BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Painting the Canvas of the Great Andean Uprising: Recent Research on the Age of Tupac Amaru

José Carlos De la Puente Luna
Texas State University, US
jd65@txstate.edu

This essay reviews the following works:


These books historicize a series of alternative political projects, visual regimes, and social orders that emerged in tension with (and even outlived) late eighteenth-century Bourbon reformism. They also conjure up frustrated histories and possible futures only partly realized. By decentering conventional temporal and spatial approaches to late colonial Andean society, they illustrate ways in which imperial subjects in the southern Andes reworked, tamed, and challenged Bourbon policies and the ideas of morality, religiosity, subjecthood, and empire they promoted. Moving away from formal decrees, church edicts, socioeconomic factors, and so-called structural determinants, these books show the seemingly paradoxical role that judicial courts and the local legal cultures and understandings of justice and vassalage they fostered continued to play at a time of profound and generalized challenges to the colonial order, epitomized by the great Tupac Amaru Rebellion (1780–1782).

Andean artist Tadeo Escalante rendered one of these alternative social orders in the impressive murals that he painted for the otherwise inconspicuous church of Huaro, southeast of Cuzco. In the aftermath of the Great Andean Rebellion, rebels and royalists turned rural churches into sites for mobilization, reeducation, and counterindoctrination, as Ananda Cohen demonstrates in her refreshing study of the region’s church murals. After hearing Mass in Huaro, José Gabriel Condorcanqui Tupac Amaru, who claimed descent from the last Inca king and rose to arms in November 1780 by hanging a local Spanish magistrate in the name of the king, promised local Huareños a world in which taxes, customs houses, and forced sales of goods and labor in the silver mines would vanish—an imagined world in which they would be free, ruled by an Inca descendant, and pay tribute to him alone.

Through the power of their words and actions, Andean insurgents in Cuzco redefined churches and adjoining cemeteries and plazas as sites where colonial relations would be undone, corrupt authorities eliminated, and paths to liberation collectively embraced. Ecclesiastic and government officials of the postrebellion period also reappropriated these spaces. Through visual projects like Tadeo Escalante’s, they endeavored to resignify them as places where faith and authority would be reaffirmed, insurgent memories erased, and the divine punishment awaiting insurgents made plain for everyone to see. This is, therefore, a
story of contested meanings, one that is neither linear nor self-contained. Escalante represented the massive loss of life of the Rebellion—the death toll reportedly reached one hundred thousand individuals—through the proliferation of tortured bodies. However, neither royalists nor insurgents controlled the interpretations that murals fostered and the alternative worlds they evoked. Local parishioners may have read the messages embedded in Escalante’s scenes about Hell, the Last Judgment, and other familiar motifs in subversive ways. The murals reflected Escalante’s “deliberate ambiguity,” with the rich and powerful, associated with the Spaniards and their local descendants, portrayed as debauched, ominous, and ultimately damned (162). It was they and not the Indians—alleged savages and apostates—who should give up any hope of redemption.

Cohen’s insightful analysis of Escalante’s scenes is one in a series of close readings of Andean murals she offers. Seven case studies of churches in indigenous towns in the Cuzco area from the early seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries highlight the extraordinary ability of Andean artists, many anonymous and itinerant, to blend European artistic conventions and religious motifs with local histories, practices, and traditions sometimes predating the Spanish Conquest (painted walls go back millennia in the Andes). Cohen ultimately advances an “interpretive space” for (re)reading these “visual archives” (183) that significantly departs from previous studies of mural painting and of colonial art in general.

Her richly illustrated _Heaven, Hell, and Everything in Between_ rests on the fundamental tension between religious mural painting as a popular vehicle for the transmission and imposition of Catholicism and the spectrum of its possible meanings, where actual and potential readings could lay beyond the control of ecclesiastic authorities. Pre-Columbian themes, media, techniques, and beliefs are not merely background or precedent. Rather, they provide the matrix in which colonial artists inserted European pictorial traditions, infusing them with local meanings. The centuries-old tradition of “clothing” sacred structures with textiles, and later cheaper textile murals, for instance, folded the pre-Hispanic past and the viceregal present together. Cohen’s analysis of the virtually untapped inventories and records documenting purchases and renovations reveals some of the material realities behind Andean mural painting. These registers hint at wider sources of funding, patronage networks, and communal involvement in artistic production and circulation. The author rejects simplistic models of artistic innovation, dissemination, and exchange to show that the proliferation of styles and motifs throughout the Cuzqueño countryside was a “multidirectional and idiosyncratic” process (3).

Cohen’s methodological contributions come together in her reading of the murals at the churches of Urcos and Pitumarca, which depicted the baptism of Jesus Christ. Vibrant and colorful representations of the Jordan River take on new life, departing from the black-and-white European engravings that served as the model. The compositions respond to local tastes and religious sensitivities, referencing important local sites, such as sacred lakes valued as ancestral places of origin, and the histories and traditions associated with them. Cohen retrieves the agency of artists and viewers to understand and retell the history of Jesus’s baptism and ministry within the particular trajectories and polemics of Andean Catholicism. These murals, tied to one another through reference to familiar and symbolically charged environments, helped create a “dynamic web of transatlantic and transregional exchange” linking them to other prints, canvas paintings, and murals depicting the baptism of Christ (121). Andean Catholicism, as it emerges from Cohen’s analysis, is clearly a global phenomenon.

Similar currents intertwining local and imperial forces run through Nicholas Robins’s study of intimacy in late colonial Charcas, a large territory including present-day Bolivia and portions of Peru, Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay. _Of Love and Loathing_ is based on more than 350 court cases involving marital deviance and defiance—mainly divorce and annulment cases prompted by procedural error, abuse, adultery, or other “illicit” relationships—filed in ecclesiastic tribunals between 1750 and 1825. These exceptional records show that renewed efforts by Church and Crown to narrow the terms of intimacy based on patriarchal norms failed to suppress alternative legal spaces, social practices, and family networks providing wives and husbands significant room to maneuver as they sought to create, reinforce, or break intimate bonds. These records and the petitions, letters, and graphic testimonies they contain paint a world in which clandestine marriages, longtime and sporadic illicit liaisons, marital infidelity and violence, spousal abandonment, and concubinage remained widespread, despite religious doctrines and royal decrees.

In Charcas, well-known Bourbon policies about marriage and intimacy, exemplified in the _Real Pragmática_ (1778), aimed at eroding individual marriage choice by enhancing the power of fathers and legal guardians to influence the spousal choices of those under their authority. By showing the difficulties of enforcement faced by royal and ecclesiastic authorities, Robins’s book offers a valuable reconstruction of how empire-wide initiatives “played out on the ground” (100). Royal efforts to “reassert patriarchy” and Catholic morality in Charcas increased women’s agency, exacerbating the trends that these edicts sought to
reverse (4–5, 100). Although increasingly restrictive laws issued between the 1770s and early 1800s forced many women to reunite with estranged and abusive husbands, they also had other significant and largely unintended consequences.

Although it is difficult to gauge the nature and scope of these transformations without a clear picture of the situation prior to 1750, Robins argues that numerous young couples filed lawsuits to challenge or limit patriarchal authority, or evade it altogether. Many prevailed. Most notably, single or abandoned mothers as well as lower-class and casta subjects went to court to stop unwanted marriages or have them nullified. Women took men to court for child support and to restore their lost honor, filing lawsuits without the permission of their husbands. Bourbon policies also triggered a rise in clandestine marriages (many driven by romantic affinity), which, along with free unions and de facto divorces, remained effective strategies to circumvent church- and state-sponsored paternal power.

Robins’s work is filled with striking stories about women and men who openly defied social mores and established roles, even at the risk of losing honor and freedom. Manuela Tapia was repeatedly denounced in La Plata for openly having numerous lovers (23). Antonio Yta was jailed for “concealment and simulation of gender” after two court-appointed physicians determined that he was a “true woman” at the behest of his wife (160). Private letters, penned by men and women and included in the dossiers to prove love and affinity, offer priceless insights into prevailing ideas about love, affection, and intimacy. (Including the original Spanish text in the notes would have been beneficial to the work.) Of Love and Loathing also presents shocking stories of cruelty, rape, and long-term abuse. The victims were almost invariably women. Father Matías de la Borda, held captive by the enigmatic Julián Apaza (Tupac Katari) during the 1781 siege of La Paz, was denounced for raping female parishioners while serving as a priest in the town of Guachacalla (142–143). The archbishop placed Father Borda in a monastery, but no further sanction seems to have been applied.

The challenges victims faced in obtaining justice were real. Working to retain their preeminence in marriage issues and defend the autonomy of their fueros (special jurisdiction), ecclesiastic authorities did not always side with Bourbon attempts to police spousal choices and marital life. However, the clergy’s emphasis on spousal reconciliation, male authority, and negotiated or extrajudicial settlements hindered the efforts of women to escape abusive partners and find relief, albeit temporarily. Ironically, physical separation was sometimes the only way for these women to make vida maridable, as the Church commanded. Moreover, ecclesiastic prosecutors often agreed with husbands and priests, and judges punished women more harshly than men, ordering or approving the confinement of wives and daughters in seclusion homes.

Although Robins’s analysis reveals a “broad, vital, and understudied arena of female agency” (5), he is careful not to exaggerate or extrapolate this agency. Some court cases show women’s ability to make choices regarding relationships, resources, and movement, whereas others show that such choices often came at a high cost: unhappy marriages, seclusion, abandonment, abuse, and public shame often predated them. The agency/patriarchy pair, Robins concludes, is more an antinomy than a dichotomy; “an apparent contradiction in which both sides are true and locked in dynamic conflict” (185). Of Love and Loathing is a welcome addition to the growing literature seeking to capture the complexities of female agency and patriarchy as they played out in the ecclesiastic courtroom and the moral realm.

The social order predicated and upheld by the colonial Catholic Church also takes center stage in Charles Walker’s ambitious retelling of the Tupac Amaru Rebellion, the “Cuzqueño” phase of the Great Andean Uprising, fought in the regions of Cuzco and Collao (the provinces surrounding Lake Titicaca) and led by Tupac Amaru, his wife Micaela Bastidas, and their family. Walker’s account, the most thorough to date, posits that this uprising was ultimately hamstrung by its reliance on existing power structures like the Catholic Church for support. Religion was indeed one of the major battlegrounds. The “rebels” faced a fundamental dilemma: Could a world without the Church or Catholicism be imagined? Sometimes, the insurgents violently rejected religious symbols as well as church doctrine and morality. Tupac Amaru’s public denunciation of bad priests and his promise to do away with excessive parish fees and priestly demands struck a chord with his forces. At an early stage of the uprising, they besieged him to rid them of the priests “who disturb us” (66). Despite generalized dissatisfaction with entrenched ecclesiastic abuses, however, important differences separated the leadership from its following, much less sympathetic toward Spaniards. Words attributed to Tupac Amaru—“who would absolve us in the time of death” (66)—and the insurgents’ actions and negotiations signal the possibility—I will suggest—of their imagining a distinctly Andean church, led by an indigenous priesthood, rather than no church at all. This possibility speaks to the Andean judicial struggle for full admission into the priesthood, a subject only seldom connected to the Great Insurgency. Similar attitudes, and the widespread desire for a church led by native Andeans and fulfilling their own
spiritual needs, were probably captured in some of the mural paintings studied by Cohen, although with a different register.

The rebels’ ambivalent attitudes toward the Church, crisscrossed by ethnic and class fractures, were complicated by the ambiguous role played by clerics—mostly Creoles but also Peninsulars. The largely oppositional role that the clergy played bolstered Walker’s contention that the rebellion failed in Cuzco due to its inability to divide the ruling classes and create a multiclass and multiethnic front, despite general dissatisfaction with Bourbon reformism. The local clergy was caught in a parallel conflict triggered by Bourbon demands to take rents and autonomy away from the Church. Walker’s treatment of this subject allows for a reading of the rebellion that moves between the personal and the structural. A handful of priests seem to have genuinely supported Tupac Amaru, although their political programs only partially overlapped. Confronted by colonial authorities, some of the supporters vehemently denied their loyalty to Tupac Amaru, explaining it in terms of the threats they received and the captivity they endured. Most clerics, however, clearly opposed the rebellion.

Walker revisits the role of the polemic Juan Manuel Moscoso, bishop of Cuzco. Unlike previous interpretations suggesting that this prelate from a powerful Creole family was a veiled supporter of the rebel cause, Walker convincingly argues that he undermined the movement from within. The epistolary exchange between Moscoso and Tupac Amaru, wherein the former commands the latter to surrender and repent, as well as the bishop’s meeting with Diego Cristóbal (José Gabriel’s cousin and main successor in Cuzco), are keys to unraveling the powerful ideology that helped defeat the uprising. The early excommunication of the Inca leader and his wife, and the strategy of keeping parish priests in rebel areas reveal Moscoso as one of the architects of the royalists’ counterinsurgency campaign. The rebel couple, Walker concludes, “could not imagine a world without the Catholic Church” (85). Their excommunication drained enthusiasm, increased desertsions, and placed them in an ultimately untenable position vis-à-vis their social peers and potential followers in Cuzco.

Walker’s well-documented account makes other important contributions. Building on three overlapping factors—leadership, chronology, and geography—it rounds off an explanation as to why military violence intensified from all sides, leading to a scenario of almost “total war” (10–11). Violence and radicalization did not necessarily originate in the purportedly millenarian or Messianic beliefs of the Andean masses, but rather in more immediate military considerations. Building on the works of Sergio Serulnikov, Sinclair Thompson, and others, Walker lays out an explanation, anchored in spatial, political, and cultural factors, for why the rebellion was less radical in Cuzco than in the “more indigenous” Collao region. In Cuzco, insurgent leaders were part of the oppressive structures that their rank and file ultimately hoped to overthrow, whereas in El Collao, native inhabitants and communities with “less attachment to the colonial system” swiftly disposed of many members of the local cacique class, Tupac Amaru’s own peers (13, 16). Had he been a cacique in the Collao or Charcas areas, the great José Gabriel Condorcanqui could have likely met a similar fate.

Walker’s overview also brings female leadership to the forefront, most notably that of Micaela Bastidas, who managed the rebel headquarters in Tinta—the center of the Cuzqueño uprising—and became a major political player early on. The book presents virtually all of the extant information about this understudied figure and similar others, suggesting several avenues for future research. The Tupac Amaru Rebellion breaks new ground by underscoring the need to study indigenous counterinsurgency led by powerful local caciques who opposed Tupac Amaru, as well as rethink the different outlooks and goals separating the leadership—Inca descendants, loyal subjects, and devout Catholics—from the largely anonymous followers who, at least to some degree, saw Tupac Amaru as “the last Inca of Peru” (34) and a vehicle for the establishment of, or a return to, a more just society.

A comparable interest in Andean political culture informs Sergio Serulnikov’s exceptional synthesis of the Age of Andean Insurrection. This short book, originally published in Spanish in 2010, reviews the past fifty years of scholarship, identifying important shifts in foundational paradigms. Recent studies pay microhistorical attention to local conditions and discrete historical experiences, underscoring the political and symbolic dimensions of Andean collective violence and revolutionary praxis. Although systems of cultural beliefs and socioeconomic structures delineated the specific historical setting, Serulnikov argues, such variables “can only provide the context for experience, not experience itself” (11–12). Instead, the main social actors in Serulnikov’s account speak through their actions. It is in the narrative of the events between the summer of 1779, when community leader Tomás Katari reached Buenos Aires to plead his case before the viceroy and the audiencia, and the early months of 1782, when Diego Cristóbal Tupac Amaru and his relatives were arrested and executed, that the deep political meanings driving the insurgents’ actions are uncovered. Similar lawsuits filed by countless communities against abusive priests, caciques, and
corregidores, as well as José Gabriel’s own legal battle to exclude his subjects from mita service and claim the Marquisate of Oropesa, reinforce Serulnikov’s main insight: judicial engagement and violent rebellion emerge as mutually reinforcing strategies. To be locally enforced, audiencia rulings had to be accompanied by displays of collective strength. Therefore, resorting to the court system to obtain such rulings “did not prevent popular revolts.” On the contrary, rulings granted these uprisings legitimacy (27).

Indians made up 90 percent of the population in the southern Andes. Despite the visibility of hereditary leaders like Tupac Amaru, small peasant communities, articulated through elected authorities of noble and commoner stock who served on municipal councils, constituted the “heart and soul” of the indigenous insurrection (2). Serulnikov’s cohesive narrative, apt for specialists and nonspecialists alike, opens with the violent refusal of the Indians of San Juan de Pocoata (Charcas) in August 1780 to fulfill customary tribute and mita duties until Tomás Katari, their elected leader, was freed. The narrative problematizes established accounts, often distorted by nationalist considerations and elite biases, extending the analysis beyond Cuzco to include northern Potosí (also known as Charcas) and La Paz, where a series of related but highly decentralized rebellions spearheaded by the Katari brothers, Tupac Katari, and other charismatic but lesser-known leaders broke out even before Tupac Amaru’s uprising.

Most notably, Revolution in the Andes highlights the ideological differences that distinguished these interrelated scenes of insurgent activity. Different movements met, and for a short time collaborated, in the lacustrine provinces of El Collao—between La Paz and Cuzco. The rebel coalition fell apart in October 1781 because of divergent hopes and leadership styles, as well as insurmountable rivalries. There were important parallels and equally important differences among these regionally based movements.

In Cuzco and parts of El Collao, the so-called Inca Cultural Renaissance fueled the rebel cause in paradoxical ways. Vibrant memories of Inca kings and imperial traditions underpinned the leadership and prestige of the Tupac Amarus, but such symbols reminded the indigenous masses overburdened by repartos, mitas, and other duties of the significant social gap separating them from urban Inca descendants and provincial caciques. The wealth and status of the Inca regional aristocracy, to which aspiring rural elites like the Tupac Amarus strived to belong, was “unmatched anywhere in the Andes” (40–41). The Inca nobility had grown to become comparable to, and in fact enmeshed with, the powerful Spanish elite. Wealthy caciques and Inca nobles enjoyed significant legitimacy and commanded a great deal of authority among their indigenous troops. The ascendancy and prestige of their Inca lineages among the masses ensured their success in defeating Tupac Amaru in the courts and on the battlefields.

The revolts and campaigns that erupted in Charcas in the 1780s drew upon alternative itineraries for liberation. A coalition of movements, loosely identified with the Katari brothers, took shape in indigenous villages with strong communal structures. There, entrenched notions of justice, predicated upon the need to return to an old “reciprocal” pact, inspired rebellion. Some communal authorities in Charcas continued to collect tribute and deliver it directly to the viceregal authorities, while at the same time petitioning for a lowering of these demands and refusing to obey local magistrates. In exchange for loyalty, tribute, and conversion, the monarch had accorded indigenous subjects a significant degree of autonomy and self-government in the 1550s. Access to courts and the prospect of legal redress had justified fulfilling tribute and mita duties since then, although increased fiscal pressure and rampant corruption had made obtaining justice increasingly difficult.

Other aspects of the rebellion, however, signaled important political transformations. Although in the early weeks of the uprising “the attachment of the native peoples to Christian ritual proved more enduring than their acquiescence to secular power” (93), religious symbols and church ministers became the target of fierce attacks as violence escalated in Charcas and El Collao. Moreover, Andean traditions of self-government had changed over the course of two centuries. In countless communities, local lords (caciques and tribute collectors), as opposed to municipal alcaldes and other authorities, were rebranded as illegitimate and corrupt (especially if imposed by Spanish officials). Years before the Bourbons attacked the privileges of the cacique class, indigenous subjects in these areas had begun to oppose them in courts and dispatch them in extremely violent ways.

Among the predominantly Aymara-speaking communities of the plateau, a contact zone between Cuzco and Potosí, a succession of revolts and campaigns eventually led, in March 1781, to the siege of La Paz by an army of forty thousand Indians commanded by Julián Apaza, a petty merchant who called himself “Tupac Katari” to honor other major rebel leaders. By the time the siege was lifted, fifteen thousand people had died from hunger, illness, or at the hands of the insurgents. Here the rebellion showed its strongest anticolonial and nativist overtones, becoming a real war to the death. The land was to be removed from the king’s sovereignty and returned to its ancient owners. Everyone else, above all people of Spanish ancestry, was
to be killed, subjugated, or expelled. Apaza and his followers partially rejected the claims to leadership of the Tupac Amarus, whose aristocratic Inca and foreign Quechua roots marked them as intruders. Although a broad Andean coalition seemed imminent, it never fully materialized. Nor did the Kataristas accept Spanish claims about the Kataristas’ cultural and racial inferiority. Many Spaniards were forced to dress in Indian clothes and chew coca, not as an insult but as a sign that a new time of indigenous dominance was coming. Even if for a brief period, and most notably in this particular revolutionary scenario, the insurgents undermined colonial hierarchies, diluting their own subalternity.

In recovering these local histories and social experiences, Serulnikov is particularly interested in exposing the distinct political culture that enabled the rebels “to translate their discontent into collective mobilization” (12). This is, in a way, an archaeology of political symbols and meanings. As Walker states in the foreword, the series of revolts, particularly in northern Potosí, “developed within the colonial fold” (xii). Broad patterns of political action, such as journeying to local and regional courts to petition and litigate, were first borrowed, and then appropriated, from Iberian and colonial practices and institutions. During the Great Andean Uprising, many rebel leaders acted simultaneously as military commanders and legal representatives, signaling these two sides of Andean concerted political action.

In explaining the defeat of the Great Rebellion, Walker and Serulnikov stress both the effectiveness of the Church’s ideological arsenal and the military power of local Spanish militias and viceregal armies (composed of Indians, Spaniards, and castas). Nevertheless, Serulnikov’s observation that the Great Rebellion “ended through an implosion rather than outside military repression” (97) points to some pending issues that will hopefully inspire future studies. As Serulnikov notes, many leaders of the uprisings were captured and brought before colonial authorities by members of their own communities, who likely realized—or came to accept—that the courts were, after all, the most effective means for challenging local and imperial powers. (The Bourbons even agreed to a widespread demand for an audiencia in Cuzco.)

Moreover, the nature and scope of Tupac Amaru’s political project—whether the Kingdom of Peru, ruled by an Inca, would remain part of the Castilian Crown or become a separate entity altogether—is still open to debate, although letters and edicts show a shifting platform in which mentions of King Charles gradually faded away. The royalism of a large segment of the indigenous tribute-paying vassals and Inca elites of the southern Andes—or perhaps, more accurately, their anti-Tupacamarismo—is still poorly understood and merits further study. Later events and shifting political climates in Cuzco and elsewhere, as well as the role played by other royalists during Spain’s monarchical crisis, the establishment of the first governing juntas, and the Wars of Independence of the 1810s and 1820s make this line of inquiry even more intriguing.

These works are important additions to the literature on the late colonial period. The authors reduce the scale of observation—sometimes to a single village, court case, or religious building—to explore how, by triggering deep political and social transformations, Bourbon reformism and other late colonial developments became intertwined with local stories of resistance and accommodation. While highlighting empire and imperial designs as frameworks for understanding these transformations, the authors delve into the microhistories and micropolitics of the Andean countryside. The massive uprisings of the early 1780s were the single greatest challenge to the Bourbon reconceptualization of the American kingdoms. Nonetheless, constant appeals by the king’s vassals to ecclesiastic and civil courts, common at all levels of society, remained widespread forms of individual and collective agency, sites for political mobilization, and vehicles for expressing collective aspirations of different sorts. Imperial reforms ignited the southern Andean region, but its visual, legal, and political cultures formed and grew in tandem with the empire.

The generalized climate of discontent during the Bourbon era is well known: renewed conflict between Church and state and between local and Peninsular elites; regal intervention in the domains of religious and artistic sensitivity and marriage and the family; and increased fiscal pressure and extralegal burdens. By stressing the historical depth of southern Andean visual, legal, and political traditions, these works show the importance of agency, actual practice, and custom over structure, Church doctrine, and written law. If the so-called Bourbon Reforms signaled a second conquest, it was, like the first, a protracted and unfinished one. The breakdown of the monarchical regime and the advent of the republican order were not a forgone conclusion. There were other possible outcomes as connected to known events as they were to the suppressed histories and artistic representations uncovered in these works.
Author Information
José Carlos de la Puente Luna is an associate professor of history at Texas State University. He is the author of *Andean Cosmopolitans: Seeking Justice and Reward at the Spanish Royal Court* (University of Texas Press, 2018) and *Los curacas hechiceros de Jauja: Batallas mágicas y legales en el Perú colonial* (Fondo Editorial PUCP, 2007).
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