

Distillation and Diaspora of the Transformative Force of Doña Felipa: Women's Power in José María Arguedas's 1958 novel *Deep Rivers*¹

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José María Arguedas's 1958 autobiographical novel *Deep Rivers* expresses deep respect for the power of women to stand up for the common good amidst a corrupt society. The novel is narrated by an adolescent white Peruvian boy who shared the author's childhood experiences. Like the author, the narrator's fondest memory of early childhood was living in the kitchen with Quechua women servants who loved him unconditionally like they loved each other and the mountains—ancestors who they worshipped (ix). This love and sentient-landscape cosmivision colored the narrator's reportage of an uprising led by Quechua-speaking women that he witnessed and participated in during the 1920s as a student in a Catholic boys' boarding school in the post-colonial mountain town of Abancay, Peru.² The town was governed by all manner of corrupt men who caused the local people to suffer in many ways, including depriving them of salt. The populace was divided by race, ethnicity, class, gender, societal structure and cultural cosmivision as well as by the deep river, Pachachaca, which rushed through the narrow gorge in which they all dwelt. This sets the context of the story.

¹ I use the word "diaspora" in its sense of scattering or sowing. The Oxford English Dictionary states that diaspora comes from the "ancient Greek *δια-* dia- prefix + *σπορά* sowing, seed (see spore n.), after ancient Greek *διασπείρειν* to disperse."

² "The Andean cosmivision," or cosmivision andino, is a phrase commonly used in the Andes. I use it to describe indigenous concepts of universes within universes of the interconnected, and reciprocal nature of all sentient and insentient life, including inanimate landforms.

Arguedas has become one of the most important indigenista authors, and *Deep Rivers* has received great attention.³ Scholars have addressed many aspects of this novel, including the devilish forces of the underworld, dreams and magic, and the function of memory.⁴ But few have paid attention to the role of Doña Felipa. Two important exceptions are anthropologist Linda J. Seligmann and Hispanic literature scholar Anne Lambright. Seligmann illuminates some of her ethnographic fieldwork and historical research of chola market women as agents of social and economic change in the Andes by closely examining the “uprising of cholitas, led by Doña Felipa” in *Deep Rivers*.⁵ Anne Lambright's interdisciplinary article on how time, space and gender create a hybrid intellectual in *Deep Rivers* emphasizes the importance of the feminine in founding an ideal community.

That the work is founded to a great extent on the feminine is evident not only in its thematic function, but also in various

³ The Oxford Spanish Dictionary defines indigenista as a person who dedicates themselves to the study of the language and culture of indigenous people. “Persona que se dedica al estudio de la lengua y la cultura de los pueblos indígenas.”

⁴ Usandizaga, Helena. “Amaru, Winku, Layk'a, Supay O Demonio: Las Fuerzas Del Mundo De Abajo en Los Ríos Profundos.” *José María Arguedas: Hacia Una Poética Migrante*, Sergio R. (ed. and prologue) Franco, Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, University of Pittsburgh, 2006, pp. 227-246. Antonio Cornejo Polar (Antonio Cornejo Polar).

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⁵ Seligmann discusses Doña Felipa on pages 714-17 within her longer work on urbanized indigenous bilingual Quechua women active in the moneyed economy of the Andes. Seligmann, Linda J.. “To Be in between: The Cholitas as Market Women.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 31, No. 4. Cambridge University Press, Oct 1989, pp. 694-721.

techniques used by the narrator. First, the poles of opposition which mark the text are often moderated by women or by elements traditionally associated with the feminine, such as nature or music, or are fused within spaces dominated by the feminine. . . . The most oppressive and divisive spaces represented in the novel are spaces dominated by men and by masculine law. In contrast, those spaces primarily occupied by women and nature are shown to be liberating and conducive to uniting the fragmented community. . . . The feminine is shown to be a solid base on which to found Peruvian culture, . . . a new (ideal) community (6-7).

Lambright elaborates with the example of Doña Felipa:

The mestiza Doña Felipa . . . confronts the system by leading a group of chicheras in an uprising to protest the lack of salt in the town. It is only through the feminine the women of the town, that the official world can be opposed (15-16).

Doña Felipa, the women of the town, nature and the concept of "the feminine" are linked, Lambright suggests, as the foundation of Arguedas's project to envision the creation of an ideal Peruvian society on the pages of *Deep Rivers*. In this essay, I add to that scholarship.

I argue that Doña Felipa symbolized the power of independent mestiza women (cholitas) as a transformative force in society; a force that was simultaneously distilled into and transmitted by the mestiza character of Doña Felipa.⁶ This feminine force was likened to a force of nature; it connected with the powerful Pachachaca River, and even the life-giving power of the sun. As a distillation of this force, Doña Felipa represented all mestiza women of the Peruvian Andes, especially cholitas in the chicha

⁶ In this paper the term mestiza is interchangeable with cholita. Cholitas were (and are) urbanized indigenous bilingual Quechua women active in the moneyed economy. Doña Felipa was a cholita. Cholitas in 1920s Abancay, Peru were identified by their style of dress, which included a shawl made out of factory-produced cloth, and a white hat.

cornbeer industry.⁷ The diaspora of this force inspired others (including men) to take action for justice and the public good.

Like the mestiza Doña Felipa, the novel's author, Arguedas, was a synthesis, or bridge, of ethnic cultures and classes. Arguedas was the first-born legitimate son of a blue-eyed, blond-bearded land-owning white man. But Arguedas (like the narrator of this autobiographical novel) was banished to the kitchen by his stepmother to be raised by the Quechua-speaking indigenous servants, whose cosmivision he absorbed and⁸ maintained even after years of education that eventually made him an elite intellectual.⁹ Doña Felipa likewise straddled worlds. Bilingual and independent, this indigenous business woman moved among and conversed with people from all ethnic groups and socio-economic classes: the free ayllu Indians, whites, mestizos, military officers and soldiers who frequented her chicharúa corn beer establishment, as well as the Rector, priests and colono Indian serfs belonging to the haciendas.¹⁰ Doña Felipa had freedom of movement, speech and action that was

⁷ Chicha is a cornbeer that has been made and consumed in the Andes for thousands of years. Chicha was traditionally drank from a half gourd, but also served in sturdy glasses in post-colonial chichería cornbeer establishments.

⁸ The Oxford Spanish Dictionary defines indigenista as a person who dedicates themselves to the study of the language and culture of indigenous people. "Persona que se dedica al estudio de la lengua y la cultura de los pueblos indígenas."

⁹ English-language academic writings commonly use the word "Indian" when writing about the aboriginal peoples of the Andes. However, that word in Spanish (indio) is considered an insult. Out of respect I choose to use the word "indigenous." The only times I use the word "Indian" are when I am referring to its use in the text. In the novel it is used both as a descriptive and a derogatory term.

¹⁰ Free ayllu Indians were indigenous Quechua-speaking people living in reciprocity-based rural communities of subsistence farmers on their ancestral land (an ayllu). Dress distinguished free ayllu Indian women from mestiza cholitas; free ayllu women handspun and wove their garments from the wool of their own alpaca, llamas and/or sheep, while cholitas' clothing was at least partially factory-made. Colonos were indigenous Quechua-speaking people wearing homespun garments like the free ayllu Indians, but they lived and worked as serfs belonging to Haciendas. Haciendas were huge holdings of land and indigenous people, owned by white men.

denied to white upper-class women, “gente decente”—“decent people” (such as the blue-eyed hacienda visitor in the book) – as well as to the “mute, constantly weeping colonos (99-101, 177).”

Doña Felipa’s presence in the novel started with a sound—the sound of women shouting. Outraged mestiza women (and some men and boys) ran through the streets like a force of nature, a killer “flash flood.” The mestizas were labeled such because of their attire and occupation. They wore store-bought Castillian-cloth shawls, white straw hats, and jewelry of gold and silver coins. This attire marked them as *chicheras*—owners or waitresses of *chicha* corn beer establishments.¹¹

An un-named leader emerged, distilled out of the masses. “Her stout body completely filled the arch” of the Cathedral’s bell tower as she called out for justice (89). The Rector (representing the Church’s authoritarian power) confronted her. They dialoged face-to-face, both wearing white symbols of purity and goodness (his robes, her hat). The Rector responded to her logic not with words, but by signaling someone to ring the church bells to drown out the women. But the women’s voices for justice rose just as loud as the church bells, symbolizing their power as equal to that of the Church itself (90-92).

The women, unafraid of getting shot, took rifles away from the police and armed themselves (92-93). One woman was shot superficially in the chest, about which the as-yet unnamed Leader jested, “What’s this, woman? A salt dealer’s bullet! That can’t hurt anybody!” (93) That incident exemplified the courageous force of the *cholitas*.

This feminine force was also an invisible power transmitted through the eyes. Arguedas writes:

¹¹ *Chicheras* are *cholitas* (like Doña Felipa) who own or work in a *chicha* cornbeer establishment—a *chichería* (see endnote 12).

And the distribution (of salt) began. She presided from atop the stone bench. There was no disorder. The designated chicheras opened sacks with knives and filled the women's cloaks (with salt) . . . There she was, the ringleader, *controlling everything* from atop the stone bench, *even to the heartbeats of each of the angry, triumphant cholos*.¹² At the slightest attempt to break the silence, she *stared*, and the women themselves nudged one another, imposing order, trying to calm down. From the broad face of the chichera, from her low forehead, from her almost invisible eyes, *flowed a regulating force that enveloped, detained and drove away fear* (94, 95) (Emphasis by author).

After the women liberated hoarded salt from the corrupt local salt dealer and set off to distribute some of it to the poorest of the poor, this ringleader was finally named for the first time with the women's shouts of "Long live Doña Felipa!" (95) In this way, the character of Doña Felipa slowly entered as a distillation of the feminine force of social upheaval that spanned the previous six pages.

Doña Felipa had two bayonet-tipped Mausers she took from the police (126). Although army sergeants were rumored to disembowel people with those bayonets, in Abancay they only paraded around with them (166). Doña Felipa, however, actually did disembowel someone with a bayonet—a salt dealer's mule; she strung its intestines across the Pachachaca Bridge, and flew the flag of her shawl from atop its stone cross (142).¹³

¹² Cholas is synonymous with cholitas and mestizas.

¹³ Seligmann interprets the shawl on the stone cross somewhat differently as a sign of Doña Felipa's murder.

Though the uprising of the cholos is put down, and Dona (sic) Felipa's orange shawl is found hanging from a stone cross at the entrance to Patibamba, her body is never discovered (717).

Capturing the bridge was a metaphor for the power of mestiza women to transform society. The Pachachaca Bridge connected the mestizo town of Abancay to the hacienda lands where the indigenous colonos were forced to labor. On that bridge Doña Felipa challenged authority with the placement of her shawl and the mule's intestines. This suggested that the feminine force of bridge-like mestizas was more powerful than both the army and the Church.

The disemboweled mule carried much significance to the people, for it was mentioned in two songs celebrating the feminine force for justice known as Doña Felipa. The first song started with a market porter in a *chichería*, where everyone helped him make up the chorus.¹⁴

". . . Long live Doña Felipa!" he cried then sang:
 "The little soldier's rifle
 must have been made of cactus bones,
 that's why, that's why,
 it thunders harmlessly,
 that's why, that's why,
 it thunders harmlessly.
 No, no, brother,
 it's not the rifle,
 it's the soul of the little soldier
 that's made of worthless brushwood.
 The salt dealer's revolver
 was loaded with llama turds,
 and instead of powder,
 and instead of powder,
 with salt-mule farts (102)."

¹⁴ Chicherías are chicha cornbeer establishments. Arguedas described 1920s chicherías in Abancay as dark cavernous places coated with soot and grime where "huge waves of flies surged around the doorways" (42).

Doña Felipa's diaspora grew like a force of nature as "the song spread to all the groups in the street and to the other chicha bars" like fearsome "rising waters of those Andean rivers" that swell "with foaming water" because "the clouds burst (102)."

Later, the army entered town to try to restore "order." An "older" mestiza waitress incited the wrath of the State by improvising a new song that raised the stakes. She directly addressed the huayruro (civil guard, policeman), especially with the lines "When Doña Felipa's mule / when the mule's guts / were lost, you were lost (176-77)." This cholita singer's face was pitted, similar to Doña Felipa's smallpox-scarred face; this was a visual clue of their interconnectedness as power figures (91, 142, 176). The narrator compared this cholita singer to a force of nature when he described her "hymnlike song which seemed to have come all the way from the waters of the Pachachaca (176)." A few pages later, the strength of this woman (together with two other chicheras tackling a policeman) was described like the force of a river washing away a town in a flood. In addition, those three chicheras restated their lack of fear of a policeman's "little bullets." Gunshots just strengthened their courageous acts for justice all the more (179).

The second scene where the force was conveyed through a look alone was when Doña Felipa's comadre, her child's godmother, commanded a harpist and the narrator to play music and dance to stir the masses into action by using only her eyes. Swept up in Doña Felipa's diaspora, the harpist's music seethed with contagious rapture (179-180).

The narrator compared Doña Felipa to the powerful and dangerous Pachachaca River, and also connected her to the fate of the idiot woman in his boarding school.

You're like the river, *señora*. . . They'll never catch you. . . You'll return. I will see your face, powerful as the noonday sun. We'll

set fires. We'll burn everything down! We'll put the idiot in a convent (153).

The idiot woman represented the power of the feminine force to transcend boundaries of ethnic and class hierarchies. She embodied the notions of Indians and nature, even though she was white. She was called an “Indian” in disgust, and was raped, abused and unable to speak for herself – much like the colonos. Resonating with the power of Doña Felipa and the natural world, the idiot later used her own bear-like agility and strength to climb the cross (just as Doña Felipa had) on the Pachachaca Bridge high above the deep river. There she grabbed Doña Felipa's shawl as her own. Cloaked in this shawl, the idiot metaphorically rose from the bottom of the hierarchy of privilege to the top—literally climbing on top of the arch of the cathedral's bell tower. There the narrator saw her overcome her suffering lot, and become the happiest person in Abancay. Significantly, it was under this very arch that Doña Felipa earlier stood face-to-face successfully arguing justice with the priest, where the women's shouts equaled the volume of the peeling bells of the Church. From this towering vantage point, the idiot passed judgment on all others. The shawl seemingly transmitted Doña Felipa's power into the idiot woman by resonating with and amplifying the idiot's own latent power, ultimately transforming the idiot into a protective force called Doña Marcela, a guardian angel (142-144, 151-152, 188, 212).

Doña Felipa was of a more widespread force, as powerful as the mighty Pachachaca River and the noonday sun; simultaneously she was a transmitter of that very same force. At the end of the novel, the fate of the force of Doña Felipa and her diaspora was left open-ended. Doña Felipa was never caught, and her whereabouts entered the realm of popular mythology. Even though her husband regained control of the chichería, he only fired the young plump waitress who then left town with

the harpist (190-91). Apparently he did not fire the other two chicheras, including the older one who sang the song mentioned above. They stayed, presumably behind the closed doors of their homes, while the plague swept through the town. Thus Doña Felipa and her diaspora remained as a powerful feminine force—women's power, which could rise up again at anytime to fight for justice and the common good.

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