From the mid 19th century to the present, many gold rush episodes have occurred around the globe, some far more memorable than others in terms of marking turning points in the demographic, cultural and political destiny of nation-states. The ‘easy entry’ nature of artisanal mining can make for momentous change, as mounting numbers of incoming migrant miners, using very basic skills and implements, gravitate to a strike site hoping to gain a livelihood or, better yet, an economic bonanza. In addition to the rough and ready atmosphere of strike sites where miners work and play hard, some gold rushes have been associated with the rise of frontier democracy. Egalitarian collaborative labour relations are likely to evolve that starkly contrast with the social hierarchies of miners’ places of origin and may lead towards collective political association as well. Such gold rush outcomes normally take place in relatively remote areas away from government control, as exemplified during the 19th century in California, Australia and the North American Yukon. Myth or reality? Can this happen at gold rush sites at present?

Juxtaposing literature on these 19th century experiences with more recent 20th and 21st century African and Asian artisanal gold rush documentation, I question what kinds of people take up pans, shovels and picks to seek a livelihood in gold-rich regions. Contrasting differences and similarities then and now, I explore the emergence of collective occupational identity and whether the localized democratization of economic opportunity and the pull of the windfall gain of high value gold finds can catalyze a national sense of frontier democracy in the frenzy of present day gold rushes.