# POSITIONED EXTRACTIVE WORLDS: Gold Mining and Not-So-Radical Alterity in the Colombian Pacific Lowlands

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Like most Latin American cities, Quibdó's center engulfs a rectangular public square that is home to a Catholic cathedral. Stand in the middle of this square and your gaze will likely pull to the west, where a lush green blanket of trees reminds you that—despite the cement-plastered constructions, the roads swarming with motorbikes, the 130,000 people sharing this city with you—you're in the heart of the rainforest of the Colombian Pacific province of Chocó. When walking toward the greenery, your vision will greet the Atrato River that drains this rainforest and that snakes between the city and the trees. After crossing the road abutting the square, and wading through a seemingly ceaseless stream of motorbikes, you arrive at an esplanade that provides an elevated viewpoint of the Atrato. Turn your neck 60 degrees to the left, train your eyes on the opposite waterfront—beyond the motorized longboats docked on the city shore—and you will see the mouth of the Quito River feeding the Atrato its water. The feeding looks forceful, more so when the tributary has swollen after rainfall: a clash of different hues of brown, with the Quito bleeding its more troubled tone into the parent river.

One of the longboats takes you upstream to the source of the trouble. Minutes after entering the Quito's mouth, you navigate past one mining dredge after

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**Figure 1. Quibdó's tree-covered square and the Atrato River behind it. Photo by Jesse Jonkman.**

another, dipping their mechanical cranes mid-river or in pools on the shoreline. From up close, you can hear their pump engines roaring, gulping up the riverbed's slurry through the crane, thrusting it to the dredge's opposite end, and gushing it over mercury-soaked mattresses. Only then does a cascade spit back the whole chocolate-toned mess into the river—slightly lighter on mattress-caught gold, slightly heavier on mercury. *Chocoanos* call the machines *dragones*, which is Spanish double-speak for large *draga* (dredge) and the operation's monstrosity. Passing the monsters by boat, you'll best not engage them (especially if you're new to the river). You'll best not shout greetings, raise arms, take photos conspicuously. Because controversy is imminent in the "dragons." Their silt has transformed the Quito into a mishmash of sandbanks and malignant branches. Their mercury pollutes the Atrato watershed, along with its people and fish. And their gold enriches sanguinary paramilitaries who tax the dredgers.

These muddy rivers course through a "haunted frontier" (Gordillo 2014) whose present is deeply implicated with the ghosts of older and newer colonial pasts. Chocó has a predominantly Black population whose ancestors were forced by Spanish and white Colombian slavers to pan gold on the Pacific rainforest's riverbanks. Many contemporary *chocoanos* scope out these very same places for gold autonomously, while many more were raised on their parents' mine work a few decades ago. Back then, as now, extraction was done with hand-based



**Figure 2. A dredge with a submerged crane (not in the Quito River). Photo by Jesse Jonkman.**

tools—*bateas* (washing pans), spades, sluice boxes—and diesel-powered pumps, by which families supplemented gardening, hunting, and fishing activities. But these economies have come under strain. White and Mestizo miners from other provinces and countries started to arrive with hydraulic excavators in the 1980s, and with dredges in the 2000s. Their numbers mushroomed when gold prices spiked after the 2008 financial crisis. Besides prompting runaway deforestation and mercury pollution, the new mines devoured the crops and superficial gold layers that sustained local livelihoods in a province that, despite copious gold, has always ranked among Colombia's poorest regions.

In 2015, the Bogotá-based justice center Tierra Digna filed a legal writ on behalf of four *chocoano* organizations.[1] The plaintiffs accused several public agencies of neglecting the constitutional rights of Atrato communities affected by unencumbered mining, with the dredged-out Quito tributary serving as a leading example. The lawsuit was picked up by the Constitutional Court, which recognized the extractive harms committed and declared the Atrato River a *sujeto de derechos* (legal subject). The court's 2016 ruling (T-622) identified a close relationship between the river's well-being and the cultural reproduction of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous peoples, echoing the culture-nature interdependency that Pacific social movements had been stressing for decades (Asher 2009; Escobar 2008). In the court's wording, the T-622 sentence upheld an "ecocentric focus" that "derives from a basic premise that the earth does not belong to humans and, contrarily, assumes that humans belong to the earth, like any other species." To protect local "biocultural rights," the court assigned state agencies

with tasks of river restoration, protection, and policing, while ordering them to collaborate with communities.[2] Subsequently, the plaintiffs chose fourteen Atrato "guardians" belonging to Afro-Colombian, Indigenous, and campesino organizations who would oversee the ruling's implementation.

So far this story treads familiar ethnographic terrain. It has all the trappings of being yet another illustration of local communities being pitted against the ontological "occupation" (Escobar 2015, 28) of capitalist modernity. In the past few years, ontology has become a popular conceptual answer to extractive capitalism in Latin America, where mineral, oil, and other frontiers are expanding with unyielding force (e.g., de la Cadena 2015; Li 2013; Salas Carreño 2017). Ontological anthropologies observe that the anti-extractivist resistance by Indigenous, Black, and Mestizo communities stems from conflicts not purely about rights and resources, but also about radically different ways of world-making. On one side we find the dualistic worldview of extractive corporations and accommodating government bodies, treating nature as a singular reality bracketed off from human culture. On the other side are the relational ontologies of communities, who stress intimate relations between human and nonhuman worlds and seek to have the personhood of rivers, mountains, and forests recognized by biopolitical institutions that as yet have only viewed them as natural resources.

In my research on gold mining in Chocó, I have routinely come across a story with similar intonations, not only in ontologically inclined scholarship on the Pacific (Bateman 2020; Escobar 2015, 2016, 2017) and the T-622 ruling (Boelens et al. 2023; Cagüeñas, Galindo Orrego, and Rasmussen 2020; Gallon Droste 2021) but also in the critical prose of journalists, development workers, and naturally, the "ecocentric" ruling itself. In this story, unlicensed mining appears as a developmentalist threat to Afro-Colombian cultural lifeworlds, which are presumably at cross-purposes with dominant capitalist society in the sense of being strongly reliant on the vitality of rivers and forests. Although this story of extractive refusal summons the inspirational activism of certain grassroots leaders, it is also, as I see it, oblivious to the complex material relations by which heterogenous communities engage with extractive capitalism in their everyday lives. Alterity arguments that situate Pacific lifeworlds in neat opposition to resource frontiers disavow the subjectivities of countless *chocoanos* who participate in these frontiers in efforts to make ends meet. Through eighteen months of fieldwork (2016–2025), this article focuses on excavator mines that brought projects of more-than-human world-making in uneasy alliance with projects of mechanized mining. In the mostly Afro-Colombian territories of this ethnography, many people saw excavators not as an invasive force from which non-modern worlds




**Figure 3. Map of Chocó. Image by John Wyatt Greenlee.**

needed to be defended, but as an imperfect means to construct new worlds. Through their contentious engagement with extraction, I here argue, *chocoanos* in mining regions challenged their peripheralized position in a national extractivist economy that brutally sidelined them.[3]

In building my argument, I am not interpreting such engagement as a rejection of relational world-making. To the contrary, the sections below show that—per the ontologist maxim—my research participants' cultural understandings of mining territories did "not precede the relations that constitute[d]" (Ruiz-Serna 2023, 62) these territories. Yet whereas ontological ethnographies of extractivism tend to highlight activist discourses about posthumanist ethics and plural natures, my ethnography instead interrogates restless materialities and ontological

multiplicity through a fine-grained attunement to messy everyday lifeworlds. This shift of focus leads me to view Chocó's mining geographies as generative not of a collectively carried cosmological alterity, nor of some Afro-Colombian-style "radical otherness" (Viveiros de Castro 2010, 21), but, rather, of "positioned" worlds of difference, an understanding that takes inspiration from Stuart Hall's (1990, 226) thinking on the "politics of position." In particular, the knowledge practices I describe testify to the emplaced and dissimilar locations that *chocoanos* in mining zones occupied while corresponding with both predatory economies and more-than-human ecologies.

The article's structure is as follows: The first section examines the ethnographic contributions and pitfalls of ontological anthropologies, especially in relation to this case study. Then, the succeeding sections make my argument of positioned ontologies empirically palpable by delving into, respectively: the moral ambivalence of forest-destroying excavators in Chocó; the "ontological conflict" between extraction-engaged communities and outside experts criticizing them; the multiple worlds existing within the goldfields; and finally, the "persuasive" nonhuman elements that coproduced these worlds.

## POSITIONING ONTOLOGY

The Constitutional Court's affirmation of the co-constitutiveness of humans and rivers evokes a posthumanist sentiment that sounds not too different from current anthropological theorizing amid the "ontological turn." For some time now, an expanding body of research has undertaken the exercise of "an anthropology beyond the human" (Kohn 2013) from varied theoretical and methodological stances (Blaser 2010; Latour 2013; Mol 2002; Law 2015; Viveiros de Castro 2010). Probably the loudest shared critique of this diverse literature is that humans and nonhumans do not belong to separate ontological domains. Ontologically attuned anthropologists refuse the nature-culture dualism of modern European philosophy, which takes nature as an unmediated object onto which humans unleash variously accurate cultural interpretations, and following from this, presumes that interpretations born in Europe are those that ultimately interpret best. As contrasted with this "one-world metaphysics" (Law 2015, 128), ontological anthropologies theorize relational worlds whereby no element, human or otherwise, preexists the relations in which it is assembled with others. As a consequence, the nonhuman object is no longer situated in dualistic opposition to a human subject. Objects, as reality itself, are materially heterogenous and "manipulated in practices" (Mol 2002, 4). They are host not so much to varied subjective perceptions as to varied relational enactments.

This emphasis on relationality has shaken up ethnography in at least two ways. The first is that agency is no longer distributed exclusively among humans, for reality unfolds through the meanings that people draw from the environs with which they coexist, not the designs they impose on them. Hence we are now reading posthumanist texts populated by "earth-beings" (de la Cadena 2015), spirits (Ruiz-Serna 2023), and thinking forests (Kohn 2013). A second feature of such texts is that they conceptualize interlocutors' discourses—however incredible according to Western metaphysics—as truths, rather than cultural approximations/deviations of one natural truth. The theoretical concern is less with contextualizing non-dualistic cosmologies via thick description than with analyzing their philosophical potential for building worlds that exceed the modernist worldview and its attendant Anthropocenic destruction.

Latin America has been at the vanguard of these developments. Across the region, students of "political ontology" have researched "ontological conflicts" (Blaser 2010) between, on the one hand, the myriad place-specific knowledges of Indigenous, Black, and other communities and, on the other, the liberal truth-making of mining companies, bureaucracies, development agencies, and others champions of modernity (de la Cadena 2010, 2015; Escobar 2015; Li 2013; Salas Carreño 2017; Ureta and Contreras 2020). One common takeaway from political ontology is that communities' "pluriversal" politics disrupts not only modern liberal governance but also the universalist and anthropocentric inflections of academia, which would be wise to pay notice to such politics and recognize the multifarious and other-than-human qualities of the real.

Colombia's Pacific lowlands, of which Chocó comprises roughly the northern half, emerge among the places most referenced in these debates. The Pacific's standing as a somewhat exemplary site of "thinking otherwise" has gathered much force from Arturo Escobar's (2008) renowned research with leaders from the *Proceso de Comunidades Negras* (Process of Black Communities) social movement. In it, Escobar studies the region as one of "territories of difference," a depiction that his recent writings (Escobar 2015, 2016, 2017) have refurbished with ontologist ruminations. His work brings to the fore the localized cosmologies of Pacific communities, for whom, Escobar (2017, 29; my translation) notes, "territory is the collective space for existence, a vital space that ensures the survival as a people in profound interdependency with nature, the human, and the spiritual."

With Escobar, several ethnographers have called attention to Black and Indigenous worlds that involve affective relations with rivers, forests, and other beings. Ulrich Oslender (2019, 1700–1701), for one, finds examples of "a relational

ontology in the Pacific lowlands" in activist-intellectual discourses and river-based logics of transportation and housing. He sees this ontology threatened by extractivist capitalism, which has plunged the region into "an ontological conflict and struggle over ways of being in the world and over the right to coexist in the pluriverse, or a world of many worlds" (Oslender 2019, 1702). Meanwhile, Daniel Ruiz-Serna (2023, 16) illustrates how the Colombian war harms relational worlds in the Atrato's lower basin, where Afro-Colombian and Indigenous peoples, together with animals, spirits, and forests, are pushing for "a form of being that is at odds with the values embodied by certain modern institutions and practices." Along similar lines, Diego Cagüeñas, María Isabel Galindo Orrego, and Sabina Rasmussen (2020) argue that interdependent relations between *chocoanos* and the Atrato produce a pluriform *vida orillera* (shore life). While observing the destructive influence of illegal mining on the subsistence economies that comprise this life, they philosophize on the T-622 ruling's potential for converting the Atrato into a Latourian "Parliament of Things," where democracy is enjoyed equally by all beings, including nonhumans.

Undoubtedly, political ontology gives much food for multi-existentialist thought, not the least because the Pacific and other places it studies are often inspiring sites of Black and Indigenous resistances against colonial-capitalist onslaught. Nonetheless, even as the here-cited works generate smart theories on the discursive cosmopolitics of key interlocutors, they also spill little ink on the minutiae of daily life in which these interlocutors and their surrounding communities actualize their worlds (but see Ruiz-Serna 2023)—where radical oppositions between modernity/capitalism/state and their antonyms rarely endure. As the succeeding sections demonstrate, musings on Latourian parliaments and sweeping generalizations about "different" territories feel rather tone-deaf to ordinary economic and legal struggles in Chocó's gold-mining areas. More concretely, the anti-modernist thrust that Escobar and like-minded theorists ascribe to the Pacific lowlands forecloses attention to the complex benefits and downsides that unevenly positioned Pacific peoples ascertain regarding extractive economies, or to how these positions are thoroughly *entangled with* colonial modernity and degraded ecologies.

I am hardly the first to express reservations with anthropology's renewed preoccupation with generalized otherness. Ontological research has attracted criticism for homogenizing Indigenous groups through ahistorical notions of alterity (Bessire and Bond 2014; Cepek 2016; Ramos 2012), erasing the voices of Indigenous thinkers (Todd 2016), overlooking humanist struggles against racism (Zeiderman 2019), and committing "a quasi-colonial exercise in representational ventriloquism" by "mining our subjects' discourse for bits of alterity-affirming

content" (Cepek 2016, 626, 633) without accounting for its mundane application (see also Todd 2016). An overall agreement in these critiques is that anthropologists can only sustain their radical alterity presumptions through a systematic disavowal of the goings-on in the places they speak for (e.g., Bessire and Bond 2014, 444).

To their credit, most ontological analyses theorize difference as a relational condition that arises through "partial connections" (de la Cadena 2015, 283) with modern politics. Furthermore, their texts sometimes include disclaimers that acknowledge the heterodox encounters of Afro-descendant and Indigenous peoples with capitalist economies (e.g., Oslender 2019, 1701). Even so, the "partial connections" acquire little scrutiny other than antagonistic examples, while prominent authors typically recur to dichotomous terminology to index the incongruity between modern statehood and Indigenous and Black world-making (de la Cadena 2010, 347; Escobar 2016, 20; Viveiros de Castro 2010, 15). Even when diverse opinions are recognized, people who don't follow the cosmopolitical script appear mainly as victims of capitalism, without hearing how they themselves view their Indigeneity or Blackness. Ontology-inflected ethnographies are conveniently silent on where these not-so-different dwellers of "territories of difference" fit within their morally charged cosmological worlds. Yet by generalizing the multinaturalist language of certain thinkers, leaders, and artists as defining traits of immensely vast places, ontologists risk replacing a self-professed concern for multiplicity with an intellectual policing of the parameters of legitimate epistemology. Without empirical attunement to emplaced encounters, arguments of collective difference tread eerily close to neoliberal-culturalist logics that distribute moral concern to racialized peoples on the basis of their performance of benign otherness (Bessire and Bond 2014, 445; Cepek 2016, 633).

So what, by this critique, to make of rural *chocoanos* who, far from viewing wildcat mines as an existential threat, described them as an instrument to construct precarious new ways of being? How to write about the hundreds of interlocutors—toiling in pits, charging mine rents, soliciting mining titles, buying secondhand excavators—in a language that doesn't reduce them to defectors of Pacific cosmology? Instead of discarding ontological anthropology for its a priori inadequacy to answer these questions, I follow authors who have put its propositions of multiplicity and other-than-human history in closer dialogue with fleshy material practices (Hetherington 2013; Tsing 2015; Winchell 2023). I take this route because, as my ethnography reveals, there is indeed value in understanding the Chocó goldfields as a multiple reality "enacted by . . . specific practices" (Escobar 2015, 34; my translation).[4] The extractive decisions of my research

collaborators were not the outcome of misguided ideas about the rainforest, as certain experts from outside the region had me understand, but emerged from historically situated relations with material surroundings. Thus, while aforementioned studies of the Pacific invoke the sympathetic agencies of rivers, forests, and spirits to push back against the dualisms of capitalist modernity, I draw attention to contingent more-than-human worlds that constantly move in and outside mining capitalism. These worlds, I suggest, alert us to trace the *positioned* ontologies of people whose lives are structured by joint histories of subjugation.

This proposition borrows from Stuart Hall's (1990, 226) ideas on the "politics of position." For Hall (1990, 226; emphasis original), cultural identities were "not an essence, but a *positioning*": "the unstable points of identification and suture . . . made, within the discourses of history and culture." Writing on the Caribbean, Hall (1990, 227) refuted the notion of a singular Black experience, and perceived Black diasporic identities as articulated around a "doubleness of similarity and difference." Afro-descendants, Hall saw, are united in the overarching experience of colonialism. Still, owing to this, they have also developed variegated subject positions vis-à-vis colonial centers, as Europeans uprooted Africans from their pasts and forced them onto divergent historical paths.

Importantly, Hall's observations speak loudly to greater Afro-Latin America, where discourses of Black collectivity and heterogeneity have animated social-movement struggles around ethno-racial rights, played out since the 1980s amid a region-wide adoption of Afro/Indigenous multicultural reforms. Effectively, concerned with the historicity and variance of Black subjectivities within these struggles, different authors (e.g., Cárdenas 2012; Paschel 2016; Restrepo 2004) have used Hall's thoughts on the open-endedness of identity to make case-specific variants of the argument that "identities are about questions of using the history, language and culture in the process of *becoming* rather than *being*" (Hall 1996, 4, cited in Paschel 2016, 238; emphasis original).

Building on such scholarship, and grounded in Hall's ideas on differentiated sameness, the sections that follow approach mining experiences in Chocó as emanating from positioned, as opposed to radical, worlds of difference. Such nuancing foregrounds that rural *chocoanos* who accept, reject, and put up with gold articulate a wide array of stances toward local ecologies and planetary economies, at the same time that they share material histories of resource extraction, structural impoverishment, and resistance to anti-Black public governance. By exploring positioned extractive ontologies, then, I am mindful of storied lifeworlds informed by the longue durée of liberal extractivism and ancestral place-making, as well as by individual positionalities that encounter leftover mine landscapes in

uncertain and uneven ways. In fact, as this last point indicates, the article proposes that when analyzing gold's "politics of position," we must make visible not only the historical becomings of its human protagonists but also those of the nonhumans participating in the mineral's excavation.

## CONDEMNING AND COMMENDING EXCAVATORS

Until the early 1990s, Chocó and the wider Pacific mostly consisted of "idle lands" (*tierras baldías*), a legal category that disavowed the presence of Black and Indigenous peoples. Throughout the 1980s, the official emptiness paved the way for private industries to lay claim to Pacific resources, and their unabashed land-grabbing precipitated calls for territorial autonomy by grassroots movements (Escobar 2008). These bottom-up demands amalgamated with a transnational momentum of ethno-racial rights in Latin America and beyond, creating a "multicultural alignment" (Paschel 2016, 81) that eventually set the stage for Afro-Colombian legislation. Accordingly, when a new constitution institutionalized the nation-state's pluriethnic character in 1991, it also instructed via a transitory provision the drafting of special legislation for Black Colombians. This "ethnicization of blackness" (Restrepo 2004) gained further traction when Law 70 was passed two years later, formalizing Afro-descendant identities and ordering the titling of collective lands to Pacific communities. In the law's aftermath, much land was indeed assigned to Afro-Colombian "community councils" (*consejos comunitarios*). Yet external pressures on Black territories did anything but wane, with gold being a dominant force. Community leaders repeatedly denounced, publicly and juridically, small-scale miners and mining firms for, respectively, destroying their lands and obtaining mining titles without their consent. As mentioned, one important legal response to these denunciations was the T-622 Atrato ruling.

In passing the sentence in November 2016, the Constitutional Court underscored the urgency, and lampooned the inefficiency, of an ongoing government clampdown on unauthorized mining. In 2001, Colombia had adopted a mining code (Law 685) that had privatized the mining economy. The code illegalized most small-scale diggers, who massively struggled to acquire mine concessions now that they had to compete with corporations in the "free" market for the same subsoils. Illegalization further intensified when President Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018) assumed office. Santos's administration designated large-scale mining as a national "locomotive for growth" and introduced a slate of punitive measures to curb the illicit gold rush in Chocó and other places. Helicopters and speedboats sent security forces to the far-flung corners of rainforests, where they bombed excavators and dredges and arrested their operators. To elucidate the draconian measures,

state officials accentuated the criminality of the miners, who were said to pillage rainforests, fund organized-crime groups, and thieve from the concessions—superimposed over local miners' ancestral lands—of foreign companies, which in many places, including Chocó, were still only engaged in exploration activities. What the T-622 ruling added to the criticism was the idea of "biocultural rights," suggesting the illegalized miners jeopardized not just nature but also the local cultures thriving through it.

When I lived in Chocó in 2017, I learned that this biocultural sentiment enjoyed great appeal in meetings on the ruling in the provincial capital of Quibdó. Grassroots leaders, central government emissaries, and activists all commented that illegal mining presented a ferocious challenge to coexisting waterways and people. "The rivers are part of who we [*chocoanos*] are," said esteemed local human rights defender Richard Moreno, for example, in an event that presented the Atrato's guardians to the general public.

And yet, a great variety of interpretations existed on the new riparian rights. For instance, in an Atrato-themed meeting organized by the national ombudsman, *chocoano* politicians and activists passionately questioned a Ministry of Defense official on the ministry's destruction of mine equipment, arguing that this caused the contamination of rivers and the unnecessary dismantling of excavators that could be utilized in impoverished municipalities. Another contention was which extraction actually threatened the Atrato. As Diego Melo-Ascencio (2024) outlines, the notion of biocultural citizenship and the focus on illegal mining were inventions of the court; the community plaintiffs had merely litigated against nonconsensual forms of extraction (including legally sanctioned mines). What's more, grassroots leaders were differently positioned vis-à-vis unlicensed mining. Whereas some belonged to downstream communities that suffered from the mines' contamination without reaping benefits, others had joined the lawsuit, not to interfere with "illegal" activities, but to secure their position versus multinational titling in their territory (Melo-Ascencio 2024, 1765–66).

Still, the greatest disagreement, in my reading, occurred between the gold-critical tone of these Quibdó conversations and the reputation of extraction in the villages of my research, all of which had been swept up by excavator mining. To be sure, these places, too, heard negative comments about the excavator miners, also known as *retreros*.[5] The latter, the critiques went, had ravaged their lands and corroded their social fabric with alcohol consumption, sex work, and childhood pregnancies. An oft-made observation was that the *retreros* had created a culture of laziness, as the fast earnings of mine rents had drawn people away from the slow but more honest temporalities of artisanal mining and subsistence gardening.



**Figure 4. *Bareque* mining. Photo by Jesse Jonkman.**

But this wasn't the leading narrative. To many people, the excavators were foremost a medium to bring future economic plans into the present, and to participate in the "extractive locomotive" from which they were formally excluded. Contradicting the Constitutional Court, they refuted the government not for allowing destructive miners to dig, but for scaring them away. Incessantly, people mentioned the abundant gold they had enjoyed during the boom years, some five to ten years before my fieldwork—before government persecution had put a big dent in the number of excavator mines. Customary landowners reminisced about the rents they had charged or the mines that had employed them; community leaders waxed nostalgic about the public works they had financed through gold, and merchants about the lavish money the wider community had spent. And everyone reminisced about the *bareque*: a satellite economy in which artisanal miners spade out the mud walls of excavator pits, offering richer gravels than those found while river panning, pump mining, or realizing other traditional techniques. In enlisting law enforcement agencies to demolish the excavators, the government was gradually strangling the life out of these economies, and with that, diminishing all the minute ways in which excavator mining had made life easier. Gold was the houses that had been refurnished, plastered, and built, the university fees paid for children, the presents bought for parents. Gold was the televisions, porcelain toilets, and smart phones finally arriving in riverine villages. Gold was the parties celebrated, the friends helped, the hospitals visited, the medicines consumed.

## AN ONTOLOGICAL CONFLICT ABOUT THE RAINFOREST

The liberating potential of excavator mining chimed poorly with the river protectionism that infused government and grassroots discourses in Quibdó. The

Atrato's biocultural life rarely surfaced in the myriad moments that research participants—many of whom lived in the river's drainage basin—drew my attention to their province's political abandonment. In daily conservations, as well as in protest marches during a 2017 Chocó-wide general strike against "state abandonment," complaints about government neglect were less likely to deal with mine pollution than lacking infrastructure, unreliable health care, absent jobs, and, yes, the impossibility of mining legally. In remote villages, people also emphasized the absence of government-supplied potable water, sewerage, electricity grids, internet, health care, roads, and pathways; shortcomings of which some had been provided for by the informal taxes that *retreros* paid to community councils.

Against this material backdrop, the force by which the Atrato entered the limelight of national (even transnational) conversations about right-bearing culture-natures was confusing, for me, but also for certain research collaborators. Various discussions on the Atrato ruling centered on a group of intrepid lawyers who, emboldened by the ruling's denunciation of state agencies permitting river destruction, had offered their services to community councils to sue the state for compensation. In one such discussion, a mine worker named Alfredo expressed a sentiment that sharply captured the political ambivalence several people experienced regarding their newfound environmental victimhood: "I don't get this. The state wants to get rid of us because we use mercury. And now we're suing the state because of mercury."[6]

This was not to say that inhabitants of mining regions did not care for, or grasp the conservationist relevance of the forest landscapes that the excavators pulverized. Throughout my research, I have routinely noticed outside experts tie the ecological problems of mining to an insufficient comprehension or appreciation thereof by mine-affected communities. A newspaper diagnosed a "lack of awareness of thousands of Colombians who are literally making a living by destroying the environment in which their children grow up" (Torres Martínez 2015; my translation). An official of the National Mining Agency, whom I joined on a technical visit to artisanal mines, recognized that "the problem of Chocó is . . . a complete lack of knowledge. People want everything now and in the long run there'll be nothing left for them." A foreign journalist, speaking in an Atrato meeting, lamented that some people "no longer have the custom of cultivating," before rhetorically asking, "What will happen when these machines leave and people have lost the custom and mentality of being campesinos?" And a development worker, who co-led a project that encouraged gold-dependent communities to switch to farming, saw little use in this effort because of local cultural values: "There was this project of cacao in Chocó. People would grow cacao instead of mining. It didn't work. . . . It's the culture of the people. They're extractivists."

With their culturalist, if not sometimes racist, undertones, these statements suggested that the problem of illegal excavation was partly a problem of knowledge and values. Their explanations failed, however, to account for one important caveat: ecological critique was everywhere in mining villages. Such critique, though, was targeted more at the tangible threats the excavators presented to the forest's resources and less at hazy notions of biodiversity, animate rivers, and deforestation rates. Without fail, *chocoanos* mentioned the surface gold of artisanal mines the excavators consumed, or the crops, timber, game, and fish they had made disappear in a flash. These problems were fretted on not exclusively by mine critics but also by people who had made, or were still making, livings from mine employment, rents, and *bareque*. Camps of "pro" and "anti" excavation were anything but clearly demarcated. Many, if not most, people recognized the forest destruction of the excavators, but also put this in moral juxtaposition with their own life goals. There was severe pain in having one's forest culled, river polluted, fish poisoned; yet in the big scheme of economic things, excavator mines were also one of the few sources of income in a peripheralized rainforest where there were practically no companies to work for, and few markets to sell produce to. One afternoon, community leader Martín and I discussed Colombia's upcoming 2018 presidential elections. "Supposedly [presidential candidate] Robledo is on our side, but he says we can only do subsistence mining," he said of a politician known to be an ally of small-scale miners, but whose non-endorsement of excavators, so Martín saw, was tin-eared to Chocó's impoverishment. "That's like me telling politicians they can just earn enough for subsistence. Here we also have the right to grow."

Even people who regarded the excavators adversely often found their ecological worries overshadowed by subsistence necessities. Yessid, thirty years old, recalled the "paradise" that the town of his youth used to be. "People did their artisanal mining. They sold their yucca and plantains and they were rich. Now people cultivate nothing, nothing, nothing. Here you cannot find crops anymore. Do you know what a dredge does? What an excavator does?" Yessid knew. He had previously worked as an excavator driver. However, despite his experience-based refusal, he would straight after our interview head out to a mining cut to participate in *bareque*. I asked if he would consider driving excavators again in the future, to which he replied, "Of course. No one refuses an opportunity."

What bothered many interlocutors was not so much the calls of legislators, journalists, and other outsiders to save the forest from ruination, as that these pleas were often painfully divorced from their livelihood struggles. Similarly, they refuted the government's environmentalism not because they failed to

fathom its argumentative logic, but because it rarely considered the human histories that formed part of the rainforest; or as specific commentators pointed out, because policymakers seemed to suggest that plants mattered more than people, because they ignored the historically charged relationship between Chocó and mining (over three centuries of slavery and political abandonment old), and because they placed the burden of preservation on communities alone, leaving mining multinationals to pollute however they pleased. "The government says environmental damage, but that's just a strategy for him to bring multinationals," said *bareque* miner Flor, a woman in her late forties. "Because excavators don't provide a percentage to the government. . . . But the excavator fills [holes] with the same mud it removes; multinationals don't. They destroy everything."

Paraphrasing Sebastián Ureta and Andrés Contreras's (2020, 369) distinction, forest degradation seemed primarily an ontological problem, rather than a purely epistemological one. The allure of tree-felling machines—sanctioned by landholders, taxed by community leaders, praised by *bareque* miners—was not due to deficient environmental knowledge, but emerged from *chocoanos*' positioned material-semiotic relations with their rainforest, arisen against a background of lacking economic opportunities and a larger-than-life history of institutional neglect. All things considered, the Chocó rainforest of regulators was a starkly different world from the place people in mining regions knew. The latter spoke not (or not exclusively) about long-term biodiversity, river-bearing rights, and formally protected forest reserves, but especially about acute economic and environmental circumstances that urged them to make variously troubled extractive decisions. In other words, to many rural *chocoanos*, the rainforest was not an object to preserve for its abstract natural—and perhaps abstract cultural—richness, but a concrete everyday environment that offered livelihood in wider material contexts of deprivation, and that had done the same thing for parents and grandparents. Actually, according to some, the ancestors' cultural heritage was not ended but advanced by the excavators. To hear community leader Winston say it: "They say mining is illegal, criminal; this is not true. To us, five hundred years of mining is ancestral, traditional, subsistence mining. If you say we're illegal, then legalize us."

Although many people agreed with Winston's criticism of the mines' political treatment, extractive worlds in Chocó proved varied and complex. As the next section demonstrates, the excavated forest was an unmistakable object "multiple" (Mol 2002). Even if the intrigue of excavators was nurtured by shared conditions of marginality, *chocoanos*' diverse experiences of mining—their "doubleness of similarity and difference" (Hall 1990, 227)—were also interspersed with the textured sociopolitical life of gold-mining regions.

## THE MULTIPLICITY OF MINING FORESTS

"The government says it's illegal, but it's not," Mauricio said. "If you don't consume it in great quantities, you're fine. They use it in tuna. And I've eaten a lot of tuna in my life." Uttering these words from his blue plastic chair, Mauricio was rubbing *it* into a *batea*, sustained between his thighs and filled with a gray dough of dirt; *it* being mercury, the weighty liquid binding to gold. The soggy dirt he was massaging had just been wrung from a dozen-some cloths by the dayshift half of a crew consisting of a dozen-some men. For three days and three nights, these cloths had covered a classifier, a Z-shaped, three-meter-tall sluice box. For each day and night, an excavator bucket dumped on this classifier sands and gravels, which water from a nearby creek diluted and washed down over the zigzagging device. The excavator was the last stop in a chain of three machines that passed forward piles of earth from one rotating steal arm to the next. All three excavators were the property of a white miner called Roberto, who had decided that this morning, after seventy-plus hours of force-feeding the soil into the classifier, it was time to see how many gold grains had returned from the earth-scouring labor.

Those grains were why Mauricio was here, *batea* on lap, massaging and talking mercury. He, too, was a white settler, but unlike Roberto, he had no history in excavator mining, nor perfectly represented the foreignness it symbolized. Mauricio had been living in the village for more than a decade with his wife and son, during which time he had earned a reputation as a beloved neighbor. This morning, though, he was above all the neighbor of Pablo, the friend for whom he doubled as bodyguard on the long walk between village and mining fields, a route popular among robbers. Roberto's machines were working a forest



**Figure 5. Excavator mine. Photo by Jesse Jonkman.**

land customarily owned by Pablo, who taxed the former a take of the "wash" and needed to ensure he kept no secrets about production. Although Law 70 had assigned lands to entire communities, tracts within collective lands still informally pertained to individual families on the basis of historical usage.

Alongside Pablo and me, three other men huddled around Mauricio, anticipating the day's catch and following up on his mercury defense with their own government rebukes. Sitting beside Mauricio, and agreeing with him, was community leader Yoser—"We have a government that does not think about the common good but only about foreign companies"—who was also kneading earth, washing out the other half of the classifier's dirt in a white plastic bucket. A few meters away stood mine worker and fellow villager Lorenzo—"Our president talks about the peace process, but here we're living at war. We miners are under attack by our own government"—who, once Mauricio and Yoser finished washing, used a wretched T-shirt to squeeze all water from the remaining gold-mercury amalgam. And pacing around the group was Roberto himself—"For our government, anything is illegal when there's no money in it for him"—who used an electric scale to weigh the powder Lorenzo had dried out.

The get-together overturned assumptions I had initially held about the excavators' reputation. Before fieldwork, critical academic and journalistic writings had taught me plenty about the destruction that excavator mining wrought on socio-natural worlds. Yet in Chocó, local villagers and foreign *retreros* were jointly unearthing gold, and jointly trash-talking government agencies trying to stop them from doing this.

Then again, despite widespread alliances with the white settlers, *chocoano* communities' relations with mining forests—the forests' multiple ontologies, if you will—were borne from diverse individual circumstances. Yoser had arrived at Roberto's pit as a community council representative, taxing 8 percent of whatever would flow from his bucket and Mauricio's *batea*. An environmentalist engineer, Yoser hoped to use the percentage to realize his vision of building a tree nursery that compensated for the deforestation of this and other encampments. For his part, landowner Pablo earned 12 percent of each washing, only to see most of it end up, according to his self-deprecating banter, in the pockets of his various girlfriends. And Lorenzo had a double financial interest. Apart from being Pablo's son, he was also one of Roberto's most trusted workers.

It was personal, granular histories such as these, in lieu of some generic Pacific cosmology, that surfaced in explanations about mining attitudes. They also helped clarify why people preferred certain excavation techniques over others. After all gold had been weighed, I returned to the village with Pablo and

Mauricio. In our forest walk, I asked the former why he had chosen to work his land with an excavator, instead of with the traditional motorized pumps that other villagers used.

"I have sites where you can still work with a pump," Pablo said. "But it's not even enough to earn back your fuel. The gold is too deep. That's why I need Don Roberto."

"Have you worked with pumps in the past?" I asked.

"Of course, but at my age, I'm too lazy. That's for the younger generation." To my surprise—given his fast walking and his bragging about having seven girlfriends—Pablo confessed that he was seventy-one.

"What about agriculture?" I asked. "Could someone from the family cultivate in the area?"

Mauricio, walking behind us, intervened. "Agriculture is not enough for commerce here. It's just subsistence. There's no way you can save money with that."

Chocó's goldfields were hardly a singular thing. Reasons to invite miners to dig in ancestral lands were influenced by individual economic and noneconomic life projects. Several landholders said their older age, professional jobs, or far-flung urban lives prevented them from mining and farming the lands themselves. Others argued that surface deposits had been mined away, and that leftover gold could only be reached with excavators. Yet others mentioned the additional benefit of *bareque*, which allowed the whole community to profit, including women miners—*bareque* was also why many held the excavators in higher regard than the Quito dredges, whose environmental rampage chiefly enriched their foreign owners.

Additionally, certain people also feared that the government's penalization of excavator mining served to empty Chocó for future multinationals, which would be less inclined than the current *retreros* to share gold with landholders. Lorenzo was one who held this fear. "Here there are quite a few who say they don't want excavators," he told me. "But I say, take advantage of the land while it's alive. They will be sorry when they still have their virgin lands and the government brings their multinationals."

Besides public policies, local power dynamics also stimulated these "before it's too late" speculations. A few customary landowners, including those critical of environmental devastation, had struck deals with miners to claim land before it could be usurped by neighbors. When I interviewed him, Pablo's cousin Eduardo presented himself as a vehement opponent of excavators—"entrances are

little, and all that destruction." He criticized Pablo for squandering away "family crops and virgin lands" and keeping profits to himself. He revealed that because of a conflict with Pablo, his extended family had decided to subdivide their land into individual tracts. Nevertheless, after breaking free from their cousin's greed, Eduardo and other family members were now themselves taxing an excavator mine. Why, I asked, this U-turn? "Vengeance," Eduardo said. "If we don't work them, Pablo will deplete those lands. I like agriculture, but when I sow something, he'll have an excavator tumble it. So that's why I called our family and told them: 'better us than him.'"

## PERSUASIVE ECOLOGIES

The previous sections have shown that moral assessments of mining cannot be analyzed without attending to human power relations, ranging from wider political economies to the goldfields' internal social life that interacts with these economies. Taking a grounded vantage point throws into relief that any ontological project of advancing or resisting extraction is built on situated biographies. As Stuart Hall reminds us, stories about identity and alterity are never stable collective events, nor individual concepts conjured in spatiotemporal isolation. Rather, the making of worlds of selves and others must wade through the murk of power-laden histories of meaning-making: "Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories" (Hall 1990, 225). What I now wish to highlight is that in Chocó's mining sites, such history-making was never an exclusively human effort. The appeal of excavators—quite in sync with the ontological turn's ethos—was also co-constituted by the nonhuman entities and beings that breathed life and loss into political economies. Mining landscapes operated as what I call "persuasive ecologies," insofar as their physical and affective qualities framed decisions on whether, and if so, how to mine. Three persuasive elements of these ecologies deserve special mention: the subterranean invisibility of gold, the low perceptibility of mercury contamination, and the highly perceptible violence of resource depletion.

For starters, how gold presented itself to miners had a great bearing on its persuasive pull. Here I'm not flagging the mineral's evident condition as an expensive marketable commodity, but rather underscoring its pre-extractive invisibility in alluvial subsoils. Searching for unseen gold particles with *bateas*, spades, and excavators has highly uncertain outcomes. One day you're lucky; the next day you're not. In response to my inquiries about production averages, miners invariably mentioned the impossibility of a straightforward answer. Mining, they explained, was a "lottery," whose return on labor held vastly irregular hours.

Miners were never certain about the scattered hidden treasure awaiting them down below. Only posteriorly could they ascertain their economic successes and failures, once their work cycle had ended. Gold could not simply be willed into existence through effort, time, and investment; its appearance also depended on whether or not the mine "gave," to use one verb by which miners asserted that their work environments were not just instruments of labor but also "excessive things with a force of their own" (Hetherington 2013, 66).

The intermittent temporality of gold's emergence was not unmoored from personal attractions to mining. When outlining what they liked about gold, research collaborators ordinarily suggested its potential for abrupt affluence, a benefit not present in wage work in stores or local state offices, nor in the "alternative economies" of commercial farming on which development programs wagered to lure people away from mine destruction. There were plenty of stories of miners who had made a killing during a lucky spell while working the invisible subsurface. When digging into this vast netherworld of simultaneous somethingness and nothingness, a bounty of gold specks was never certain, but always a possibility. There was no such prize to bet on with the consistent yet low returns of urban work and farming. As miner Américo put it: "The mine appears from one day to the next. If you're lucky, six months can change your life. You can progress much faster than with a wage of 600,000 [pesos], which isn't enough for subsistence."

If gold's underground imperceptibility constituted a major component of local relationships with the mines, it was another imperceptible metal, mercury, that put into perspective why the mines got away with some of their environmental disturbance. Chemical studies had measured exuberant mercury levels in *chocoano* communities (Palacios-Torres, Caballero-Gallardo, and Olivero-Verbel 2018). Yet of all the evils ascribed to the *retreros* and their mines, mercury was probably the easiest to overlook. The liquid penetrated Chocó by stealth, morphing piecemeal into ecologies that gave few visual clues of its presence. You could not see whether this or that staple, river, or land was polluted, let alone observe the degree of toxicity. The same rang true for human bodies. While longitudinal effects of mercury intoxication include damages to kidneys, the stomach, intestines, and the nervous system, none of these effects were, as yet, substantially experienced in the places of my research. On many occasions, people sought to contradict the quicksilver's bad reputation. Seated at the kitchen table of his excavator mine, Evelio set forth a position influenced by personal medical experience, no less than by his experience mining the depleted lands of the same river basin he was from. "Personally, I have never felt the problem of mercury; never

felt anything. And these lands are so *acabadas* [finished]. The gold that is still here is so small, it basically forces you to use mercury. If not, it escapes."

All in all, there was little consensus on mercury's health impacts. Some, like Evelio, saw little harm in consuming it. Some, however, eschewed bathing in rivers, eating local fish, or, in the case of miners, inhaling toxic fumes that the burning of gold-mercury amalgams produced. Some noted that the solution poisoned carnivorous fish and therefore did not affect vegetarian bocachico fish. Some, like me, worried about eating bocachico but did it anyway out of affection for its unmatched taste or for the people preparing it. Some believed in contamination yet did not worry whatsoever. "They say it's poisonous," Francisco, a mining engineer from Quibdó, told me in between bellowing laughter, before heading out to buy a bocachico for his mother. "But those effects are very slow. You only notice it when you're old." Bottom line, mercury was a strongly multifarious reality whose medical truths seemed protracted, contingent, and largely imperceptible. In some conversations, the fluid metal emerged as the archetypical carrier of a "slow" kind of "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight" (Nixon 2011, 2); in others, it was not clear whether it constituted violence altogether.

Other effects of the gold frontier materialized much more eventfully. The excavators, after all, had maimed tree after tree, denuded forest after forest. They had exhausted the gold and crops of subsistence economies. And they had wounded the rainforest with toxic-blue pools that bred pests of malaria-carrying mosquitos. However, this ecological undoing was not only brought up in critical endorsements of the excavators' criminalization; paradoxically, it also ended up speaking in the machines' favor. An important reason to invite the deep-digging vehicles had been the scarcening of accessible gold, and this logic seemed to have gathered more persuasive force with each passing boom year. Given that surface deposits had now been largely unearthed or buried under mine runoffs, and garden crops mined away, it had only become more difficult to imagine a future in which artisanal economies were hegemonic. In the telling of pump miner Gilberto: "It's bad what the government does [burning excavators], because we live off this. . . . Right now the situation is worse [than before the excavators]. People used to go down to the stream and found their *granito*, two *granitos* of gold, easily. But where the excavators have worked, it's more difficult now. . . . If I go there, I don't find anything."

Consider a counterexample for comparison. While analyzing community tensions surrounding a copper-mining company in Ecuador, David Kneas (2018) observed that the company's exclusively exploratory character facilitated reconciliation between the local proponents and opponents of the mine once the company

left the region. That no dramatic physical transformations had occurred made it easier for people to lower tensions and build post-mining futures together. By contrast, the actual upturning of forest landscapes in Chocó had rendered non-extraction an increasingly unlikely possibility, not just for the excavators' most ardent supporters but also for people who looked back fondly on the pre-boom years. In quotes such as Gilberto's, going down had become a self-fulfilling truth: extraction begetting extraction. Where a few decades back, the popularity of the new mines had benefited from the previous depletion of surface deposits, this depletion had only become more urgent once the machines began turning the goldfields upside down. The attraction of the excavators was thus not simply technological but also ecological, to the extent that, at least to certain people, the material and sensorial drama of mining devastation rendered their lands evermore seductive to deep excavation.

In brief, excavators were received, heralded, and endured by *chocoano* landholders and artisanal miners who needed to put their agencies in continuous correspondence with shifting physical surroundings. And still, even as Chocó's gold, mercury, and mined-out forests may provide clear ethnographic responses to ontologist theorizing about nonhuman agency, their dynamic materialities also demonstrate that such agency is often much less stable than what posthumanists tend to give it credit for. Arguably, the trouble with time in many ontological texts stems not simply from the statically portrayed humans, as critics have consistently argued (see, again, Bessire and Bond 2014; Cepek 2016; Ramos 2012), but also from the wider landscapes of which the humans form part, which oftentimes appear equally unblemished by history.[7]



**Figure 6. After the gold rush. Photo by Jesse Jonkman.**

Examples hereof, I believe, also come from ontology-inspired accounts of the Colombian Pacific, which typically return to a somewhat stable posthumanity when substantiating their points about relational worlds.[8] To be sure, such accounts do consider that Pacific territories are products of history—or more precisely, that "rural black identities have become intimately linked to the experience of the aquatic over time" (Oslender 2019, 1698); that "throughout their long history, Black and Indigenous communities in the Pacific have maintained and reworked their own worldviews, rooted in their territories" (Escobar 2017, 29; my translation); or that, as a result of mining, "life forms that took millions of years to establish are dissolving in the blink of an eye" (Gallon Droste 2021, 77; my translation). That said, their posthuman places remain mostly recipients of, and not instigators of, socio-environmental change (the instigators are predominantly the outsider-imposed economies). The general picture is one of perduring and traditional landscapes, a sturdy, contrasting foil through which we can appreciate the recent transformative violence of extractive capitalism. So, while ontological analyses are thick with examples of fluvial engagements and traditional work, they tend to have less to say about Black and Indigenous practices that seem less evocative of non-modern alterity, nor about the influence that past ecological experiences and material transformations exert on present forms of territory-making—albeit done in the name of tradition, extraction, or both.[9]

Yet, as I've tried to show here, interrogating the not-only-human worlds of research collaborators also means noticing those worlds' biographies and temporal pulsations (Tsing 2015). More to the extractive point, it means chronicling what Andrea Marston (2021) terms a "material history" of extraction, in which local ecologies are simultaneously altering and being altered by stratified economies (see also Jaramillo 2020; Jonkman 2025b; Tubb 2020). As for Chocó specifically, it implies facing up to the jumbling tempos of persuasive landscapes, where positioned human politics are deeply invested in the positioned temporalities and historicity of nonhuman matter—where the jackpot rhythms of sporadically appearing gold, the violently slow toxicity of mercury, and the historical unfurling of material depletion, all lay their imprint onto whichever direction resource frontiers sway.

## CONCLUSIONS: Writing against Othering (Again)

Ontological anthropologies have proposed rigorous ways of rethinking the sites of ethnographic study, urging us to take seriously non-Western cosmologies that stress the sentience of nonhuman entities and the multiplicity of nature. They have also been vehemently criticized for missing the nuances of cosmology

in everyday struggles and, correspondingly, for putting their radical proposals at risk of becoming registers of exclusion that preemptively define the parameters of acceptable cultural expression (Bessire and Bond 2014; Cepek 2016; Todd 2016). Rather than merely restating these critiques, I have sought to undertake a grounded ethnography of ontological difference in Chocó's mining zones, combining a concern with the vitality of more-than-human ecologies with an attentiveness to the political "positioning" (Hall 1990, 226) of heterogeneous *chocoanos*. In many ways, then, mine has been a kind of "writing against radical alterity," to tweak Lila Abu-Lughod's famous dictum. More than years ago, she invited us to author "ethnographies of the particular" (Abu-Lughod 1991, 138) that minutely captured the heterogeneity of peoples who had theretofore been stuck in anthropological slots of cultural otherness. The preceding sections, though, have chronicled the extractive particular not only to exercise the "tactical humanism" that Abu-Lughod (1991, 138) proposed, but also, heeding more recent calls (Tsing 2015; Zeiderman 2019), to put such humanism in conversation with lively nonhumans that, although densely entwined with anthropogenic history, are never fully acquiescent to it.

The ethnography contrasts with conventional ontological accounts of Latin American mining, which usually scrutinize the material politics of agentive landscapes in discursive resistances to extractivism (de la Cadena 2015; Escobar 2015; Li 2013; Salas Carreño 2017). Instead of once more researching how capitalist extraction negatively impacts local human and nonhuman worlds, I have explored how such worlds impact extraction. Many people in Chocó considered excavator mines as constitutive of new forms of world-making, as opposed to (only) a threat to existing worlds. Even though outside experts criticized mine-accepting *chocoanos* for being unaware of or insensitive to the rainforest's deterioration, the latter constantly uttered ecological reservations about mining, while still holding these in productive tension with the deprivation of themselves and their lands. Therefore, if the arrival of destructive mines were an issue of epistemology (of environmental knowing), it was also always one of ontology (of relational being and experiential becoming); that is to say, the gold frontier was determined by *chocoanos*' storied socio-material worlds, not their mistaken understandings of mining machines. Varied local attitudes toward excavators were shaped by previous extractive pasts and present-day exclusions of mining policies, as well as by the cadences of local power relations and "persuasive" ecologies—ecologies that included indeterminate gold, furtive mercury, and mining fields in which the past ravages of excavation actualized the physical conditions for its continuation.

Ultimately, my attention to these positioned extractive worlds can be read as an effort, borrowing from Mareike Winchell (2023, 622; emphasis original), "to reframe ontology from questions of a stable, discrete sphere of meaning or materiality to an *ethnographic* problem of how people strive to uphold ties through which other-than-human relations are sustained, or not, and the broader significance of such ties in the shadow of earlier violence." Indeed, neither static nor secluded, ontologies in Chocó's mining areas emerge from more- and less- remote histories of extractive violence—some of which was inflicted on, and by, nonhuman agents. The landscapes that such histories coproduce thus testify to the urgency, as observed by Sophie Chao (2022, 212), of "a more nuanced and situated conception of posthumanity." After all, *chocoano* landscapes' mining-induced harms, and attendant mining-inducive materialities, push against "the celebration of more-than-human encounters as inherently conducive to multispecies intimacy and thriving" (Chao 2022, 11). Yet whereas Chao's concern lies with Marind communities who resist the obliteration of their lifeworlds at the hands of foreign oil palm, my ethnography points to more muddled more-than-human encounters, whereby invasion and tradition, benevolent and malicious materials, and the making and unmaking of place are not always easy to tell apart. More than anything, such extractive messiness confirms that, like anti-mining resistance, the unfolding of extraction is also a profoundly localized and historied affair, premised on grounded subjectivities that navigate both hierarchical economies and specific material formations (Jaramillo 2020; Marston 2021; Schwartz 2021; Winchell and Howe 2024). Analyzing these subjectivities in Chocó and other places proves crucial for evading the robust resistance-acceptance dichotomies that pervade much popular and academic writing on extraction-affected communities. Far from inexorably embracing or rejecting excavators, or helplessly stomaching their assault on relational worlds, many *chocoanos* saw in the machines a less-than-perfect way to enter a national mining economy that fought hard to shut them out.

**ABSTRACT**

*Ontology has become a popular conceptual tool to interrogate place-based struggles against mining. This article undertakes a somewhat different ethnography of extractivism, as it focuses on excavator mines that brought projects of more-than-human world-making in uneasy alliance with projects of mechanized extraction. In the Colombian Chocó, many Afro-Colombian landholders and artisanal miners saw illicit gold mining not as an invasive threat to existing worlds, but as an imperfect means to construct new worlds. Although outside experts criticized them for being unaware of or insensitive to the excavators' destruction of their forest landscapes,* chocoanos *constantly uttered ecological reservations about mining, while holding*

*these in productive tension with the deprivation of themselves and their lands. The article interprets extractive experiences in Chocó as emanating from "positioned," as opposed to radical, worlds of difference, which testifies to the emplaced and dissimilar ontological positions that* chocoanos *occupied while corresponding with both predatory economies and more-than-human landscapes.* [ontological anthropology; gold; mining; extractivism; Afro-descendant politics; more-than-human territories]

**RESUMEN**

*La ontología se ha convertido en una herramienta conceptual popular para analizar las luchas territoriales contra la minería. Este artículo aborda una etnografía algo diferente del extractivismo, ya que se centra en las minas trabajadas con excavadoras, que crearon alianzas incómodas entre proyectos de construcción de mundos más-que-humanos y proyectos de extracción mecanizada. En el Chocó, Colombia, muchos propietarios de tierras y mineros artesanales afrocolombianos no consideraban la minería ilícita de oro como una amenaza invasiva para los mundos existentes, sino como un medio imperfecto para construir nuevos mundos. Aunque expertos externos los criticaban por desconocer o mostrarse insensibles ante la destrucción de sus bosques causada por las excavadoras, los chocoanos expresaban constantemente sus reservas ecológicas respecto de la minería, al tiempo que mantenían estas reservas en una tensión productiva con la privación que sufrían ellos mismos y sus tierras. El artículo interpreta las experiencias extractivas en el Chocó como emanadas de mundos de diferencia "posicionados," en vez de radicales, lo que da cuenta de las posiciones ontológicas situadas y disímiles que ocupaban los chocoanos al relacionarse tanto con economías depredadoras como con paisajes más-que-humanos.* [antropología ontológica; oro; minería; extractivismo; políticas afrodescendientes; territorios más-que-humanos]

## NOTES

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1. These organizations were the *Consejo Comunitario Mayor de la Organización Popular Campesina del Alto Atrato* (Greater Community Council of the Popular Peasant Organization of Alto Atrato), the *Consejo Comunitario Mayor de la Asociación Campesina Integral del Atrato* (Greater Community Council of the Peasant Association of Atrato), the *Asociación de Consejos Comunitarios y Organizaciones Étnico-Territoriales del Bajo Atrato* (Association

of Community Councils and Ethno-Territorial Organizations of Bajo Atrato), and the *Foro Interétnico Solidaridad Chocó* (Chocó Interethnic Solidarity Forum).

2. Corte Constitucional, "Sentencia T-622/16," 5.9 and 5.10, 2016, https://www.corteconstitucional.gov.co/relatoria/2016/t-622-16.htm. Quoted portions of this sentence are my translation.
3. Other anthropologists working in Latin America have likewise shown how marginalized peoples, rather than being solely victimized by illicit economic activity, may also take part in and repurpose it to challenge formal economic models that pass them over. For illustrations, see Ramírez (2011) on coca farming in Colombia and Schwartz (2021) on gasoline smuggling in Venezuela.
4. In this light, this is not my first analysis that is at once influenced by and divergent from political ontology literature. I have elsewhere analyzed the tensions between Colombian formal governance and the lifeworlds of artisanal (not excavator) miners (Jonkman 2025a).
5. From *retroexcavadora*, which is Spanish for "backhoe" but is also used in Colombian mining regions to refer to excavators (otherwise known as *excavadoras*).
6. All names of people are pseudonyms, except those of public figures.
7. For an alternative to, and critique of, such material stability, see Winchell (2023).
8. A notable exception is Daniel Ruiz-Serna's (2023) work, which studies the making of Bajo Atrato territories through fine-grained ethnography.
9. Ulrich Oslender (2019, 1697) provides a more detailed description of Pacific geography. He writes about an "aquatic space" of "intricate river networks, significant tidal rangers, labyrinthine mangrove swaps, and frequent inundations." Nonetheless, while his account should be commended for advancing a more evidence-based spatial analysis, it is also, I find, light on social change. Oslender's (2019, 1694) "territory of difference" is mainly restricted to subsistence economies and traditional practices, and his observations about contemporary geography—for example, he writes that "all travel in the region is river based" (Oslender 2019, 1698)—are substantiated by recurring citations of geographer Robert West, who traveled through the Pacific in the 1950s. (As an aside, in fact, the Pacific region has several cities, while many towns are connected by road.) Although Oslender (2019, 1701) notes that "rural black populations are modern, too," and mentions their involvement in economies such as mining and oil palm plantations, he does not elaborate much on the position these populations occupy in "the notion of the aquatic space as relational ontology" that is "under attack from the forces of modernity" (Oslender 2019, 1701).

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