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Embracing the Anaconda: A Chronicle of Atacameno Life and Mining in the Andes

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Embracing the Anaconda: A Chronicle of Atacameño Life and Mining in the Andes.

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In Embracing the Anaconda, Carrasco gives a concise century-long view of how Atacameños – the Indigenous people of this desert region – have negotiated relations with mining companies, water access, and their own cultural and economic survival. Differing notions of social justice as seen by her interlocutors and outsiders – herself included alongside various mining and state agents – is the book’s central theme.

Carrasco provides a nuanced assessment of social injustice in this region. Based on a multisited ethnography buttressed by nearly ten years of professional work in the area, she describes the “slow violence” the region suffers after over a century of intense mining for nitrates, copper, lithium, and smaller amounts of other minerals. Mining has long disrupted Atacameño people’s culture and wellbeing: as mining companies claimed and consumed water, they created scarcity which forcibly displaced rural families to cities as they could no longer live off farming and herding. Confined to cities or facing declining agricultural prospects, many accepted wage labor – with all the lifestyle changes, comforts, new needs, and disruptions this brings. Both rural and urban communities suffered from the impacts of toxic mineral pollution, new road construction, and the exhaustion of resources like llareta – a flowering plant endemic to this region which is now nearly extinct after being used for decades as fuel in the mine. These dynamics all resulted from the presence of Atacameño people’s massive neighbor: the Chuquicamata copper mine, an open pit measuring 6 square miles and half-a-mile deep.

Some Chuquicamata statistics are worth repeating. Today the waste pile stands 300 feet high and covers 80% of the adjacent company town, which had to be abandoned. One-hundred tons of rock must be torn out of the ground to produce one ton of copper. Five pipelines bring water from the Andes mountains to Chuquicamata. Locals describe the 1951 pipeline and the 1967 pipeline as tipping points: herd sizes fell dramatically after this as the water drained out of high-altitude wetlands to feed the ever-growing mine. It was also in the 1950s that llareta became nearly extinct; only then did Chuquicamata’s smelter replace this plant-fuel with natural gas.

Alongside this violence there were some benefits. Atacameño elders remember the old mining company, Anaconda, fondly. When owned by U.S. capital, the mine provided Atacameños with jobs like collecting llareta and sulfur, building roads, and maintaining the pipelines. These provided wages, helping families stay in the rural desert. Their relations with the foreigners were collegial and respectful, by contrast to the paternalism and condescension Atacameños attribute to the Chilean state and contemporary mining companies, including the state-owned Codelco. Carrasco, who grew up in a nearby mining town and worked for some months as a consultant for Codelco, is respectful with these memories and the messy reality by which mining dominates the local economy. She provides an engaging account of her complicated positionality.
Throughout the text Carrasco grapples with a difficult question, How do lessons from the past inform the present and future of relations between mining companies and Atacameño peoples? She identifies a generational split: Atacameños under about 45 years old do not view mining companies positively and instead emphasize how extraction has led to exhaustion which has led to forced displacement. Carrasco’s account brings to life the fact that the Atacama’s highlands are drying out. For decades, Atacameño communities have had to beg and steal for access to water. The book’s 6 chapters each recount a different episode in the fight for water: in urban, rural and sacred places; in daily practice and annual canal cleaning festivals; and at different points in time. Chapter 4 recounts a company’s contemporary corporate social responsibility effort while chapters 5 and 6 provide a historical account based on the papers of William E. Rudolph, the Anaconda Company’s chief engineer in the 1940s and 1950s.

The conclusion to *Embracing the Anaconda* echoes findings by other anthropologists working in mining communities and ends with ambivalence. It recognizes that environmental crisis and exhaustion are here and have physically and culturally displaced Atacameños, yet emphasizes how far, in the past, providing jobs and showing kindness went towards creating good relations between mining companies and Atacameños. It challenges mining companies’ claim to practice “new” more ethical mining, but does not hold them or the state to account for the slow violence they unleashed. Some readers will be frustrated by the absence of a vision for a socially just Atacameño society in an exhausted world. The book’s strength lies in situating today’s mining conflicts in a longer history of socioenvironmental change and rural-to-urban displacement. It is a must-read for anyone interested in the Atacama, mining communities, and slow environmental violence.