"Precarity, Migration, and Disposable Labor in the Peruvian Amazon" Gordon Lewis Ulmer. In Press. In *The Handbook of Culture and Migration*, Jeffrey H. Cohen and Ibrahim Sirkeci, eds. Edward Elgar Publishing. 2021.

Abstract
This chapter illuminates the lived experiences of precarious laborers who migrate internally between the Andean and Amazonian regions of Peru to participate in the illicit gold mining economy. While scholarship on migrant precarity often invokes dichotomous terms such as legal/illegal, documented/undocumented, etc. to focus on the political subjectivity of migrants or their socioeconomic insecurity, I argue that internal migration in Peru confounds this binary framework. My analysis situates migrant labor in broader political economic realities while attending to their lived experiences of precarity. Building on ethnographic fieldwork with contingent laborers in Madre de Dios, I consider how migration patterns, informal economic activities, and extractive work (both historically and in the present) not only shape how contemporary Andean migrants in Amazonia make a living, but also their way of life.

Key words: Precarity, illicit economies, devalued labor, mining, Amazonia

Biography
Gordon Lewis Ulmer is an Assistant Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Humboldt State University. His research examines themes of environmental crisis, precarious labor, and public health from the perspective of political ecology. His scholarship and pedagogy are centered on engaged and applied work in cultural anthropology, and his most recent projects have concentrated on projects related to natural resource extraction, biodiversity conservation, infrastructures, tourism, and global development with geographic foci on Andes-Amazonia and Central America.

Introduction

> "My parents died when I was four. I had no one else. I slept on the streets and worked on people's *chacras* (small farm plots), making about 3 *soles* (~$1) per day picking fruits and vegetables. But then a friend of mine told me about all the gold in Madre de Dios, so we came here! I had crazy ideas when I arrived… like buying an airplane. I was so young but it was believable to me because I was making five times more money panning gold than picking fruit, making around 15 *soles* (~$5 US) each day."

-Armando, former child gold miner

Armando never extracted enough gold to purchase an airplane. Instead, he panned gold for a year after he arrived in Madre de Dios, Peru from the Andean highland region of Cusco. A child at the time, he was in violation of labor laws (minimum age requirement for mining work in Peru at that time was sixteen), and was picked up by the *Comisaría* (local authorities). He was taken to a 'youth lodge,' (a boarding school for the children of rural laborers and foster home for orphans), where he was fed, provided a bed, and sent to school in a nearby mining town. Extractive labor crews and land concessionaires recruited Armando and other children from the lodge to work weekends in gold mining and logging operations.

Armando is one among an estimated 40 to 50 thousand Andean migrants who relocated from the Peruvian highlands to the Amazonian lowlands to work in gold mining. At the height of the resource boom in 2011, gold's price quadrupled and surpassed cocaine in value, seizing its place as Peru's most profitable illicit export. Since the boom, gold mining has become increasingly precarious work, not only in terms of contingent labor arrangements but also in terms of its effects on local communities, shifting legalities around extractive markets, and its relationship to other illicit activities.

Migration and precarity are ontological experiences (see Dudley, 2018; Millar, 2014; Neilson & Rossiter, 2005; 2008; Stewart, 2012). While scholarship on migrant precarity often invokes dichotomous terms such as legal/illegal, documented/undocumented, etc. to focus on the

political subjectivity of migrants or their socioeconomic insecurity, I argue that internal migration in Peru confounds the binary framework typical to discussion and demands a more nuanced approach. My analysis situates migrant labor in the political economic realities of daily life while attending to the experiences of precarity that emerge around the devaluation of labor. In this chapter, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork conducted during multiple trips to Madre de Dios, Peru to illuminate the lived experience of migrant gold miners and the historical processes that influence their precarity.

This chapter is organized into five sections. First, I define precarity and its utility for understanding the experiences of internal migration in Andes-Amazonia Peru. I consider how precarity creates political vulnerability for internal migrants, the decline in patron-client relationships in gold mining, and the struggle to maintain security. Second, I evaluate the term *unskilled labor* and consider how devalued work can provide a better framework for understanding the migrant experience. Third, I outline the history of labor precarity in Madre de Dios, Peru to understand patterns of movement of people amidst broader structural forces. Building on this historical analysis, I consider how infrastructural development has encouraged greater movement between Andes and Amazonia and opened new opportunities for households to "*florecer*" (flourish), which is symbolized by the completion of a migrant's home. Finally, fifth, I consider the legal risks that migrant laborers experience participating in an illicit economy to show how migration, precarity, and unskilled work converge around the politics of gold and other illicit activities.

Conceptualizing precarity & migration

Migration scholarship has recently highlighted the growing precarious conditions that many migrant laborers experience (Anderson, 2010; Bélanger & Tran Giang, 2013; Lewis et al., 2014; Schierup & Jørgensen, 2016). Dichotomies such as legal and illegal, documented and undocumented, can delineate different experiences; however, they can simultaneously obscure critical similarities. Some scholars have suggested that it is more useful to locate migrants on a continuum of precarity, legality, and formality capturing its "multi-dimensional and constructed" nature (Goldring, Berinstein & Bernhard 2009:240; also see Bélanger & Tran Giang, 2013). When migration and precarity are discussed in tandem it is often in reference to citizenship (e.g. Senses, 2016). However, internal migration challenges formal categories while still attending to the political vulnerability of movers based on their subjectivity to the Peruvian State. For many internal migrants from the Peruvian Andes, moving is part of a broader diaspora associated with the aftermath of Peru's civil war and neoliberal reforms (Paerregaard, 1997). Although gold mining camps in Madre de Dios are composed of mostly Peruvian citizens, some who hailed from the highlands lack official documentation that is required for formal employment, such as a birth certificate or national identification number (see UNICEF, 2016). While Andean migrants in Peru may be "internal migrants," they are often viewed as outsiders when they arrive to Amazonian communities.

Scholars use precarity to reference perilous socioeconomic conditions related to the insecurity and irregularity produced by contingent labor in the postindustrial Northern Hemisphere

(Bourdieu, 1998; Cangià 2018; Standing, 2011). Precarity is a symptom of global capitalism, often-dubbed Post-Fordist neoliberalism, now approaching its fifth decade, and the shift towards temporary labor arrangements and flexible work regimes (Harvey, 1989:150).

In Madre de Dios, the shift to contingent extractive labor corresponds to the 21st Century gold boom. Patron-client relations involving long-term work arrangements in mining operations have transformed into contingent labor arrangements in which miners frequently move between projects working 12-24hr shifts. One gold miner from the Andes described extractive activities before this major transformation:

> "I worked in mining for 6 or 7 years, but back then it was artisanal. We only mined eight hours each day. We took siestas for an hour or two after lunch. We had crews of 15 people, so we did not have to work as many hours. We were only allowed to work eight hours each day—we were part of a syndicate. Now men get really sick from all the pollution and there are only four *obreros* who work 24 hours."

Older gold miners described working in large parties prior to the gold boom and as they began migrating seasonally to work in Madre de Dios during the 1980s and 1990s. The patron often provided food, clothing, shelter, and transportation. Today most of these basic needs are the responsibility of individual laborers.

Irregular and unstable work, previously a characteristic of low-skilled labor, has become a feature across different categories of work (Smith, 1997). Contingent, informal labor is a broad phenomenon that includes an estimated 78% of the "economically active people" across Peru

working informally (RPP, 2016). It is not difficult to see how the socioeconomic conditions of contingent labor give rise to migration, as laborers relocate to seek work and wages. This, however, is primarily focused on the economic migrant, who represents just one of many types of internal movers. Migration might be better understood using a holistic model that pays attention to an individual's social role in the household and community, local traditions, geography, and the belief that migration will lead to greater well-being (Cohen, 2004).

Like migration, precarity is not simply a reflection of socioeconomic conditions or processes. Anthropological definitions of precarity have extended the term's meaning into new domains including political subjection (Lazzarato, 2004), ontological experience (Millar 2014; Neilson & Rossiter, 2005; 2008; Stewart 2012), and as a general condition of our present time (Tsing 2015a). As Neilson and Rossiter (2008:54) observe, precarity is only a new epoch 'when set against a Fordist or Keynesian norm' (also see Boyer, 1986; Coriat, 1991; Lipietz, 1987). Precariousness, insecurity, and informality are not an exception to capitalism but rather its norm (Breman & van der Linden, 2014). On a global scale, this critique is best summarized in the words of Akua Britwum, a Ghanaian scholar, who said in response to an ILO presentation on precarious employment in 2011: 'What you are calling precarious work sounds like what we in Ghana call—work' (Mosoeta, Stillerman & Tilly, 2016:8).

Andean migrants who mine gold in Madre de Dios are not a monolithic social group. While some miners remain landless, lack housing, and struggle to meet basic daily needs, others have reinvested their earnings in agricultural land and productive assets or housing and have actualized some degree of social mobility and security. For example, Gustavvo, a *motorista* (boat

pilot), migrated to Madre de Dios in the 1990s to mine gold. After several years of saving, he was able to reinvest his earnings to purchase a 15-meter *lancha* (launch or open motorboat), which he uses to generate income by transporting passengers and cargo up and downriver each month. Despite his success as an entrepreneurial boat pilot, Gustavvo still recognized the dearth of earning opportunities in the region and the broader structural problems that perpetuate precarity in Madre de Dios:

> "They give us no other options. You look at the bulletin… where they advertise jobs and all you see are jobs for mining, logging, cooks for mining, cooks for logging, but where are the professional jobs for secretaries and other office jobs? There is nothing for us to do but mining, and yes, we want other options to survive! There is very little investment in anything here except highways… the electricity is bad, the lights, water…the government doesn't care about resolving these problems."

Gustavvo's testimony underscores how precarity is more than the lack of stable work. It is a general condition of underdevelopment and political marginalization (for comprehensive review, see Millar, 2017).

Unskilled or devalued Labor?

Most migrant workers worldwide are unskilled laborers (Martin, 2007). However, framing work in terms of unskilled labor only reveals part of the story for migrants in Madre de Dios. Workers do not lack skills, rather the skills they have are undervalued. Many migrant workers in Madre de Dios are multi-skilled and practice occupational multiplicity (Comitas, 1964). In fact, the migrants

and miners I met are best thought of as “working-class renaissance men” (Elbein 2015), as they move between jobs.

Like the term precarity, skilled labor also contains multiple meanings and requires some conceptual unpacking. Skilled labor is conceptualized as ‘a bundle of capabilities or requirements that are attached to entities at the individual level of analysis; i.e., skills are possessed either by individual workers, or they are requirements of individual job roles’ (Baba, 1991: 2). However, as Baba (1991) notes, ethnographers who have studied work have demonstrated that skill is better understood at a group level given that work activities are carried out by social groups rather than individual workers, and that skill often requires a ‘deep structure’ of local knowledge linked together by informal social organization. Extractive laborers in Madre de Dios labor together in work parties that require a variety of technical capabilities derived from shared knowledge systems and transmitted through practice, with the household often a site of intergenerational transmission of labor knowledge (Ulmer 2018).

Much of the work deemed ‘unskilled’ labor, in fact, requires many capabilities and access to knowledge, which is not characterized by formal training or education. Hernández Romero (2012: 73) argues that the broad depiction of agricultural labor as unskilled obscures attention to the skills and abilities needed to perform agricultural tasks, to the process of acquiring them, and to ‘their impact in the life trajectories of those working in the fields.’ Similarly, depicting artisanal gold miners in Madre de Dios as “unskilled” laborers (many who also happen to have agrarian backgrounds) diminishes the ability to recognize the myriad capacities and requisite knowledge required to be successful and survive in the harsh conditions of the Amazonian lowlands.

During field research, I worked occasionally as a *tripulante* (boat crewman) while shadowing in boat operators who transported passengers and supplies upriver. As a *tripulante*, I learned how to scan the surface of the river and gesture to the *motorista* to navigate away from driftwood that could damage the boat's outboard motor. This work can be quite dangerous, as boating accidents are common and large tree trunks and other organic debris pose hazards to navigation. In fact, the last rural laborer I interviewed in 2015 passed away in a boating accident two years later. Most gold miners, timber workers, and others I interviewed had experienced boating accidents.

Hunting and food preparation are other important skills for rural extractive laborers. Extractive laborers often spend several weeks or months in remote areas and supplement canned goods by hunting monkeys, javelins, agouti paca, and other wild game. Interviewees described various hunting methods, such as using fires to 'smoke out' agouti pacas from their burrows, and food preparation techniques such as using salt and sunlight to make jerky from hunted game to extend the life of meat. However, hunting has become less important over the past decade following the rapid infrastructural development of the region.

Gold miners in Madre de Dios are often highly specialized technicians and there is a difference between the unskilled *obrero* (laborer) and the specialized technician who can operate special machinery. As one miner stated, "There is too much competition now— you have to specialize to get work!" Gold miners with technical experience are in demand and unlike *obreros*, miners

who specialize in semi-mechanized operations keep a percentage of the gold they extract. They are referred to as '*traqueros,*' '*gringeros,*' *carancheros,*' '*pistoleros,*' and '*torneros,*' depending on their experience with different extractive machinery (e.g. the *traca, gringo, caranchera, chupadera*, etc.).

I first learned about the role of the unskilled *obrero* from Eduardo, a man who migrated from the Andean highlands to Madre de Dios in the 1980s. Eduardo was confronted with ever-growing health complications, including kidney problems and hypertension, which he attributed to a lifetime of earning low wages. We sat near the riverbank at one of his work sites in southeastern Peruvian Amazonia talking about his contingent labor employment as an artisanal gold miner. "*No soy minero, solo un obrero* [I'm not a miner, only a laborer]" he said in response to my query about why he is paid a wage rather than a shared percentage of gold profit.

Obreros perform numerous tasks such as hauling equipment, shoveling pebbles, pumping water, and cooking food for a fixed daily wage. Operators of various extractive sites sometimes hire laborers for a fixed wage instead of a percentage of extracted resource (e.g. gold, timber, or Brazil nuts). Such work is deemed unskilled, despite the experience and technical knowledge required to perform such work, and wages are normally low. However, working as an *obrero* guarantees Eduardo cash and mitigates the possibility of spending several unpaid days in the mines when no gold is found. To put it in the words of another miner, "*A veces trabajas por dos, tres semanas pero no encuentras ni mierda* [Sometimes you work for two or three weeks but you don't find shit]!" Gold miners often work for weeks without any luck but wage labor as an *obrero*

means Eduardo can depend on the extra 300 *nuevos soles* (~$93 US) each month to compliment other earning opportunities.

Another way to think about the concept of 'skilled' labor is to consider how capitalist development takes advantage of pre-existing skills and abilities and "salvages" them, or brings them to the marketplace (Tsing, 2015b). For example, the informal employment of an *obrero* at a mining labor camp relies upon their upbringing in the Andes as a member of a household where basic construction skills were taught and technical knowledge was learned that enable *obreros* to perform a variety of tasks, such as assembling sluices for mining, building small tents for shelter, clearing trails, and so forth. Migration from the Andes to Amazon exemplifies that "unskilled" laborers are often multi-skilled and have gained useful knowledge through informal channels, all of which contribute to their successful relocation.

The role of labor mobility in the development of *an extractive enclave*

Populations across Peru since the Pre-Columbian period have 'organized their livelihoods on the basis of the possibility of geographical mobility' (Takenaka, Paerregaard & Berg, 2010: 4). However, mobility and migratory-based livelihoods in Madre de Dios have a particular history of precarity that originated when the region was transformed into an extractive enclave during the 19th Century Amazonian rubber boom. Understanding this history of precarity and migrant labor is paramount to understanding the present conditions and political economic relations that continue to perpetuate insecurity and instability of many contemporary households.

In 1894, high quality *caucho* (rubber) was discovered in the region and *caucheros* (rubber barons) chartered an extractive economic system that laid the groundwork for the present (see Alexiades & Peluso, 2009; Reyna, 1942). Companies kidnapped and lured indigenous peoples from across Amazonia to tap rubber (see Varcárcel, 1993). This influx of imported coerced labor gave rise to the *ribereño* (mixed ancestry) society in Amazonia while European epidemics decimated indigenous Amazonian populations (Coomes, 1996, Naughton-Treves, 2004).

The rubber industry also attracted an intercontinental labor force to Madre de Dios. In addition to imported indigenous labor, Madre de Dios was also a destination for Japanese migrants as part of Peru's labor contract with Japan from 1899-1923. During the first two decades of the 20th Century, Peru received some 20,000 Asian migrants or "coolies" (i.e. "unskilled laborer, Asian laborer working abroad, see Leigh 2014) to stimulate economic development in exports and industry (Blanchard, 1979). As Leigh (2014:53) writes,

> 'The "coolie" remains, in many ways, an obscure historical figure—an undocumented figure—that haunts the colonial archive by its conspicuous absence. Between the continents, between the enslaved and the free, between Black and White, the "coolie," the late 19th, early 20th century Asian migrant laborer, a shadowy figure, occupies a liminal, unbound space.'

At the request of the Inca rubber company, Morioka and the Meiji Colonization rubber companies brought around 500 Japanese migrants between 1905-1909 to tap rubber in the Tambopata

region of Madre de Dios (Lausent-Hererra, 1987:5). Most who arrived to the region had worked on sugar and cotton plantations along the Pacific coast in Peru. However, with the falling price of rubber and consequent collapse of local farms, Japanese workers were released from their contracts and migrated to Brazil and Bolivia. Some remained in Madre de Dios and started local agricultural colonies, giving rise to one of Peru's largest Nikkei (Japanese-Peruvian) communities. Global rubber prices crashed after the British flooded the market with cheap rubber from plantations in Malaysia and Sri Lanka in what was arguably the first case of bio-piracy when Harry Wickham smuggled some 70,000 stolen rubber seeds from the Amazon to Southeast Asia. For this reason, rubber tapping was a short-lived extractive activity in Madre de Dios , though it left a lasting legacy socially, economically, and politically.

Although the rubber industry in Madre de Dios ended after the international price collapsed in 1912, its demise did not signify the end of extraction. Instead, extraction became a prototype emulated in the future. Since the collapse of rubber, there has been a sequence of boom and bust economies around natural resources: furs and skins, mahogany and other timber, gold, hydrocarbon, and most recently, monocrops such as papaya and cacao. One of the consistent features across these booms is the influx of temporary migrant labor for the captureof natural resources.

Another pattern of precarity that has endured since the rubber boom era is debt bondage. Debt bondage is a mechanism that takes advantage of migrants' precarity by capitalizing on their pre-departure. In order to pay for the costs of migrating, migrants often borrow money at high

interest rates. Bélanger (2014: 92) notes that credit may be an initial source of empowerment opportunity, but for many movers it can become a burden that 'increases their precariousness and shapes their trajectories,' which often leads to forced labor and coercion. Through the pernicious effects of debt bondage, migrants promise future wages to future bosses to transport them from their communities in the Andes to work sites in the Amazon. There they effectively become sequestered in workplaces as their wages are gouged to pay debts amassed during their relocations (Ulmer, 2015).

Infrastructural development has played a critical role in opening up the region as an extractive enclave to migrant labor. As one miner described, "It used to take a few weeks to travel here from *la sierra* [the highlands]—it was an expedition! Now it takes eight hours." The construction of roadways in 1965 joined Andean and Amazonian regions of the country and enabled a logging boom in the north and gold mining to the south (Mosquera et al., 2009). During the years that followed, the Peruvian government offered blanket tax-exemption for individuals and companies to exploit gold in Madre de Dios. The state-run *Banco Minero* (Miner Bank) assisted in developing the region using grubstake loans to encourage gold exploration and by purchasing gold at prices that followed global market rates that rose until 1980 (Guillén-Marroquín 1988). Migration in the region increased by over 40 percent during this period and coincided with record high gold prices that climbed precipitously in response to the oil crisis and floating international exchange rates when gold moved from a currency standard to a global tradable commodity.

The Transoceanic Highway, a multinational infrastructural development project enabled migrant workers to access Madre de Dios from the neighboring Andean departments of Cusco and Puno in as little as 8 to 12 hours (Southworth et al., 2011). The highway connects Brazilian and Peruvian traffic circuits and Atlantic and Pacific seaports and is part of the Initiative for Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America (IIRSA). This multinational effort was designed to integrate resource rich areas in Amazonia such as the MAP frontier (an acronym for Madre de Dios in Peru, Acre in Brazil, and Pando in Bolivia) into greater chains of commerce and development plans (Southworth et al., 2011).

Highway development has contributed to land conflicts in the region, especially as the Transoceanic Highway enables opportunists greater access to remote properties. One landowner who has timber and gold concessions along the highway proclaimed, "The problem is *fantasmas* [phantasms]!" in reference to clandestine squatters who enter private land to extract resources. His complaint was a common refrain. Other landowners also described similar problems with *fantasmas* or "*colonos*" (colonists, or settlers) including an encounter that resulted in a machete fight to defend private lands from migrant settlers attempting to cultivate crops. Another landowner who had plans to cultivate papaya expressed concern that he would be held liable for illegal logging that was taking place on his parcels of land. Local residents often identified Andean migration, rather than the highway development, as the reason for these conflicts.

During an informal conversation, one resident from Madre de Dios complained that people from the Andes are "invaders" who bring their traditions to the Amazon. He argued, "Why do they put

their *toritos* on the houses? They are in the jungle, not *la sierra* [the highlands]!" and referred to the Andean practice of placing a pair of *toritos* (ceramic bulls) on a house's rooftop, a tradition from the Pucará area of the Cusco region in the Andean highlands.

However, the resident's complaint points to an important point about precarity and migration. The placing a pair of *toritos* marks the finality of house construction. Before the house is finished, families tie flowers to rebar frames where additional floors have yet to be constructed. The bouquets are believed to bring growth, "*florecer*" (to blossom, or flourish). Once the second floor is finished, the household places the *toritos* on the rooftops, "Then, it's *techado*" [roofed, or enclosed, or complete]," added another resident. Some miners do not build their homes in Madre de Dios, but instead remit to their families in the Andes and elsewhere. One artisanal miner described how his compatriots reinvest in their home communities. He informed me, "I have miner friends in Huapetue [a large mining site in Madre de Dios] who have homes in Lima, Cusco, Arequipa, and other places." While precarity is a major dimension of the migrant experience, another side is the promise of growth, completion, security, and new opportunities and to rest at night in a home that is *techado*.

Some locals refer to Madre de Dios as a "colony" of Cusco, noting that most of the population are migrants or second generation from the bordering Andean departments of Cuzco and Puno. Former Peruvian president, Belaunde Terry (1994), invoked a mix of patrimonial and populist rhetoric to encourage a 'colonization of Peru by the Peruvians.' Internal migration between the Andean highlands and Amazonian lowlands in Peru requires consideration of the role of the state,

which has received little attention in scholarship on mining (Hirst & Thompson, 1995: 409; also see Ballard & Banks, 2013). However, the nation-state is shaped by resource extraction (Shafter, 1994), and Peru provides a good example of this phenomenon and how it relates to migrant labor. What is referred to as the "new extraction" of Andes-Amazonia Peru entails a vision of the region as a vast opportunity for development in hydrocarbons and mining, an idea promoted by former Peruvian President Alan Garcia (see Bebbington, 2009). Factors that have created ideal global investment opportunities in Peru include growing global demand for hydrocarbons and minerals as well as the emerging economies of China and India in the Far East. The Andean nations of Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia similarly approach the political ecology of extraction as an issue of patrimony, that resources belong to the nation, not to local or indigenous populations (Bebbington, 2009: 19).

Precarity & illicit economies of labor

The precarity of migrants is in the context of broader national and global political economic structures (Porst & Sakdapolrak, 2018; Rigg & Oven, 2015). As Porst & Sakdapolrak (2018: 36) explain, a translocal perspective makes this possible in part because migrants are understood as:

> '[…] embedded at both the place of destination and the place of origin at the same time. Therefore the risk and vulnerability context at the place of origin of a migrant has an impact on their everyday life at the place of destination.'

Andean migrants in the Peruvian Amazon face several everyday risks and vulnerabilities working as artisanal gold miners. Translocality helps to understand how precarity motivates migration as well as its outcome. During my fieldwork, there were over 200 military operations in Madre de Dios. I arrived to the field during a major labor strike in which riot police, armed troops, and thousands of miners occupied the streets of the region's capital city in Puerto Maldonado. Tensions escalated over new anti-mining decrees, which slowed work for several weeks.

After the strike, I travelled upriver to interview rural laborers and reunited with Juan Carlos—an Andean highlander. Juan Carlos was currently working as a *motorista* and as maintenance staff for an environmental organization that was developing an ecotourism business. One evening, he informed me that he planned to return to gold mining because he needed to earn more money than he was currently making (1,000 *nuevos soles* or ~$315 US per month). He had three children to support and his wife urged him to find better paying work elsewhere. I asked him, "How long would you need to mine gold to earn a month's salary in conservation?" He pulled out his cell phone and opened a calculator app. Text messages from his friends in La Pampa described extracting around 30 grams per a day. He would keep 25 percent of the gold and the machinery owner keeps the other 75 percent to pay operational expenses such as fuel, loan payment on the mining machinery, equipment transportation costs, and additional *obreros* for clearing beaches of vegetation to set up the operation. The quarter portion of an average 30-gram extraction is 7.5 grams of gold and is typically split between three miners. Juan Carlos calculated that he could

keep 2-3 grams for himself, earning around S./350 (~$100 US) per day. He answered my query: "I only have to work for about one week, maybe less."

Combined with the declining price of gold and the escalation of military interdictions of mining operations in the region, the risks associated with mining are higher than ever. When I first met Juan Carlos, he had just left work in mining and decided to sign a 3-month contract with an environmental organization that runs an ecotourism venture on protected land. Extraction and conservation are complimentary for Juan Carlos, who has shifted between gold mining and conservation for over a decade. This complimentary relationship between extraction and conservation exemplifies how workers adapt to mixed economies and parallel paths of development and are unencumbered by distinctions like legal/illicit when it comes to work. Gold mining enables Juan Carlos and others to earn quick cash in between more reliable, formal, contractual jobs.

I observed Juan Carlos shift from mining to conservation for a 3-month contract, then return to mining for one month at the end of his contract. Later he returned to his *chacra* (family farm) to harvest crops for sale. Then he returned to conservation for another 3-month contract. After this contract ended, I ran into him in town and he was driving a mototaxi while looking for formal employment again. Several months after I had returned to the U.S., I saw online that he had found a job at *Gobierno Regional de Madre de Dios* (GOREMAD), the office of the regional government. After speaking with him online, I learned he returned to gold mining after his contract at GOREMAD, and then went to work again for a conservation organization. These shifts

and moves reveal that contingency, low wages, and familial pressures coalesce to shape decisions internal migration and about short-term work in extraction.

The agency of laborers and their capacity to seek earning opportunities is restricted; broader external forces influence decisions about labor choices. The declining price of gold combined with new laws that rendered informal mining illicit makde it difficult for Juan Carlos to assess whether the risks of returning to gold mining were worthwhile. Would he have to hide the expensive motor that powers the mining operation if police and marines arrive to fire-bomb the site? Would he be convicted and sent to prison if caught? These concerns support the definition of precarity as both 'an ontological experience and social-economic condition' (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008: 55). Precarity is not merely defined by contingent labor, short-term contracts, or flexible labor pools of workers, but in the case of Juan Carlos, also entails the realities and consequences of moving between low-wage and high-wage work, legal and illicit economies of labor, and the pressures of providing for a growing family in which kinship ties are strained by socioeconomic stressors.

Precarity is compounded by shifting legalities that render certain kinds of work illicit. During my fieldwork in Peru, the legal work status of most gold miners in Madre de Dios shifted from informal to illicit after a series of decrees targeted mining protocols, alluvial extraction, and fuel transportation. For example, gold miners in Madre de Dios were unable to file permits to formally work in extraction by the deadline in 2014, which shifted the status of thousands of miners in the region from "informal" to "illegal" and codified their labor as a criminal offense (thus provoking

the major strike that occurred when I returned to conduct fieldwork in 2014). Working in extraction can be too risky or costly with ongoing military interdictions throughout the region.

This legal dimension of precarity underscores an important relationship between illegal or illicit activities and state power, a relatively understudied subject in the social sciences (Campbell and Heyman 2016). Divisions and essentialist categories like legality and illegality are "simultaneously black and white, shades of gray" (Heyman, 1999: 11). Anthropological scholarship has questioned the dichotomous conceptualizations through ethnographies that blur the lines between licit and illicit worlds (Galemba, 2008; Heyman, 2013; Heyman & Smart, 1999; Millar, 2008; 2014; Veloso, 2012). Contingent laborers who migrate between highland and lowland regions and licit and illicit activities further challenge notions that these are divergent or contradictory worlds. From the perspective of migrant households, moving between informal/illicit/shadow economies in extraction and formal employment is part of an integrated strategy to adjust to the shifting risks of their precarious lives whether in the Andean highlands or Amazonian lowlands.

The legal ramifications of mining impact a significant portion of the population in Madre de Dios and beyond. The Peruvian government's national office of statistics and demographic information, INEI (*Instituto Nacional de Estatística e Informática*), reported, mining accounted for just under half of the region's GDP (42.7 percent), in 2015. Mining constituted its principle economic activity followed by commerce (11.7%), agriculture (6.4%), hunting and forestry (6.4%), construction (6.4%), manufacturing (5.2%), and several other sectors. In other words, the most prominent economic activity in Madre de Dios was illicit, which puts a significant portion of the

labor force in legal uncertainty. Although gold mining accounts for just under half of the region's GDP, this percentage does not reflect the thousands of households in other parts of Peru that are also supported by gold mining in the region. In fact, during interviews with local residents of households with multiple generations of members from Madre de Dios, several individuals described gold mining as something that is done primarily by "people from the sierra" who take their earnings back to their respective communities instead of "investing in" or "developing" Madre de Dios. For them, gold mining essentially symbolizes an activity done by and for outsiders.

Conclusion

Precarity can be both a motivation to migrate as well as the outcome of migration (Takenaka, Paerregaard & Berg, 2010: 4), meaning that sometimes movers end up confronting challenges to security in their destinations as a result of relocation even when similar conditions drove them to relocate in the first place. Some Andean migrants experience even greater insecurities when they arrive to Madre de Dios, especially those who participate in the illicit labor market around gold extraction. The simultaneous fears of illness or death (due to unsanitary/dangerous working conditions; see Ulmer, 2015; n.d.), legal retribution for the illicit status of their work, and sustained financial insecurity resulting from inconsistent and contingent labor opportunities highlight the broader conditions that exacerbate precarity following migration.

In this chapter, I drew from ethnographic fieldwork in Madre de Dios, Peru to illuminate the lived experience of migrant gold miners and the historical processes that influence their precarity. I argued that internal migration in Peru confounds the binary framework typical in migration

discourse, which often invokes dichotomous terms such as legal/illegal, documented/undocumented, and focuses on formal political subjectivity. In contrast, internal migration demands an analysis that attends to nuanced experiences of internal migrants, which underscore how orphans, Quechua-speaking *campesinos* who lack national identification, and other precarious individuals who relocate often live like foreigners in their own country despite being Peruvian citizens.

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