what happens to life when extractive industries come to an end. Various authors in this debate have made the case for studying the empirical characteristics and political

potentialities of people and places that are situated ‘after capitalism’, ‘after dispossession’, or in ‘capitalist ruins’ (Morton, 2010; Saleminck and Rasmussen, 2016; Tsing, 2015). In this chapter, we likewise address the interface of the lives and afterlives of resource frontiers, putting ethnographic emphasis on political and social potentialities. Specifically, we maintain that while the assumption of a post-extractive afterlife might grasp certain social and extractive dynamics of mining areas (Avango and Rosqvist, 2021), it is not necessarily indicative of how people in mining sites themselves conceive of being in time.

Time and again, notions such as ‘afterlife’ and ‘post-extraction’ assume, more or less explicitly, demarcated temporalities such as ‘before’, ‘during’ and ‘after’ in order to address how landscapes and communities are affected by resource extraction. Yet the lived experience of time and space at resource frontiers is often much more cyclical in nature. Such regions are subject to appearing, disappearing, and reappearing extractive practices, and are characterised by overlapping resource potentialities. Indeed, quite unlike the successive chronology of national mining legislation—whereby miners explore, then exploit, then close down—time in mining sites is messy and multiple; it consists of coexisting temporalities of people, lands, policies, and things. Just as the afterlife of one mine may give birth to future mining desires and activities, so present-day extraction is sometimes experienced as an aftermath of earlier boom years of the same or another resource. Time is, for the most part, a muddled matter.

Following scholars who emphasise the presence of multiple temporalities of mining (D’Angelo and Pijpers, 2018; Jaramillo, 2020; Luning, 2018), and others who have challenged the finality of the mining cycle (Cater and Keeling, 2013; Halvaksz, 2008), this chapter explores how different temporal experiences coincide and converge with one another in two informal gold-mining regions in Colombia and Venezuela. In particular, we reveal that during our fieldwork in these regions the extractive present was imagined as an afterlife and/or a thing of the past. In other words, miners who were extracting in the present nevertheless experienced and described their work through tropes of anteriority (of being stuck in an earlier time) and posteriority (of being stuck after history). As such, rather than following the scholarly convention of using time as an analytic to describe harm inflicted on vulnerable populations—as ‘slow violence’ (Nixon, 2011), ‘a state of uneventfulness’ (Hetherington, 2020, 37), or surely, as ‘afterlife’ (Gordillo, 2014)—our analysis seeks to foreground, as Chloe Ahmann (2018, 144) puts it, ‘how affected groups *work time* to emphasize their vulnerability’. While the muddled temporalities we describe are by no means a monopoly of informal mining zones, we consider that they are especially pronounced there. Previous booms and busts of mineral markets, drastic changes to landscapes, steep rises in the arrival of newcomers, and

political shifts towards either the criminalisation or the toleration of gold miners jointly result in a constant reshuffling of economic and social practices in these regions, and by extension in a constant reshuffling of local experiences of time.

Time is a classical object of anthropological inquiry and runs through almost all social analysis. As Ernest Gellner (1964, 1) asserts, 'the way in which time and its horizons are conceived is generally connected with the way the society understands and justifies itself'. How extractive communities understand and justify their own temporal and social make-up is thus key here. In gold country, expectations of future extraction often emerge as rapidly as they go bust, nostalgia about previous resource booms intersects with present opportunities and future misfortunes, former mine infrastructures become an integral part of contemporary mines, state-of-the-art technology gets replaced by older and cheaper equipment in the event of an unlucky mining streak, and both the new and older work techniques are described to the passing anthropologist as 'our traditional culture'. In short, the past, present, and future are all over the place in the goldfields.

In building our case, we draw on ethnographic fieldwork in Venezuela and Colombia. Eva van Roekel lived in Venezuela on and off between 1998 and 2008. In 2019, she made a research trip to the Venezuelan border with Brazil. Due to the pandemic, since 2020 she has conducted collaborative fieldwork with a local anthropologist who lives in this mining region located in Bolívar State. Jesse Jonkman has conducted over 14 months of fieldwork since 2016 in Colombia, mostly in Chocó, a vast rainforest region that covers roughly half of Colombia's Pacific lowlands. At first glance, these two mining cases seem somewhat at cross purposes. In Venezuela, a former leading global oil producer, both small- and large-scale goldmining have played a smaller part in the national economy since the discovery of rich oil fields in the early twentieth century, whereas Colombia has been an important gold producer since colonial times, the result of which is a legacy of placer- and tunnel-mining regions scattered throughout the country.¹ In recent years, the Colombian government has opened up the country to the large-scale mining industry, promoting neo-liberal legislation that has gone hand in hand with the persecution and subsequent demise of small-scale mining activities. In turn, since 2012 the socialist government of Venezuela has begun to endorse informal mining activities in the wake of economic sanctions, falling oil prices, and its own negligence of

1 In placer mining, extraction takes place in stream beds and adjacent alluvial landscapes. Most of such extraction takes place above the Earth's surface.

the oil industry (Bull and Rosales, 2020). This endorsement has partly resulted in a great expansion of informal mining in what is now known as the Arco Minero del Orinoco (Orinoco Mining Arc), largely located in Bolívar State in the south of Venezuela (Ebus, 2019; Peters, 2019).

Yet on closer inspection, there is plenty that connects the two cases. In Venezuela and Colombia alike, gold mining is a controversial activity, whereby most mines lack the necessary paperwork, non-state armed groups regulate and tax miners, state authorities (by defect or default) have partly forsaken their task of enforcing legislation, and Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations suffer environmental and social destruction at the hands of wildcat miners from other regions. What is more, as we explain below, these contentious mining dynamics coincide in both cases with muddled temporal experiences that sit uneasily with a simple linear model of extractive life-becoming-afterlife.

To make this shared argument tangible, we divide our analysis into four sections. First, we engage in conversation with classical readings in the anthropology of time and temporality, which help us to conceptualise time differently from a single and straight narrative of life preceding afterlife—or extraction preceding post-extraction. Second, we zoom in on the Arco Minero region in Venezuela, and highlight that despite an unfolding gold rush, some miners experienced their wants and ongoing mining practices as if they had descended into a messy hereafter they had never imagined becoming part of. Third, we focus on Chocó (Colombia), where residents of post-boom mining towns and villages returned to pre-boom extractive practices, and described these practices as the tragic aftermath of a rich gold rush, while simultaneously relating them to pre-boom years of poverty. Lastly, we couple both cases to highlight how lived experiences in present-day gold country cannot be analysed without considering previous booms and busts, as one resource frontier's life is often another frontier's afterlife. As such, we present 'muddled times' as an alternative way to conceive of the temporality of the gold mine, and more precisely, to look at how miners are caught up in the middle of various temporalities of resources, people, policies, and lands that co-constitute gold extraction in Venezuela and Colombia.

2 Extraction and Time

In recent years, the social analysis of mining has increasingly drawn attention to the so-called afterlife of extraction. Most of such analysis concerns studies that explore the ecologies and socialities that emerge once mines are abandoned. Among other things, these studies have shown that the social

and environmental influence of mines outlives their actual extraction phase (Avango and Rosqvist, 2021; Mazzeo, 2018; Long, 2020; Oakley, 2018), that former mines shape contemporary attitudes to new extraction (Cater and Keeling, 2013; Halvaksz, 2008), that mining results in a post-extractive situation of abandonment, loss, dispossession and lingering responsibilities and new hardships (Askland, 2020; Silva, 2020), and conversely, that the afterlife of mining is also productive of new forms of economic and social life (Keeling and Sandlos, 2017; Robertson, 2006). Another strand of research, more specific to Latin America, has conceptualised the afterlife of mining as less an empirical condition than a possible political project to emancipate national economies from their extractive leanings. Put differently, the 'after' experience of mining is the onset of conceiving new ways of diversifying the economy. This research outlines several reasons 'to design and implement a strategy that will lead to a post-extractivist economy' (Acosta, 2013, 80), such as the need to prevent the inevitable exhaustion of resources, the social conflicts surrounding mineral, oil, and gas extraction, the low economic benefits of extraction for local populations and national governments, and the contributions of the extractive industries to local environmental degradation and global climate change (Acosta, 2013; 2015; Gudynas, 2013; Moreno, 2015; Svampa, 2013).

In a nutshell, both strands of research firmly acknowledge that post-mining and the afterlife of extraction is rather the beginning of new social practices and new political potentialities for local communities and territories. While describing extractive practices and mining communities in terms of afterlife and pre- or post-extractive booms—or writing against such terminologies—we are tacitly playing with notions of time and temporality from the outset (Browne Riberio, 2019, 47). This burgeoning acknowledgment of temporal messiness within the extractive present, we believe, requires a deeper engagement with the actual experience of time and its relation to the environment. As Richard Irvine (2014, 158) rightly observes, 'conceptualizations of time emerge from social interests, activities, and relations'. Stated otherwise, how we understand time depends on for whom and what we think we are responsible, as well as on with whom and what we interact. Tim Ingold (1993) likewise invites us to ponder how past and future always gather into the present in numerous ways, and how multiple timescales of the various elements that co-constitute an empirical reality (e.g. a tree, a person, a path, a valley, and so on) interact with one another. Our struggle therefore is not to determine which temporality a priori works best, but to do justice to a much more undetermined relationship of multiple social representations of temporality and the many varieties of experience of being-in-time (Jackson, 2018, xv). Life and afterlife of mining may, for instance, easily exist side by side. Likewise, temporal experiences that

correspond with a linear progression of past, present, and future may very well coexist with circular or spiralling temporalities.

People's experiences of time are largely related to a jumble of biological rhythms, daily routines, seasonal practices, and social calendars. The influence of time on people's everyday lives is contingent on these competing or coexisting relations between natural and social tempos, cyclical and linear time, and repetition and irreversibility (Gell, 1992). Recently, a 'temporal turn' in anthropology has emphasised the heterogeneity of temporal experience under financial capitalism, and has called attention to alternative orientations to futures and pasts (Bear, 2016; Bryant and Knight, 2019). Long before this research, in his classical work on how the Nuer understood time, Evans-Pritchard (1939, 189–190) already argued that, while all time concepts are social notions, we should distinguish between time concepts that involve people's relations with their physical environment and time concepts that relate to interpersonal affiliation. Albeit both social and interrelated, these are distinctive time concepts: the first is occupational and the second is moral. In the latter, for instance, the Nuer understood and experienced when events took place not in numbers of years, but in their structural relation to a limited group of people (Evans-Pritchard, 1939, 210–211). After various generations time got lost, so to speak.

How people reckon the beginning and ending of a certain time and how they experience the passage of time in their lives thus vary greatly. That being said, Fabian (1983) warned us that we should not deny the 'coevalness' of the time of the ethnographer and that of their so-called Other. In other words, alternative experiences of time should never become a device that exoticises people. There is simply not *one* way of being in time. Anthropological critique against favouring a single temporality (often a linear one) fits a relative temporal disposition, including in Das (2006) Desjarlais (1997), van Roekel (2020), and Vargas-Roncancio (2017). These authors acknowledge that being in time is always a mix-up of different temporalities that converge and overlap, just as the busts and booms in mining settlements evidence. Miners may very well experience the 'post' and 'after' of extraction differently, but we should not dismiss coexisting linear temporalities while trying to make an effort at understanding the empirical realities we are interested in.

The renewed debate on Bakhtian chronotopes (i.e. the representation of time and space) in anthropology furthermore sensitises us to the intrinsic connectedness of various temporal and spatial relations (Bakhtin, in Boletsi et al., 2021, 5). The chronotope highlights how our experiences and subjective understandings of time and place emerge through meaning-making processes that can generate different kinds of historicity (Wirtz, 2016). We should, therefore, not only look at different ways of conceiving time-space, but also accept

that different chronotopes converge in people's lives. For instance, in the case of Amazonian rubber tappers that Browne Ribeiro (2019, 55) describes, one chronotope emerges from a small and rural settlement that is organised primarily through kinship and seasonal agro-extractivist activities, while another emerges from global capitalist markets that are organised through the accumulation and movement of goods and capital. Ethnographies that explore Amazonian soils similarly point out that binaries and juxtapositions—such as living and non-living—‘trouble modern temporal divides between past, present, and future’ (Lyons, 2020, 62). The impermanence of Amazonian lands, with their ever-changing existence, makes soils inextricable from an entangled web where every element is always implicated in the existence of the other (Lyons, 2020, 99). Multiple temporalities converge likewise in Amazonian resources frontiers. As this shows, people and lands can then sometimes become awkwardly trapped between multiple chronotopes that rely simultaneously on different kinds of pasts and different claims for the future (HadžiMuhamedović, 2018).

It follows, then, that in the following sections on the extractive present in Venezuela and Colombia our interest lies not so much in analysing what life looks like after destruction—or if the afterlife has arrived (or not) for the people and lands that are implicated in mining practices. Rather, we want to analyse how local ideas about life and afterlife intersect in resource extraction (see also D'Angelo and Pijpers, 2018), and how such ideas mesh with the concrete experiences, memories, and expectations of miners, as well as the formations, residues, and adaptations of extractive landscapes.

3 The Venezuelan Gold Rush: the Afterlife Within

In March 2018, whilst the national economy was spiralling down fast and the majority of Venezuelans increasingly faced hunger and deprivation, President Nicolás Maduro smooched a gold bar on national television. With a complacent smile he looked into the camera and said that the gold is of *la patria* (the ‘fatherland’) and of *el pueblo* (the people).² His kiss was a performative act during a national communique in which the Minister of Mining and President Maduro declared a new mining area in the Orinoco Mining Arc in Bolívar State in the southern part of Venezuela. A potential of eight thousand tons of new gold, they claimed, would become the new motor to reform the economy and

2 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zarI307Yb6Q> (accessed on 8 September 2021).

endorse the new national cryptocurrency, the 'Petro', bringing prosperity and happiness to all Venezuelans.

Not so long ago, similar promises saturated national broadcasting and the future of Venezuela was brighter than ever: abundant oil would bring affluence to all Venezuelans. This promise of 'sowing the oil' to strengthen agricultural and industrial activity has existed in the national imaginary and political discourse since the 1930s (Coronil, 1997). Yet, due to low oil revenues, in the last decade the Venezuelan extractive imaginary has in some way taken a 'resource turn'. The Maduro government now aims to stabilise the steep crisis and diversify the economy through the extraction of minerals, such as gold, diamonds, coltan, iron and bauxite. Particularly, gold has become the new promise of wealth for all Venezuelans and a way to survive a complex humanitarian crisis (van Roekel and de Theije, 2020). These social imaginaries have had far-reaching political outcomes. In 2016, the government issued a decree to create the Orinoco Mining Arc, a special development zone for the mining of minerals that is ruled by flexible monetary arrangements and malleable labour and environmental policies—the Orinoco Mining Arc was evidently not created to encourage foreign investments, but to legalise existing informal mining activities in protected areas and formalise alliances between the government and the irregular armed groups that largely control the extraction of minerals in the south of Venezuela (Bull and Rosales, 2020, 125–126). The Amazonian forests and rivers and the southern savannahs soon turned into highly profitable assets, and violent land disputes, deforestation, water contamination, and rising crime have increasingly been harming people and lands (UNHCHR, 2020). In 2020, the disputed extractive region, which covers approximately 110,000 square kilometres, was expanded towards new potential mining areas in important rivers in the Venezuelan Amazon.

The policies that formalised small-scale mining in the Venezuelan south were infused with linear mining cycles of prospection, exploration, extraction and closure (Gobierno Bolivariano de Venezuela, 2018, 22). The Plan Sectorial Minero of 2018 likewise emphasised a prospective mineral abundance of its national territories and the promise of extraordinary profits, and its words fitted perfectly with the temporal make-up of global extractive markets and notions of pre-boom, post-mining, and the life-preceding-afterlife in the current mining literature. While reading the report, it was difficult to ignore the previous oil bust and present crisis that have confronted the country for almost a decade. Temporally speaking, Venezuelan miners seemed awkwardly trapped between these promising reports, previous booms and busts, and present crises—different chronotopes that depended on different kinds of pasts and different claims for the future simultaneously. We should not ignore

such temporal muddles, which are part and parcel of an experiential world of the extractive present and the current gold rush in Venezuela.

Late in 2019, I (Eva van Roekel) travelled to the Venezuelan and Brazilian border area and learned how Venezuelan refugees and internally displaced people had turned to artisanal gold mining as a way to survive the humanitarian crisis. Thousands of newcomers had flocked to old and new gold mining sites that had recently boosted a local economy of food, gasoline, and banknotes to make the extraction and exchange of gold possible. Although I hardly saw any gold during my stay, it appeared to be everywhere, for the good and the bad. The omnipresence of gold was similar to what I knew from my previous years of living in Venezuela, when the blessing and curse of oil had always been dauntingly present in everyday life.

When I had just decided to continue fieldwork on the emergency extraction of gold that was sustaining the livelihood of thousands of Venezuelans, the global pandemic hit. So, instead of a subsequent fieldtrip, I started collaborating with Morelia Morillo, a colleague who lives in the mining region, which used to be a thriving hotspot for ecotourism. One extractive industry had replaced the other, and the practical workings of the gold rush had built upon existing social and material infrastructures. For the past twelve months, my first-hand experiences from 2019 have fused with the field diaries of Morelia and my interrogations of her personal experiences, observations and casual conversations with villagers and newcomers. The experience of being in an afterlife often appeared right in middle of the current gold rush in her hometown. One life story of a villager helped me to perceive how previous booms and busts of many resources (not only oil) were all part of the 'extractive present' in the Venezuelan south that further muddled my ideas of the life and afterlife of mining—or any social activity really.

Tariq³ had arrived at the border town a decade ago and had soon started a household appliances business. According to Morelia, the burgeoning of Tariq's business was due to the rising shortages in Venezuela, and their local border economy was in its 'pre-boom climax' back then. The growing economy of scarcity up north soon became highly profitable in this border area, with Brazilian supplies nearby. Tariq was doing well in his personal life too. He fell in love with a girl whose father belonged to the Pemón, a local Indigenous community, and they got married and had two daughters. But his prosperous shop went bankrupt soon after a procedure called 'controlled sales' was introduced—that is, forced sale at cost price, which was controlled by the

3 The authors use pseudonyms when referring to research participants.

national armed forces. Tariq's bankruptcy was part of a larger economic bust at the border.

Many of his colleagues found refuge in artisanal gold mining, but Tariq continued to resist going to the mines. He became a taxi driver first. Soon gasoline became a scarcity too and Tariq turned to the resale and smuggling of fuel for a while. Then he started a makeshift shop in basic goods next to the road leading to the village of his in-laws. But he had to close his new business down following a violent mining dispute in 2019 in which he lost several friends. His wife became the main provider. Then she lost her job too. Tariq was in despair and saw no other option than the gold mines. For many newcomers, and residents like Tariq, gold mining became the ultimate recourse and was a kind of afterlife that was paradoxically generated by previous booms and current economic effervescence.

Early in 2021, Tariq visited Morelia in the afternoon. He told her again that he had long refused to go to the mines. 'Going to the mine is not something that makes me proud', he said.

He emphasised once more that he had tried to subsist with any job other than gold mining. He thought, just like Morelia had been told by previous research participants, that working in the gold mines was too dirty and insecure a job due to rising crime in and near the mines. Two years earlier, a small-scale mining area near his in-laws' village had sprung up. Tariq told Morelia that he was granted entrance because his wife's family belonged to the indigenous community.

The mine gives me to live. In a week I take out ... three to three point five [grams] each. Already on Thursdays, I have bought everything we need for the house. What we [extract] between Friday and Saturday, we save for any emergency. I feel good because my girls are eating well, they have milk, their Toddy [chocolate drink], their cereals, their clothes, their shoes.

While the green savannahs turned into red mud, Tariq and the others all worked in an artisanal manner, each one their own piece of land, approximately two by two metres, from which each took the gravel and the sand mixed with pebbles. This was, according to Morelia, supposedly the layer that was rich in gold, which they washed in a *suruca* (a sieve) and a wooden pan, in which the gold remains. Grams of gold that were just enough to subsist on.

Like other emergency miners, Tariq seemed hardly concerned with the prospection, exploration, extraction and closure of the expanding Orinoco Mining Arc he had unwillingly become part of. Both he and Morelia rather describe their presence in the current gold rush as an afterlife within. As

already mentioned, overlapping extractive realities coexist; past and present booms and busts of oil and gold easily subsisted with other resource commodity booms and busts that made life (a bit more) liveable at a resource frontier (see also D'Angelo, 2018). Like in many Amazonian contexts, gold cycles are just one of the many booms and bust cycles that characterise the *longue durée* of colonial and postcolonial presence in this part of the world (Browne Riberio, 2019, 48). Extraction, in its many arrangements, holds a form of permanence at these resource frontiers. The afterlife of one form of extraction, cultivation, and commerce often intersperses with other lives and afterlives that are about to appear. Each element of life, as Ingold (1993) notes, has its own timescale and rhythm that we should consider in our intent to make sense of empirical realities. These different chronotopes of resources, exposed lands, mining policies and opposing communities evidently intersect in how individuals like Tariq and Morelia experience and make sense of the extractive present in gold country. Tariq and the green savannahs in the Venezuelan south have become awkwardly trapped between different resource chronotopes that depend on different historical pasts and different entitlements for the future simultaneously. The experiences of small-scale gold miners in the current post-mining boom in Chocó prove the same.

4 Mining in the Ruins of the Chocó Gold Rush

The starting point of Chocó's resource extraction lies somewhere in the early 1700s, when Spanish colonisers began to bring enslaved Africans and their descendants to the region and forced them to work in placer mines (Sharp, 1975). Chocó soon became an archetypical example of colonial extractivism: gold travelled from its rainforest outwards, whereas investments in local infrastructure were scarce and restricted to mining operations (Wade, 1993). Colonial rule ended in 1821; slavery in 1851. Yet this combination of gold extraction and social abandonment has, in different guises, remained. Today, many of the region's Afro-descendant inhabitants continue to work in placer mining. Meanwhile, official statistics designate Chocó as Colombia's poorest region (DANE, 2020), while grassroots leaders have repeatedly organised mass protests that condemn the perceived 'abandonment of the state' (Tubb and Rojas, 2020).

Of course, continuing abandonment notwithstanding, many things did change. Mining companies came and went, villages transformed into towns, asphalt and motorboats increased the speed of travel, miners increasingly complemented wooden mining gear (pans, sticks, sluice boxes) with diesel-powered pumps, and local prices of gold and platinum fluctuated in tandem

with the shifting demand for minerals elsewhere in the world. In recent decades change has accelerated. In the 1980s, paramilitaries, guerrillas, and state forces enveloped Chocó in the wider Colombian conflict—whose violence, until then, had largely skirted the region (Wouters, 2001). At more or less the same time, wildcat miners from other parts of Colombia began arriving in the region in search for gold. Their migration was piecemeal until it took on dramatic proportions in the late 2000s, when the gold price skyrocketed in the aftermath of the financial crisis. A mining boom ensued, swallowing up the rainforest. These new miners relied on heavy machinery, such as excavators and pontoons, that turned rivers into sandbanks, streams into puddles, plots of crops into piles of rocks, gold-bearing forests into worthless moonscapes. The gold rush wreaked havoc on traditional economies of artisanal mining, farming, fishing and hunting (Jonkman, 2021; Tubb, 2020).

The boom years did not persist. After half a century of war, Colombia was cruising to a peace deal with the FARC guerrillas, and the national government deemed ‘illegal miners’ enemies of the upcoming peace. Apart from destroying the natural environment, miners supplied rents (or extortion money, as they themselves said) to paramilitaries and guerrillas, and thereby thwarted the government’s efforts to re-establish military control over the Colombian countryside. What’s more, the Santos Administration (2010–18) had envisioned ‘post-conflict’ development as revolving around large-scale extractive industries, and this endorsement coincided with the criminalisation of small-scale miners, who worked not only without the proper papers but sometimes also on the concessions of the desired multinationals. And so, in the course of the 2010s the government increasingly attempted to eradicate unlicensed extraction by means of police operations that incarcerated miners and dynamited their machinery. In Chocó, such persecution, along with the declining accessibility of gold reserves, resulted in the end of the mining boom. When I (Jesse Jonkman) did fieldwork in 2017, excavator mines had drastically decreased in number.

At the same time that the government began penalising unlicensed mining, four *chocoano* grassroots organisations filed a lawsuit against various state agencies for permitting the deterioration of the Atrato river, Chocó’s main artery, mostly as a consequence of such mining. The lawsuit resulted in the Colombian Constitutional Court declaring the Atrato a ‘legal entity’, and assigning specific tasks to state agencies to decontaminate the river and persecute ‘illegal’ miners. The court presented the ruling as a historical turning point toward the ‘sustainable exploitation of resources in the present and the future’ (Corte Constitucional, 2016). The leaders of the four grassroots organisations largely shared the court’s position on extraction. In meetings with state officials, they criticised the excavator and dredge mines for denying them future livelihoods. One of these meetings ended with a song with the

following refrain: '*Atrato es, Atrato soy, Atrato somos y debemos seguir siendo*' ('It's the Atrato; I'm the Atrato; we're the Atrato and we should continue being it'). *Chocoano* leaders and Bogotá bureaucrats agreed: the future of the region depended on making the wildcat mines history.

But this view was hardly hegemonic in the mining villages where I did fieldwork. The controversial miners had provided local households with land rents, jobs, and *bareque*; a form of placer mining whereby artisanal miners work in the pits of excavator mines—where gold is more abundant than in stream beds. These economic opportunities had allowed families to improve their homes, pay for their children's education, and help out less fortunate family members. Against this backdrop, popular opinion was that by removing the excavators, the government was not so much bringing peace as hunger, delinquency, and disorder.

Mercedes was among those who shared this opinion. The first time I met her, she was working in a water pump mine alongside her friends Yoser and Ernesto. The operation, called *chorreo*, consisted of hosing down a wall of gold-bearing earth, transforming it into a brownish stream that snaked towards a subjacent sluice box, in which gold specks were trapped from the surrounding sediment. Yoser manned the hose, Ernesto threw away larger pebbles from the sluice's entry point, and Mercedes discarded the gravel, using two hand-sized wooden boards to rake, bundle, and finally sweep it away in a lateral direction. All three of them were past their thirties and had worked in *chorreo* before the excavator miners had conquered the rainforest a few years earlier. They had abandoned *chorreo* in the heyday of the more lucrative *bareque*, but now that the excavators were mostly gone, they had once more picked up their former labour. Economic hardship even required them to work during the Holy Week of Easter, a fact they did not take lightly.

'The government might save the environment, but if mining ends, we end', Mercedes said after I acquainted the miners with my study on mining politics. Once she had finished one more routine of collecting, bundling, and dumping gravel, she began to elaborate:

Look, [the police operations] affect the excavator miners the most, but we are living off them. So, if they don't work, what are we going to live off? Here we make 10, maybe 20 thousand pesos a day [3, maybe 6 US dollars]. With the three of us! So, I have 5, 6 thousand pesos to buy food for my children.

Before I could ask, she added, 'I have five children'.

Her friend Ernesto cut in: 'The only reason why we're here is that there is no other work'.

‘This is just for your daily utilities, for your food’, Mercedes underscored. ‘But sometimes we have to stop eating to pay for utilities. We’ll die of hunger here. What can you do if the government decides to make the mines disappear? You die of hunger. What else? Who would have thought, to have to shovel (*echar pala*) during Easter?’

While walking towards the exit point of the sluice box, and away from the conversation, she repeated three times over a single sentence in a hushed voice: ‘Hunger is killing us. Hunger is killing us. Hunger is killing us.’

Her mantra-like lament was a far cry from the aforementioned hopes of activists and legislators for a future free of ‘illegal mining’. Unlike them, Mercedes did not see the end of the excavators as a precondition for a sustainable tomorrow. Rather, she seemed to equate it with the end of her own time—‘if mining ends, we end’—thereby denying the possibility of that extractive hereafter that critical scholars of Latin America have so often imagined and celebrated (e.g. Acosta, 2013; Gudynas, 2013). For her and other miners, post-extraction was no option whatsoever. That said, along with their rejection of a non-extractive hereafter, they simultaneously described their current labour as a sort of extractive afterlife itself, meaningful only in relation to a rosier economic past. Herein they were not so different from Tariq in Venezuela. But while in his case the afterlife equalled the gold rush itself, in Chocó it connoted the mining labour that persisted despite the end of the boom years. *Chocoano* miners were panning in stream beds and hosing in pits after being employed as excavator conductors, after receiving land rents, after the *bareque*. And so, even if they praised wholeheartedly their traditional mining for granting them a sense of labour autonomy (Jonkman, 2022), many also described it as a residual economy that produced merely a pittance compared to excavator mines.

Cabello, for one, reckoned that with his current *matraqueo* operation (shovelling sand on a sluice box) he made only one-tenth of what he used to earn as an excavator driver at a pit that had closed a few years previously. In an interview, he made no attempt to sugar-coat his contempt for the government’s police operations. ‘The government has ended everything; Chocó is one of the departments that will disappear. Just imagine, we lived so much more *sabroso* [richly] with the machines. Here we have a plot of land, but we can’t have it worked because the [excavator] miners don’t want to run the risk’. His concern, though, was the disappearance not just of the excavators but also of the prospects of working in an artisanal manner now that the excavators had mined away most of the surface gold. ‘Look, the problem here is that artisanal mining has ended. It’s so difficult right now, even with heavy machinery you can’t do anything’.

Miners like Cabello and Mercedes presented their work as existing after history—or more specifically, after prosperity. After all, the excavators of migrant miners had emptied their local lands of gold and laid waste to crops and fertile soil. And they were now left behind looking for scraps in a leftover landscape, using equipment whose horsepower was only a fraction of that of the migrants' machinery. Yet peculiarly enough, Chocó's local miners spoke of themselves not only as if being in an afterlife, but also as if being stuck in the past. Theirs, after all, was a special kind of afterlife, one that was associated with pre-boom poverty. They regarded their contemporary labour practices as an afterthought of the gold rush, precisely because these were said to belong to a previous day and age. Traditional forms of mining (panning, tunnelling, pump mining) had been the labour of parents and ancestors (reaching as far back as colonial times), and felt to many contemporary miners out of place in today's era of mechanised extraction. What's more, under current environmental circumstances, most miners agreed that low-tech equipment was no longer suitable. The recent removal of surface gold by excavators demanded more of the same heavy-handed excavation, not the surface-scraping of pans and pumps.

While the national government had focused its formalisation efforts on traditional forms of mining, many of those working the traditional methods regarded them as being hopelessly outdated. They had already passed the technological stage (pans, pumps) they once more found themselves in, as had the landscape they were labouring in. As community leader Moisés said, 'The state wants us to do traditional mining: a batea, a bar, and a spade. All legislation focuses on this. But this is only going backward. Artisanal mining is no longer possible. We have passed that stage. We also want to progress. That's what they're denying us: progress.'

All this demonstrates that *chocoano* miners recurred to muddled conceptions of time to make sense of their contemporary precarity—even though the terminology being used was often not shy of a good dose of linear promise (or 'progress', to use Moisés's phrasing). Indeed, by designating their modest techniques as both the aftermath and the antecedent of what they considered to be the technological present, they underlined that their work was, extractively speaking, awfully out of time. Surely, such temporal experiences cannot be reduced to theoretical and legislative arguments that understand mining in a neatly divided pre, intra, and post phase. At resource frontiers like Chocó—and the Venezuelan Arco Minero for that matter—swift booms and busts give shape to a much more muddled experience of time, whereby the extractive present is rarely only experienced as one temporal phase, as miners

may understand and present themselves through local time concepts of posteriority (of living an afterlife) or anteriority (of living in the past), and sometimes both.

5 Muddled Times as Afterthought

Mining codes and concomitant legislation often frame extraction as a linear process with neatly delimited temporal phases; that is, as exploration preceding exploitation preceding mine closure. The burgeoning scholarly literature on resource extraction challenges the assumptions of finality and linearity that such narratives uphold, and instead shows that (ex-)mining sites produce multiple experiences of time and land. Phrased otherwise, the actual workings of time clearly depend on whom and what people think they are responsible for, as well as on with whom and what they interact on a daily basis in past, present, and future. Now, while current theorising on temporal multiplicity has mostly led to analyses that have as their ‘starting point the potential conflict and non-synchronicity of mining temporalities’ (D’Angelo and Pijpers, 2018, 215), we have shown that in gold-mining regions in Venezuela and Colombia it is quite difficult to put coexisting timeframes in such sharp juxtaposition, insofar as overlapping and converging chronotypes result in a muddled experience of temporality. To be precise, by spending time with small-scale miners we have learned that being a miner may very well be considered to be somewhat of an afterlife itself, that the lingering death of one resource frontier (the Venezuelan oil industry) may give birth to another (Venezuelan gold mining), that former extractive practices can suddenly resurface in new guises in the aftermath of a resource boom, and that environmental devastation might be at once the effect and cause of resource extraction (as for some *chocoanos*, the destruction wrought by excavators has led to pragmatic desires for more excavator mining). In effect, temporal notions such as ‘pre-boom climax’ materialise the ongoing muddling of time in South American mining frontiers where gold appears, disappears, and reappears together with other resources. In this scenario of constant change and resource frontiers overlapping or even cannibalising each other, the experience of time is a jumbling phenomenon. Amid the continuing reshuffling of the old and the new, residents of mining settlements continually invoke the past and future to give meaning to the present, in which they incorporate multiple temporalities that move with different rhythms.

In light of such temporal multiplicity, here we have understood the afterlife of mining less as some neutral or objective posterior phase in an extraction

timeframe than as one of the many cultural categories (or chronotopes) that residents of mining regions themselves invoke to make sense of the extractive present. To our thinking, a single and rigid demarcation between life and afterlife, or any temporal demarcation for that matter, falls flat when touching ground in mining frontiers. The experience of time is much more muddled than this. In both Venezuela and Colombia, some miners experienced current extraction activities as an extractive hereafter to some richer past. When taken at face value, the notion of life-becoming-afterlife proposes a chronological process in which non-extraction (as in the afterlife) succeeds extraction (as in the extractive life). The way we see it, this consecutive conceptualisation says precious little about the larger historical and overlapping resource cycles in which these moments of (non-)extraction occur. If anything, the idea of an afterlife glosses over the fact that the so-called *pre*-afterlife phase (the boom years) follows and feeds on preceding exclusions and crises or afterlives, if you will. Our point is that mining booms and extractive lives may very well exist as the aftermath of other economic and social realities (e.g. oil recessions, hyperinflation, political abandonment, colonialism). One resource frontier's life is another frontier's afterlife.

The coexistence of these intersecting activities and traversing expectations further muddles the progression of past, present, and future. By analytically confining the transformative transition of life-becoming-afterlife to one specific resource, or to one specific historical conjecture, we ignore the cyclical and overlapping resource trajectories in Venezuela and Colombia. Both Bolívar State and Chocó are archetypical manifestations of what Michael Watts (2012) calls 'the permanent frontier', which captures the fact that global extractive capitalism continually incites both the creation of new spaces of accumulation and the reconfiguration of old ones. In this regard, what was *before* the afterlife in Chocó and what surfaces from the mining activities in Bolívar State is not some homogenous life or afterlife. If we simply suggest that first there was life and now there is none, we end up setting 'afterlives'—such as non-extractive periods or economic crises—apart from the wider booms and busts from which they emerge and to which they give shape. This runs the serious risk of ignoring how gold miners like Tariq, Mercedes and Cabello understand their present work and future expectations for labour and land through memories of prior booms and exclusions, and may conceive of their current mining lives as the afterlife of earlier affluent economic epochs. Life and afterlife, pre and post, circularity and linearity, and immanence and indeterminacy all muddle in without the need for one temporal imperative in how miners experience the extractive present.

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