In early 1996, Ambondromifehy was a small village little different than a dozen others bordering the national highway running through Madagascar’s northernmost province. Comprised of several clusters of houses set back from the road, it was home to about 400 people making their living from growing rice and raising cattle. By early 1997, however, everything had changed. Following the discovery of sapphires in its immediate vicinity, Ambondromifehy had exploded into a bustling, chaotic mining and trading boomtown of around 15,000 people.

In the first years of the boom, Ambondromifehy displayed many features common to artisanal mining communities around the world (Biersack 1999, Cleary 1990, De Boeck 1999). It was a place conspicuously dominated by young men and their interests, where newcomers had to both rely on and be wary of reciprocal relations with fellow fortune hunters and where longtime residents’ sense of propriety had been drowned out by the urgent inclinations of their newest neighbors (Walsh 2012a). To complicate matters further, most of the sapphires that people were flocking here to dig were to be found within the boundaries of Ankarana National Park, a local conservation area from which all local residents were largely restricted, and to which miners could only gain access illegally. Things rarely stay the same for long in communities built on artisanal mining, however. A diminishing local supply of sapphires and new discoveries of gemstones elsewhere in Madagascar led many foreign buyers and Malagasy prospectors away in the early years of the new century, and by 2003, the population of the town had fallen to less than a third of what it had been at the height of the boom. More recently, in June 2008,

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local officials estimated Ambondromifehy’s population at 4000, less than a third of what it was 10 years earlier but more or less the same as what it was five years later when I first started hearing assurances of the town’s impending collapse. Over the same period, conservation and police efforts at keeping miners out of Ankarana National Park dropped off, partly due to the fact that the urgency of the perceived crisis of the initial boom had passed, but also to the futility of the task of trying to keep prospectors from the potential fortunes that might be dug from the ground in the region.

One feature of life in Ambondromifehy that has remained constant over the years is something that I expect will be quite familiar to anyone who has spent any amount of time in a small-scale mining boomtown: this is a place in which people must learn to live with constant uncertainty. No one I spoke with in 1999 could ever have known that that the initial boom would end up lasting as long (or as short) as it did, that foreign buyers would come and go in waves, that new discoveries elsewhere would come when they did and draw people away, or that the decline of the local trade would in fact make life better for many among the tenacious third who have stayed behind over the long term (Walsh 2012b). Running concurrent with all that is uncertain about life in this place, however, have been trends that anyone might have predicted. Young men and women worked and met. Children were born. Parenthood brought new responsibilities. People aged. People died. A place in which few prospectors intended to stay more than a couple of weeks or months at the start has become a place in which many of them have now lived for more that a decade, and this combination of time’s passing and people’s persistence has made Ambondromifehy a very different place today than it was when it first boomed.

In this chapter I present Ambondromifehy’s trajectory over a decade as the backdrop for a discussion of a range of topics that strike me as relevant to the themes of this volume. I hope that by taking a longitudinal approach I might highlight how all relationships, whether intergenerational or those connecting people with the land they occupy, have been differently shaped and influential at different times, as people have adapted to both the uncertainties and the inevitabilities of life here. As I have been doing in my research, I tack between two intertwined groups in Ambondromifehy as I proceed. I begin with the longtime residents who lived here before the boom, move on to the much larger group that has come since, and end with a discussion of how, 10 years into the boom, the latter group has come to resemble the former. Since the idea of parental