



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

RMST 202

Romance Studies,
Modernism to the Present

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*Deep Rivers: José María
Arguedas on Conflict
and Convergence
Without End*

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*Deep Rivers: José María
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with Jon Beasley-Murray

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Deep Rivers explores a shifting and conflictive frontier between Romance and non-Romance languages, colonizer and colonized: Andean Peru.

European and Indigenous languages, sensibilities, and concepts circulate, mix, and rub against each other in often complex and unpredictable ways.

Highland Peru in the first half of the twentieth century is not even postcolonial, in that colonization is ongoing, and in the countryside and the region's smaller towns and cities the modern nation-state has established itself only precariously at best.

The book's protagonist and (mostly) first-person narrator is Ernesto, a fourteen-year-old *mestizo* boy. But he is an odd sort of protagonist: never at home, almost always an outsider, strangely passive if quickly roused to passion.

He decides neither his own destiny
nor that of the book's various plots.

Ernesto gains a sense of the broad panorama of Andean culture, which itself is marked by multiple movements and displacements, symbolized above all by the “deep rivers” of the novel’s title.

Arguedas emphasizes both the dynamism of Indigenous culture, which is far from simply a relic or holdover from the past, and also the persistent struggle between the various populations that inhabit the highlands.

If colonization is not (yet) complete, then the outcome of this struggle is perhaps still to be determined.

The novel ends as Ernesto is told to leave the town and seek refuge from this epidemic at one of the haciendas of a distant relative. He chooses, however, to chart his own route towards an uncertain future.

The novel ends, but the story continues, inspired by the possibilities of harmony and convergence found even in an everyday trinket such as a child's plaything.



NEVER-ENDING STORIES

It is not easy to summarize
the plot of *Deep Rivers*.

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the plot of *Deep Rivers*.

It is not that nothing happens; on the
contrary, the book practically hums
with activity and incident.

There is always something going on. The Andes, however provincial and remote from our perspective, are in Arguedas's depiction far from being a world stuck in time, alien to change, hidebound by tradition.

Yet none of the book's various plots or subplots reach their dénouement, partly because we view them all aslant, from one side: we are not given enough information to make sense of them fully, or to see them to their conclusion.

“Your uncle, the owner of the four haciendas” (17). “My father [. . .] had conceived some peculiar plan concerning the Old Man [. . .]. We were carrying out an important plan. / ‘I’ll make him do it. I can ruin him!’” (3, 4).

“His plans had been frustrated, but we were riding along at a trot.” (22)

“Lleras has run off with a mestiza from Huanupata. They headed for Cuzco on horseback. The mestiza was a seamstress and had a bar in the Huanupata district. Lleras has put a curse on Abancay!” (144)

“This time Lleras will really be turned into a lost soul; growing bristles on his body, he will sweat and frighten the animals in the cordillera. He'll shriek from the mountaintops in the night, cause rocky crags to tumble down, and rattle his chains.” (155)

“They could not find her. [. . .] Every day they would receive more news of the movements of Doña Felipa and her companions, and of her flight toward Huamanga. Still other people contended she had started a *chicha* bar in San Miguel, which is so close to the edge of the jungle that flocks of immense blue parrots come there.” (190)

“Perhaps on the road I would meet the plague, climbing up the hill. She would come in the guise of an old woman, on foot or on horseback. I knew it now.” (223)

**“It will come in by the thousands. Now, boy!
Turn back. Go home.” (224)**

“Out, plague!
Way jiebre! Waaay . . . !” (231)

We are given bits and pieces of disconnected narrative, but seldom if ever a sense of where they ultimately take us.

Ernesto is not given access to the information he might need to make sense of what is going on around him.

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But these are also stories that seem constitutively to have no end.

The book is oddly plotless—
if full of drama and tension.

“Rather than willingly abandon his ‘play’, Ernesto remains unwilling to ‘grow up’ and assume the violent and contradictory roles associated with (upper-)middle-class mestizo masculinity.”

(Mela Jones Heestand)

It is as though there is almost no real progression from first page to the last.

Arguedas has another timescale in mind:
not the weeks, months, or years of the
average novel, but the centuries of
dominance and resistance, resilience
and adaptation, that go back to the 1530s,
if not before.

The result is a novel that is episodic: full of moving scenes and set-pieces.

These are snapshots, or even
what we would now call “reels.”

“The novel [. . .] acts as a recording machine, registering the co-existence of other semiotic systems and environments at its edges. [. . .] by resorting to the experience of pictorial sight and sound, [the text] becomes inter-medial; photo- and phono-graphic. . .

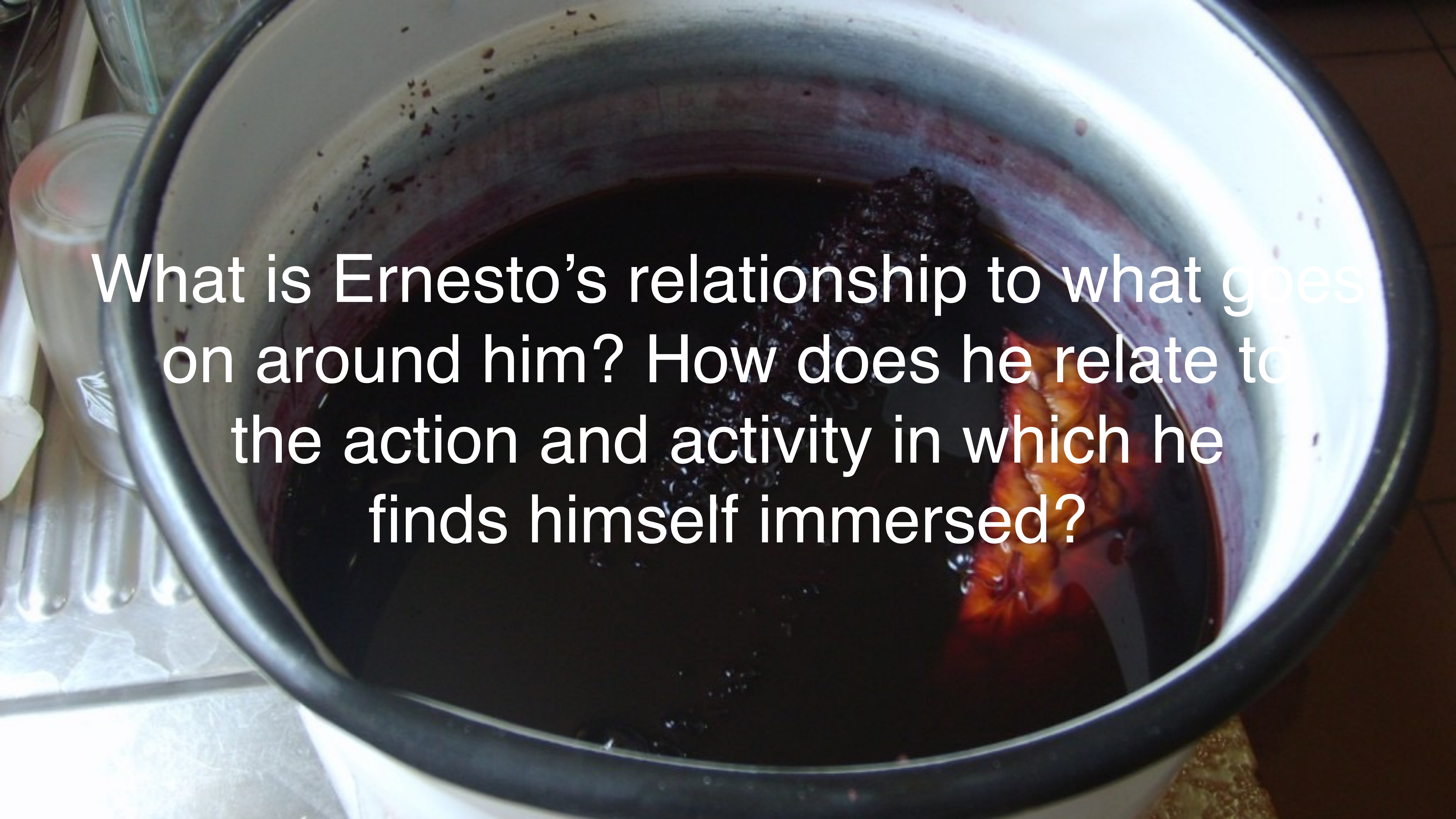
. . .the text demands that its readers not only read, but look and listen beyond its pages too: it provides other perspectives.”
(John Kraniauskas)

If novels tend to totalize, to cannibalize other forms of representation and put them at the service of narrative and plot, by contrast *Deep Rivers* resists that novelization, as though aware that the novel form itself is a vehicle of colonization.

“a problem of the spirit, of culture, in these countries in which strange currents meet without ever, for centuries, fully blending, forming instead tight zones of confluence, while deep below and far beyond the principal veins flow without end, incredibly”
(Arguedas, “La novela y el problema de la expresión literaria en el Perú”)

The struggle is to put all this in a novel,
mindful however that the “deep rivers”
of Andean culture always
exceed the novel form.

What is Ernesto's relationship to what goes on around him? How does he relate to the action and activity in which he finds himself immersed?



What is Ernesto's relationship to what goes on around him? How does he relate to the action and activity in which he finds himself immersed?

Ernesto is what we might call
a participant observer.

“Papa, the cathedral seems bigger when it's seen from farther off. Who made it? [. . .] Does it ever rain on the cathedral? Does the rain fall on the cathedral? [. . .] Do the stones sing at night?”

Everything is new to him, and everything is of interest. He is immersed in the sights but also the sounds and smells and affects of his immediate environment.

“I was excited by the women's violence. I felt like rushing at somebody, like fighting. [. . .] When they repeated the cry, I shouted it in chorus with them. [. . .] ‘Let’s stay till the end. Till the end.’ (92, 93)

He wants to get involved,
to be where the action is.

He may be passive (an observer), but he is keen to be swept up in activity (a participant) much as stones and branches are swept downstream through river rapids.

“And why are they having
the fiesta, sir?” (101)

He keeps watching, keeps asking, keeps listening, keeps up as best as he can with the frenetic activity that surrounds and envelops him.

Ernesto's desire to take part also comes from the fact that he never fully belongs.

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“Foráneo” and *“forastero”* or *“forasterito”*:
outsider or stranger, little stranger.

In an environment in which almost everyone is an outsider in one way or another, Ernesto feels his difference or distance with particular intensity.

“While he would miss me, as he talked with friends in Chalhuanca, playing the role of the newly arrived stranger, [. . .] I would feel the force of the sad and powerful current that buffets children who must face, all alone, a world fraught with monsters and fire and great rivers that sing the most beautiful of all music as they break upon the stones and the islands.” (38)

It is perhaps precisely because he is so attentive and curious about the world around him that he feels all the more strongly a sense of alienation from it.

“Ernesto discovers the abysmal differences that separate him from the others—his loneliness, his exiled condition [. . .]. He cannot turn back to his Indian community; and now he also knows that he is not an Indian.” (Mario Vargas Llosa)

He is forever betwixt and between, neither one thing nor the other, but it is for this reason that he is able to tell us about both (torn) halves of the Andean world.



APPROACHING RECONCILIATION

Despite (or even because of) its stress on difference and alienation, fragmentation and conflict, this novel is also permeated with the desire for harmony and reconciliation.

“The dialectic between unity and variety visibly repeats throughout Arguedas’s work.” (Antonio Cornejo Polar)

Ernesto finds evidence of rifts, dislocation,
and (often, willed) misunderstanding
everywhere he looks.

But he also finds points of contact and resonance that span these deep divides much, perhaps, as the Spanish-built bridge spans a river gorge on the outskirts of town.

“I didn't know if I loved the river or the bridge more. But both of them cleansed my soul, flooding it with courage and heroic dreams.” (62-3)

This is a book that is full of
pain and violence.

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pain and violence.

But it is full also of images of beauty, and of
(heroic?) dreams of harmony.

Cusco provides instances of both extreme alienation and utopian harmony.

“The *pongo* was waiting in the doorway. He took off his hat and, bareheaded, followed us through to the third courtyard. He came soundlessly, his tousled hair on end. I spoke to him in Quechua. He looked at me, startled. ‘Doesn't he know how to talk?’

I asked my father.

“‘He doesn't dare,’ he told me.” (13-14)

“He wore a very short, ragged poncho. He asked permission to leave, bowing like a worm asking to be crushed. [. . .] I couldn't hold back my sobs. I wept as if I were on the shore of a great unknown lake. [. . .] I had never seen anyone more humiliated than the Old Man's *pongo*.” (14, 15)

Ernesto recoils at this utter abjection, the absolute extirpation of agency and subjectivity; a person reduced to a thing.

“The wall was stationary, but all its lines were seething and its surface was as changeable as that of the flooding summer rivers which have similar crests near the center, where the current flows the swiftest and is the most terrifying. [. . .] ‘Papa, every stone is talking.’” (7, 8)

“I touched the stone with my hands,
following the line [. . .]. In the dark street, in
the silence, the wall appeared to be alive;
the lines I had touched between the stones
burned on the palms of my hands.” (6)

“On the narrow street the whitewashed Spanish wall seemed to have no other purpose than that of brightening the Inca wall.” (8)

“As a child you see some things we older people cannot see. God's harmony exists on earth. We'll forgive the Old Man, since it was through him you came to know Cuzco.” (11)

There is no finer image of unity and harmony in *Deep Rivers* than the spinning top or *zumbayllu* that one of the boys, Antero, brings in to school.

“What could a *zumbayllu* be? What did this word, whose last syllables reminded me of beautiful and mysterious objects, mean?” (67)

“Yllu, in one form, means the music of tiny wings in flight, music created by the movement of light objects.” (64)

The Spanish stem, “*zumbar*,” is equally onomatopoeic, meaning (of insects) to buzz, (of machines) to hum or whirr, or (of the ears) to ring. It can also mean either to come very close to something on the one hand, or to rush off or escape on the other.

It unites opposites—natural and machinic, external and internal, proximity and flight—just as the word “*zumbayllu*” as a whole combines Spanish and Quechua, while the toy itself, Ernesto imagines, can contain “a little of everything in its soul” (131).

“It concentrates within itself every resource against evil and becomes symbol of the rupture of the scholastic confinement. [. . .] It is the response to the challenge of closed spaces.” (Antonio Cornejo Polar)

Against all the fragmentation and partiality that blight the world portrayed in the novel, the *zumbayllu* promises connection and communication.

Breaking down or fleeing (*zumbando*) the restrictions and divisions of the postcolonial compact, with the spinning top Ernesto feels himself coming as close as he ever can to (*zumbando*) a convergence of elements, natural and artificial, Indigenous and Western, in which he, too, might at last find his place.

Conflict supersedes and forecloses the
possibility of convergence.

Conflict supersedes and forecloses the possibility of convergence.

The “monsters and fire” that the boy has to confront are as active and dangerous when the novel ends as when it begins.

In *Deep Rivers*, Arguedas still holds out hope, that the often overlooked or subterranean currents of Indigenous vitality could be redeemed and even themselves redeem a fallen world of degradation and violence. Here, at least, that story is not yet at an end.



MUSIC

Pianochocolate,
“Romance”



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PRODUCTION

jon.beasley-murray@ubc.ca

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