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# Gift-giving and Indebtedness

## Enchained Relationships in a Brazilian Private Museum

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Through [the museum] Artesin, people are having the opportunity to grind their own mill... Many could look at this and say: 'Oh, this is a broken, deactivated mill with nothing to offer anyone'. But we can look at it differently: Artesin, together with Dr. Marcelo and Mrs. Laura, gave us many opportunities. And it has provided opportunities for each of us until today.

— *Resident of Vila Agostina who runs a restaurant and inn*<sup>1</sup>

To 'grind your own mill' is a figurative term that refers to the activity of the old sugar mill that, for almost seven decades, ground sugar cane and provided jobs for the local population of Vila Agostina. Located in a rural area in Brazil a two-hour drive from the state's capital, the tiny village surrounded by green

mountains is home to approximately eight thousand people. Where there was once an active sugar mill which closed down, leaving locals with no job or hope for many years, nowadays a private art museum and botanical garden has become the village's centrepiece. Many villagers and the museum founders explained to me that the idea behind this phrase was that each person could now invest in their own business, making the local economy revolve around the tourism provided by the new museum Artesin.

Artesin was established in the mid-2010s by the couple Marcelo and Laura and has ever since been impacting the everyday lives of its residents. The restaurant and inn owner from this paper's opening quote explained that she first heard the phrase from Marcelo and then embraced it. Artesin transformed her life; she told me: 'It provided me with everything

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I have here'. Although born in the village, since there were no job opportunities after the mill closed down, she left to work in a restaurant in another town. As her father fell ill, she had to return. She went straightaway to Marcelo asking for a job. Unexpectedly, he proposed that she open a restaurant on a property he provided. She was surprised: 'Although we all knew Marcelo, I was unknown to him. Still, he trusted me'. She had no money: 'I didn't have even one real coin in my pocket; I'm not exaggerating', she said. Marcelo gave her money for the launch; from then on, her restaurant took off. Despite difficulties on the way, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, her endeavour progressed: supported by Marcelo, she also expanded the restaurant into an inn and said it was going well.

At first sight, 'to grind your own mill' conveys the idea of villagers' emancipation through tourism entrepreneurship, just as in the restaurant and inn owner's case. This is also the idea that Artesin's founders expressed when explaining the social and economic development project with the museum as its centrepiece. As the museum attracts tourists to the region, the local population can regain access to economic capital by offering services in the tourism sector. In this sense, Artesin is a socio-economic project with neoliberal elements.

However, for villagers to effectively 'grind their own mills', that is, for them to invest in and develop their tourism-related businesses, they rely on the support offered by Marcelo and Laura. As in the opening example, most villagers do not have the basic resources to start their businesses, so they turn to the founding couple. Hence, the economic logic of entrepreneurship only works as long as the founders provide locals with properties, money, and ideas for them to develop their

endeavours. Moreover, the success of villagers' businesses is directly connected to the museum's ability to attract tourists. Thus, the entrepreneurial project is closely linked to Artesin and its founders. Although 'to grind your own mill' conveys the idea of aiming for villagers' economic emancipation, it also means that locals are chained to the museum founders.

There is, therefore, a contradiction: while the museum founders aim for the villagers' economic emancipation, the way the initiative is implemented through a development project with neoliberal elements maintains locals' dependency on the founders. To comprehend this contradiction, this paper draws on the concept of debt within the context of gift-giving (Mauss 1990[1954]; Graeber 2011). The lens of gift-giving allows us to identify the creation of social bonds between founders and residents through indebtedness. As this paper argues, the museum founders' generosity stems partially from a sense of responsibility from their ancestors - the sugar mill owners who left the village after the government confiscated the mill due to financial mismanagement. While the villagers appreciate the generosity of the museum founders, it often makes them feel indebted, creating a sense of imprisonment (Mauss 1990[1954]; Peebles 2011).

Furthermore, these relational ties in Vila Agostina are not only forged through indebtedness but also encompass historical and territorial dimensions. To further capture how these dimensions are entangled, I draw from the metaphor of chains. In their capacity to forcefully bind people or things, chains shed light on the mutual production of debt relations between museum founders and villagers, intertwined with their past and territory.

## Gift-giving, debt, and chains

In the Maussian theorisation of the gift system, reciprocating is considered in symbolic terms as a mutual exchange, in which the primary gesture of giving seeks an act in return (1990[1954]). Beyond the obligation to reciprocate, there is also the obligation to give and to receive (ibid.). Such symbolic actions of continuous reciprocity constitute the basis of social relationships through creating and maintaining social bonds. In this sense, 'the gift is not a thing but a social connection' (Godbout and Caillé 1998: 7).

The gift also entails the notion of credit (Mauss 1990[1954]: 46), hence, the commitment underlying its acceptance emphasises the centrality of debt within the structure of gift-giving (Bäumer, Escobar and Mulder 2023). As Mauss emphasises in his analysis of 'archaic' societies, the gift 'is dangerous to take [...] because [...] [it] forges a bilateral, irrevocable bond' (1990: 76). By accepting a gift, one is committing oneself since '[a] gift is received 'with a burden attached' (ibid.: 53). In this way, '[t]he recipient puts himself in a position of dependence *vis-à-vis* the donor' (ibid.: 76). Therefore, the act of giving is not only a way of displaying one's superiority, but also, if the gift is accepted and not reciprocated appropriately, it allows the debtor 'to become client and servant, to become small, to fall lower' (ibid.: 95). As such, the debtor is often put in a position of weakness. Thus, credit and debt relations, such as those analysed by Mauss, are not only keys to building social bonds but also contribute to creating hierarchies and reinforcing power relations (Peebles 2011; Davey 2024). When a gift cannot be reciprocated, that is, when debt cannot be repaid, it creates

a sense of indebtedness, keeping debtors attached to creditors in power-imbalanced relationships. In this way, indebtedness can be imprisoning for the debtor (Mauss 1990[1954]; Peebles 2011).

Scholars have further discussed the burdensome nature of debt through gift-giving. Iskander, Guermond, and Brickel (2023) analysed how people in rural Cambodia are entangled through debt relations in microfinance programs. They argue that in circumstances of over-indebtedness, 'people do not live *in* debt [...], but *with* it' (ibid.: 47, emphasis in the original). By identifying indebtedness as a quotidian issue that people endure, the authors situate such experience within the moral economy of suffering. Also, in a setting of microfinance development projects in rural areas, Waltz (2023) identifies the creation of a perpetual cycle of indebtedness. Through the relational aspect of debt collection among networks of entrustment, she argues that NGOs mobilised existing notions of sociality and reciprocity to secure repayment. Despite intending locals' development, rural poverty is perpetuated through indebtedness. In these studies, as in Graeber's (2011) definition of debt as an obligation tied to money, the monetary aspects of debt stand out since debtors are expected to pay back their creditors. Unlike a mere obligation, Graeber argues that debt can be precisely quantified (ibid.). Still, these studies also emphasise the morality of social relations unfolding from debt.

Similarly, debt is central to the case of Vila Agostina. Despite deriving from monetary transfer, repayment is not necessarily precisely quantified in monetary terms. Yet, reciprocity is expected since, as I will argue in this article, 'gifts are not freely given; they are also not really

disinterested' (Mauss 1990[1954]: 94). Therefore, due to this lack of a clear form and time in which reciprocity is expected, a sense of imprisonment of debtors towards creditors ensues.

Moreover, in Vila Agostina, indebtedness ties are not only relational but also forged through historical and territorial dimensions. The museum founders and the villagers are bound by their ancestors and their attachment to the territory in a way they cannot easily break free. This article will capture this capacity to forcefully bind people or things together through the metaphor of chains. By looking at how the actors are enchained not only through debt but through their history and the land, other aspects of these chains come to the fore, such as historical accountability, reckoning, and mutuality.

## Data collection

The topic of private museums' relationship with their surrounding local communities has been under-investigated (Kolbe et al. 2022). This analysis contributes by bringing an empirical perspective that looks at a private art museum and its embedding in a local context. As part of a broader project investigating Brazilian private art museums, this study draws from seven months of fieldwork in São Paulo in 2021 and 2022. Artesin is one of nine private museums in Brazil, and it was mentioned by some of the art actors I interviewed. They shared their perspectives about the museum, its founders, and their experiences at Vila Agostina, contributing to the empirical material for this study. As part of a multisited fieldwork, the core of this analysis lies in a short-term ethnography (Pink and Morgan 2013) conducted in

the village in 2021. For eight days, I immersed myself in the life of its dwellers, conducting participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

Considering the 'ethnographic place' as extending beyond the fieldwork site 'to the contexts in which it is analysed and disseminated' (Pink and Morgan 2013: 354), in this research, the 'ethnographic place' also encompassed engagements with art actors and ongoing discussions with a scholar researching the institutionalisation of private museums such as Artesin (see Rosa 2021). Additionally, after leaving the site, I maintained contact with some interlocutors.

I was introduced to one of Artesin's founders, Marcelo, by a curator who had previously visited the museum. After sending Marcelo a message detailing my research scope, he replied, 'It would be a great pleasure to have you here and to show you our entire project'. When I asked for recommendations for accommodation, I was surprised by his response, 'You are our guests; you don't need to worry, just come'. Although I had heard art actors mention the couple invited them, I was positively impacted by Marcelo's generosity.

Staying at the founders' home, referred to as *Casa Grande* (Great House), allowed me to experience their routine by sharing moments with their family, other guests, and the house staff. I collected data from when I woke up until I slept. In the first three days, I conducted participant observation and engaged in long conversations with Marcelo and Laura. During breakfast, lunch, and dinner, they talked about the project and shared several stories illustrated by photos, videos, and artefacts. Beyond the premises of their house, we visited the museum and the orchidarium, where I could observe how they interacted with villagers and tourists.

The remaining days were dedicated to the village. As it is important for short-term ethnographers to engage participants from the beginning (Pink and Morgan 2013), and using the shortcut I had through the founders, I quickly created rapport with some dwellers. I spent half or an entire day with three residents, who guided me around and introduced me to potential interviewees. Two local guides guided me as a visitor, allowing me to join their daily activities and observe how they navigated different spaces and interacted with people. We visited several sites: the museum, the deactivated sugar mill, public schools, the healthcare centre, a church, and local businesses. Additionally, they took me to watch the sunset from a mountaintop, and brought me to two neighbouring towns and a party. These visits gave me a wider perspective of the village and the locals' daily lives.

I conducted thirteen semi-structured interviews with locals: in their houses, workplaces, and the museum. Six interviewees were women, and seven were men. Most were in their 40s and 50s, apart from three people who were in their 70s, one in her 90s, and two in their 20s. Except for one, all resided in the village. The only outsider was a colonel from a neighbouring town involved in a regional development initiative with the museum founder. Interviewees were of Indigenous or Quilombola descent, which are historically the predominant ethnic origins in the region. Seven interviewees developed businesses for tourists, including accommodation rentals, an inn, a camping site, restaurants, an art space, and tourism guiding. Of those not engaged in entrepreneurship, two were schoolteachers, and three were retired: two former mill workers and a former domestic worker.

The founding couple suggested all interviewees. As my time in the village was short, I embraced their suggestions. While I initially thought that having the founders as gatekeepers could influence the outcomes of my research, I was surprised that they insisted that I talk to people who were critical of the project and with whom they did not have a good relationship. They mentioned it would be important to 'hear all sides'. Thus, I believe I had the chance to listen to varied perspectives. Perhaps it was a way of getting me to report back to them, as Marcelo later inquired about how the conversations had gone. Despite being an outsider, I was aware that since I was staying at the founders' house, villagers could think I would report back to them about my findings. To avoid that, I emphasised that I was an independent researcher, not tied to the founders.

As is usual in ethnographic writing, I used pseudonyms for the museum, their founders, the village, and the mill to protect their privacy. I also anonymised all other interviewees to protect confidentiality.

### **Usina Agostina: The first debt**

To delineate how chains have been forged in Vila Agostina, I first turn to its historic core element: sugar. This commodity is deeply rooted in Brazil's colonial past. During the colonial period, sugar was one of the most important goods in Brazil. The Portuguese colony was the world's largest sugar producer through slavery in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Mintz 1985; Schwarcz and Starlin 2015). Until the fifteenth century, sugar was a luxury product used to display

wealth and power (Mintz 1985). As sugar demand in Europe rose, Portugal developed its colony into a productive system, exploiting the land through sugar monoculture (Schwarcz and Starlin 2015). Led by *Senhores de Engenho*, the Mill Lords, who received land grants from the crown, the force behind sugar production relied on enslaved Indigenous and African people. With the formal end of slavery in 1888, formerly enslaved people remained in the plantations and were hired as wage workers. Despite receiving low wages or compensation through land tenure, they continued living in precarious situations (Eisenberg 1972).

Echoing colonial times, villages were developed around the sugar plantations and mills to accommodate the new rural proletariat. These can be considered one-company towns (De Souza Santos 2023), where most residents work for a single company, which owns most houses and shops. This model has been perpetuated and is still present in Brazil. Some characteristics of the relationship between mill owners and their subordinates endure in various settings within Brazilian society. Regarded as the local nobility, the *Senhores de Engenho* governed through their capital, dominance, authority, leadership, and ownership of lands and enslaved people (Schwarcz and Starlin 2015). They represented absolute local power, which endures as a reminiscence of the patriarchal society from the colonial period (ibid.). Such power is linked to practices such as *Mandonismo*, common in rural areas, which consisted of population control by the *mandão*, the big boss. *Clientelismo* is also related as it involves an exchange of favours for political support. Moreover, *Coronelismo* is characterised by the control exerted by the colonels in rural areas in the Brazilian

Old Republic. All these practices symbolise the *Senhor de Engenho's* authority and domination over its workers, reinforcing the exchange of favours.

Vila Agostina is named after a sugar mill that operated there from the late 1920s until the late twentieth century: Usina Agostina. The mill was founded by a member of a traditional and powerful family, who developed the village around the mill for its workers to reside in. It was one of the biggest sugar mills in Brazil in the 1950s, and while active, the village's economy revolved around sugarcane monoculture. During the 1980s, a sugar crisis impacted the production of Brazilian mills, including Usina Agostina, which began to experience difficulties. In the early 1980s, during the Brazilian dictatorship, the government confiscated the mill and its surrounding 24,000 hectares of land. Former workers did not receive their due monetary compensation and were left with no prospects for work or a future in the village.

I heard different accounts about how that episode unfolded. Marcelo, the great-grandson of the mill's founder and now the founder of Artesin, retells the story, saying that the military government took the mill from its shareholders against their will under the pretext that it would sell it and pay them back, which never happened. Then, the mill was inactive for two years, only accumulating debts and getting involved in legal processes. After that, in the mid-1980s, a legal intervention occurred, 'culminating in the mill's destruction', as Marcelo lamented.

Differently, some residents whom I interviewed claimed that the mill had already been indebted to its employees under the family's management since the 1970s due to the sugarcane crisis, which resulted

in frequent delayed salaries. Thus, according to some former workers, the legal intervention was based on the family's financial mismanagement. The appointed judicial administrator divided the land among relatives and friends, and some residents were nominated as judicial interveners, such as a former worker I interviewed. While they managed the mill after the family had withdrawn, he said that despite their efforts and due to corruption among some administrators, the mill could not recover. It was officially declared bankrupt in the late 1990s.

The former workers initially fought for their overdue and unpaid salaries but soon realised they would not receive anything. According to a former labourer I interviewed, most workers, representing 90 per cent of the residents then, were never compensated. As a result, the villagers were left without any financial resources. Some dwellers viewed the village's abandonment as an outcome of the owning family's mismanagement and the subsequent corrupt administration. For instance, an ex-labourer emphasised that 'the loyal depositary has become unfaithful, and we were left waiting for something since the patrimony is gone'. Despite the mill operating on and off after its bankruptcy, according to the former worker, higher-paid labourers only received minimum wage due to administrative corruption, making it difficult for them to survive. This situation sheds light on how chains are forged through debt relations. The unpaid workers were chained to the mill, and thus to the territory, partially since they were hoping for compensation to come, partially because were in no financial condition to move.

While poverty has been an issue in the village for

many years, it worsened, especially after the mill shut down. At the beginning of the 1990s, the municipality encompassing Vila Agostina had an extremely low Human Development Index (HDI) below 0.3. At the start of the 2000s, it was ranked among the 135 poorest municipalities out of more than 5,500 in Brazil. I heard several stories of how people survived after the legal intervention. As a resident told me:

When the mill closed down for good, when it stopped, the question of survival came up, didn't it? And a lot of people starved. Because people depended on it, many were getting older and couldn't get a job elsewhere.

Some people relied on retirement funds to support their families, while others received government food aid. Some moved out to build their life elsewhere, or at least one family member left to work away and provide for those who stayed. Still, villagers faced severe difficulties. One story that often resurfaced was about consecutive robberies at the village supermarket. Many residents conspired to rob it, and its workers allowed it to happen, knowing that people were desperate and starving.

### **Paying off a debt**

While Marcelo does not share the same view about who is responsible for the debt to former workers, his actions indicate that he acknowledges his family's responsibility to the villagers. In the late 2000s, the confiscated properties of Vila Agostina were put up for

sale through a judicial auction. Marcelo, who had spent his childhood in the village while his father managed the mill's operations for many years, reacquired the land that once belonged to his family. Initially, he kept the land at a distance, as he had the cane growing there produced in another mill.

Only a few years later, he returned to the area with his wife, Laura. This return, along with the land repurchase and the development project centred around Artesin, reflects Marcelo's commitment to the village's future and its residents. While not explicitly stated, his return can be seen as a way to re-establish social ties with the former workers and their descendants, which his ancestors had severed.

To pay off his ancestors' supposed debt, Marcelo engaged in gift-giving towards villagers, as I will further develop. However, due to an unequal power hierarchy, this dynamic became unbalanced. Two major gifts from the founding couple to the villagers can be outlined. The first gift was allowing locals to reside in the reacquired properties without charging rent. The second gift involved developing a project to boost the local economy centred around Artesin. While these gifts may appear generous, the recipients are often unable to reciprocate accordingly. Considering there are no truly free gifts (Mauss 1990[1954]), what could the founding couple expect in return?

In the coming sections, I will detail how this gift-giving dynamic unfolded, reinforcing the social ties between the museum founders and the former mill workers and their descendants. As I will argue, these ties unfolded through a mutual production of relations of debt and indebtedness, which are also enchainned through historical and territorial dimensions.

## The first gift: Forging historical and territorial chains

After repurchasing the land, Marcelo's first gift was allowing locals to reside there without charging rent. He said it had always been like that, and villagers could not afford it. By taking responsibility for the former workers and their descendants, who were 'adrift, with no prospects', as he put it, Marcelo seemed to free himself from supposed guilt and, thus, from the debt left by his ancestors.

Although the debt was centred on money, since Marcelo's ancestors apparently did not pay what they owed their former labourers, it also encompassed other historically ensnared aspects. Besides labour ties, 'the colonel', as Marcelo's great-grandfather is still called in the village, also provided access to primary education, healthcare, cultural activities, and consumer goods. The locals also reached 'the colonel' when they needed assistance. The same behaviour continued to be perpetuated towards Marcelo, as locals constantly turned to him when they needed help: a job, a loan, medical support, advice, whatever was needed. It was not strange, then, that many even referred to Marcelo as *pai* (father) and Laura as *mãezinha* (little mother). For instance, one dweller told me, 'They take care of us, and we always want them close by'. Many locals often complimented the kindness of Marcelo and Laura, emphasising how grateful they were for their return to the village.

This relationship, which goes beyond the monetary aspect and into the sphere of the population's 'care' by a patriarchal figure, sheds light on a chain rooted in history unfolding between the museum founders

and dwellers. In a way, both sides are reproducing a tie of dependency, which seems desired by founders and dwellers alike. On the one hand, as the founders were often sought after in times of difficulty and took responsibility for the locals, they held a position of superiority and power – just as their ancestors. On the other hand, as villagers had been ‘looked after’ for many years and then ‘abandoned’, having a figure to turn to in case of need was also comforting. Hence, beyond the founders’ economic means to help locals, both sides sought the connectedness and mutual ties symbolised through the historical attachment between former workers with the mill and their owners. This chain highlights the patriarchal aspects of these relationships, which, while desired, can also be seen as enchaining, as they reinforce and perpetuate residents’ dependency on the mill owner’s descendants. This also recalls the idea of *Mandonismo*, recognizing Marcelo as the ‘big boss’ who assumes responsibility and control over the population.

Moreover, while Marcelo’s property lending seemed like a generous gift, some locals have pointed to other reasons behind it. For instance, an interviewed ex-worker of the mill said, ‘The only thing that remains as safety are the homes of those who are here’. He explained that, despite the land reacquisition, according to the law, former workers and their descendants are allowed to live in the land if they dwell in it. Under the right of *usucapião*, which means ‘acquisition by use’, those with long-term possession of a property could request its ownership under specific conditions. Still, they would have to legally dispute their right to stay, a complex process. If people leave their houses, Marcelo could also demand their expropriation. For instance, I heard

a story of a resident who moved out of town, leaving his house empty, and there were rumours that Marcelo would retrieve it. Thus, locals cannot simply leave the place or risk losing possession through prolonged use. In this way, they are tied to Marcelo, the legal owner, through territorial chains.

The territorial attachment can also be identified in other instances. For example, Marcelo’s willingness to preserve the village as it was in his childhood signals a nostalgic connection that can be illustrated by the floods that annually devastated the village. While not affecting the museum premises and Marcelo’s residential properties due to their geographic location uphill, it affected numerous dwellers. As many people lost furniture and belongings, every year, the couple promoted a *mutirão*, a joint endeavour to collect donations, most of them made by themselves, to help those affected. Residents lamented the disaster and felt grateful towards the couple’s generosity. Marcelo told me that a former mayor proposed relocating some houses to avoid inundation. Marcelo said that it was absurd since it would disfigure the historical landscape. Instead, he suggested that the mayor build a dam. Changing the village’s landscape was inconceivable for him. I wondered if preserving it was a way of leaving the scenery of his childhood untouched or if, unconsciously, he was perpetuating the population’s recurrent need for his help.

Furthermore, the territorial chain extends to disputes concerning the sugar mill’s property. Although deactivated in the late twentieth century, the mill’s building still stands, its bronze ruins reflecting the passage of time. The huge structure has been preserved with its many rooms designated for specific

sugar-grinding processes. Marcelo could not reacquire the mill since it had not been auctioned. It is owned by a group of former employees, the *condôminos*, or joint owners. One of them explained that they feared losing the mill, so they went there daily to ensure their ownership. While it was unclear how much the building is worth, many older residents still considered the possibility of resuming grinding. The old mill also symbolises the power struggle between the *condôminos* and the mill founders' descendants. Marcelo expressed a desire to use the site for art exhibitions, which was not allowed by the *condôminos* up until my visit there. He also mentioned how workshops were conducted in the building and his attempts to buy some old apparatuses to develop artworks. Despite these approaches, the joint owners reinforced their ownership by limiting Marcelo's use of their property. The founders also seemed interested in preserving the mill's ruins since it is a local attraction for tourists. While *condôminos* did not earn anything to maintain the site, Marcelo provided them with a monthly food parcel. Once more, the museum founders and this group of residents are enmeshed not only by debt relations but also through their territorial and historical attachments.

Another territorial and historical chain is constituted by the '*Casa Grande*' (Great House) of Agostina. It served as the residence of the sugar mill's owners and is now the museum founders' main house. It is located among other properties that are only privately accessible. Despite no walls or fences demarcating private property, entry is restricted to authorised people, as security guards monitor access. Built in the 1940s, the house consists of large living rooms, a dining room, a spacious kitchen, and several en-suite bedrooms, some

encircling a central courtyard. Although the founding couple and their family primarily reside in the state's capital, they spend most weekends in the *Casa Grande* and lived there for several months.

Historically, the term *Casa Grande* refers to the residency of *Senhores de Engenho* (Freyre 1993). This is contrasted with the *Senzala*, where enslaved people lived in precarious conditions. Its strategic position atop the hill allowed the *Senhores de Engenho* to oversee their workers and historically symbolised the power of landowners over the population (ibid.). Despite its negative historical connotations, villagers and founders still called it *Casa Grande*. Art actors in São Paulo and a local teacher problematised the retention of the name, which they claimed echoes colonialism in the relationships between the museum founders and locals. During a conversation, Marcelo asked my thoughts about keeping the name. I suggested that a name change could help avoid the connotations it carried of power imbalance rooted in colonial times, and if the name were to remain, its meanings and symbolisms could be discussed with the locals. Marcelo said he preferred to keep it since it had always been used. Keeping the name *Casa Grande* symbolises the powerful position of the new generation of founders, as it equates them to the Mill Lords. Consequently, although not overtly expressed, the villagers are placed in an inferior position, reminiscent of the formerly enslaved individuals living in the *Senzala*.

As seen in this section, the different perspectives of participants shed light on chains being forged beyond debt relations as power disputes unfold through land ownership and historical accounts, which come with feelings of guilt and indebtedness. In this sense, main-

taining these ties also becomes a tool of power for both sides. Many dwellers felt grateful for Marcelo's generosity and for having him to turn to when in need. However, since they cannot reciprocate and are often put in a position of inferiority (if they leave, they lose their houses; or are associated with the *Senzala*), they remain dependent on the founders. Thus, the liberation obtained by Marcelo to pay off the supposed debt owed by his ancestors to the mill workers ends up creating a new debt: this time, owed by the locals to Marcelo.

### **The second gift: Artesin and a socio-economic development project**

Lending land was not the only way for Marcelo to 'give back' to villagers. Upon returning in the beginning of the 2010s, Marcelo and Laura were struck by the locals' difficulties. When villagers approached the couple and asked them to reactivate the mill, they responded that it was not feasible. Moved by the situation and aiming to help the community, the couple started thinking of 'a new paradigm for socio-economic support', which ultimately led to the creation of the Artesin.

They had recently visited Inhotim Institute, a contemporary art museum and botanical garden in Minas Gerais, Brazil. Founded in 2006 by the mining tycoon Bernardo Paz, Inhotim has become a worldwide tourist attraction and is often referred to in the Brazilian media as the 'Disney World of the Arts'. Inspired by Inhotim, a few years after their visit, the couple began to build an open-air museum and a botanical garden next to the former sugar mill. This would serve as the centrepiece of a development project

that was to revive the local community. They replanted an area that had once been an aeroplane runway and invited artists to create commissioned artworks.

Artesin spans approximately 35 hectares and, during my visit in 2021, featured around 30 artworks on permanent display.<sup>2</sup> Most were site-specific, created for the museum through artistic residencies, while others were acquired or leased. In addition to renowned Brazilian artists, there were internationally recognised artists, along with works by unknown artists. For instance, a resident who worked as a driver and security guard for the founding couple had two works exhibited. He told me that while assisting an artist developing an artwork, he also discovered himself as an artist. The museum founder, Marcelo, also displayed his own artworks there, even though he did not self-identify as an artist. In the first years, the couple primarily handled art curation, with guidance from an artist and museum associate. At the start of the 2020s, they hired an independent curator to lead the curatorial process. The curator, whom I interviewed before travelling to the village, mentioned that while their goal was to internationalise the programme and build connections with institutions in São Paulo, they also aimed to include local and regional artists.

The 'park' or 'garden', as it was called by the locals, is characterised by young trees that do not allow for much shade to protect passers from the warm sun, revealing the project's incipiency. While visitors, some of whom I met, were attracted to the open-air museum, some ideas of what is expected of a museum were not met. For instance, no reception area or staff were available to provide information, nor was there essential infrastructure like a restroom. Additionally, a café or

restaurant, which is common in museums nowadays, was also absent. If visitors got thirsty, they would be lucky to encounter a boy riding around on his bicycle selling water. There were no guided tours offered by the institution either. To find information about the artworks, there were signs with the artists' names and a short explanation. However, this did not apply to all the artworks. Some pieces may have gone unnoticed because, without any signage and by blending in with their natural surroundings, they appeared to be just part of the scenery. I visited Artesin several times during my stay. Despite the strong sun, the visit was pleasant and usually lasted less than an hour. While I encountered only a few visitors from outside the village, I saw many locals. Some people exercised, wandered around, dated, did photo shoots, or hung out with friends. There were also larger groups on school field trips from nearby cities.

As the founding couple explained to me, the 'project', as they called it, is part of a larger social and economic plan to develop the region through education, culture, and art. As Artesin attracted tourists, the local population could earn a living from a nascent tourism industry. In this way, they fostered dwellers' financial independence. 'Artesin is only one pillar of the project', said Laura. Apart from the open-air museum, they organised a yearly festival filled with free concerts, workshops, and activities, attracting outsiders and engaging residents. The couple also developed a library with computers, a music school that provides free classes, and a space with machinery for locals to sew and sell their craft. The founders were active in the community as they brought outsiders to offer workshops on specific themes, from business and

film-making to dance and acting. They also partnered with SEBRAE, a national public service that fosters small entrepreneurs' development, bringing courses to help locals develop in the tourism industry. Additionally, founders engaged with the public schools, helping with their infrastructure (for example, donating computers) and promoting activities for students and staff (for example, graffiti sessions). Although in different proportions, this socio-economic revitalisation of a decaying town recalls the so-called 'Bilbao effect', which has inspired the foundation of museums worldwide after the successful development of the Guggenheim in Bilbao, Spain (Plaza 2006).

The logic of economic development through fomenting entrepreneurship was developed in the 1980s by, among others, the American non-profit organization Ashoka (Dees 2007). The logic is all about supporting, connecting, and developing social entrepreneurs. Instead of making charitable donations that help tackle societal problems, particularly among people experiencing poverty, philanthropists support and help people become entrepreneurs themselves. Building on this model of social entrepreneurship, the underlying economic logic established by Artesin's founding couple can be understood as an instrument for economic development with 'neoliberal elements' (Ferguson 2007). In his study on a universal direct payment granted to all South Africans to alleviate poverty effects and labour insecurity, Ferguson identifies the program's 'neoliberal elements', such as conceptualising poor individuals as microenterprises and encouraging risk-taking (ibid.: 79). In line with Ferguson's study, in the Brazilian project, some neoliberal elements are also identifiable. The stimulus

to develop tourism entrepreneurs, giving them autonomy, and promoting market exchange in the tourism industry are some elements that characterise the project as a neoliberal instrument for economic development. Almost everyone I talked to mentioned how ‘empowered’ people felt through Artesin. This idea of empowerment, which initially appeared in the museum founders’ discourse on the media, was spread among locals’ speeches. Founders repeatedly reinforced that beyond giving, they were ‘providing the tools for people to trace their own paths’. The recurrent phrase ‘to grind your own mill’ summarises the entrepreneurial logic in which each individual invests in their own business.

Following this logic, the founding couple provided locals with encouragement, ideas, and tools to develop their endeavours. However, the couple’s involvement often went beyond this, as they gave locals a significant part of their businesses’ infrastructure. Throughout my research, I encountered many successful cases. The inn and restaurant owner introduced at the beginning of this paper was one of them. Beyond offering her the opportunity to take over the business, Marcelo helped with an initial investment, partially financed the inn’s renovation, and provided some furniture. Similarly, three other local entrepreneurs said the founders contributed by providing properties, developing the infrastructure, and acquiring furniture for their businesses. Another man was first given a job as an intern at Artesin and was later trained at the museum to become an independent guide.

### **Creating a new debt: Feeling grateful, feeling indebted**

The founding couple’s support was usually welcomed by locals, as their endeavours needed an initial boost to take off. All entrepreneurs mentioned how the generosity of Artesin and its founders had transformed their lives. They not only started earning money, but also held hopes for a better future. For instance, a villager told me, ‘After I started the restaurant, I don’t need to leave to work far away anymore. I can stay here with my family. We are happier’. Another person expressed how her business was going well: ‘My accommodations are full almost every weekend in January. I don’t have to worry as much as I did before’. Moreover, an entrepreneur repeatedly highlighted the couple’s generosity: ‘They are incredibly generous, I know I can always count on them’.

By paying off their ancestors’ presumed side of the debt and, thus, supposedly aiming to break free from feelings of ‘guilt’, as museum founders ‘gave back’ and helped the population, they initially seemed not to expect anything in return. Since an expected return was not clear, it was difficult for recipients to reciprocate in a balanced way. Yet, interviewees pointed out some possible expectations the museum founders held while developing the project. According to some villagers, the museum founders expected locals to agree with, support, and participate in the activities they organised. Besides, they expected the villagers’ loyalty, for instance, by paying requested favours. I could experience locals’ promptitude towards founders first-hand. When Marcelo called a few locals to guide me through the village, they immediately responded

positively and showed up when asked. A tour guide told me he is always available when Marcelo calls him to guide visitors. Two entrepreneurs said they always try to join all workshops offered for their businesses' development or to promote local engagement with the museum. Nonetheless, Marcelo complained that he had organised a workshop recently, and only a few people showed up. He was upset and said it would be difficult to implement the project if this kept occurring.

While many villagers demonstrated their loyalty, support, and even devotion to the founders and were always available to do favours, their acts of reciprocity still did not seem sufficient compared to what they had received from the founders. Villagers often mentioned how Artesin 'changed their lives', 'saved them from very difficult conditions', and 'gave them hope for a better future'. By recognising these impactful consequences on their lives, and due to the lack of clarity on how reciprocity could occur, it was difficult for locals to engage in a balanced reciprocal relationship with the founders, thus creating a feeling of indebtedness.

Artesin plays a central role in creating this indebtedness since the museum's success in attracting tourists is tightly linked to locals' endeavours. The tourism services they provide can only take off if the museum succeeds. If the museum closed and no more tourists came to the village, the residents' businesses would hardly survive. Thus, the chain between the residents and the founders is intensified even more because of the dependency created. Despite the power imbalance, the chain is twofold: while locals count on Artesin and, consequently, on their founders for their endeavours to succeed, founders also assume responsibility towards locals, making it difficult for them to simply leave.

Despite the differences, the social ties developed through Artesin can be comparable to the ones previously established in the former sugar mill. Back then, the owners were directly responsible for their employees by providing wages, as well as housing, school, and health care. In this way, employees were very dependent. In contrast, Marcelo and Laura had no legal labour responsibility for the villagers. Artesin had no infrastructure requiring staff; therefore, it had basically no employees. Apparently, during my research, only two interns were employed, and one curator was hired as a consultant. Although founders never made this explicit, avoiding employer-worker relationships with the villagers could possibly be related to traumas from their ancestors' unresolved relationships. In this sense, the entrepreneurial economic logic envisioned by the museum founders protects them, for example, from labour duties, lawsuits, or even new feelings of guilt.

### **Trying to break the chain**

During my fieldwork, I noticed that not all villagers accepted the support of Marcelo and Laura, thus avoiding a relationship of ongoing dependence. They were not willing to keep expressing their gratitude. Instead, they tried to 'break the chain'. One former mill worker, for example, tried to do so by openly criticising them and not allowing his relatives to work in Marcelo's other businesses. He said he did not trust the founder and accused him of hiring corrupt people. Moreover, a villager criticised the couple, saying they could not expect everyone to rearrange their schedules to attend

their workshops. Being one of the few residents critical of the project, she was bothered by how others flattered the founders at all costs. Differently, she did not accept all their favours, expressed her opinions, denounced favouritism, and refused to do everything they asked.

A local teacher also criticised the founders and their project. The founders had initially invited him to meetings to discuss the project's implementation. Yet, as disagreements unfolded, he accused them of expecting unconditional loyalty and not allowing anyone to think differently. He said he was later excluded for disagreeing with the founders and posing uncomfortable questions. The teacher even suggested that the founders' inflexibility towards disagreement was comparable to how the *Senhor de Engenho* dealt with his subordinates. Such criticism suggests the perpetuation of authoritarian traces of colonial practices in present relationships. The founders, however, accused the teacher of continuously provoking them, especially publicly, via social media comments. They showed me comments in which he criticised their authoritative decision-making. For the teacher, his dissatisfaction with the founders was not just a matter of rhetoric. In an attempt to break the chains of dependence, he decided to pay his rent to the founders, thus refusing their gifts ('free rent').

As these examples illustrate, some locals did not want to feel indebted. Thus, sometimes, they avoided receiving gifts from the founders, preventing reciprocity to work. When taken to a more extreme case, like in the teacher's example, instead of collaborating, he isolated himself and was excluded by the founders, culminating in terminating the social tie that was initially formed.

## Conclusion

Building on the concept of debt within the context of gift-giving (Mauss 1990[1954]), this study examined how relationships in a Brazilian rural village built around a deactivated sugar mill unfolded after the development of an economic project centred on the private art museum and botanical garden Artesin. To support the village's abandoned population, the mill owners' descendants' return symbolises the re-establishment of a social tie left unresolved by their ancestors. The museum founders initiate a gift-giving dynamic to settle a supposed debt owed to villagers. As they give gifts that cannot be easily reciprocated in a balanced way, villagers feel indebted. Thus, in trying to free themselves from their ancestors' supposed debt, the founders create a new debt: this time, owed by the locals to them.

As this paper argued, indebtedness emerges not only from relationships through gift-giving but also from other dimensions. The metaphor of chains elucidates how various actors become entangled. The case of Vila Agostina sheds light on how enchainment is forged through debt relations between villagers and the museum founders, as well as through their history, territory, and a project for local development. As such, this study contributes to the anthropological discussion of debt and indebtedness by highlighting other dimensions involved in building social ties through gift-giving. The metaphor of chains allows us to capture these dimensions better, as it also highlights how difficult it is to break free from them.

Furthermore, the forging of chains brings to the fore the reproduction of a relational dynamic stemming

from a historical attachment rooted in colonialism. As both villagers and the museum founders seek the connectedness and mutual ties symbolised through the old mill, the dynamics of power hierarchies and 'care' are reproduced in a new form with neoliberal characteristics. While these relationships carrying historical patriarchal aspects are desired, they can also be enchaining, as they reinforce and perpetuate dependency relations. Thus, whilst aiming for emancipation, the project with neoliberal elements reproduces authoritarian traces of colonial practices in present-day relationships.

Finally, let me return to the phrase that spread widely throughout the village: 'to grind your own mill.' Despite entailing enchained relations, power imbalances, and the reproduction of colonial practices, the art project also gives an abandoned population hope for a better future. As this study shows, within a context characterised by high levels of poverty, like in Brazilian society, projects like Artesin are not only needed but often appreciated by those enduring severe difficulties. What remains to be learnt is how to look at and implement these projects, reflecting on the burdens of the past in an attempt to avoid reproducing enchaining relationships.

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## Notes

- 1 The names of the museum, the village and its founders are pseudonymised to protect their privacy. Also, in this quote, the interlocutor uses the term 'doctor' to signal Marcelo's high social status. In Brazil, people often refer to elites using this term.
- 2 Currently, there are more than 40 artworks.

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