Lynching as a cultural system in Highland Bolivia

...For it is only by some bold poetry of thought that men can be strung up above the level of everyday conceptions to take a broader look upon experience or accept some higher principle of conduct.

R.L Stevenson, ‘Lay Morals’¹

This article is based on 18 months’ fieldwork on the Bolivian Altiplano between 2009 and 2011, based between the peri-urban neighbourhood of Rio Seco in El Alto, the Defensoria del Pueblo, a state-created human rights office in the town centre, and the natal village of the family with whom I lived, which governed itself through Indigenous Originary Peasant Justice. The article shows how aesthetic representations of ‘spectacular justice’ hanging on the streets of El Alto in the form of hanging puppets function to create the impression of a neighbourhood which is united around a legible normative order, and is quick to dispense justice when necessary. However, the same residents disavow the hanging puppets’ creation, and regard violence as both horrific and fundamentally un-Bolivian. My research participants treated the puppets as apparitions; that is, they disavowed an active role in their creation and maintenance, and I took them at their word in this. They represented the puppets to me as intrusions, as apparitions. I am not, therefore, interested in the ‘truth’ of the puppets’ origin. Rather, I use them as figures which, placed within an interpretive framework, reveal a fundamental contradiction at the heart of the Bolivian state’s ongoing project of ‘pluricultural’ constitutional reform: While Indigenous Originary Peasant Justice² is available to rural community members, it is constitutionally debarred from operating in

² The right to govern a community according to the ‘uses and customs’ of its members
the cities, where most self-identified indigenous Bolivians live, and where the perceived lack of citizen security is a major concern for residents.

El Alto is a fast-growing migrant city, spreading upwards in developing neighbourhoods and outwards across the Altiplano through new ‘urbanizations’ (urban settlements). This means that many streets and fields are dotted with half-constructed houses or walled-off plots awaiting construction. Migrants make gifting arrangements with one another to work on their respective houses. The family with whom I lived had built their house in this way but mostly through their own labour; the father of the family moved first to the city and exchanged his labour with a fellow migrant. His wife joined him after construction had begun, and helped complete the adobe-brick building with her baby ‘in an awayu³ on my back’. The family with whom I lived maintained economic, ritual, social and political obligations in their natal villages to a far greater extent than they did in the neighbourhood.

This article argues that law appears in different modes across these three sites; in the human rights office, cases are entextualised in files, which are re-inscribed into the larger (liberal, future oriented) legal framework of the state, and law appears as technique; in the Indigenous Originary Community, law appears as mythopoetics: as a series of ongoing reflections on the inheritance of the pre-Columbian legal cultures, and is materialized in ponchos, coca leaves and ceremonial whips; in the per-urban neighbourhood, there is no such larger imaginative framework governing normative ordering, therefore the puppets ‘stand in’ for, index, and in so doing create, a legible legal system fabricated⁴ from cloth,

³ A regionally-patterned cloth for carrying children, food or produce
rope and stories and experiences of citizen insecurity\(^5\). I turn to Derrida’s concept of 
*hauntology* to (paraphrasing Jameson\(^6\)) to destabilize the ‘density’ of the ‘living present’. If 
legal claims are made and pursued through case files and evidence in the human rights 
office, through ponchos, whips and coca leaves in the country, they are materialized 
through the hanging puppets in El Alto. I read these intrusive apparitions as displaced 
refractions of the figure of the Kari Kari, however transposed into an urban key: that of the 
thief. By ‘attending to the spectre’\(^7\) I aim to show how mythic figures from one socio-legal 
milieu reappear in another, and in so doing I aim to destabilize the relationship between 
normative orders in communities and neighbourhoods, illegibilities which trouble the 
people which frequently move between them to sow or harvest, plead, politick or party. 
Crucially, what I name ‘clandestine legal conduct’ in the neighbourhood reveals the absence 
of a cultural system but simultaneously brings a cultural system into being, one which 
addresses subjects both literally (in script) and sensually as they move through the city. This 
clandestine legal conduct has, however, the quality of mimesis\(^8\): it imperfectly brings a 
haphazard system into being through imitation, but it is brought into being so that it will 
ever have to be used, and the violence, both spectral and all-to-real which is feared by 
residents, is kept at bay. This, then, is an article about the efficacy of effigies.

The article begins by setting the scene and introducing the neighbourhood, before 
placing the neighbourhood in relation to the wider legal imaginary of Indigenous Originary


\(^7\) What is a hanged man if not a spectre? See Derrida, J. (1994). Specters of Marx: The state of the debt, the 
work of mourning, and the New international. New York: Routledge

\(^8\) Helen Risor makes this point well in Risør, Helene. 2010. “Twenty Hanging Dolls and a Lynching: Defacing 
Peasant Justice, before addressing itself to a close interpretation of the puppets as expressive of law’s hauntological mode.

The Anexo 25 de Julio, Rio Seco, El Alto
The Anexo 25 de Julio is located off the Avenida Costanera, a long, winding avenue which runs alongside the dry river which gives the area its name. At the top of the avenue, where the minibuses turn over the bridge and idle to collect fares, stand a small collection of tin shacks where ‘consultants’⁹ await custom on stools outside. The road is fenced by the river on one side, and a wall on the other. There are bridges crossing the river at several points, leading to an expanse of scrubland punctuated by a concrete football pitch and rusting playground, before houses and streets rise up on the other side. A large whitewashed church with a corrugated iron roof squats moodily over the river, ever silent and looking forsaken. Nearby is an overflowing rubbish tip, round which stray dogs crowd. At night the air is heavy and sometimes acrid with the tang of burning pyres of rubbish. Little fires dot the banks of the river, tended sometimes by a single furtive figure. Dogs approach until the flames lick too close and then retreat.

The street on which we lived was (in 2010) unmacadamised, and fewer than half the houses had been built to completion and occupied. The remainder were either under construction – a ground floor structure built, with supporting pillars for the future upper

⁹ Diviners of coca leaves, who can perform rituals which identify the sources of magic being used against one, and the rituals to counteract this magic. They also offer predictions and advice.
floors reaching hopefully into the sky, or merely a walled-off plot of land, sometimes with a message daubed on the outside wall, warning against trespassers.

Warnings preceded me every step of the way from La Paz to El Alto. Firstly from the well-meaning daughter of the family with whom I was rooming in La Paz (“You can’t go! The ‘Chinese’ up there will cut your face!”), and secondly from the neighbourhood walls themselves, as I walked up to the house at first I was addressed by two painted signs in succession. The first, painted on a corner wall, read:

“Alcoholics will be lynched on this street”. The second, three blocks further along, read “The thief will be lynched and burned on this street.” These promises were painted in a script which brooked no argument. The messages were starkly painted in simple capitals, otherwise the walls were a bare scumble of umber.11 Taken in dialogue with the figures which hung above them, the interplay of text and limply hanging or lightly swaying figure read like a promise made and a promise fulfilled. The multiplicity of the hanging figures seemed arrayed like flags on the Mall,12 but here to greet some visiting emissary from Hades. A verse of Pushkin’s came to mind:

What a number! Whither drift they?

What’s the mournful dirge they sing?

Do they hail a witches marriage?

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10 Exemplary here was the walled-off plot that was said to be intended as a police station. However during my 18 months living there it remained a patch of scrubland, and on only one occasion did I see two policemen cycling through the area.

11 Quite unlike those on the main road, which were thoroughly palimpsested with hand-painted advertisements, political slogans, tags, and graffiti.

12 London’s principal avenue for state rituals
Or a goblin’s burying?\textsuperscript{13}

However these figures were phantasmatic, not phantasmagorical, and their register was not the occult, but the eerie, which Fisher defines as “a failure of absence or a failure of presence”.\textsuperscript{14} The street seemed eerie because it was usually devoid of human presence (a failure of presence) but was nonetheless peopled by non-human agents in the rough outline of dead humans. This ‘failure of absence’ raises the following question for Fisher:

“In the case of the failure of absence, the question concerns the existence of agency as such. Is there a deliberate agent here at all? Are we being watched by an entity that has not yet revealed itself?”\textsuperscript{15}

Who made the puppets? No one would say. It was as though they had simply emerged as apparitions. When I asked, I was answered with awkwardness and much shuffling of feet. ‘They have always been here since I have been here’. The alcalde,\textsuperscript{16} I think.’ ‘The people got together to do it long ago’. There was a denial of authorship which mirrored the passive voice used in the painted warnings, the eerie absence of an agent’s hand. This disavowal of authorship – no one had personally stuffed the clothes or prepared the nooses, and no-one knew anyone who had, meant that if no-one is the author, everyone is the author, and there is safety in this faceless, collective anonymity. The puppets came from no-one and everyone.

The ‘zone’\textsuperscript{17} itself was represented to me by the people I met as a place of danger and uncertainty, although I never encountered problems on the streets other than from guard dogs. The rhetoric did not seem to me to match the reality, which was revealing of the

\textsuperscript{13} Quoted in the prologue to Dostoyevsky, F The Devils (2010) (A.P Briggs introduction, trans. Garnett, C.)
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. p63
\textsuperscript{16} The local council
\textsuperscript{17} ‘Zona’ was the Spanish word used for area of the city
phenomenological experience of danger and citizen insecurity. The family sold provisions from a shop at the front of the house. In the back was the family’s father’s workshop, where he would produce machines\textsuperscript{18} or cabinets built from metal. Customers to the provision shop were served through a small window, and the workshop was well hidden behind tall metal fences (as were all the other houses nearby) and guarded by dogs. The children were told not to stray far from the immediate vicinity, especially at night, when games of football were restricted to the area directly outside of the house.

This pervading sense of danger manifested itself in a number of ways, particularly through being invoked in talk and the repetition of rumour. Several apocryphal tales circulated; there was the vagrant killed and dumped beneath the bridge on the Avenida (or did he simply lie down there drunk and perish in the cold night?) or the elderly woman abducted in a car from the roadside by men who told her they were police but instead robbed her of all her market money and dumped her in an unfamiliar zone. There was also a story of a dead body rolled into the dry river from a moving car. I was able to contribute something myself to this body of knowledge. One Sunday night in the Ceja, El Alto’s central marketplace, I saw a man passed out drunk in the road; minibuses weaving narrowly passed his lolling head. A youth pushed through the pavement throng and, thrusting his arms under the slumped man’s armpits, began to pull him up. Just as he had raised the man to his feet the youth, in an unbroken balletic motion, maneuvered the man out of his jacket and slipped it over his own shoulders, patting the pockets down as he did so, seeming to find nothing that pleased him. He walked purposefully away allowing the man to crumple back into the road left with only a thin shirt half-covering his torso. On this freezing cold night four-thousand meters up

\textsuperscript{18} Such as a machine for washing quinoa, and beautiful kitchen furniture.
in the snow-covered Andes, without assistance the man could not have survived for long, let alone until morning. When I returned to the house the family hungrily devoured this story, ruminating on its significance all evening and holding it up as synecdochal of social relations in the city. The mother of the family pulled her stool (usually positioned beside the newly-purchased cooker) into the main room which served as bedroom and dining room, urging me to re-tell the story to each new family member who came in. The behaviour of the ladron was morally repulsive to them but also within their understanding of social relations in the city quite explicable, even, sadly, to be expected. It was treated as a melancholy index of moral decline, and was added to the body of demonology that existed around the figure of the ladron.

The rhetoric of fear and danger which circulated through the zone in El Alto was more explicit. I was told that previously, ladrones could be recognized by the scars on their faces, but that this was no longer a reliable identifier, and that they had learned how to disguise themselves. I learned that Peruvian gangs crossed the border clandestinely to wreak havoc in the poor neighborhoods. I learned that for the first years of the zone’s establishment the male neighbours had undertaken night patrols, with the object of deterring and apprehending ladrones and protecting their houses. The area at that time was less well-connected to the centre in this fast-growing city. There were no longer foot patrols at night while I lived there; however there remained a trace of this practice in a coded form of knocking which could be used by residents to rouse the street in cases of trouble, and in the knife which was sheathed in the fastener to my bedroom door. When mother and daughter walked to the bakery to

19 15 years prior to my arrival in 2009
20 As no-one I knew had any dealings with banks or a bank account, most of their wealth was kept in the house at any time, and it could not be left unoccupied for any time at all.
stock the shop for the day at four in the morning they would meet up with the women from another shop along the road and all go together, believing that there would be safety in numbers and routine. The family repeatedly stressed that I would need to be careful as an unfamiliar figure, and furthermore that it would be unwise to move around the zone at all after dark. The absence of security was a genuine worry for them and pre-occupied them greatly, not only in the zone itself but in the wider city more generally. The safety of the eldest daughter as she travelled to and from university was a further subject of concern, and she took the mobile phone with her often so that she could call the shop in order to inform the family to expect her as she was on her way home.

The imperatives of this rhetoric and reality of danger and these clandestine defensive collaborations collided late one night. The household was abed. I awoke in glinting moonlight to the sound of dogs barking – a common enough sound and no cause for alarm. But they persisted, and I heard the source of their disturbance, as someone began banging on the metal doors that shielded the house from the street. I waited. Surely someone at the front of the house would hear? On it went, the dogs becoming more agitated, snarling now. I put on some clothes and crept out into the yard. I tapped the window of the room in which the mother and father slept, there came no sound from within. I chapped again, harder this time, again nothing. I felt strangely constricted, not wanting to rouse the whole house.21 I went to the gate and asked who it was. I need beer came the slurred voice. A crate of beer. Confident that this was some trickster or chancer looking to rob the shop as soon as I undid the deadbolt, I told him that the shop was closed, and returned to my bed content that I had played my small part in defending the homestead from the threats of the night. In the morning, however,

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21 The peculiarly British dread of ‘making a fuss’.
I read my mistake in the crestfallen faces of the family when I recounted the night’s events. There had been a prior arrangement that I was not privy to - that a man who was having a party might stop by late and pick up more beer. The man’s visit had been legitimate and planned. The hostility to wanderers in the night had been circumvented by prior agreement. I had taken at face value the notion that any unexpected interloper was out of place, and could only be up to no good, when in fact clandestine agreements enabled neighbourly business to be done in the night. I had cost the family a considerable amount of money – a crate of beer would have brought in almost sixty Bolivianos – about five pounds at the time. I cursed myself for not banging on the window until I had woken the whole house.

The Noche de San Juan, which marks the June solstice, functioned as a ritual inversion of the zone’s danger, bringing people out from behind their iron fences. It was the only night I spent there during which people moved around the zone freely and fearlessly. The tradition dictates that bonfires are lit in front of the houses – often consuming old wood or furniture that is no longer needed. We had no such material to spare, but went walking around the zone with the children admiring the fires and exchanging pleasantries and sweets with the neighbours. This was highly exceptional; in the evenings and nights there was no street life to speak of.

I treat these practices and sediments of historic practices as examples of fugitive, clandestine legal conduct. There is a generalized fear of mobility in this zone. This place is also a non-place, nowhere, and is therefore open and penetrable and can be traversed by (potentially) anyone. It can be unclear who belongs and who does not. It is not legibly ordered, what legal conduct there is, is fugitive or clandestine, agreements made without reference to

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22 I consciously echo James Scott’s description of ‘fugitive political conduct’ in his Weapons of the Weak (1987)
authority or tradition. How then, to regulate this unstructured field? How to define and defend the neighbourhood?

The neighbourhood patrols\(^{23}\) defended the neighbourhood both practically (in the sense that malefactors could be accosted or apprehended) but also symbolically; they mapped out and demarcated the zone. If the boundaries are not clear, they must be set and marked and defended by human motion. During election time in the countryside, candidates and their supporters marched through the district, physically demarcating it and filling it with their slogans, injunctions, chastisements. At the village fiesta in Yanari, the procession marked out the village square, before moving into the Church and approaching the altarpiece to make offerings, before returning to the square again. Outside the family’s shop in Rio Seco, there was the occasional sight of a small wedding party, a bride and her bridesmaids, dancing in formation down the road in front of their house and circling the block. The co-ordinated movement of people\(^{24}\) (Carnival is exemplary here) demarcates areas and emplaces subjects, discourses and symbols within them in relation to the territory they traverse. The routinized, ritual or calendrical movements can do this in communities or the city centre (through which many of the great parades and carnivals pass)\(^{25}\) but the liminal zones do not have such rich sources of practice on which to draw\(^{26}\) – they are newer, their roots are shallower. How then to demonstrate that the zone is not ungoverned and an easy target? I suggest this is

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\(^{23}\) See Orin Starn on the ‘Rondas Campesinas’ for the significance of this form of legal practice across the Andes. In Starn, O. *Nightwatch* (1999)

\(^{24}\) One need only think of the Carnival here – see Tassi, N. TASSI N. ‘Dancing the image’. Materiality and spirituality in Andean religious images. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2012: 18, 285-310

\(^{25}\) See, for ex., Nico Tassi’s work on the *Fiesta de Gran Poder* above.

\(^{26}\) Sometimes, they invent their own – See (on the establishment of a new Fiesta in Cochabamba) Goldstein, D. *Dancing on the Margins: Transforming Urban Marginality through Popular Performance* in City and Society Volume 9, Issue 1 June 1997 Pages 201–215
accomplished by two kinds of legal materials which can be found in the streets: the puppets and the painted warnings.

We are therefore faced with two questions: What do the puppets reveal, stand for or symbolize? What do the puppets do? I do not mean this in a crudely functionalist sense. The worlds or relations they incite may have no necessary utility, no ultimate ‘function’. Rather, they are the justice of the bricoleur, not the engineer. They are a legal system, which may cover a territory of only a few peri-urban blocks, fashioned from the materials immediately to hand; in this case cloth and rope to be sure, but also those discursive, ‘cultural’ materials which the puppets themselves both index and enact. Their meaning, and therefore the success of the interpellative hail\(^{27}\) that they make, depends on them activating a cultural script. It is this cultural script which animates the puppets, and makes them explicable and threatening to interlopers or passers-by (and conversely makes of their eeriness a staging, a shadow-play, and therefore quite unthreatening to the local neighbours). The cultural script to which I am referring is that of lynching.

### Zone and village, neighbourhood and community

The phenomenon of lynchings in peri-urban and rural areas of Latin America have received much scholarly attention, addressing the relationship of vigilantism to the state and its borders\(^{28}\), gendered subjectivities (Jensen 2007), the shadow of militarization and human rights (Burrell and Weston 2007), mimesis of the state’s power over life and death (Risor 2010) and, in Bolivia, as a spectacular performance that aims to capture the state’s attention (Goldstein 2007). Furthermore, accounts of lynchings frequently circulate rapidly across the

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\(^{28}\) Abrahams, R. (1998) *Vigilant Citizens*
Bolivian media, the most notable during my time in Bolivia was the lynching of four policemen in Ayo Ayo, and the lynchings of three thieves in Achacachi, but incidents which occurred while I was living in La Paz, but news of which was widely discussed among my informants both in La Paz and El Alto.

In the 'anonymous' city, where the ties of mutual reciprocity and the transparent community tutelage of the fiesta cargo system have neither roots nor support, neighbourly mechanisms of guiding compliance do not operate. Where, in rural communities, there is a geographical and social transparency which presages communication (one can see a neighbour approaching from a distance, one can observe other houses and their occupants, as well as who is working in which field and for how long), in the evolving neighbourhoods of El Alto, this ancient form of behaviour control does not exist in the same way or to the same degree. There is simply less social space for communal life to flourish. The streets and plazas are seen more as spaces of danger than meeting-places, and are usually windswept and empty. Houses are set back from roads, hidden behind iron gates of eight or ten feet in height, behind which guard dogs await, making the practicalities of observation not only impossible but also potentially dangerous. These messages, such as “The ladron will be burned in this street” are testament to the uncertainty of these zones, and a challenge to the status of the visitor. In a rural community the members can ‘see’ the markings dividing the fields even where there are none, and laws are ‘written in the heart’. Warnings are not required as the communities themselves are constituted by Indigenous Originary Peasant law and practice.

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29 See Simmel, G. (1903) *The Metropolis and Mental Life*
30 This was said to me by several informants
31 Indigenous Originary Peasant Law’ is the appellation given to indigenous justice systems by the Political Constitution of the State of 2009, and bears the traces of previous discourses of decolonization: the ‘peasant’ status from the 1952 revolution, the ‘originary’ status flowing from the ‘neoliberal-multicultural reforms’ (Sieder, Postero) of the 1990s, and ‘Indigenous’ flowing from the indigenous governmentality of the MAS government.
– who would need a warning? There is no presumed subject who could not have internalized such a warning, and strangers can be seen making their approach from distance. In the city, however, interlopers must be interpellated as they move from street to street. An unmarked zone could be a lawless zone, and a lawless zone is a defenceless zone. When it comes to the hanging puppets – well, with apologies to McLuhan, the medium really is the message. Both signs and puppets are interpellative gestures, hails which address subjects as they pass and thus implicate them in the street’s normative order, and they do so in the borrowed language of spectacular justice.

I argue therefore that this symbolically demarcated space can only be apprehended in relation to the socio-political roots of the zone’s residents in rural communities which practice Indigenous Originary Peasant Justice. This relation also accounts for the characteristics of the aesthetic materializations of law on El Alto’s streets. I argue that they appear as emissaries of law’s ‘hauntological mode’.

A number of ethnographic facts must be brought back into the analysis before we go further. Firstly, the highest form of punishment available to most rural communities which operate their own Indigenous Originary Peasant justice is banishment. In the village of Yauri Kurawa, the parents of a murderer were banished from the village and their property seized and redistributed after the murderer had fled the town by night. Banishment is therefore available as the highest form of punishment to both malefactors and their relations under certain circumstances. Secondly, there is the generalized fear of the generic figure of the

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32 See McLuhan, M (1964) Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man
33 It bears remembering that many of the presumed subjects of this street-level law cannot read.
34 Both through the text and through the sensuous aesthetics of the puppets.
36 In this case, where they assist the offender’s escape or help to cover up his crime.
thief, the interloper, the outlaw of which the vampiric Kari Kari, who nourishes himself with fat extracted from his victims, is one mythopoetic embodiment. But like Indigenous Originary Peasant justice itself, the Kari Kari’s power seems to dwindle as he crosses from country to city. People in rural communities feared the Kari Kari, people in the cities feared thieves. Goldstein points out that the figure of the thief takes on nightmarish characteristics and gives rise to a demonology of thieves, that is a body of knowledge around how to identify them (for example, they can be recognized by the scars on their faces but the absence of scars proves nothing as they are clever and know how to disguise themselves; Peruvians are inveterate thieves, and are better at it than Bolivians).  In rural communities, theft is so explicitly prohibited, so antithetical to the moral foundations of life that thieves place themselves beyond the register of moral personhood altogether. In this sense it is unsurprising that they should take on the numinous qualities of demons (they are relentless, multiple, well-hidden or disguised, merciless…). Every migrant to the city must know that there could be two or three banished thieves following him that it is not only the virtuous who are on the move from rural communities. These antisocial exiles will head for the city and to get to the city they will pass through the liminal zones. And let us not forget the circulating stories and personal experiences of theft, violence and danger suffered or felt at the hands of strangers. All of this creates an atmosphere of tension and fear.

I argue then, that these puppets can be interpreted as efforts to embody, fix, and substantiate these exiled thieves and murderers who haunt the social imaginary. Through their memorialization in the streets, they are materialized and made visible, judged, tried and conquered. Above all, they are rendered visible and immobile.
There is a further temporal dimension to be explored here. The signs that they wear point to the future, as do the written slogans – the thief WILL be lynched and burned on this street. But their form testifies to a lynching which has already happened (and to a crime which has already happened). They activate the street as a site of justice in *potentia* whilst indexing the street as a site of justice already dispensed. They create a narrative temporal chain of events. The Puppets are witnesses to the street’s potentiality for spectacular justice, but they also testify:

– ‘see? These are the ropes I forged in life’.

I therefore ask, do the puppets belong to the present, past or future? They index a symbolic (past) lynching; they hang inertly in the present, yet they announce themselves as guides to the future (‘the thief will be lynched and burned on this street’). But this threatened future lynching’s only function is to baptise the present with the threat of violent punishment, and to interpellate those passing into this logic. My argument is that if this is indeed an uncertain zone, betwixt and between temporalities (neither the ancestral, cyclical countryside nor the moving, developing, linear city proper) then it is unsurprising that law there appears in a hauntological mode, as “relics of a lost presence”. The vacant lot allegedly earmarked for a police station is hauntological, an absent presence here, a (non-)apparition of what Goldstein has called the ‘phantom state’. The puppets, in this reading, function on another level simultaneously from that of interpellative gesture or hail marking out the legal field and addressing passersby. They are also hauntological figures; they make material the absent figures who haunt the social imaginary – the wandering thieves and murderers, the urban

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38 This is not law in the future perfect tense. Rather,
40 Fisher, M. *Ghosts of my Life* p130
41 See Goldstein *Ibid.* pp80-85
counterparts of the Kari Kari. They are an attempt to ward off thieves and wrong-doers through bringing thieves and wrongdoers into being and conquering them. The construction of the thieves and wrongdoers (whether as Kari Karis or thieves) can be read alongside the construction of the violent past and as its consequence, as the thieves become inheritors of senseless colonial cruelty. The puppets are a (disavowed) tableau of the absence of security, of the absence of moral wholeness and the absence of legal legibility in the zone. They make these absences present in the street and present in time. They are a transubstantiation of the cloth and rope of fear and normative uncertainty into legal memorials, indexes and hails, and in their turn they activate the street as a fraught space of justice, interpellating subjects as they read the words or pass beneath the phantasmagorical eves the puppets make.

It is certain that the myth of the Kari Kari is rooted in real historical practices – the extraction of fat from human cadavers by Catholic/Franciscan monks during the Middle Ages, and the use of ‘Indian’ fat by Conquistadors to heal horses and grease rifles.42 Knowledge of this practise was shared and constructed in ‘hush arbours and fairs’43 and passed down through oral tradition. But the symbolic utility of the Kari Kari means it is an adaptive figure which takes on new characteristics according to present material conditions and cultural transcripts. This historically-rooted figure becomes a fugitive through time and changes his appearance from a pale-skinned foreigner to potentially any Bolivian; he changes his mode of operation from striking at close hand to striking from afar; he comes to embody the spirit of colonialism and what the Comaroffs have called ‘millennial capitalism’ and is freighted with immoral associations (he seems to embody the (structural) opposite of the Pachamama – he

43 Again, I intend to echo Scott here, specifically his discussion of hidden transcripts, see Scott Ibid. pp
takes and weakens where she nourishes and strengthens). This figure escapes its time and, transposed into the key of the thief, is materialized, tried and strung up on the streets of Rio Seco. Fisher⁴⁴ (in the context of a discussion of the film The Shining) is apposite here:

*If there are ghosts, then what was supposed to be a New Beginning, a clean break, turns out to be a repetition, the same old story. The ghosts were meant to have been left in the Old World...but here they are...⁴⁵*

There are further hauntologies at play here. Firstly, the coded knock retains in its potential for activation the memory of the night patrol. This is also the memory of the insecurity of the zone’s establishment. This memory ‘haunts’ the present, and is kept alive through the potentiality in the present for the knock’s deployment and the affects of threat and fear that this memory generates. The (future) time when such defensive practices can be stood down was never spoken about, and remains out of reach.

These connections suggest to me that the hanging puppets can bear the symbolic weight of a lynching so that the flesh and blood bodies of intruders or interlopers do not have to. The signs and puppets function as a vernacular through which the residents can present themselves as united and merciless, without in fact having to be so. They are partaking of a language available to them, a cultural script of immediate and pitiless street justice, and in so doing forestalling the need for brutal violence by making of it a symbolic shadow-play, killing the myth so as not to have to kill the man. The puppets are symbols, warnings of what might befall not just the thieving interloper or careless drunk, but of what justice is. It is something,

⁴⁴ Here in the context of a discussion of the film The Shining (1980)
in Goldstein’s words, that can be made with one’s own hands. But they also, by their presence and their citation of lynching, create a demotic legal order, which may stretch only for a few city blocks, and be effective as far as the residents are willing to live up to their threats, and as far as any interlopers are prepared to pay heed to the warnings.

The one recent occasion on which the coded knock was used to rouse the street had ended in the interloper being chased off. This story was relayed to me in the context of a discussion about the zone’s lack of security, but it was a discussion which shaded into a discussion of the horrer, and fundamental un-Bolivianness, of violence. Violence, it was said, had not existed in Bolivia prior to the Spanish invasion, where (significantly) killings and ‘burnings’ were taught to the first Bolivians and have been multiplying and metastasizing ever since, echoing down through time since that originary act of violent theft and settlement. This version of the past functions as the structural opposite of the present; it is peaceful and secure where the present is violent and insecure. And in occupying this space in a political ontology it becomes active – as a (partially) recuperable past, as a spur to change the present. It is a past that vindicates the present’s uncertainties. It is, to borrow Fisher’s phrase,

“A phantasmatic past that can only be retrospectively – retrospectrally – posited.”

Everywhere I went on the high plains, a horror of, and antipathy to violence was clearly enunciated. The signs (the ladron will be lynched and burned on this street) communicate what the cultural script of lynching contains and does not contain. To lynch is not to kill; the lynched man remains alive. The burning is an exemplary punishment and one which would

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46 Goldstein, D. *The Spectacular City*


48 Fisher, M. *Ghosts of My Life* pp122
not normally form part of the chain of lynching events. Indeed, lynching was only ever represented to me as a lamentable but necessary instrumental action, and never an end in itself. So Mallku Tomas, of the Indigenous community of Yauri Kurawa, was the only person to tell me that lynching could form a part of indigenous originary Peasant Justice; but only as a means to the identification or apprehension of the perpetrator – not as a punishment.

It is apposite here to identify the opposing political logics of the different spaces of the indigenous community and the migrant-settled peri-urban zone, and I do this through the historico-conceptual vocabulary of Foucault. He reproduces the measures to be applied when a plague enters the town from the end of the 17th Century, and specifies the practices of surveillance and separation that were to be used based on a system of registration backed by force. The response to the plague is an inturning, an individuating and identifying, a segregating of people in the interests of containment, and the absolute exercise of power over these newly disaggregated bodies, now inscribed with their ‘true’ individuality. As Foucault notes,

*Behind the disciplinary mechanisms can be read the haunting memory of 'contagions', of the plague, of rebellions, crimes, vagabondage, desertions, people who appear and disappear, live and die in disorder.*\(^\text{49}\)

\(^{49}\) Foucault, *Panopticism* p4
The political dream of the leper, by contrast, is that of exile – the leper is banished so that the community he leaves behind remains pure (or is purified by the banishment of its pestilential members):

*Underlying disciplinary projects the image of the plague stands for all forms of confusion and disorder; just as the image of the leper, cut off from all human contact, underlies projects of exclusion.*

The logic of banishment applies to the Indigenous rural community, and that of individuation to the peri-urban neighbourhood. The liminality of the Anexo 25 de Julio is testified to by the tension between these ‘projects of exclusion and inclusion’, and the fact that every resident is *simultaneously* peri-urban *vecino*, rural *comunario* and national *ciudadano*. Law appears in a hauntological mode (as displaced relics and absent presences) in the territories where these tensions become most visible: the liminal urban neighbourhoods in which lynching stories, effigies and rumours of *ladronismo* circulate. I take this to be a feature of the uneven landscapes of postcolonial societies, particularly those, like Bolivia, where law is where meaning is made because that is where “meaning is to be found”.

I argue in this essay that the ultimate hauntology is that of lynching itself, that the puppets are the embodied ghosts of phantom lynchings, and through their haunting presence is the legal field demarcated and those subjects moving within it interpellated. The possibility of spectacular justice haunts the politico-legal imaginary in two directions. It appears from the juridical metropole as a barbaric spectre from the past demanding a response in the form of

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50 Foucault, M *Ibid.* p5
security; viewed from the countryside it looks like a perversion (in that it is matter out of place\textsuperscript{52}) of Indigenous Originary Peasant justice.\textsuperscript{53} The spectacular\textsuperscript{54} violence is here transposed into the mundane, the everyday, but the trace of violence remains. Taking into account their spatial, temporal, and mythopoetic associations and connections, these materials, these nightly statutes, these puppets signify law in a hauntological key.\textsuperscript{55} Daniel Goldstein argues that lynching in this context does not constitute a cultural system. I would modify this – I think lynching here both is and is not a cultural system. What I mean by that is that if there were a comprehensible or legible system of authority such as exists in the rural village,\textsuperscript{56} there would be no need for the puppets. The puppets gesture toward a system of immediate and brutal punishment whose existence the residents disavow. So the puppets, in their corporeal materiality, bring the system (which does not exist) into being. Their material presence depends on the system’s nonexistence, and yet simultaneously brings this non-existent system into being. Lynching is a cultural system which (simultaneously) exists and does not exist, and the puppets are the matrix through which this (non)existence is made visible and enacted.

Conclusion

Viewed from one angle, the residents of the zone are behaving as exemplary neoliberal subjects, taking responsibility for their own security and, unable to afford to pay private security guards as the wealthy zones can, rationally deploying a cheaper alternative. From another angle, there is a counterhegemonic potential latent within this cultural system – that

\textsuperscript{52} See Douglas, M (1966) Purity and Danger
\textsuperscript{55} As opposed to the human rights office, where law appears in a technological key; or in the rural community, where law appears in a mythopoetical key.
\textsuperscript{56} Indigenous Originary Peasant Justice
if the people can make a revolution in these streets,\textsuperscript{57} why not justice also? If indigenous law can only be located in the countryside, and the state’s law fails to instantiate and define itself in the uncertain, developing zones, then a legal bricolage is necessary – a fashioning of legal materials from the resources to hand in a zone in which neither indigenous justice nor state justice are realizable.

This article has troubled the notion of a unitary state law by showing a case in which often conflicting normative orderings are distributed across a space (the Altiplano) which is traversed by migrants bringing legal ideas, practices and materials with them as they go. Further, this article has shown how law appears in different modes across these sites, anchoring itself in, respectively, the distant past, the promised future, and the beleaguered present. Finally, this article has shown how a legal or cultural system is not constituted by presences alone, but by absences and their indexical apparitions.

It is unclear how the relations between these distinct ways of ‘imagining the real’ will play out. I argue that we can only understand the shaping presence of law in Bolivia - the spaces and possibilities of justice that it both opens and closes, through the experiences and ideas of lay legal thinkers and practitioners and their interactions and movements within and between larger systems and imaginaries. It is through their particular struggles and understandings that universal emancipatory possibilities may be glimpsed. Those possibilities inhere in the subjectivity of the vecino, the subjectivity of the Indigenous Originary Peasant, and perhaps even in that of the liberal subject itself. But these subjectivities each contain darker possibilities and there are haunted by spectres, which are made material by anonymous residents on the streets of Rio Seco.

\textsuperscript{57} As they did in 2003 –a reason why a rhetoric of marginality misses the mark here.