

Jessaca B. Leinaweaver

University of Manitoba

Paper: Intimate Labors Conference, October 4-6th, 2007, University of California, Santa Barbara

Companionship and Custom: The Mechanics of Child Circulation

I welcome the conference organizers' approach to "intimate labor," a category that usefully informs my work on child circulation, transnational families, adoption, and carework. My contribution to this conference would explore the intimate labor carried out by young people, usually young women, who are circulated into the homes of kin and acquaintances in the context of neoliberal Peru. This contribution will be based upon in-depth ethnographic research in Ayacucho, Peru, the bulk of which was carried out from 2001-2003 (although I continue to return regularly in the summers), and will take an anthropological, kinship-focused perspective.

In Peru, the longstanding practice of child circulation – where a young person goes, or is sent, to the home of a relative or acquaintance – has enabled and reinforced the internal migratory movements which characterized the past half-century. In child circulation, children usually relocate to the household of a better-off relative, where they "help" in the performance of ordinary domestic chores. The relationship between the child and the new parental figure is forged through long-term companionship in close spatial proximity, sharing everyday tasks such as cooking and housework.

But this practice is not only interpreted in terms of kinship – it also has recognized, though sublimated, economic underpinnings. The child's direction toward a better life is rooted in understandings of class, and the parental figure's relationship toward the child is expressed in monetary form via the *propina* (Spanish for "tip"), an allowance that is understood as proper to kinship rather than labor relations. The *propina* is a socioeconomic practice, located principally within and between Peruvian households, which is both gendered and classed. The *propina* is presented as voluntary, but I argue that a more accurate explication is that it reinscribes unequal social relations between classes and between adults and youths. When a young person accepts a *propina*, this reaffirms for the giver that he or she retains social superiority. Thus, the *propina* marks and makes tenable the inequalities contained within the social space of the household.

The analysis of the *propina* thus ultimately complicates kinship studies' egalitarian tendencies in interpreting family spaces. It speaks most clearly to the organizers' focus on "the social meanings of money and love." What I have throughout my work referred to as kinship – as, above, when contrasting kinship and labor – might more productively be glossed as intimacy, and the "intimate labor" approach works well for complicating and elucidating my Peruvian interlocutors' separation between work (done for a wage) and help (done out of love).