



## Economies of obligation

### Patronage as relational wealth in Bolivian gold mining

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Recent scholarship in anthropology offers critical attention to inequality as a constitutive feature of social life to which specific legal, cultural, and religious traditions supply diverging answers. Drawing upon these debates, this article explores the ways that Quechua- and Spanish-speaking subjects in the Bolivian province of Ayopaya imagine, inhabit, and strive to address inequalities stemming from the region's history of labor violence. While Ayopaya's history of hacienda servitude lives on in contemporary structures of racialized disparity, I argue that it also conditions particular traditions of exchange that rural groups draw from in order to contest a new gold mining economy. Against more pessimistic accounts of late capitalism as a moment of inexorable abandonment, particularly for indigenous groups, I query the tenacity of obligation and probe its political possibilities as a practice of claim making (and a scholarly heuristic) by which to expose the ethical refusals on which "free" exchange relies.

Keywords: inequality, labor, indigeneity, ethics, extractivism, value, circulation

To the grating rhythm of an air compressor located just outside the building, René recounts how he came to own the Ayopaya gold mine. It is April 3, 2010, and René and I are seated in the living quarters of his gold processing plant—a cement building perched precariously above the winding Sacambaya River in the rural province of Ayopaya, Bolivia. René is in his late thirties, descending from a wealthy *criollo* (white) family in the eastern Bolivian city of Santa Cruz. In 2002 he and his cousins bought the mine from Fabio Rodriguez, the nephew of an influential hacienda *patrón* or owner of a landed agrarian estate. During subsequent years, Fabio advised the fledgling entrepreneurs on their mining affairs. Yet he also used his familial status to intimidate the young men, warning them of the dangers of working in



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this primarily indigenous, Quechua region.<sup>1</sup> René recalled, “Fabio told us, ‘It would be impossible for you to work here without me. I was a *patrón*. They’ve known me all my life. They would throw you out.’”

Despite René’s efforts to mitigate potential conflict by way of his alliance with Fabio, in subsequent years he faced growing opposition from mine-workers as well as Quechua-speaking villagers. The first conflict occurred in 2013, after René had only been operating the mine for several months. Like many in the region, the Quechua villages neighboring the mine had originated as housing settlements for hacienda servants and farmers. One bordered the hacienda, peopled by former servant families who had historically been on good terms with the landlords. The other was located on the mountain slope above and was inhabited by former tenant families who had participated in violent uprisings against Fabio’s family in the 1940s. With money earned working at the mine, people from the lower village planned to install a water turbine for electricity. However, the upper village objected that since the water flowed through their land, they too should benefit. In a matter of days, this quarrel brought the mining operation to a halt. Frustrated that their neighbors were benefiting once again from alliance with mestizo elites, people from the upper village used sticks and boulders to block the road to the mine. Only after René paid the peasant union 4000 bolivianos (578 USD) to purchase another water turbine would villagers allow René and his laborers to enter, and *el mineral* (gold) to leave, the mine.

By way of an examination of gold mining conflicts in the rural Bolivian province of Ayopaya, this article queries the “reactivation” of hacienda-based patronage ties on a new “plane of social relation” from where they previously occurred (Stoler 2016: 31; cf. Donham 2011). Despite the legal abolition of hacienda servitude in 1953 and the subsequent shift from “unfree” to “free”—that is, wage-based—labor, demands for aid from bosses suggest that extractive relations in Ayopaya did not undergo an absolute break from “vertical” relations to a more atomized individualism. Yet rather than only condemn this continuity, my account asks about the creative ways that villagers recast older patronage idioms to challenge the individualist tendencies of a newer, ostensibly more “free,” gold economy. And while viewing patronage as a “feudal residue” surely misses the transformations a practice undergoes in its enactment (Jauregui 2014: 86; cf. Piliavsky 2014: 4), I am interested here also in the ways that exchange relations in Ayopaya retain ethical valences related to the late hacienda system. Most notably, such relations include an insistence upon *patronage as a relational orientation to wealth*, a view that aligns status with an exemplary duty to vulnerable subjects. As we shall see, proponents of modern economic contract like René contested this relational ideal as anachronous and unjust. Yet he too was subject to this inherited paradigm as a condition of future profit.

René’s purchase of the gold mine reflects the complex history of landed relations in Ayopaya, particularly after hacienda abolition in 1953. Haciendas were

1. According to Bolivia’s most recent census by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE 2001), 90 percent of the Ayopaya’s 26,825 residents speak Quechua, and more than 92 percent identify as indigenous Quechua. This makes Ayopaya one of Bolivia’s most Quechua regions.

agrarian estates supported by the unpaid labor of Quechua and Aymara tenant farmers, weekly laborers, and domestic servants and originally consolidated by the titling of *encomiendas* (colonial land grants) in 1645. Unlike plantations in the eastern lowlands, Ayopaya's haciendas included family farms owned by "small bosses" (*juchuy patrones*), peasant smallholders who bought their way out of servitude (Jackson 1994: 89, 182). The ubiquity of "unnatural" or sexual abuses by bosses against their laborers combined with the tight control over labor conditions fomented widespread antihacienda uprisings in the 1940s (Gordillo 2000). These included a 1947 rebellion of 40,000 hacienda laborers, union activists, and Aymara and Quechua farmers in which two landlords were killed (Dandler and Torrico 1987: 334–78). The Socialist Revolution of 1952 introduced universal suffrage and abolished forced labor. Following land redistribution a year later, many landlords left the region. Quechua villagers noted that after the Revolution only landowning families who fostered amicable relations with rural villagers could continue living in the countryside. The rest "would have been killed." Given this tense rural dynamic, that the kin of former hacienda landlords like Fabio continued to live in Ayopaya was itself remarkable—evidence of the particular relationship they had managed to maintain with Quechua villagers.

Both the turbine conflict and René's ties to Fabio raised questions about the constitutive ways in which Ayopaya's former hacienda system shapes mining relations in the present. Hacienda infrastructures laid the groundwork for new mining pursuits, supplying roads, mining caverns, buildings, and cheap labor. Yet René's access to these infrastructures—including dirt roads or water channels needed for gold processing—was contingent upon villagers' assessments that he was upholding his duty within arrangements of agrarian patronage that preceded him. These duties included supplying money, transportation, and aid in gaining access to electricity and water. Thus René's ties to former *hacendados* (hacienda owners) were double-edged, enabling access to resources and roads while also making him vulnerable to demands for aid from Quechua villagers to whom he might otherwise have little obligation. While this case attests to the structural continuities linking older regimes of indigenous labor exploitation to new economies of racialized resource extraction (Striffler 2001: 197; cf. Fabricant 2012), such structural continuity was not of principal concern in villagers' mobilizations. Rather, villagers contested new mining elites' failure to sustain relations of aid rooted in the earlier hacienda system. If structural continuities served to perpetuate inequality, they also supplied the relational ground for militant demands for aid from former and current bosses (Auyero 2001; cf. Shever 2012).

Focusing on villagers' demands for aid as a way of negotiating the longevity of racialized inequality, this article centers on the unstable extension of an older language of agrarian obligation to new arrangements of gold mining. For Ayopayans with whom I conducted fieldwork, to ethically inhabit wealth requires its enactment as a relationship to others. Such a view underpinned a range of demands premised on the ideal that mine-owners provide aid to workers and others living adjacent to the mine. By taking seriously these demands for aid, my account seeks to extend our understanding of so-called "indigenous critique" (Kirsch 2006: 3), particularly among Quechua groups in the central Andes. Indigenous mobilizations against labor injustice, particularly resource mining, have been a persistent

concern in Latin Americanist anthropology.<sup>2</sup> Following June Nash's (1993) study of patronage as a means of structural recursion in Andean mining contexts, contemporary works approach patronage primarily as an index of economic and psychic oppression (Postero 2007; Fabricant 2012). Instead, this essay explores how rural Quechua groups in Ayopaya maneuver within the constraints of existing lives and given the longevity of hacienda ties. In so doing, I seek to raise new questions about the ways people reconfigure extractive relations absent their ability to entirely up-end broader systems of racialized inequality.

### Patronage, violence, and the force of the gift's *rendre*

In Bolivia, as elsewhere in Latin America, notions of indigenous spirituality and belonging supply key political tools within ongoing struggles over ecological degradation and natural resource control (Conklin 1995; cf. Ulloa 2005; de la Cadena 2015). While attempts to contest capital extractivism often rely upon romantic ideals of a bounded, precolonial cultural order (Langdon 2016), this has not been true of all indigenous revivalist projects in Bolivia. Despite their variance from more purist elaborations of indigenous belonging, Quechua hacienda laborers in Ayopaya have a deep history of organizing, at times militantly, against unjust labor practices. In the 1930s, Quechua groups organized in part by drawing from a conception of hacienda laborers as *jallp'a sangres* ("the blood of the earth"), members of an indigenous collectivity bound to the landscape through agricultural labor rather than timeless residence (Ari 2014: 4). Elsewhere in the Andes, too, Quechua laborers have reframed their position within hacienda labor hierarchies as a basis for subsequent demands that *hacendado* kin uphold patronage duties (Bacigalupo 2016; cf. Ferraro 2004). Thus in organizing collectively to reshape extractive conditions at René's mine, Ayopayans continued with a long tradition of Quechua activism premised upon enduring hacienda ties that state reformers (and many anthropologists) characterize as counter to a liberatory project of indigenous revival (Winchell 2016).

My attention to patronage as a modality of indigenous claim making draws from debates concerning the relational qualities of wealth, particularly the ethical workings of elite duty in conditions of entrenched inequality. Contemporary patronage conflicts in Ayopaya respond to a more or less shared concern among members of former *hacendado* families and Quechua laborers with Ayopaya's violent hacienda past as demanding a continued reckoning in the present. The temporal stakes of exchange have been a key concern in anthropological studies of gifting, particularly the force of the obligation to *rendre* (to return, reciprocate, or repay) the gift (Guyer 2016: 19; cf. Bornstein 2012; de la Cadena 2015; Duggan 2004; Graeber 2001: 221; Green 2005; Muehlebach 2012; Povinelli 2011: 142). In his seminal essay on *The gift*, Marcel Mauss ([1925] 2016: 58) examined the interplay between

2. For ethnographic accounts of peasant organizing concerning labor treatment upon agricultural estates, see Freyre (1946), Tullis (1970), and Orlove (1974). For indigenous activism against contemporary resource extraction, see Nash (1993), Postero (2007), Fabricant (2012), Li (2015), and Salas (2017).

gift and return as an “enduring form of contractual ethics” that spans what are otherwise taken as the disparate or even appositional domains of volition and duty, constraint and interest. As Jane Guyer notes in her translator’s introduction (2016: 19) to *The gift*, key difficulties remain in ascertaining how, precisely, to retain the manifold valences of the French concept *rendre*: Is this the “return” of the very object that was given? Or is a new object “reciprocated” or given as a counter-gift? Whose agency determines this process? That of giver, recipient, or object? And through what processes or movements does such *rendre* unfold: through exchange among two parties or, rather, qua circulation? Furthermore, what of the *obligation* to return the gift? Should obligation be understood as coercion, or is it an activity (*se rendre* or surrender) taken upon the subject herself?

Attending to the force of *rendre* as an obligation to return highlights a space of exchange that is temporally persistent and “laterally adjacent” to ostensibly dis-embedded capital (Maurer 2016: xiii). It also supplies an opportunity to rethink the volitional and temporal qualities of economic contract in general. Thus, rather than prescribe to obligation a quality of either coercion or choice, I am interested in thinking together their layering at the level of practice. Obligation derives etymologically from the Latin *ligare*, to bind. Both obligation and bond “imply constraint and captivity . . . but both can also imply an act one performs on oneself” (Guyer 2012: 491). It is this sense of obligation as a condition of being compelled to act in certain ways (i.e., to *rendre* the gift) but also as a work on the self that the rest of this essay ponders. Key here is the temporality of obligation not only as a practice bound to human life span and economic calendars but also as an aspirational model for addressing past injustice. Demands that mestizo elites repay the debts accrued through past hacienda violence destabilize more volitional accounts of moral action premised upon the temporally bound, proprietorial agent who “owns” her body and, thus, her actions (Strathern 1988: 147; cf. Munn 1976). As elites weighed their own patronage duties, they also wrestled with the broader question of how to act ethically given the lingering injustices of hacienda servitude.

Foregrounding the aspirational qualities of obligation complicates the tendency to treat patronage as mere cultural reproduction. Following Harri Englund (2011: 7), I approach demands for patronage as an obligation to *rendre* less as a rule-bound system or communitarian ethos than as an aspirational language that shapes specific relations among people and to wealth. As John Murra (2017: 3) argued in his classic study of the Andean archipelago system, agricultural villages in contemporary Bolivia are defined not only by “occasional bits and pieces that happen to survive” but rather with “real continuities in fundamental and important institutions,” among them ecology, agriculture, and land tenure as well as the vertical traffic in goods, persons, and labor across space and social groupings. While relations of reciprocal exchange linked dispersed settlements in the pre-colonial era, elements of these relations—taken as key to Inca patronage—were also implemented by Spanish reformers as a paragon of legitimate authority rooted in land gifts as well as the distribution of cloth, coca, and wool to Quechua subjects (Larson 1998: 41; cf. Mumford 2008: 36). Verticality thus might be approached not only as exchange across ecological zones but also as a way of organizing hierarchical relations according to an understanding of authority as sustained by the distribution (Parry and Bloch 1989; cf. Alberti and Mayer 1974; Lyons 2006) and



often-opulent display of abundance (Tassi 2010: 207; cf. Osorio 2008). Within this frame, power does not exist *a priori* but must be created anew through specific ties among subjects and accompanying exchange practices (Lyons 2006; cf. Wolf 1999: 275). In this piece, I explore the force of the obligation to *rendre* in godparenting and broader patronage relations and argue that such obligation both generates and destabilizes value.

Attention to the idioms of obligation that are produced through intersecting histories of Andean exchange and colonial violence supplies an important counterweight to the tendency to approach exchange relations as cultural survivals either of a purely Andean cultural tradition or of a Spanish-derived hacienda institution (Mayer 1974; cf. Winchell 2016). Quechua villagers' creative attempts to extend obligation to new subjects such as René complicate a more passive view of patronage as mere recursion. That is, they denaturalize the *telos* that can locate such aspiration only on the side of a premodern, "primitive mentality" (Lévy-Bruhl 1978). While villagers' insistence upon the continued entwinement of productive forms and social relations does recall Lévy-Bruhl's elaboration of participation as a "continuance of favour" (ibid.: 129), rather than being recursive this insistence brought new relations into being. This generative elaboration of wealth as relation casts doubt on a more familiar narrative of capitalist progress in terms of dissolving labor ties and associated patronage regimes (Marx [1867] 1972: 433; cf. Harvey 1989: 147). Rather, villagers sought to secure the "embedded" quality of exchange, a relational quality of modern economy that arguably extends beyond Bolivia but which is disavowed by the fiction of an autonomous, self-regulating market (Polanyi [1944] 2001; cf. Yanagisako 2013).

### Agrarian patronage and the ethics of obligation

Seated on a raised curb just outside the store and surrounded by carefully stacked rows of bottled shampoo, bar soap, and other grooming supplies, Martín drank and visited with friends and relatives, including godchildren and godparents. He was in his early fifties, spoke Spanish, and was the grandson of an infamous hacienda *patrón* who owned vast swaths of land in villages some twenty kilometers from the municipal center of Ayopaya where I lived during ethnographic fieldwork between 2010 and 2012. When we first met in 2011, he owned and managed a small-scale gold mine located on land inherited from his grandfather. Because of his familial ties to the former hacienda *patron*, Martín was for villagers an important figure of patronage and aid. Later that afternoon, the back of his truck was weighed down with about twenty Quechua villagers catching a ride back to the villages near the mine. In addition to offering transportation, Martín acted as a *padrino* (godparent), contributing money for baptisms, funerals, birthdays, and marriages as well as for medical care and children's schooling. These relations of aid were inflected in complicated ways by the region's hacienda past; indeed, the majority of his godchildren were relatives of his grandfather's former hacienda servants.

On Sunday mornings, I often walked from the rural cabin where I was staying to the town center, where I would find Martín milling about outside a small store owned by the family of former hacienda servants and his *compadres*. One such

morning, as we sat together outside the store, an adolescent girl named Mela approached Martín. Mela was the eldest of seven children in a very poor family, and had grown up in the village closest to the hacienda. Her parents, Quechua farmers, had previously worked as servants for Martín's grandfather. Martín introduced her to me as his goddaughter, noting that he paid the necessary expenses in order for her to attend middle school here in town. Before she left, he dug a crumpled twenty-boliviano bill out of his pocket, handing it over to her in order to purchase new drawing supplies. Later that day, over fried chicken, Martín recalled how he had come to be Mela's godfather. When she turned thirteen, her mother knocked on his door (i.e., the entrance to the historic hacienda building) to ask whether he would be willing to serve as her godfather. Knowing the family from his youth, when he spent summer vacations at his grandfather's hacienda in the countryside, he agreed. According to Martín, he had "felt obligated" to serve as Mela's godparent because her parents had worked as unpaid hacienda servants for his grandfather. While proscribed within a given cultural code, his willingness to act as a godparent was not given. Rather, it followed from his reflection upon his family's role in the former hacienda system and upon the forms of action this history required of him in the present.

While conducting fieldwork in the municipal center of Ayopaya,<sup>3</sup> I learned about the importance of the region's hacienda past not only as a historical referent but also as the core of expansive networks of patronage among criollo elites and Quechua villagers. According to villagers, these patronage relations originated in the pre-1953 hacienda era, when landlords would serve as godparents and religious sponsors (Lyons 2006). Since that time, the children and grandchildren of hacienda owners had continued to aid villagers with the costs of baptisms, weddings, funerals, and education. Martín, for instance, still supplied transportation, clothes, food, and medicine to the families of former servants. While such relations have often been described as evidence of the continued domination of a mestizo elite, I instead ask what they tell us about the tenacity of a specific "authority complex" premised upon an exemplary alignment of wealth with a duty to assist former hacienda laborers (Alberti and Mayer 1974; cf. Ferraro 2004). This formation of authority unfolded through "informal" kinship arrangements, including Christian godparenting and associated practices of child circulation (Leinaweaver 2008; cf. Weismantel 2001). Instead of simply expanding kinship duty to a "fictive" sphere of nonbiological

3. Between March 2011 and March 2012, I lived in the rural town I call Laraya, located in the province of Ayopaya, eight hours from the city of Cochabamba. In Laraya, I attended union meetings, joined people in their farmlands and orchards, attended monthly *challa* rituals, accompanied municipal officials to survey roads and environmental centers, celebrated holidays and patron saints' day festivals, and gathered with villagers and townsfolk for two much-anticipated visits from President Evo Morales. In addition, I visited former hacienda buildings, mills, and agricultural farmlands, as well as regional gold, antimony, and sodalite mines. Along with seventeen months of fieldwork between 2010 and 2012, I have conducted follow-up research over two summers in 2015 and 2017. Finally, this research builds from 120 open-ended interviews which I conducted in Quechua and Spanish with members of former landowning and servant families, farmers, merchants, shop-owners, government officials, mine-owners, domestic servants, and mine-workers.

sociality (Ossio 1984; cf. Mintz and Wolf 1950), *compadrazgo* promised a tenuous form of spiritual binding that drew families together through an idiom of inter-subjective responsibility, and whose fulfillment brought honor or prestige to the godparent (Sallnow 1989; cf. Campbell 1964; Pitt-Rivers 1971).

*Compadrazgo* arrangements were not simply outcomes of structural recursion, but rather marked specific individuals' willingness to engage in a transformative labor of historical reflection. Notably, Martín and Mela were born after hacienda abolition in 1953. Nonetheless, they inherited certain possibilities for addressing entrenched inequalities from existing relational traditions that had also been pivotal to the hacienda era. The ethical potentials of patronage, despite its entwinement in injustices of former hacienda bondage, were evident in the accounts of Quechua villagers living adjacent to the mine. Doña Rosa, a former servant of the hacienda owned by Martín's grandfather, explained: "Don Martín is good. He is not bad. He carries us in his car. He pays us and helps us." Another Quechua villager, Doña Juana, lived beside Martín's mine. When I asked whether she had been nervous seeing Martín move into his grandfather's house in 2004, she echoed this sentiment but linked it to actual changes in productive relations: "Don Martín is good. When Don Paulo [his grandfather] died, [Martín] returned but only to mine. He only plants potatoes to eat [not to sell]. He doesn't earn anything [from farming]." Despite this concern with the shifting sources of profit—from unpaid labor to daily and weekly wage contracts—villagers valued the continuity of relations enabled by Martín's upholding of patronage duties that preceded him.

Not everyone agreed that such continuities of patronage were positive. Don Alejo, the child of hacienda landlords and the founder of a rural school for Quechua girls, distinguished his own position from that of his elder kin: "I don't discriminate. I belong to another epoch. My father's character was very different from my own because he lived in another time. Furthermore," he added, "I feel that the systems they maintained were unjust." Despite Alejo's disavowal of the forms of "discrimination" that shaped the earlier hacienda system, he was still identified by villagers for his ties to that system: "There are still several elderly villagers who call me *niño* [child], and they greet all the children of former landlords with this title." Others simply called him *patrón*. Despite his own marked discomfort with hacienda-based social distinctions, Alejo acknowledged their importance as a system of social classification. As he put it, "This is something that has stayed with them. And although you tell them, 'Don't say it. I am not your child nor your boss,' you can't erase it."

Alejo's account supplies insight into the ways that hacienda-based ties continue to shape everyday life among the kin of *hacendados* and servants. For the kin of former *hacendados* like Martín, the forms of status elaborated by that system remained pivotal not only as they shaped structures of inequality but also as guides for how to act properly as an elite. This sense of inherited hacienda status as compelling particular forms of aid to former servant families was elaborated most strongly by Flora, the daughter of hacienda landlords. Flora was in her seventies and spoke both Quechua and Spanish. Her parents had been known as *juch'uy patrones* ("small bosses") who purchased land following the crumbling of larger hacienda estates in the mid-eighteenth century (Jackson 1994). As we sat together in her humble chicha brewery, Flora described to me the support she provided to



her two half-sisters, who were born when her father absconded with the daughter of one of his Quechua *mitani* servants. Over the years, she “gifted” the girls “clothes, food, and [supplied] beds to sleep in.” Later, when they were older, she paid for the girls’ college education. Flora’s children grew up alongside these adopted kin, raised as siblings who ate together, walked to school side by side, and even shared a bedroom. This sensibility did not apply only to her half-kin; Flora also distributed free food to needy villagers in her *chicha* brewery. Despite the financial burdens that such aid introduced, Flora felt compelled to act as she did. As she put it, “What can one do? One simply has to give.”

If older residents like Alejo or Flora narrated *compadrazgo* and related patronage relations in terms of a continuity of hacienda relations, younger residents, including Flora’s son Raul, attributed such relations with more emergent, reconciliatory dimensions. Pausing from his *charango* playing as we crowded around the kitchen table of a mutual friend during the days of Carnival, Raul spoke candidly about his family’s role in town. According to him, “All the landlords committed errors with their female servants,” yet his family was distinct in that it had integrated the out-of-wedlock children born from such couplings. By adopting her half-siblings, he explained, his mother Flora had “assumed the responsibility of her father.” As with Martín, here aid did not flow naturally from economic status. Instead it expressed some elite’s sense of accountability to the hacienda past. As Raul put it, his mother’s actions reflected her “sense of moral, familial obligation.” Through such acts, members of former *hacendado* families not only acknowledged but also sought to remedy the past. In this regard, Raul noted, history “depends on what happens; either one forgets it or one improves upon it.”

For the kin of former landlords and laborers, obligation through *compadrazgo* arose as a “sentiment of duty,” not only to fulfill the responsibilities that accompany status but, more specifically, to make amends for past violence through generosity to those mistreated by one’s kin (Guyer 2012: 499). *Compadrazgo* thus supplied an intimate terrain for the fulfillment of elites’ obligation to account for prior violence through the contemporary distribution of food, resources, medicine, and money to specific families and persons. Such arrangements point to a mode of *rendre* as honor that materializes through exchange and consubstantiation between two parties (Guyer 2016: 19; cf. Campbell 1964; Pitt-Rivers 1971). For participants, the inequities shaping such exchange were taken as constitutive rather than anomalous or accidental to the form. This concern with addressing lived inequality stands in sharp contrast to a more liberal, rights-based anxiety with eradicating economic differences, an anxiety guiding many projects of social welfare and humanitarian aid.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, in Ayopaya, arrangements of aid among former hacienda landlords and worker families were built upon a sort of economic realism wherein inequality arose as an inevitable condition of rural life, yet one whose acknowledgment held promise for addressing and even ameliorating injustice.

4. For instance, in his account of Evangelical aid, Omri Elisha (2008: 156) shows how, despite their best intentions to the contrary, humanitarian efforts focused on leveling inequality through charitable giving often reentrench rather than level the gap between those who give and those “burdened with the obligation to reciprocate” the gift.

In Ayopaya, where most elites are heirs of hacienda wealth, inhabiting one's inherited status in a purposeful way—that is, as a directive for lived relations of aid—arose as an ethical ideal. Here, wealth came to be aligned with a specific set of ritual kinship duties that extended beyond direct participants in the earlier agrarian economy. Echoing the dual meaning of the Latin *ligare*, to bind, obligation for elites like Flora was not simply compelled but also reflected “an act one performs on oneself” (Guyer 2012: 493). These forms of aid were driven less by an anxiety with lingering inequality than by a concern with inhabiting wealth as a historical relation that required certain actions in the present (Skaria 2002: 82; cf. Englund 2011: 44). Reframed in this way, we can appreciate why, for Raul, history depends upon “what happens”—how elites act given their orientation to the bonded past. While certainly inflected by the specificities of Ayopaya's late hacienda system, such practices raise broader questions about the nature of wealth. Wealth here was not simply an effect of economic profit or structural recursion but rather materialized a more tenuous status produced through accrued acts of aid. Absent its enactment through the minutiae of patronage relations, one's status could erode or even be undone.

### Obligation refused: “I did not enslave them”

René was in his late thirties and came from a wealthy mestizo family. His grandparents had been owners of a sprawling agrarian estate in the city of Cochabamba and shareholders in one of the city's oldest news organizations. In 2002, René and his two cousins purchased a gold mine from Martin's grandfather, who resided in Ayopaya. The mine was located on former hacienda land that the family had retained despite the redistribution of most hacienda property following the 1953 agrarian reform. The villages surrounding the mine, like many in Ayopaya, had originated as housing settlements for hacienda servants and tenant farmers. At the time of fieldwork in 2011, René employed some thirty mine-workers and seven domestic maids. Workers came predominantly from nearby villages as well as from the cities of Oruro and La Paz, and resided in gender-segregated dormitories in a housing complex bordering the mineral processing plant. The plant had been newly built in 2002 and boasted a mechanized panning system. Directly adjoining the plant was a private apartment (equipped with air conditioning and cable television) where René and his cousins stayed during their rotating shifts overseeing the mine. Down the dirt road about two miles was Martin's mine, which employed about ten workers and two maids and consisted of several run-down buildings covered by dilapidated tin roofing.

With the exception of the turbine conflict, René's mining operations had gone smoothly since his purchase of the mine nine years earlier. However, in late fall of 2011, a dispute arose between René and neighboring villagers. At issue was René's failure to deliver upon several promises of aid to villagers, among them his assurance that he would complete an abandoned bridge across the Sacambaya River. In addition, he had agreed to supply money for an infrastructure project that would extend electricity and potable water to nearby villages. During fieldwork, I asked villagers about the conflict. René, people explained, had promised villagers “a

thousand *huevadas*” (many things) but delivered upon none. In response, *la gente* (“the people,” here Quechua villagers and workers) were now trying to “take over the mine” (*tomar la mina*). As in the 2002 turbine conflict, people used tree trunks and boulders to block the road to the mine. In the coming days, and believing René lacked a bill of sale, villagers circulated a public *denuncio* (denunciation) calling for his expulsion from the region. Faced with the risk of violence to his person and business, René left for the city of Cochabamba and hired a lawyer.

In the municipal town of Laraya, perspectives on René’s claim to the mine varied. Outside a small dry goods store that he and his wife owned, Severino was hurriedly preparing a delivery for René. He was a slight, strong man in his late forties who had turned to transportation after working in the mine as a child. Having secured a tarp over the truck bed, he disappeared through a back door, reemerging moments later with a large manila envelope. Inside were legal documents from René’s lawyer attesting to René’s ownership of the mine. René planned to circulate these documents to union leaders and municipal officials to prevent further conflict. Seeing the envelope, Severino’s wife cautioned, “René had better consult well with his lawyer.” Another man seated nearby chipped in, “Yes, but if all his legal business is in order, there should be no problem.” Martín called out from his usual perch on their stoop, “His legal matters are in order. But this has to do with more than law: if the *campesinos* [peasants] are frustrated with him, they will not let him work. They could take over his equipment or attack the mine. He has the law on his side but that doesn’t mean anything.” Others agreed: Despite the legal status of his property, René’s failure to supply promised aid rendered his mine vulnerable to peasant appropriation.

Events at René’s mine should be situated within broader nationalist decolonization movements aimed at regaining sovereignty over natural resources since the early 2000s (Goodale 2008). In 2005, President Morales was elected on the heels of mass mobilizations contesting the neoliberal privatization of “basic needs” such as water, gas, and food staples. Since coming to power, the Movimiento Al Socialismo or MAS party has remained steadfastly opposed to “*neoliberalismo*” as a violation of both indigenous and national sovereignty (Perrault 2013: 72, 83; cf. Gustafson 2011). Legislature since 2006 reflects this concern. For instance, Bolivia’s 2009 constitution recognizes the contractual rights of mining unions alongside private foreign and national companies. In addition, a 2014 mining law (*Ley 535 de Minería y Metalurgia*) prohibits association between cooperative and private companies. Ayopaya has not been isolated from these national tensions over resource rights and indigenous sovereignty. According to a Bolivian human rights organization working in the region, mining conflicts have spiked since 2009, with several violent union–police confrontations since 2012 (CEDIB 2013). In April 2014, confrontations with police outside the mining town of Kami, Ayopaya, led to the death of two miners and forty injuries (ACLO Fundación 2014).

Calls for René’s departure from the region dovetailed with the pending passage of a new law officially “nationalizing” Bolivian mines (*Supreme Decree No. 1308*), later implemented in August 2012. The law stipulates that mines cannot be bought, be sold, or change owners, and encourages the creation of mining “collectives” to be held in common by workers or national (but not international) companies. And yet, pinning these militant forms of political protest to post-2006 political

shifts overlooks Bolivia's often bloody history of mining struggle, one in which rural unions are often positioned against the government rather than in alliance. In the twentieth century, union strikes were violently suppressed by state police and military forces, leading to massacres in 1918, 1923, and 1942 as well as a prolonged struggle between 1946 and 1969 (Nash 1993: 218). Current conflicts draw from this long history of antistate mobilization in which direct action, and not simply legal channels, supplied efficacious media by which to reshape shifting configurations of wealth and labor. By suspending the assumption that mining conflicts in Ayopaya are mere microcosms of national proindigenous resource conflict, new questions arise as to why villagers simultaneously supported one gold mine while attempting to topple another.

In Ayopaya, my conversations with Quechua villagers living adjacent to the mine alerted me to the specificity of their relations to particular bosses less as members of a general mestizo class but rather as particular subjects whose families had enduring and often intimate ties to people and land in the countryside. While on a *pikchado* (coca-chewing break) from agricultural work, Ramiro, an elderly Quechua farmer, spoke with his son and me about the mining conflict. Seated upon a log in the shade, he explained that, unlike Martín's grandfather, who had previously owned the mine, René spoke no Quechua. Neither did he "*compartir*" (to partake, to share) with them in rural fiestas and religious holidays. In contrast, the kin of former hacienda owners like Martín or Flora helped to host elaborate fiestas for workers and neighboring villagers. Furthermore, Ramiro noted, René did not greet villagers when he passed them on the dirt road leading to the mine, a fact that violated ideals of elder respect and of patronage-based alliance so key to the earlier hacienda economy. Along with failing to greet pedestrians, René was known to drive recklessly, stirring up dust on roads where villagers walked and endangering people and livestock. Such criticisms evoked a classic figure of racialized wealth: *q'aras*, whites and foreigners whose wealth accrues from the exploitation of others and who fail to partake in traditions of mutual exchange (Van Vleet 2008: 51), particularly food sharing (Ramirez 2006). Yet, as we have seen, in Ayopaya many Quechua villagers recalled hacienda landlords as being the most benevolent of patrons.<sup>5</sup> This perception, in turn, guided contemporary expectations concerning the appropriate behavior of new mining elites like René.

Given that René hailed from outside the province, one might protest that such criticisms were unfair. Perhaps he was simply unaware of an existing patronage paradigm? When I interviewed him in his air-conditioned apartment bordering the processing plant, René clarified his position:

Look, the times change, and I'm all for them changing, but I do not support people walking all over you and violating your rights. Because I did not do anything to them. I did not enslave them. I pay taxes. I'm

5. For instance, in oral histories collected with Quechua villagers in the 1980s, villagers described Señor de Machaca, a regional patron saint, as a *hacendado* who distributed food to hungry child shepherds in a mountain crag (Aquino 1987). This association between hacienda landlords and magnanimous giving complicates a more common understanding of Andean *ayni* (reciprocity or mutual exchange) as the basis for contemporary Quechua orientations to wealth.



legally established. It's ridiculous that because I work in this region they think they have a right to climb up and travel in my truck. After all, I'm the one who pays *them*. Yet, I'm supposed to be at *their* service.

Here, René defended his unwillingness to fulfill villagers' patronage demands, one rooted in his view of patronage as anachronistic and even unjust. While he disavowed this reparative logic—"I did not enslave them"—his account also demonstrates his understanding of patronage as an ethic of historical accountability. Instead of accepting this ethic, however, René characterized patronage as a "violation of rights" to property and to profit. In addition to rejecting the ideal of patronage as a mechanism of historical remedy, he addressed what he saw as the pernicious reversal of power in Bolivia's proindigenous present. While René assumed that his position as a wage-payer would allow him to determine the terms of interaction with workers and villagers, he instead found himself subject to proscriptive norms established by workers: "I'm the one who pays *them*. Yet I'm supposed to be at *their* service."

In his account of the meeting of lord and bondsman, G. W. F. Hegel ([1807] 1979: 17) famously argued that an encounter of mutual recognition would allow consciousness to mature into self-consciousness: that is, a state of independence or being "in-itself." Yet later in the book, in his chapter on lordship and bondage, Hegel (ibid.: 111–19) clarifies that it is the bondsman, and not the lord, who can achieve such self-actualization in the world. The bondsman attains independence by placing himself, via his labor, in the Thing. In contrast, the lord must continually confront the threat of his own dissolution given his dependence on the bondsman's labor. In *Black skin, white masks*, Frantz Fanon ([1952] 1994) critiqued Hegel's lord–bondsman dialectic, arguing that it failed to account for the obstructions of slave agency in a colonial setting and related to racist understandings of certain subjects as less than human. Instead of being transformed or liberated through a moment of mutual recognition, Fanon (ibid.: 109) writes, the gaze of the master "fixed me there." While acknowledging the problematic distributions of racialized in/humanity in Hegel's work, if we suspend the idea that recognition constitutes the principal modality through which agency can be found or actualized, his account supplies key attention to labor as the material basis not only for identity but also for status. With this reliance on the bondsman's labor, the lord must perpetually confront the fact that he is something less than independent self-consciousness: that is, a subject constituted by his own activity alone. Conversely, the labor of the bondsman arises as a key site for the actualization of agency.

Indeed, it was precisely through the withdrawal of labor that mine-workers sought to contest René's rejection of patronage duties. Along with legal *denuncios*, in the coming weeks René faced more road blockades and, even more worryingly, found workers increasingly unwilling to work for him. By the spring of 2012, workers had begun to leave his mine *en masse*, seeking jobs in other industries or taking up work for Martin instead. One day, as I was passing through the countryside huddled in a truck with several of René's former miners and two former domestic servants, the vehicle intersected René as he returned to his mine. The trucks slowed, then stopped. The driver of our truck rolled down his window and turned to René, "We are carrying off all your maids. They are not going to work for you



anymore.” The men laughed, but it was true: his head maid—who was in the vehicle with us—had left to work for Martín. René looked down, seemingly embarrassed and fearful of eliciting a confrontation. In an interview some days later, René’s former maid explained that she left for Martín’s mine both for better pay and to escape unwelcome sexual advances from her former employer. Conversations with maids at René’s mine echoed this sentiment. Seated on the stoop awaiting a bus back to the mine several weekends before, one woman brazenly asserted: “We don’t want to cook for the miners anymore. We’ve had enough!”

Drawing from Hegel’s account of lordship as a relation dependent upon the labor of the bondsman, we can understand René’s complaint of being “at the service of another” as registering an anxiety with the vulnerability of his own status, not to mention of his profit. René depended upon Quechua laborers to sustain him—to transport food, to prepare meals, and to feed miners—as well as to secure profit by extracting, processing, and transporting gold. But this was not all. Laborers also constituted the relational terrain through which status could be achieved or destabilized. This contingency of status in posthacienda Ayopaya lay at the heart of Fabio’s initial warning to René. Without ties to former landlords, Fabio had cautioned, “They would throw you out!” In short, his very presence in the countryside was built upon his embeddedness in ongoing relations of aid and support. Patronage thus emerged as an activity of “positive value creation” (Munn 1976)—or, in more Hegelian terms, the relational construction of lordship—through an expansive orientation to wealth as a duty to others stretched over time and space. When René declared, “I did not enslave them,” he eschewed this relational ethic, attempting the “contraction” of spacetime: that is, the subversion of such transformative expansion by recourse to a more atomized idiom of subjectivity (*ibid.*: 13).

For former maids at René’s mine, gendered forms of labor protest arose as a key means to contest his refusal of this more expansive understanding of patronage obligation. As workers left the mine, women’s labor and the movement of their bodies constituted a material practice through which to register support for or opposition to particular bosses (Strathern 1988). The movement of workers from one mine to another complicates analyses of Andean mining conflicts as evidence of indigenous opposition to capitalist extraction (Taussig 1980; cf. de la Cadena 2015). That people continued to seek out Martín as a desirable employer indicates that the dispute had to do not only with extraction per se but also with certain elites’ attempts to disentangle their status from long-run patronage arrangements. As in James Ferguson’s account of social welfare programs in South Africa (2013: 226, 229), dependency was “not simply bondage or unfreedom” but also provided choices among competing sorts of hierarchical affiliation. Yet here it was the dependency not only of villagers upon mining bosses but also of these same bosses upon villagers for labor that supplied a crucial “mode of action” (*ibid.*: 226). Despite René’s rejection of this ethical framework, the mine’s material and historical ties to the hacienda introduced duties whose refusal risked his undoing.

This fact was not lost upon the mine-owners. Indeed, after workers and villagers drove René from the region, his two co-owners—also his nephews—attempted to remedy the situation by hosting new *challas* (sacrificial offerings), purchasing a bull that was then ceremonially slaughtered, its heart and hoofs offered as a gift to earth deities to prevent injuries before the rest was cooked and then collectively

consumed by workers and bosses (Nash 1993). These efforts attest to owners' attempts to mitigate against Quechua villagers' perceptions of the mine-owners as indifferent to the fate of their impoverished neighbors. A Quechua-speaking woman whose son worked in the mine synthesized this view. Asked about the mining conflict, she explained: "It's that the rich get richer and the poor stay poor." Yet these efforts to soften villagers' perceptions of reneged patronage came too late. By 2015, Ren's mine had been abandoned, a family dispute and economic hardship resulting in bankruptcy. Martin's mine, however, continued to prosper.

### Creating and disrupting value through circulation

Villagers' creative attempts to extend existing agrarian duties to new gold mining elites challenge more familiar understandings of patronage as a recursive survival or historical residue (Nash 1993: 31; cf. Postero 2007: 187). Classic studies of hacienda labor defined practices of godparenting and monetary sponsorship as "vertical relations" by which landlords solidified economic power (e.g., Mintz and Wolf 1957; Ossio 1984). Other works reframed such kinship ties, godparenting relations, and even marriage among servants and landlords not as coercion but rather as acts of resistance by which subjected groups sought to subvert the economic domination of landlords (e.g., Guerrero 1991; cf. Spalding 1970; Wade 2009). Yet such assessments overlook the ethical frameworks that guide participants' own experiences of a given patronage relation. In so doing, they elide the possibility that patronage might operate as something more than a lingering effect of prior subjection or an economic strategy driven by material need. To remedy this elision, we might ponder value beyond exchange value: that is, as more than the mere production of profit.

Recent anthropological studies of value production through exchange have problematized the presumptions of personhood and agency that view the circulation of persons, goods, and labor in terms of the domination of certain subjects by more powerful groups (Strathern 1988; Ramberg 2014). As Marilyn Strathern notes, many feminist anthropologists have historically treated the circulation of women, particularly those in positions of structural vulnerability, as effects of male coercion reflecting patriarchal ideology (Strathern 1988: 339). Instead, Strathern underlines forms of value (including modes of alliance, sociality, and gendered personhood) configured through the relational contiguity of circulation over time and space. Building from Strathern, subsequent work suggests that a given practice can supply material resources to vulnerable groups *while also* enabling or fulfilling an ethical relation (Ramberg 2014: 164). My approach follows this conceptual path, shifting from questions of agency to a broader consideration of the relational production of value through circulation. By suspending the presumption of the proprietorial subject, the idea that people ever entirely "own and retain control over" their labor or their bodies, we can trace processes of value creation through the circulation of goods, labor, and even persons in often-hierarchical settings (Strathern 1988: 147, 151; cf. Herzfeld 1985). Such an approach rejects the capitalist ideal of economy as a horizontal sphere of exchange hovering outside or above the externalities of culture, kinship, or history (Polanyi [1944] 2001; cf. Jauregui 2014: 82). It also challenges the presumption that value is a receptacle of capitalist or market exchange alone.

Thinking through the historical patterning of value creation in specific trajectories of circulation is particularly pressing in the Andes, where, as in Melanesia, exchange as reciprocity has been treated as a more or less intact cultural system that has weathered the effects of Spanish colonialism.<sup>6</sup> Here reciprocal exchange tends to be equated with a domain of Andean ethical practice that is spatially outside of and ethically at odds with the pathos of capitalistic greed and Western individualism (Albro 2007: 286). Yet this premise overlooks the ways that reciprocity as an aspirational model for exchange arises as an achievement of intersecting native and colonial histories. Vertical distribution both across ecological levels and as a model of reciprocal exchange among subjects was more than a precolonial institution that persisted in occult form in religious and kinship settings; it also served as a model of authority that Spanish reformers implemented in order to rein in the abuses of *encomienda* owners and rural *caciques* (ethnic lords) and, in the process, confer greater rural legitimacy on a nascent colonial state (Larson 1998; cf. Mumford 2008).

Well into the twentieth century, notions of redistributive exchange guided hacienda workers' relations to bosses as well as to their own labor (Langer 1985, 1989; cf. Orlove 1974). Honor was embodied in the person of the *patron* and sustained through patronage-based arrangements of aid wherein workers' own labor often figured as a "gift" to the landlord (Lyons 2006: 17, 19). While ideals of reciprocal exchange organized labor and kinship relations, they also supplied the ethical frame guiding both hacienda workers' challenges to labor abuses and their demands for greater aid and patronage support (Ari 2014). In those cases where landlords compromised their side of such arrangements—either through excessive violence or through failed patronage—former hacienda servants and laborers to whom I spoke recalled contesting this poor treatment by moving to another hacienda. As in this earlier time, in 2011 Quechua workers challenged denied patronage and related abuses by retracting labor from mines and mineral processing plants. In the process, they made subversive use of their own bodily circulation as a key modality not only for the creation of value (labor exchanged for wages/aid in order to generate profit/honor) but also for its disruption.

Conflicts at René's mine rendered visible broader tensions concerning the question of whether new mining elites should be held to account for the region's bonded past. For villagers, the locatedness of the mine on former hacienda land and its reliance on former hacienda infrastructures and labor relations required that René uphold earlier patronage duties. This might be understood as an insistence that he maintain a "socially thick" network of extraction against more progressive ideals of "socially thin" and dehistoricized profit (Ferguson 2006: 203). In this regard, the patronage of regional mining and agrarian elites can be understood as a form of *rendre* (return or repayment) for debts accrued by hacienda violence. This return occurred not only through the more personal exchange of money and material

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6. For classic studies of Andean reciprocity as a persisting cultural practice with precolonial origins, see Allen (1982), Alberti and Mayer (1974), Bastien (1978), Brush (1977), Earls (1969), Isbell (1978), and Harris (1995). Other works foreground reciprocity as an ethic of relationality and redistribution. See Taussig (1980), Van Vleet (2008: 15), and Leinaweaver (2008). For a critique of culturalist understandings of exchange, see Abercrombie (1998); Starn (1991).

goods from former *hacendados* to specific subjects—as in the *compadrazgo* relations discussed above—but also by way of broader channels of circulation among mining elites and villages inhabited by former servant families (Guyer 2016: 19). Like the kin of *hacendados* such as Flora, Quechua workers at René's mine, too, articulated wealth in terms of a more expansive set of obligations over time and space. By withdrawing labor and blocking the mine, villagers reminded René of the contingency of wealth not only as status but also as profit. Circulation, then, was not just a quality of itinerant labor from one mine to another, it was also an expected traffic or redistribution of wealth among Quechua villages residing adjacent to the mine and despite the shift to a wage economy. When René refused to uphold this model, Quechua villagers and workers withdrew their labor, thereby destabilizing not only his gold business but also his broader status in the region. In the process, they upended René's more myopic vision of profit as a form of value produced through the “contraction” of spacetime (Munn 1976: 13), one evident in his remarks that he “did not enslave them” and thus needn't uphold patronage as a device of historical repair.

Considering obligation both as a work on the subject and as a mode of compelled action (Guyer 2012: 493), René's case suggests how, absent elites' willingness to take on such transformative work, villagers attempted to compel the enactment of wealth as elite duty through acts of labor protest. Labor here arose as a tool of political maneuver, a form through which to expose the relational underpinnings of wealth: what Marx described as the “secret” of the “social character of private labour” hidden within the commodity ([1867] 1972: 320, 323). This mode of Quechua activism forces a rethinking of political agency in its relation to colonial history. In particular, it highlights a mode of “indigenous critique” whose “articulation of political alternatives” is rooted not only in non-Western systems of value, cosmology, or ontology (Kirsch 2006: 3, 103), but also in the creative “re-activation” of certain elements of a bonded, colonial past (Stoler 2015: 31). Therefore, as in other postplantation regions of the Americas (Sigaud 2006: 17; cf. Wolfe 1955; Scott 2008), the Ayopaya case suggests that for Quechua villagers, too, the shift from older regimes of agrarian patronage to new arrangements of labor contract and rights was experienced as profoundly ambivalent. New labor contracts not only supplied access to new rights but also encouraged the loss of prior obligations from agrarian bosses. Yet these transformations toward a more disembedded market did not go uncontested. By arguing that redistributive duty inhered in specific persons and relations, villagers sought to contest the injustices borne by a shift to new, more “free,” conditions of wage labor in gold mining. By denaturalizing this *telos* of economic abandonment (Marx [1867] 1972: 433; cf. Harvey 1989: 147), Ayopaya villagers sought to reframe some elites' refusal of patronage obligation less as inexorable historical fate than as a willful act of injury to be contested at all costs.

## Conclusion: Economies of obligation

This article has foregrounded how Quechua groups in Bolivia creatively rework earlier institutions of agrarian patronage in order to reshape the terms of contemporary gold extraction. Such practices point to modes of political critique that not

only precede the spread of a global indigenous rights discourse in the 1980s, but also, in their extension of hacienda-based ethical languages, complicate requisites of a “pure” indigeneity that underlie state systems of rights-based recognition (Povinelli 2002). Quechua demands that elites uphold inherited duties stand in tension with a more familiar notion of indigenous agency as oriented toward securing a rupture with the bonded past. Instead, Quechua villagers drew from existing patterns of patronage among *hacendados* and workers to insist that new elites, and not simply the kin of landlords, held obligations to groups mistreated under the region’s hacienda system. That such demands grew out of a violent past suggests that modern forms of critique need not require a temporal rupture but can instead emerge out of the very formations they aim to contest (Englund 2011). Attention to the political entailments of these demands for aid from former and current bosses is particularly pressing given the ways that indigenous groups are often held to impossible standards of purity from the colonial (Smith 2012: 51; Simpson 2014).

Foregrounding patronage as a relational orientation to wealth, this essay has turned on obligation as an aspirational language that both compels particular forms of action and unfolds as an ethical work on the part of the subject (Guyer 2012: 493). By insisting that new mining relations remain partly bound to the duties articulated within a former hacienda economy, Bolivian villagers sought to expose the social underpinnings of inequality that proponents of “free” labor deny (Ferguson 2013: 230, 232). Taking seriously the importance of enduring patronage ties in shaping gold mining problematizes a familiar historical *telos* wherein contract overtakes other relations of exchange such as gifting or patronage. Thus, for Marx ([1867] 1972: 433), it was the dissolution of feudal ties that cut loose the fetters on exploitation, thereby hurling “free and ‘unattached’ proletarians” onto the labor market. As for subsequent scholars of neoliberal capitalism, here the history of economic development is narrated as the displacement of obligation by abandon: that is, by ever more fragmented and atomized relations of production.

Instead, this essay has asked about the ways that modern forms of economic contract—such as wage labor—remain partly bound up in earlier arrangements of patronage rooted in the hacienda system. Rather than accept new mine-owners’ appeals to a normative language of rights and citizenship, villagers used the offer and withdrawal of labor in order to expose the relational underpinnings of wealth not only as an aspiration guiding patronage but also as a material condition for gold extraction. By insisting that mine-owners heed the duties elaborated within an earlier patronage frame, Ayopayan villagers rejected the valorization of private gain on which “free” exchange relies. In contesting the naturalness of profit unhinged from relations of exchange, Ayopayans revealed the very fiction underlying that premise: the autonomy of the market and the “private” nature of labor (Marx [1867] 1972: 320; Polanyi [1944] 2001). In this regard, their demands remind us that relations of economic abandonment and social undoing that often appear natural to scholars are not experienced as such everywhere.

In closing, I would like to ponder the question of how scholarly analytics of economy condition broader possibilities for ethical action in an inegalitarian present. Namely, in what ways do narratives of capitalist fracture limit the viability of other relational orientations to wealth? In accepting this narrative, how do scholars lend credence to ideals of individuated profit used by elites like René in order to





defend his stubborn refusal of complicity in or accountability for past labor violence? These remarks are not meant to be prescriptive; I am not proposing patronage as the solution. Yet, I am suggesting that taking seriously the idioms of wealth and duty at work in Ayopaya might illuminate new pathways of scholarly analysis and action. For, as Ludwig Wittgenstein pointed out some time ago ([1953] 1973: 241), descriptive categories exert in the world: our languages condition and constrain possibilities for acting. By contesting the normalization of abandonment in a wage-labor economy, Ayopayans rejected a new, more detached elaboration of wealth merely as private gain. Lingering with their demands opens up new possibilities for inhabiting the unequal worlds we live and make. What would it mean if, following Ayopayans' lead, economy at large were taken as exemplarily *obligated*—bound by and thus also answerable to histories of labor and violence that necessarily inflect the present? In this regard, obligation supplies a fruitful site from which to rethink a more familiar *telos* of economic abandonment, and, in so doing, to open up new possibilities for ethical action in the face of injustice.

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## Economies d'obligation: le patronage comme richesse relationnelle dans l'exploitation des mines d'or boliviennes

Certains travaux anthropologiques récents soulignent que les inégalités sont constitutives des formes prises par la vie sociale, et que le droit, les cultures et les religions apportent des réponses divergentes aux problèmes qu'elles engendrent. À partir de ces débats, cet article explore l'imaginaire de personnes parlant le quechua et l'espagnol dans la province Bolivienne d'Ayopaya, et leur façon d'habiter et de répondre aux inégalités associées à la violence de l'histoire du travail dans cette région. Bien que l'histoire de la servitude Ayopaya dans les hacienda survive jusqu'à aujourd'hui dans les structures d'inégalités radicalisées, je suggère qu'elle conditionne également certaines traditions d'échange que les communautés rurales utilisent pour contester la nouvelle économie de l'exploitation des mines d'or. À rebours de certains portraits plus pessimistes du capitalisme avancé présenté comme un moment d'abandon inexorable, en particulier pour les groupes autochtones, je m'intéresse à la ténacité de l'obligation et explore ses possibilités politiques, comme force de proposition et heuristique qui éclaire le fait que le "libre" échange repose en partie sur des refus dans le domaine de l'éthique.

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