

# UC Santa Barbara

## UC Santa Barbara Previously Published Works

### Title

Embracing the Anaconda: A Chronicle of Atacameño Life and Mining in the Andes by Anita Carrasco London: Lexington Books, 2020. 171 pp.

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

4 London: Lexington Books. 2020. 171 pp.

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

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

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

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43 Alongside this violence there were some benefits. Atacameño elders remember the old mining  
44 company, Anaconda, fondly. When owned by U.S. capital, the mine provided Atacameños with  
45 jobs like collecting *llareta* and sulfur, building roads, and maintaining the pipelines. These  
46 provided wages, helping families stay in the rural desert. Their relations with the foreigners were  
47 collegial and respectful, by contrast to the paternalism and condensation Atacameños attribute  
48 to the Chilean state and contemporary mining companies, including the state-owned Codelco.  
49 Carrasco, who grew up in a nearby mining town and worked for some months as a consultant for  
50 Codelco, is respectful with these memories and the messy reality by which mining dominates the  
51 local economy. She provides an engaging account of her complicated positionality.

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3 Throughout the text Carrasco grapples with a difficult question, How do lessons from the past  
4 inform the present and future of relations between mining companies and Atacameño peoples?  
5 She identifies a generational split: Atacameños under about 45 years old do not view mining  
6 companies positively and instead emphasize how extraction has led to exhaustion which has led  
7 to forced displacement. Carrasco's account brings to life the fact that the Atacama's highlands  
8 are drying out. For decades, Atacameño communities have had to beg and steal for access to  
9 water. The book's 6 chapters each recount a different episode in the fight for water: in urban,  
10 rural and sacred places; in daily practice and annual canal cleaning festivals; and at different  
11 points in time. Chapter 4 recounts a company's contemporary corporate social responsibility  
12 effort while chapters 5 and 6 provide a historical account based on the papers of William E.  
13 Rudolph, the Anaconda Company's chief engineer in the 1940s and 1950s.  
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17 The conclusion to *Embracing the Anaconda* echoes findings by other anthropologists working in  
18 mining communities and ends with ambivalence. It recognizes that environmental crisis and  
19 exhaustion are here and have physically and culturally displaced Atacameños, yet emphasizes  
20 how far, in the past, providing jobs and showing kindness went towards creating good relations  
21 between mining companies and Atacameños. It challenges mining companies' claim to practice  
22 "new" more ethical mining, but does not hold them or the state to account for the slow violence  
23 they unleashed. Some readers will be frustrated by the absence of a vision for a socially just  
24 Atacameño society in an exhausted world. The book's strength lies in situating today's mining  
25 conflicts in a longer history of socioenvironmental change and rural-to-urban displacement. It is  
26 a must-read for anyone interested in the Atacama, mining communities, and slow environmental  
27 violence.  
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