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Unpacking Coloniality from the South: Gendered Intimacies and Affective Contracts in Peruvian Migrant Labor in São Paulo, Brazil

Lorena Izaguirre
Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research (F.R.S. - FNRS) and UCLouvain, CIRFASE

Abstract:

This article addresses a central question: how are colonial hierarchies of race, class, gender, and geography mobilized within intimate, co-ethnic networks to legitimize labor exploitation? Drawing on the case of Peruvian migrants in São Paulo's artisanal workshops—spaces that double as homes and workplaces—I argue that exploitation is underpinned by a distinctly gendered mechanism: the instrumentalization of affective ties. Combining the lenses of the coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000) and the coloniality of gender (Lugones, 2008), I propose the notion of an unwritten "affective contract" that anchors inequality, particularly for Indigenous women. Based on biographical interviews, the analysis unfolds in four parts: (a) recruitment processes and the dynamics of dependent mobilities; (b) intimacy as a gendered mechanism of labor control; (c) the role of affective contracts in shaping labor relations; and (d) the blurring of family and work boundaries. The article extends coloniality theory by tracing its intimate, gendered micro-mechanisms and contributes to migration studies by showing how kinship and *paisano* networks reproduce historical inequalities in South–South migration.

Keywords: South-South migration, coloniality of power, coloniality of gender, intimacy, kinship, unfree labor, Peruvian migration

1. Introduction

When her *patrona* in São Paulo, a fellow Peruvian migrant, refused to pay her and tried to disrespect her, Vera confronted her directly. "No," she recalled saying, "you treat people like that because they are from *your communities*. I'm not from the highlands… I'm not from the

puna[1]." In this meaningful exchange, Vera, a 18-year-old Indigenous woman from an urban district in the Cusco region, does two things at once: she resists being positioned as a docile, exploitable Indigenous worker, while simultaneously reinscribing the very same racialized geography that equates a rural highland origin with inferiority. This tension encapsulates the central puzzle this article seeks to unravel: how are colonial hierarchies of race, class, gender, and geography mobilized within intimate spaces to legitimize and sustain labor exploitation?

Vera's story offers a window into the complex nature of kinship and co-ethnic (i.e., perceived as sharing the same race or ethnicity in terms of phenotype) networks that shape migrants' pathways to labor market incorporation (Portes & Manning, 1986; Portes & Zhou, 1993; Zhou, 1992). While such networks can provide support and economic opportunity (Portes & Bach, 1985), they are also marked by power imbalances, as solidarity coexists with exploitation (Miranda, 2017; Rosales, 2020). Yet, less attention has been paid to how these ambiguous relationships unfold within intimate spaces, particularly when labor is embedded in domestic or kin-like arrangements among migrants from the same geographical or racial/ethnic backgrounds.

My research investigates racialization processes not between migrants and host societies, but within migrant communities themselves, in a specific, understudied context: a migrant circuit based on artisanal crafts production and trade linking Cusco, in the Peruvian southern Andes, with São Paulo, Brazil (Izaguirre, 2019). In the early 2000s, as artisanal production relocated from Cusco to Brazil, the pioneers of this trade began recruiting workers—typically family members, friends, and *paisanos*[2], such as Vera—to work in São Paulo. These live-in working arrangements, often framed as mutual aid, frequently resulted in debt-bondage, unfree labor, and material and emotional dependency. Drawing on 64 biographical interviews conducted with Peruvian migrants who arrived in Brazil between 1980 and 2015, I thus analyze how artisanal workshops functioned as both sites of production and as intimate spaces where racialized, classed and gendered relationships unfold.

To understand these processes, I draw on Aníbal Quijano's (Quijano, 2000b, 2000a) concept of coloniality of power, which frames race, labor, and modernity as interwoven legacies of colonialism that persist across time and space. Racialization and internal hierarchies have long shaped Peruvian society, particularly in how Indigenous and rural populations are positioned as inferior within the national community (Alcalde, 2020; Babb, 2020; de la Cadena, 2000). These distinctions travel as Peruvians migrate abroad: migrants carry with them internalized hierarchies that shape who is recruited, under what conditions, and who is expected to work without complaint. I argue that the coloniality of power is reproduced and sustained through a distinctly gendered and racialized mechanism: the mobilization of intimate, affective ties to enforce coercive labor conditions. Turning to feminist scholarship on the coloniality of gender

[1] *Puna* is a Quechua term referring to high-altitude, cold lands in the Andes. It commonly designates the harsh, elevated plateaus used for herding and agriculture, often associated with Indigenous rural life.
[2] People who identify themselves as being from the same village, district or region.

(Lugones, 2008, 2010), I demonstrate that for Indigenous Peruvian women in particular, the lines between productive labor, reproductive work, and affective obligation are deliberately blurred by *patrones*. This entanglement functions as a primary mode of labor control that is more insidious than that experienced by their male counterparts, revealing how affective ties are instrumentalized differently across gendered and racialized lines.

Throughout this article, I deliberately use my interlocutors' terms: *patrón/patrona/patrones* for the employer-recruiter and *funcionário* for the recruited worker. The term *patrón* is used over 'employer' to evoke its historically-laden meaning in Latin America: a relationship rooted in colonial hierarchies and affective asymmetry. Conversely, *funcionário* ('employee' in Portuguese) highlights a central contradiction, suggesting a formal status that is undermined by the lived reality of dependency and unfreedom. The *patrón-funcionário* dyad thus illuminates the persistence of colonial logics within the intimate spaces of migrant labor.

To do so, I build on the literature on coloniality of power and gender and put it into conversation with scholarship on intimacy and labor. As intimacy is understood as a politically charged sphere where the legacies of coloniality are powerfully felt, in intimate spaces emotions function as mechanisms of control in migrant labor regimes (Collins & Stringer, 2023). The narratives of my interlocutors reveal how affection, respect, fear, and obligation, both sustain and conceal coercive labor conditions, especially for women.

By tracing these dynamics, this article makes a dual contribution. For decolonial theory, it troubles and extends (Burawoy, 2009) our understanding of the coloniality of power and gender, by revealing its micro-mechanisms within the affective dimensions of kin-based and *paisano* networks in the intimate spaces where labor, mobility, and affective ties intersect, such as the artisanal workshops. For migration studies, it deepens conversations on emotions, racialization, and labor by centering the role of gendered affect in labor regimes of the Global South, where kinship networks function as both lifelines and instruments of control (Stensrud, 2017).

The article first lays out the theoretical framework and research context, then analyzes the empirical findings across four dimensions: recruitment and dependent mobilities, intimacy as gendered labor control, affective contracts, and the blurring of family and work relations. Finally, the conclusion discusses the broader implications of these findings for understanding the intimately managed mechanisms of colonial power and for complicating narratives of co-ethnic solidarity.

2. Theoretical framework

While research has shown that co-ethnic migrant networks can be sites of labor exploitation, complicating narratives of solidarity, the specific logics that sustain this exploitation from within the community remain undertheorized. This article addresses that gap. It asks: how are colonial

logics of race, class, gender, and geography mobilized to sustain labor exploitation within the intimate spaces of co-ethnic migrant networks? To answer this question, the framework is anchored in Aníbal Quijano's concept of the coloniality of power. This lens is essential for understanding how historical logics persist across borders, shaping labor relations, affective ties, and the intimate spaces where migrants live and work.

2.1 The coloniality of power and gender: Race, gender and labor exploitation

The Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano's concept of coloniality of power refers to a hierarchical matrix of capitalist power sustained through discourses, practices, and institutions in which racial classifications on the world's population plays a central role (Quijano, 2000a, 2000b). This system constitutes the foundation upon which social hierarchies were created, reconfiguring differences of geographical origin. Quijano's work shed light on two historical processes resulting from 15th century European colonization and configuring modern power. First, the social construction of race which placed colonized people in a situation of natural inferiority; and second, labor control as the central mechanism of capital accumulation (Quijano, 2000a). The coloniality of labor refers to how societal systems of exploitation are built on racially codified labor: whereas "white" labor is deemed "superior" and productive, indigenous and enslaved labor power is constructed as "inferior", thus as "free exploitable" (Gutierrez-Rodriguez, 2014; Quijano, 2000b). Structures of western domination continue to operate through different dimensions analyzed by scholars extending the concept of coloniality of power.

Recognizing that race and gender are co-constituted within systems of colonial domination, Lugones (2008) shows how colonialism imposed a binary gender system that deemed racialized women (especially Indigenous and Black women) as sub-human, animalistic, and outside the protections of "true womanhood", correcting a blind-spot of Quijano's analysis of coloniality of power. The coloniality of gender underlines that gendered hierarchies place colonized, rural, indigenous and migrant women as less human and opposed to the characterization of European women, making their productive and reproductive labor uniquely exploitable. These colonial structures of domination are not merely external historical forces but are internalized and reproduced by migrants themselves, a dynamic central to the exploitation within the artisanal workshops where women were subjected to intensified demands for both productive and reproductive labor.

2.2 Social hierarchies on the move

This article contributes to the growing literature on the coloniality of power in migration. This scholarship has addressed the political regulation of people's movements (Ang et al., 2022; Astolfo & Allsopp, 2023; Çağlar, 2022; Petitcorps & Desille, 2020), and the reproduction of migrants' racialized hierarchies in reception contexts (Alcalde, 2020; Aufseeser, 2024; Berg,

2015; Gutierrez-Rodriguez, 2014). Here I shift the focus to the reproduction of internalized colonial hierarchies within the migrant community itself (see also Varriale, 2021).

The colonial logics migrants carry with them are rooted in Peru's social context, where, as in many postcolonial societies, racialized distinctions are articulated not only through phenotype but through a range of spatial and cultural signifiers. These include geographical origin, particularly the urban-rural divide (Babb, 2020; Orlove, 1993), educational level, which functions as a marker of class and acculturation (Alcalde, 2020; de la Cadena, 2000), as well as dress styles, language use, food practices (Babb, 2020; Cox Hall et al., 2020). Being "from higher up" in the rural Andean highlands, for instance, becomes a racialized position associated with a presumed backwardness (Babb, 2020). This ethnoracial classification—colloquially known as *cholear*—operates as a contextual and relational process, dependent on where it is done and who does it (Sulmont & Callirgos, 2014), a logic that, as my analysis will show, directly translates into *patrones* viewing workers from these regions as more suited to exploitation.

The transnational reproduction of these hierarchies is driven by a process of "internal Othering," whereby migrants reinforce intragroup distinctions to reproduce privilege and secure their own social position (Alcalde, 2020). By distancing themselves from signifiers of indigeneity—a process historically linked to urban migration and 'de-Indianization' through which individuals shed markers of indigenous identity to become *cholo* or *mestizo* (Sulmont & Callirgos, 2014)—upwardly mobile migrants produce "internal Others" who are deemed legitimately exploitable. As Berg (2015) and Alcalde (2020) have shown in the context of Peruvian migration to the United States, these classificatory hierarchies travel with migrants and are reconfigured as they move between multiple national and racial projects (see also Erel et al., 2016; Grosfoguel et al., 2015). My analysis extends this insight to a South-South context, where these dynamics operate among co-nationals within intimate labor arrangements.

2.3 Intimate dependencies and the emotionality of exploitation

Understanding the relationships in the workshops requires engaging with the concept of dependency. In migration contexts, dependency is both structural and interpersonal, arising when migrants rely on others for mobility, employment, and survival, particularly when lacking legal protections. Its implications are particularly acute in this migrant circuit, where newly arrived *funcionários* lived, worked, and slept in spaces entirely controlled by their *patrones*, often under conditions of unfree labor like debt bondage (Brass, 1999). These conditions, however, foster contexts of forced intimacy, meaning labor relations can also be analyzed as intimate relationships involving dependency and trust (Zelizer, 2005).

Intimacy thus becomes the medium through which this state of dependency is governed and made exploitable. This article understands intimacy as "the interwoven social life" (Lugones, 2010, p. 743) emerging from the routines of domestic life that produce "familiarity and

privileged knowledge" (Jamieson, 2017). However, following a feminist and decolonial perspective, intimacy is not treated as a private sphere sealed off from power. To study what Ann Stoler calls the "gendered and racialized intimacies of the everyday" is "not to turn away from structures of dominance but to relocate their conditions of possibility and relations and forces of production." (Stoler, 2007, p. 13). Building on this approach, I conceptualize intimacy as a set of embodied relations and affective ties that connect personal lives with broader structures of power, shaped by intersecting hierarchies of race, class, gender and sexuality (Boris & Parreñas, 2010; Pain & Staeheli, 2014). In the Andean context, Canessa (2012) exemplifies this perspective by showing how such hierarchies are reproduced in the small spaces of everyday life—kitchens, marriages, and community relations—among indigenous Aymara in Bolivia.

Within this intimate site, the primary process through which control is exercised is the "emotionality of exploitation" (Collins & Stringer, 2023). Focusing solely on material coercion overlooks a central dimension, as emotions are a "key component of relations of power that sustain such situations" (Collins & Stringer, 2023, p. 305). Because labor cannot be separated from the feelings, sensations, and intensities that are embedded in places and experienced in ordinary encounters (Gutierrez-Rodriguez, 2014), emotions are not merely a byproduct but are "key social forces in generating and sustaining the conditions for exploitation" (Collins & Stringer, 2023, p. 316). In the context of the migrant artisanal workshops, intimate relations become deeply entangled with gendered forms of labor, dependency, and mechanisms of control (Boris & Parreñas, 2010; Oswin & Olund, 2010).

The literature on migrant domestic and care work offers a compelling comparison. In those contexts, employers often mobilize a language of kinship—treating workers 'like family'—as a potent strategy to extract labor and ensure compliance (Gutierrez-Rodriguez, 2014; Parreñas, 2015; for the Latin American context, see Chaney & García Castro, 1989; for Peru specifically, see Pérez, 2021; Radcliffe, 1990). Yet, migrants affectively subvert their working conditions and the emotions shaping this type of labor relation, where loyalty, obligation, gratitude, as well as anger, humiliation and indignation produce both proximity and social distance (Ariza, 2024). Research consistently shows how live-in arrangements blur the lines between family, personal, and work life, creating mechanisms of control alongside complex affective ties (Lee et al., 2018; Parreñas, 2015). Similar spatial strategies of labor control through employer-managed housing are documented in contexts such as migrant dormitories (Jones et al., 2024). This literature is therefore directly relevant, as most women in the artisanal workshops were often expected to perform unpaid domestic and care work for the *patrón's* family alongside their primary labor.[3]

[3] While this burden fell disproportionately on women, a few male *funcionários* also reported being required to perform domestic and care work, a dynamic that underscores the *patrón's* power to impose feminized labor on those perceived as most subordinate.

Therefore, for the purposes of this article, intimacy is defined not just as closeness, but as a terrain of unequal and often coercive mutuality where familiarity and affective obligations of kinship and *paisanaje* are mobilized to enforce gendered labor discipline. It is through this lens that we can understand how the intimate becomes a key site for the reproduction of colonial distinctions of race, class, gender, and geography in contemporary South-South migration.

3. Context and Methods

The analysis is drawn from a larger ethnographic study conducted in São Paulo between 2014 and 2016. Participants were recruited through fieldwork in key sites of Peruvian migrant commerce in São Paulo's city center, including Rua 25 de Março and the garment district of Brás. These sites provided access to former *funcionários* across a spectrum of economic trajectories, from the large majority working as street vendors at the *Feirinha da Madrugada* ("predawn market") to the small number who had become shop owners (*lojistas*). Recruitment also utilized local community contacts and snowballing.

The broader study, grounded in a multicase ethnography informed by the extended case method (Burawoy, 2009), includes 64 life-narrative interviews with Peruvian migrants organized around three migration cohorts, each corresponding to a distinct mode of labor incorporation: transnational artisan entrepreneurs (1980s–1990s), workshop proletarians (late 1990s–2000s), and informal street vendors (2010s). This article draws on a subset of interviews from participants whose trajectories intersected with the artisanal workshop circuit, primarily from the second cohort of 21 interviews but also including participants from the first and third cohorts whose experiences of the workshops illuminate different stages of the migratory circuit. Eleven participants are cited by pseudonym in the analysis; their narratives are representative of broader patterns observed across the subset.

The participants were working-class migrants (aged 18-40 at the time of interview), mostly from the Cusco region. Significantly, the interviews were retrospective, with participants recounting, often years after the events, their experiences of exploitation. This temporal distance provided a space for critical reflection on their relationships with their *patrones* and the complex nature of kinship, which in the Andean world extends beyond blood relations to include fictive kin ties, protective relationships with *ahijados* (godchildren) and alliances between *paisanos*.

4. Findings

4.1 Migrant recruitment, dependent mobilities, and unfree labor

The initial recruitment process itself reveals how colonial hierarchies are mobilized within kin and *paisano* networks to establish conditions of dependent mobility and unfree labor. Pioneer migrants trying to set up their business in São Paulo during the late 80s and early 90s leaned

on trusted, pre-existing relationships to make arrangements quickly, orally, and without any formal written contract, a dynamic evident across the interviews. For example, Claudia, an 18-year-old from Calca, was recruited by her Confirmation godmother who she respected and appreciated. Blas was brought into the circuit by his brother-in-law. Andy, a 20-year-old from Urcos, came to work for a distant aunt he had already worked for in Cusco. And Marcela, a 28-year-old replacement teacher, was convinced to travel by a neighbor with whom she was already working in an artisan workshop to supplement her unstable salary.

This practice mirrors *enganche,* a recruitment mechanism at the heart of the hacienda system in pre-agrarian reform Peru.[4] Far from being a historical relic, scholars have identified the persistence of *enganche* in contemporary Peruvian migration, both internal and international. Paerregaard (2013), for instance, speaks of a "transnational *enganche*" to account for the expansion of Peruvian migration to the United States through vast family and friendship networks. In these labor relations, forms of coercion, violence, or domination are systematically used, including components of unfreedom, which some authors have conceptualized as unfree labor (Brass, 2011; Moulier-Boutang, 2005).

Like *enganche*, the recruitment of *funcionários* was both classed and racialized. Concerning class, *patrones*, typically upwardly mobile migrants, explicitly recruited from more precarious social backgrounds, leveraging the class difference to position themselves as benevolent figures or moral authorities. As Adams and Golte (1990) observed in Andean workshops in Lima, kinship ties often serve to obscure these class hierarchies, allowing exploitation to occur under the guise of familial duty. *Funcionários* responded to the *gift* of migration with an unwavering commitment to work.

Racialization, articulated through geography, legitimized the *patrón–funcionário* domination. As several interlocutors explained, *patrones* systematically recruited from the rural highlands, considering these *funcionários* more exploitable. Melba, the daughter of a Quechua-speaking peasant couple, recalled that her *patrona*, a fellow cusqueña from an urban district, never showed her special regard. Similarly, Mario, a 33-year-old from Arequipa, described how *patrones* who recruited his sister treated “workers from the countryside, from the highlands of Cusco... like slaves.”

As previewed in the introduction, Vera's testimony most vividly illustrates the enactment of these spatial hierarchies:

> A woman from Cusco will not bring another woman from Cusco, she brings from the countryside, they only bring from the countryside […] Let's say that a Piseño brings [all

[4] *Enganche* (debt-peonage) was a labor recruitment system historically used on *haciendas* (large landed estates) to exploit Indigenous peasants. It relied on informal agreements and employer-financed travel to indebt workers, which then justified wage withholding, restricted movement, and other exploitative conditions (Brass, 1999).

> the workers] from the *countryside*, from the [peasant] *communities*, from *the highlands...* the people who are really in need are the ones they bring. […] That's why once... [her *patrona*] wanted to disrespect me... sometimes she got on my nerves, so I told her "No, you treat people like that because they are from *your communities*". I said "I'm not from the highlands, you don't know where I'm from, I'm from Coya, I'm not from the *puna*.

Vera's discourse, equating a 'higher up'/'rural' origins with exploitable indigeneity, echoes scholarship on how geographical distinctions shape racialized subjectivities in Peru (Babb, 2020). Babb shows how a gradient of racialization based on altitude and perceived rurality - contrasting urban areas, valley towns, and highland rural communities- are mapped onto ideas of indigeneity and backwardness. Vera's explanation also shows how the colonial notion of race produced a new way of codifying geographic origin (Quijano, 2000b), associating rurality with an ethno-racial inferiority that legitimizes exploitation (Thorp & Paredes, 2010). Her distinction between her own urban origin and that of others *comunidades* is also a claim to a higher class position. In Peru, indigeneity can be partially "shed" through education and urban acculturation (de la Cadena, 2000). By asserting "I'm not from the highlands," Vera claims a form of cultural capital she believes should shield her from the treatment deemed acceptable for her more "rural" counterparts.

Her self-distinction ('I'm not from the *puna*') is thus an act of negotiating internal Othering. As an Indigenous-marked woman, she pushed back against a racialized geography that positioned her as less worthy of respect. This racialized geography underpins the tacit logic of who is deemed acceptable to exploit, rationalizing mistreatment even among *paisanos*. By confronting her working conditions, Vera simultaneously subverts the stereotype of the docile Indigenous worker, asserting an agency that complicates both racialized expectations and kinship-like labor dynamics.

4.2 Intimacy as a gendered mechanism of labor control

The artisanal workshop, by blurring the lines between home and work, was transformed into an intimate site where labor control was enacted through gendered, colonial mechanisms. In this regime, being considered a "good worker" meant being constantly available, with no clear division between rest, personal time, and labor. Housing workers inside the workshop was not just a matter of convenience; it became a means of exerting surveillance and control over their movements, routines, and social interactions, a dynamic also observed in migrant domestic work (Lee et al., 2018) and employer-provided migrant housing like dormitories (Jones et al., 2024). Furthermore, *funcionários*' material livelihood depended entirely on their *patrones*, making it difficult to resist or leave. This section demonstrates how these intimate conditions enabled forms of surveillance and paternalism that drew directly on what Lugones (2008) terms

the coloniality of gender, targeting uniquely Indigenous women and her bodies, relationships, and affects.

Control began with tactics common in unfree labor, such as the retention of passports and the strict supervision of *funcionários*' mobility to isolate them from outside influence. For instance, Marcela's *patrón* asked her for her passport, but she refused. She learned later that her colleagues in the workshop had all been deprived of their passports, as this was a very extended practice according to my interviews. However, these mechanisms were also underpinned by a gendered logic of protection. That was the case for Griselda, a 27 years old indigenous woman from Puno, and Quechua native speaker. She worked for 3 years without a proper salary for her *patrona*, a woman from Cusco city: “She [her *patrona*] tried to isolate me from my family. My mother did not hear from me for 3 years. She and my sister would call her to talk to me, and she'd say she would give me the message. But she never told me anything at all.” Her *patrona* also forbade her to go out, justifying her isolation with a paternalistic language of care: “She said, 'You can't talk to other people,' 'It's very dangerous to go out, it's for your own good.” Griselda told me that it took her time to realize that she was being exploited: “I realized what was happening when I started *namorar* [dating]. I realized it and stopped working on Sundays. At 8 o'clock in the morning, I was already at the door, ready to leave the house." Vera also felt isolated: "She [her *patrona*] did not want me to go out because I knew several [Cusqueños] here in São Paulo. My Sunday was free, but she [her employer] did not want us to go out Sundays; she just wanted us to work with her. According to Mario, the *patrones* “put fear in your head”.

By instilling fear of the "hostile city," where nobody is deemed trustworthy, *patrones* used a paternalistic language of care ("it's for your own good") to mask their control over *funcionários’* lives outside workshops, thus reinforcing their dependency. This same paternalism was deployed to quash active dissent, a tactic made possible by the intimate nature of the workshop setting. For instance, Griselda’s questions were met with accusations of outside influence (“Who is advising you, eh?”), while Vera’s demand for her unpaid salary was dismissed as childish impertinence: "You are too spoiled, Vera." Within the intimacy of the workshop, such responses transformed labor disputes into matters of personal discipline, enacting a colonial script that frames Indigenous women as ungrateful, childlike subjects to reinforce a racial and gendered hierarchy.

The surveillance of women was exacerbated in their intimate, romantic and reproductive lives—a key domain of control under the coloniality of gender (Lugones, 2008). The emotional bond Griselda formed while caring for her *patrona’s* baby, for instance, was instrumentalized to prevent her from leaving: “You can’t leave. Think of the baby, she’ll suffer.”, her *patrona* insisted. For other women, like Claudia, romantic relationships were treated as a direct threat to the workshop's order. Her *patrona/*godmother harassed her and spread rumors when she started a relationship with a coworker, a situation Claudia described as “psychological abuse".

Unable to put a term to this relationship, the godmother put Claudia on a bus back to Peru with her boyfriend, after 6 months of work without any payment. Claudia managed to hijack the plan. When they arrived in Bolivia, her boyfriend bought her another ticket to go back to São Paulo, while he finally took the road back to Cusco. Back in São Paulo, with no money, Claudia started up as a street vendor at the *feirinha,* selling hand-made earrings with a friend. Vera experienced a similar intrusion, with her *patrona* attempting to sabotage her marriage by casting doubt on her "past."

> V : To my husband, she turned him against me. One day when he went to ask her for a payment, she turned him against me, she said "Oh, you don't know how Vera was in Peru…" like that...
> I : She began to speak ill of you...
> V : About me, to my husband.
> I : And he believed her?
> V : Uh-huh. […] Then he began to distrust me. I told him "if you don't trust me, you can leave..."

These tactics reveal how women's sexuality and affective lives were seen as domains to be managed and controlled by the *patrón*, a direct legacy of the colonial governance of intimacy. The experiences of Griselda, Vera, and Claudia thus demonstrate that the workshop was not a gender-neutral space. The conflation of work and home intensified the demands on women, aligning their roles with domestic, care, and emotional work—fields long structured by racialized and gendered hierarchies (Babb, 2020).

4.3 The affective contract: legitimizing exploitation through *cariño*

Labor relations among Peruvian migrants in São Paulo often exceeded contractual or economic terms. They were shaped by an unwritten "affective contract": a set of obligations to perform deference, display loyalty, and express gratitude, all of which are rooted in a colonial script of paternalism and hierarchy. Within this contract, *cariño* (affection) was mobilized by *patrones* to legitimize inequality, while a performance of loyalty became the primary means for *funcionários* to seek protection and navigate their dependency. The following analysis unpacks three core dynamics of this affective contract: the ambivalence of *cariño*, the paternalistic framing of exploitation, and the internalization of obligation.

First, the ambivalence of *cariño*. Jhony's experience is revealing. A 28-year-old from Cusco, he was recruited to work in a shop in a balneary city of São Paulo selling artisanal crafts by a *paisano* who, he felt, "grew very fond of me." Yet, this same affection was used to justify exploitative conditions: grueling hours, broken promises on salary, and the threat of being sent back to Peru.

J: Yeah, I was working there, in a shop—also run by Peruvians. What can I say? The owner grew very fond of me [*me agarró cariño*]. He was a *paisano*, from Cusco like me.“I also came like you,” he told me, “working for someone else.” He started working for his sister—like a helper, a craftsman.

But you still see that thing… when they bring you over, like people say, they exploit you. Because I used to wake up at 7 and close the shop at 8 or 9 at night. And that’s how it was—nonstop work. […] They had told me I’d be working from 7 to 4 or 5 in the afternoon. But when I got here, it was different. But I didn’t know anyone, so I just had to work. I had to do my part.

I: Were you ever able to say, “this wasn’t what we agreed on?”

J: I did mention it—about the salary. I asked, “How much will I be paid monthly?” Because they had told me I’d be working Monday to Saturday, not Sundays. He said, “Here at the beach, the pay is 800 [*reais*].” And he told me, “Here we work through the weekend during the season.” But if I’d known it was 800, I would’ve stayed in Lima—I could make that in a week there. I wouldn’t have come. Because over the phone, they had told me something else. […] He said, “No, but that was the agreement. Maybe there was a misunderstanding. If you don’t want to stay, I’ll pay for your ticket and you can go back.” I told him, “Okay, that’s fine.” […]

But later I saw him as an honest person. And he was a *paisano* too. […] He liked my work. After a week, he said, “You work well,” and that’s when he started growing fond of me. When it comes to food, and the house I stayed in, I have no complaints—he was caring.

Jhony’s narrative powerfully extends the concept of the "emotionality of exploitation" (Collins and Stringer, 2023). While Collins and Stringer focus on how employers impose emotions to create entrapment, Jhony's case reveals a dynamic of co-production. His insistence on his *patrón*’s ‘honesty’ is not a denial of his exploitation, but a necessary strategy for enduring it. To resolve the contradiction, Jhony actively separates the exploitative system (“when they bring you over… they exploit you”) from the person of the *patrón,* whom he recasts as a caring *paisano*. The *patrón’*s performance of *cariño* is the resource that enables this separation, but it is Jhony's own participation that makes the affective contract function. The result of this co-produced logic is a deep ambivalence: a state where affection for his former *patrón* coexists with the feeling of having been exploited. Ultimately, *cariño* does not erase the exploitation; it obscures it, making resistance or departure emotionally complex.

Second, the paternalistic framing of exploitation. Marcela’s testimony drills down into the colonial logic that underpins this affective contract, revealing how *patrones* use a language of kinship to legitimize their actions, particularly along the racial and class lines established in Peru. She described how exploitation operated under the guise of affection:

> That boy [a fellow *funcionário*] hadn't even finished school. He was his nephew and that sly one [the *patrón*] brought him over. He hadn't even finished his studies—he brought him over and keeps him like her domestic employee, in his house. He was family.
>
> And then there were others—he had tricked them […] A girl, coming from the countryside, didn't know anything, and neither did her parents. She was even easier to deceive. The *patron* calls them "son," "daughter." The girl couldn't even pronounce words properly—she was from the countryside, *really from the countryside*. She couldn't speak clearly. "Oh, how did he bring you here?" "He told me he was going to help me," that's what the girl told me. "And does he?" "Sometimes he buys me a little piece of clothing, he gives me something."

Marcela's analysis is incisive. By calling his *funcionários* "son" and "daughter," the *patrón* reframes a labor relation as an affective one, where the goal is to "help." This paternalism is explicitly racialized and classed: it is most effective on those who are young, "from the countryside," Quechua-speaking, uneducated, and "didn't know anything." In doing so, *patrones* transform material debt into an affective debt, directly mobilizing the colonial hierarchy that positions rural, Indigenous people as subjects in need of paternal guidance rather than as workers with rights.

Third, the internalization of obligation. Miguel's testimony, in turn, reveals how these affective ties are navigated from the *funcionário's* perspective. Recruited in São Paulo at 24 years old, Miguel came from a poor internal migrant family in Lima and worked intense, unregulated hours, performing both artisanal and domestic work for his *patrona*.

> M: I didn't have a schedule. In the morning, I would wake up at 6 a.m. to prepare breakfast and take her [his *patrona*] son to school. Then I would come back and start working in the workshop. In the afternoon, I would cook dinner because they didn't like to cook.
> I: So you did everything…
> M: I did it because I wanted to. Like I said, I'm someone who likes to help so that I can also earn a certain level of respect, you know? I didn't do it because I was forced to. I wanted to win over people's trust and affection. I wasn't doing it out of obligation—I wanted to show that I had a purpose. I never came here to get into bad things. […] One day, years later, I ran into Ana [his *patrona*] in the metro. "Hi, Ana, how are you?" I greeted her, and she looked at me and said, "You don't hate me?". "Why?" I asked her. "Everyone who has worked with me hates me." "Not me," I told her. "Why would I hate you? You helped me when I needed it most. How could I hate you? You were a very strict person, but that's just part of who you are." And she was surprised.

Miguel's account is a clear illustration of how a worker performs loyalty to survive dependency. He actively "works" to earn trust and affection, framing his extra labor not as exploitation but as a strategy to prove his deservingness. The *patrona's* expectation of being hated demonstrates her own awareness of the exploitative conditions. Yet, Miguel's refusal to hate her, even years later, reveals the power of this affective contract in shaping *funcionários*' own sense of worth and obligation.

Taken together, these cases demonstrate how the affective contract, grounded in perceived closeness or *paisanaje* and exacerbated by economic dependency, does not erase inequality; it obscures it. It is a powerful mechanism that sustains discipline by making exploitation emotionally tolerable, and it is co-produced not just through the imposition of the *patrones*, but through the often ambivalent agency of the *funcionários* themselves.

4.4 The blurring of family and labor relations

Migration's transformative potential also reconfigures kinship ties, revealing how colonial logics of racialized worth and class distinction are reproduced *within* the family unit itself. The story of Walter's family migration demonstrates how affective expectations clash with exploitative labor demands, exposing the tensions that arise when kin relations are recast through the *patrona-funcionário* dynamic.

The narrative comes from Walter, a 27-year-old from the urban district of Santiago in Cusco, but its central figure is his older sister. The eldest of five children and the only one to finish secondary school, her own migration story began with exploitation: recruited into an artisanal workshop owned by a well-known family, she was mistreated, only ate leftovers, and was cut off from her family for two years before escaping. A friend gave her financial support to start up as a street vendor at the *feirinha*, where she started a successful business selling Chinese fantasy jewelry. As she acquired economic and social capital, her position relative to her family transformed, placing her in a position of power.

On her visits home, the sister encouraged relatives to work in São Paulo, arriving with gifts that signaled her success. These migration decisions were framed as family matters, negotiated with her mother through open, though often contentious, discussion. The conflict began when her two younger brothers' attempts to migrate were disastrous; the first returned "thin and sick," the second lasted only a month. Their returns were prompted by the harshness of life in São Paulo, which they attributed to their sister, who they said had changed and become "mean." One brother had warned Walter: "Don't go [to São Paulo], because our sister is mean. The first few days she'll treat you nicely, but then she'll start yelling at you." For his part, Walter offered a different interpretation, suggesting his sister simply liked "things to be done properly."

This perception of "meanness" is central to the family's conflict. Walter recalls the confrontation over his first brother's return:

> My brother told my sister, “Sister, I’m going back to Peru, I can’t take it here, I miss Mom and Dad,” and my sister replied, “After everything I’ve spent bringing you here, don’t make me waste more money.” “I’m going,” he said, “I told Mom to send me money.” My sister called my mom and said, “I’m sending your son back to Peru. He’s costing me money, he doesn’t want to eat, he’s getting sick.” “Bring him back, I’ll send you money. What are you doing to my son?” “Your sons are lazy.” And so my brother returned.

What her brothers described as the sister becoming “mean” reflects this shift in her social position (becaming a *patrona)*, understood through an emotional repertoire. By labeling her brothers "lazy," she deploys a logic that echoes what Drinot (2011) has analyzed as the racialized association, central to Peruvian nation-state formation, between the country's backwardness and the indigenous character of its population—an association in which labor was seen as the vehicle for transforming indigenous subjects into productive, civilized citizens. Her own upward mobility, achieved through enduring exploitation, thus paradoxically led her to reproduce the coloniality of power that likely structured her own past working conditions.

The mother’s experience vividly reveals the core of affective kin ties being instrumentalized for labor exploitation, creating tensions even within family-based migration:

> W: […] So in 2012, my mom also went, with my little brother. My mom was curious—"I’m going to see Brazil, it’s my daughter, she won’t make me work"—so she went with my little brother […]
> I: And how was that?
> W: It was even worse for my mom. She thought, "She won’t make me work," but it was worse—she would wake my mom up early, my little brother too, to go work at the *ferinha*. My mom came back after two weeks, crying over there, and she talked to my dad on the phone: "Send me money, my daughter is treating me *like other people*, send me money!" So he sent money, and she came back with my little brother. Then my sister talked to my dad: "Mom says she’s going to work with me, and now she doesn’t want to work. *If she knew how to think…*I’d pay her, and she could save up some money—at least to build something in our land—but mom doesn’t want to take advantage of the opportunity." So my mom came back.

The mother anticipated a trip rooted in the affective logic of kinship but was confronted with the demands of a *patrona-funcionária* relationship, lamenting that her daughter treated her 'like other people'—not like family. Her experience encapsulates the painful misalignment between affective expectations and the economic logic of exploitation, particularly when familial roles are recast through the lens of colonial labor hierarchies. Conversely, the sister framed the situation solely in terms of a rational, economic opportunity that her mother was failing to "take advantage of," prioritizing labor extraction over affective bonds.

Walter's family saga is thus a compelling illustration of how migration reconfigures kinship along complex, racialized and classed lines. It creates ambiguous relationships that, as research suggests, are neither purely supportive nor simply exploitative, often masking exploitation as help (Stensrud, 2017). This family conflict reveals how the affective contract is transformed, and kinship solidarity complicated, when intersected by class stratification and the enduring legacy of the coloniality of power.

5. Conclusion

This article began by asking how colonial hierarchies of race, class, and gender are mobilized within the intimate and interpersonal spaces of migrant labor to legitimize and sustain labor exploitation. The findings have unraveled this puzzle by detailing the concrete mechanisms through which this process unfolds. While the analysis has centered on selected narratives, the mechanisms identified—racialized recruitment through kin networks, gendered policing of intimacy, and the affective contract as a tool of labor discipline—were consistent across the broader set of interviews within this cohort. The gendered dimension was particularly salient: women in the sample systematically reported worse labor conditions, more intensive control over their mobility and sexuality, and greater difficulty in exiting exploitative arrangements.

The analysis first demonstrated how kinship and *paisano*-based recruitment, mirroring historical *enganche*, creates conditions of dependent mobility by leveraging internalized hierarchies of race, class gender, and geography that mark certain workers as legitimately exploitable. Within the workshop, this dependency was managed through distinctly gendered mechanisms of control, including a racialized paternalism and an intense surveillance of women's affective and reproductive lives. An unwritten affective contract was shown to sustain these relations, where the strategic use of *cariño* (affection) by *patrones* and the co-production of obligation by *funcionários* obscured the underlying exploitation. Finally, the case of Walter's family revealed how these dynamics deeply reconfigure kinship ties. The similarity of experiences across a significant timeframe underscores the pervasive, enduring nature of these logics within Peruvian society and how they are reinscribed in transnational contexts.

This article's central contribution is thus an extension of Aníbal Quijano's theory of the coloniality of power, addressing its micro-level, intimate mechanisms through the lens of María Lugones's coloniality of gender. While grounded in the specificities of the Peruvian context, this study provides valuable insights about how colonial hierarchies shape intra-group racialization processes, moving beyond a simple host society-migrant binary. It reveals the political work of intimacy, showing how affective ties are mobilized to mediate labor control and exploitation in precarious migrant circuits. Furthermore, it compels a critical look at kinship and *paisano* networks, demonstrating they are not just sources of support but terrains where historical inequalities are reproduced and contested, thus complicating narratives of co-ethnic solidarity.

Ultimately, unpacking the logic of coloniality in these everyday, intimate spaces is crucial for developing more nuanced analyses of migration, labor, and migrants' subjectivities. Future research could fruitfully apply this lens comparatively across different South-South migration circuits and delve deeper into the long-term consequences of these experiences for migrants' wellbeing and sense of belonging, further illuminating the persistent, pervasive, yet often intimately managed, mechanisms of colonial power.

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