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Recentering the Commoner: *Why it Matters*

Since the publication of Raúl Porras Barrenechea's highly original but deeply prejudiced *El cronista indio Felipe Huaman Poma de Ayala* (1948), critical issues have arisen regarding the complex, mutually constitutive relationship between the famous Andean chronicler's life and his work, *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno* (1616). No less of a landmark than Porras's essay was Rolena Adorno's path-breaking "The Genesis of Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala's *Nueva corónica y buen gobierno*" (1993), which capitalized on the then recently published *Expediente Prado Tello* (1991), a striking set of land titles that included Felipe Guaman Poma as its main protagonist.[1] While Porras raised doubts about several of the chronicler's biographical claims in the *Nueva corónica*, especially those regarding the Spanish branch of his adoptive family (the Ayalas, linked to Luis Dávalos de Ayala), Adorno rearranged old and new documentation to build a compelling narrative that placed the *Nueva corónica*'s origin in an adverse, humiliating legal decision. Known to specialists since 1955 but restored to its original context thanks to the *Expediente Prado Tello* and satellite documents, the ruling came at the close of a bitter dispute between Guaman Poma and a group of Chachapoya residents, led by their *caciques*, over some lands near the city of Huamanga between 1597 and 1600.[2] Showcasing the kind of interplay at the center of these scholarly contributions, Adorno and others noted that Guaman Poma's legal setbacks shaped the *Nueva corónica* in important respects, while the *Nueva corónica* shaped Guaman Poma's peripatetic journey to denounce a world turned upside down, in writing and before viceroy and king, 16 years later. An examination of the larger historical forces behind Guaman Poma's legal downfall serves as the starting point for Masters and Cañizares-Esguerra's most welcome retelling of the story.

1. Raúl Porras Barrenecha, *El cronista indio Felipe Huaman Poma de Ayala* (Lima: Lumen, 1948); Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno*, edited by Rolena Adorno, John Murra and Jorge Urioste (México, D.F.: Siglo Veintiuno, 1992); Rolena Adorno, "The Genesis of Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala's Nueva corónica y buen gobierno," *Colonial Latin American Review* 2, no. 1–2 (1993): 53–92; Elías Prado Tello and Alfredo Prado, *Phelipe Guaman Poma de Ayala: Y no ay remedio* (Lima: Centro de Investigaciones y Promoción Amazónica, 1991).

2. Pedro Mañaricúa, "Documentos importantes sobre la vida y andanzas del famoso don Felipe Huaman Poma, Huamanga," *Huamanga* 20, no. 85 (1955): 5–6; Juan Zorrilla, "La posesión de Chiara por los indios Chachapoyas," *Wari* 1 (1977): 49–64.

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In this version, Guaman Poma regains his place—rightfully in my opinion—as "one of the most famous and important early-modern chroniclers anywhere in the world." This approach requires that we look beyond the Andes, with the risks and benefits that this strategy entails. But first, the authors urge us to accept the Chachapoya version of the events as the foundational premise upon which the broader argument rests: "Felipe Guaman Poma" was the rather pompous alias of the Indian Lázaro, a landless, litigious commoner with inflated claims, a *cacique* impersonator upon whom a firm, severe sentence had to be imposed to set the record straight. Masters and Cañizares-Esguerra argue that, beyond the specific circumstances, Lázaro faced a much more formidable and less contingent rival than the Chachapoya, namely, a colonial society increasingly dependent on paperwork, in which documents retrieved from the expanding imperial archive finally began to catch up with, and conspire against, the inflated aspirations and false claims of upwardly mobile commoners such as Lázaro. Humiliated but ultimately undeterred by his defeat, he went on to write a "manifesto against the archive"—the *Nueva corónica*—in which he carefully elevated himself to the role of a Christ-like ecclesiastic investigator, an Inka prince, and the ultimate arbiter of all kinds of claims about the Andean past, present, and future, archives notwithstanding. Guaman Poma was everywhere (or purported to be). His seemingly exagerated claims of an illustrious origin, many of which are made evident in the essay, became ever wilder.

On par with other freethinkers with celebrity status such as Domenico Scandella and Martin Guerre (and with what their lives represent for early modernity), the authors tell us, Guaman Poma and his project for the Andes were nevertheless crisscrossed by a self-defeating paradox: The *Nueva corónica* "both blasted Peru as an inferno of upwardly mobile commoners and urged a new archive-based social order in which paperwork prevented deceit." In other words, as he rejected past archives to wipe the slate clean, the authors argue, Guaman Poma advanced rather contradictorily that "the archive would restore society." His was a futile attempt to establish "an archival regime to certify every vassal's waking movement, restore social, racial, and gender distinctions to God's original design, and finally establish immovable status hierarchies." But that was not how archives worked in the early seventeenth century, and Guaman Poma, an avid contributor to the imperial repository, should have known better.

Anyone who has studied local archives in some depth would find it difficult to disagree with Masters and Cañizares Esguerra's fundamental observation of a *general trend* toward archivalization (at least in that part of the world), which, as they note, gained significant speed in the Andes during Francisco de Toledo's viceregal tenure between 1569 and 1581 (whether this can be demonstrated in a

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single essay and with examples borrowed from New Spain is a different matter). While this historical tendency would be key for understanding the resolution of countless court cases, I still wonder whether the answer to the twin questions of "why did [Guaman Poma] fail to achieve the social mobility he desired—how was he outed as Lázaro?" is "the archivalization of society." I think that there was *at the very least* some truth in the legal claims of the Chachapoya against Guaman Poma—and have stated so in writing. It makes the story more compelling, more revealing of the effervescence of the time. It also makes the *Nueva corónica* even more impressive. As Masters and Cañizares-Esguerra argue, and I argued many years ago, it opens new research horizons.[3]

However, one of the limitations of the 1600 ruling against Guaman Poma is that we are not privy to his defense. Nor do we know whether the adverse ruling was nullified in a higher instance (as documents I am yet to publish seem to suggest). The available sentence does state that he secured witness testimony and, quite possibly, some written proof of his individual claims, but these papers, if they still exist, are yet to be found.[4] As the truism goes, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Although one can suppose that some of the records presented by Guaman Poma in his own civil-cum-criminal trial with the Chachapoyas made it into the *Expediente Prado Tello*, we cannot be certain. To name but a few puzzling details, Guaman Poma was careful *not* to call himself *cacique* of Chiara, Chupas, or Rantavillca, where the lands were located, in the *Expediente Prado Tello*. Nor did he spell out his familial relationship with the main litigants (the Tingos and Ayalas), as I have noted elsewhere. Therefore, it is still unclear how the documents included in the *Expediente Prado Tello* would have helped or harm his case against the Chachapoya. Without additional documentation, it is impossible to settle the matter of Guaman Poma's identity. Therefore, unlike the provincial magistrate who determined the case in the first instance, we must find him *non-guilty*. At least for now, we must acquit.

More to the point, I wonder whether, at this relatively early stage of the "installation of an archival regime," *cacicazgo* lawsuits (which Guaman Poma's *was not*) but especially land court cases are good choices for trying to prove this trajectory toward the preponderance of the archive. Since Adorno's 1993 analysis, but especially during the last decade, legal historians have learned a great deal about the non-documentary aspects of land claims in early colonial Peru. One of the fundamental insights is that written titles (which both parties possessed in Guaman Poma's famous dispute) were not (and in truth would

3. José Carlos de la Puente Luna, "Cuando el 'punto de vista nativo' no es el punto de vista de los nativos: Felipe Guaman Poma y el problema de la apropiación de tierras en el Perú colonial," *Boletín del Instituto Francés de Estudios Andinos* 37, no. 1 (2008): 123–49.

4. Zorrilla, "La posesión," 59.

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never be) the sole determinant factor in adjudicating a case. Lawsuits in Huamanga and elsewhere at this time were determined in the court of public opinion and the market of political influence, even if that entailed downplaying or even dismissing previous deeds.[5] This is especially relevant in a place such as Chupas, where, at the turn of the century, major shifts in ownership regimes and in fact, some would contend, in the very proprietary relations that make this story intelligible—a matter that I cannot discuss in any detail here—dispossessed many people from their previous holdings but opened opportunities as well for new actors to claim land under different rationales. Maybe this was not so much a clash between the titled and the untitled as it was a quarrel about how to establish a better right to property, communal and otherwise, of the same lands. Within the First General Land Inspection in which this case was heard, moreover, *pueblo* lands were to be preferred over *cacique* patrimonial lands, but alas, Guaman Poma realized this too late.

That the Chachapoya were able to establish, to the magistrate's satisfaction, that Felipe Guaman Poma was a *no parte* (someone with no legal standing in the case, an impostor with no inherent right to land on behalf of a commons or a *cacique* lineage) remains, in my view and until new documents are discovered, the best explanation for his legal defeat and subsequent punishment and exile. Proof of this is that some of the lands in Chupas remained in the hands of the Tingos for many years after Guaman Poma's punishment and exile. Although the "archivalization of society" surely explains countless other legal failures, both parties relied to some extent (but not exclusively) on deeds to the same landholdings, obtained from colonial authorities. In this scenario, the specific legal strategy pursued by the Chachapoya seems the determinant factor. Even if, for the sake of argument, the Chachapoya posited, one admitted that others could have overlapping, even stronger claims to the lands in Chiara Hill, Guaman Poma, an impostor, was no legitimate party in the matter. This was a clever procedural argument by which one could remove a rival from the dispute without engaging with the substance of the case. Moreover, a careful reading of the ruling indicates that the complaint against Guaman Poma was not adjudicated solely on the basis of archival proof (or lack thereof) but as expected, on intra- and inter-communal consensus-building mechanisms, reputation, and first-hand inspections. The judge decided this case not by appealing to a "unitary regime of truth" but by picking one among several lines of legal argumentation advanced by the litigants.

5. José Carlos de la Puente Luna, "Customs Apart: Rethinking Inheritance and Competing Land Claims among Native Commoner Women in Colonial Andean Villages," *Colonial Latin American Review* 33, no. 1 (2024): 79–104; José Carlos de la Puente Luna, "Tales of Ancestry, Inheritance, and Possession: New Documentary Evidence on Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala and the First General Land Inspection (1594)," *The Americas* 80, no. 1 (2023): 129–42.

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That said, it is true that, in the end, the Chachapoya titles proved stronger than Guaman Poma's, in great part because, as Masters and Cañizares-Esguerra propose, his "commoner" status was accepted as legal truth. Along with the authors, we can assume this working thesis, but then we need to ask ourselves: What kind of commoner was he? Why does it really matter? Put differently, which commoners could write the *Nueva corónica* in early colonial Peru? Who, within the commoner class, could have pictured themselves addressing the monarch directly? Who could have access to the rooms and hallways of the viceregal palace, the *casa del buen gobierno* where Guaman Poma traveled to deliver the *Nueva corónica* in 1615? None of these questions can be properly answered if we define "commoner" merely in the negative, that is, as opposed to "noble," "prince," or "*cacique*."

In my view, what matters a great deal in understanding the life and work of Guaman Poma, and what got me interested in him in the first place, is what lies *in between* these opposite ends. From a social-history standpoint, it is that space that Guaman Poma inhabited. He was a commoner, yes, but commoners came in many degrees. The interesting parallels with Guerre and Scandella (the famous "Menocchio"), which others before Masters and Cañizares-Esguerra have pointed out, would indeed be strengthened if we were to problematize the idea of Lázaro/Felipe Guaman Poma as a "poor Indian" or a "peasant," which he was not. Regarding the former, he was certainly not poor, for his different occupations and official, salaried appointments over several decades provided him with a material basis well beyond the reach of most tributaries of his time (and which probably paid for the copious amounts of paper and ink needed to prepare the final version of the *Nueva corónica*). It is very interesting to note that, in the *Expediente Prado Tello*, a petition on Guaman Poma's behalf in fact calls him "Casiqui [sic] principal y administrador dela prov[a] delos soras y lucana andamarcas y sircamarca." By 1597, Guaman Poma had joined the ranks of the provincial stewards of community holdings.[6]

Regarding the other status, that of "peasant," he was not, in practice, a farmer subject to state levies, an obligation that he would have managed to escape by migration and other unknown mechanisms (which we can nevertheless surmise by way of comparison). Thus, his "commoner" status also requires some clarification. He would certainly be an *indio del común* inasmuch as he was not of the lordly class. But he would have certainly been a *comunero* (the other meaning of "commoner") no more, if we define that as someone who earns a livelihood through commoning an agropastoral space with other commoners, equally

6. Prado Tello and Prado Prado, *Phelipe Guaman Poma*, 181 [slightly amended after the original].

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dependent on that commonwealth for their livelihood. On the contrary, he managed this commonwealth for a whole province, Lucanas. Hints of Guaman Poma's non-commoner status, in this sense, appear in the dramatic story he tells toward the end of the *Nueva corónica*: He returns home after decades of travel and service to the king and the poor, only to find that, due to his long absence (and thus failure to contribute to the commons), he has lost his rights to his family possessions ("casas, y sementeras y pastos") within the community of his village in Lucanas. Especially if he was a commoner, he did experience significant upward mobility, but it came at a cost. No title could make up for his absenteeism. In other words, his entitlements within the commonwealth did not exist anymore.

Thus, from my perspective, what connects Menocchio (a slightly privileged miller within the peasant class in Fruli) to Guaman Poma is not only the heterodox and highly original ways that they read and interpreted the knowledge of their time, as Masters and Cañizares-Esguerra correctly point out, but, as a precondition for this, the very social mechanisms, local networks, and class dynamics by which they gained access to that knowledge, religious and secular, in print and in manuscript form. The experiential and lettered knowledge that so masterfully converge in the *Nueva corónica* shape the intricate ways the author presents himself and his textual and visual arguments in the work—and in fact, the very genres in which it was written. As such, it is access to this growing body of early-modern knowledge, with enough time and leisure (comparatively speaking) not only to digest it but also to extensively engage with it in a 1000-page treatise, which grants Guaman Poma his privileged status within the learned, cosmopolitan elite culture of his time. Not all *caciques*, let alone the myriad *mandoncillos* of five or ten Indians depicted in the *Nueva corónica*, had access to this wealth of information.

In other words, those of us interested in how his social status shaped his work should remember that, while Guaman Poma's efforts at self-fashioning are critical to understanding how and why the *Nueva corónica* was written, they are not sufficient. There are matters pertaining to how an author chooses to present himself in the text (his authorial strategies) that warrant engaging with the scholarship on the *Nueva corónica* as a major literary work (its intertextual relation to other works). In that sense, one of the most revealing strands of scholarship regarding the *Nueva corónica* and his author is the set of studies about his *lecturas*, his readings and sources. Pioneered by Rolena Adorno and Pierre Duviols and followed, among others, by Audrey Prevotel, Marteen Van de Guchte, José Cárdenas Bunsen, Kathryn Burns, Regina Harrison, and, most recently, Soledad González Díaz, these studies have

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reconstructed, through painstaking research in libraries around the world, the corpus of textual and visual sources (eighteen so far, according to the most recent estimate) within (and against) which Guaman Poma positioned himself and his poignant arguments. The growing literature on Guaman Poma's relationship with Father Martín de Murúa, one of the authors with whom he polemicizes, sheds light on similar issues.[7] Both scholarships would have been important to discuss. After all, that was Guaman Poma's own authorial strategy and method (hence the chapter of the *crónicas pasadas*, the earlier chronicles, for instance). Moving from text to context and back, then, it is in the combination of these specific readings with the biographical bits included in documents yet to be discovered that we will continue to find answers to the when, where, how, and why of the *Nueva corónica*. When and where did he get access to this information? In whose library, convent cell, native municipal council, or notarial office? Under what conditions? What do they tell us about larger historical transformations?

It is time that we shake Guaman Poma out of some of the "ethnohistorical" (i.e., preliterate) readings of his work. I fully agree with Masters and Cañizares-Esguerra in that the model of the author-as-ethnographer and informant of pristine, unchanging Andean societies and mentalities is a serious limitation to our understanding of how Guaman Poma amassed a significant body of knowledge (and, hence, to how he should be read in the present). He is no "transparent window into the native past," as the authors posit. Even more, as a literate man, he did not learn only from experience (or worse, from some invisible connection to an immutable "Andean mentality"). Nor did he simply fabricate out of whole cloth either. It is precisely this realization that reminds us that the information he acquired and the knowledge he produced would not have hinged solely on a real or purported *cacique* status. There is more—much more—to the story. It is not always easy to distinguish what already is from what ought to be in Guaman Poma's angry pen (i.e., that which he is already approving of from that

7. Rolena Adorno, "Las otras fuentes de Guaman Poma: sus lecturas castellanas," *Histórica* 2, no. 2 (1978): 137–58; Kathryn Burns, "Notaries, Truth, and Consequences," *American Historical Review* 110, no. 2 (2005): 350–79; José Cárdenas Bunsen, "La legislación eclesiástica, el cabildo indígena del Hospital del Cuzco y la relación entre Murúa y Guaman Poma," *Letras* 91, no. 133: 163–86; Pierre Duviols, "Guaman Poma, historiador del Perú antiguo: una nueva pista," *Revista Andina* 1 (1983): 103–15; Soledad González Díaz, "Autoría y fuentes en la Nueva corónica y buen gobierno de Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala," *Revista de Historia* 32 (2025): 1–33; Soledad González Díaz, "Guaman Poma y el Repertorio anónimo (1554): una nueva fuente para las edades del mundo en la Nueva corónica y buen gobierno," *Chungara* 44, no. 3 (2012): 377–88; Regina Harrison, "Guaman Poma, Law, and Legacy." In *Unlocking the Doors to the Worlds of Guaman Poma and His Nueva corónica*, edited by Rolena Adorno and Ivan Boserup, 141–61. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2015; Audrey Prévotel, "De los libros impresos a la Nueva corónica. Los grabados como fuentes de Guaman Poma," *Letras* 85, no. 121: 63–80; Maarten Van de Guchte, "Invention and Assimilation: European Engravings as Models for the Drawings of Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala," In *Guaman Poma de Ayala: The Colonial Art of an Andean Author*, edited by Rolena Adorno et al., 92–109. New York: The Americas Society, 1992.

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which the author is proposing by way of reform). Nonetheless, my impression remains that Guaman Poma was a staunch defender of the written word and its hegemonic recording and storing technologies, past and present. Above paperwork, however, he was a true believer in justice. The word, in its double meaning of "justice" and "judge," appears more than 600 times in the *Nueva corónica*. True justice could only emanate from a Christian conscience, Guaman Poma seems to be telling us throughout. As such, justice revealed deeper truths, which mere documents ("the archive") could not. Thus, a world upside down is not a world with faulty archives but a world without justice.

In closing, I want to leave the readers of *The Americas*, to whose authors and editors I thank for the opportunity to join this important forum, with a quote and an invitation. The first comes from a specific passage where Guaman Poma praises the "grande auilidad" of the cord keepers, secretaries, and treasurers of the Inka. But then, as if he were talking to us in the future, he immediately remarked, "mejor fuera en papel y tinta."[8] The second urges us to go back to the many arguments, admonitions, anecdotes, collective portraits, and even documentary templates with which Guaman Poma reminds his Christian readers of the importance of the quest for justice, especially for the poor and downtrodden, the *indios* of the kingdom. These passages stand as examples of Guaman Poma's own readings, of course, but perhaps, more importantly, of the trust he placed upon written documents that would lead to the long-awaited *buen gobierno* if they were inspired by Christian consciences and placed in the right hands, those of the equally Christian justices of the "house of good government" (as opposed to the venal "jueces de palo" denounced in the *Nueva corónica*). Perhaps therein lies the real paradox.[9]

JOSÉ CARLOS DE LA PUENTE LUNA is a professor of history and associate chair at Texas State University. He is the author of *Los curacas hechiceros de Jauja: Batallas mágicas y legales en el Perú colonial* (2007) and *Andean Cosmopolitans: Seeking Justice and Reward at the Spanish Royal Court* (2018), and the coeditor of *El taller de la idolatría: los manuscritos de Pablo José de Arriaga, SJ* (2021) and editor of *Commoning Across Worlds: Practices in Landscapes of Community* (forthcoming; 2027). Some of his works on Guaman Poma include "Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, administrador de bienes de comunidad" (2008); "Cuando el "punto de vista nativo" no es el punto de vista de los nativos: Felipe Guaman Poma y el problema de la apropiación de tierras en el Perú colonial." (2008); "El capitán, el ermitaño y el cronista: claves para establecer cuándo nació el autor de la *Nueva corónica y buen gobierno*" (2016); and "Tales of Ancestry, Inheritance, and Possession: New Documentary Evidence on

8. Guaman Poma, *El primer nueva corónica*, 361–363.
9. Guaman Poma, *El primer nueva corónica*, 701 [715].

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Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala and the First General Land Inspection (1594)," published in *The Americas* in 2023. He is currently working on a book about commoner colonization, the foundation of villages, and the making of community in the Colonial Central Andes.

JOSÉ CARLOS DE LA PUENTE LUNA

Department of History,
Texas State University
San Marcos, United States
jd65@txstate.edu

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