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Mapping South American Latina/o Literature in the United States

*Interviews with
Contemporary Writers*

JUANITA HEREDIA



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Juanita Heredia

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United States

Interviews with Contemporary Writers

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Flagstaff, AZ, USA

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First, I would like to begin with the writers interviewed, Daniel Alarcón, Marie Arana, Kathleen De Azevedo, Carolina De Robertis, Patricia Engel, Carmen Giménez Smith, Daisy Hernández, Jaime Manrique, Farid Matuk, Julie Sophia Paegle, Mariana Romo-Carmona and Sergio Waisman. Without your pioneer works and precious words, this project could never have been born. Thank you from the bottom of my heart!

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As with every publication of this kind, I take this moment to show my appreciation to Tomás Rene, Vicky Bates and other editors at Palgrave Macmillan who have guided me every step of the way in this process. I am especially grateful to scholar, author, and editor Norma Cantú, for

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Finally, I pay homage to my family and friends who have not only supported this project but have encouraged me in every endeavor I have undertaken over the years. While I traveled to complete parts of this book, I was fortunate to stay with my longtime high school friend Sally Hui in New York City where she took me all over NYC to try various international cuisines. Reminiscent of the “old days” in San Francisco. I also treasure my friends in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and beyond, including Bonnie Lai, William Chang and family, Dexter Porter, Stacey and Alex Quintanilla, and my brother Zevedeo who has made trips to Lima to bring me books and other mementos to help my research. This project could not have happened without my parents, the first South Americans in the U.S. I knew who traveled from Lima to San Francisco via Hartford and New York City in the early 1960s. Dad, you are with me in spirit, especially when I listen to a Peruvian waltz, an Argentine tango, a Colombian bolero, and more. Mom, your example in perseverance, faith, community building, and generosity to humankind are incomparable. I love you, both!

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Introduction: Mapping South American Latinidad in the United States

Mapping South American Latina/o Literature in the United States: Interviews with Contemporary Writers is the first edited book of interviews with U.S. authors of South American origins that demonstrates how they have contributed pioneer work to trans-American literature and culture in the twenty-first century. Conversing with the authors in this volume, they have much to say about literature in global contexts, their experiences as writers in at least two cultures, two languages, and two nations, and their specific roles as transnational cultural ambassadors between South America and the United States as I have argued in my previous work, *Transnational Latina Narratives* (2009). Through their transnational experiences the authors have developed communities throughout different regions and cities across the United States. However, the texts by the authors in this collection also exemplify a return to their heritage in South America through memory and travels, often showing that they maintain strong cultural and literary ties across national borders, and thus, have created a new chapter in trans-American letters as critics like Bieger, Saldivar, and Voelz have also observed in rethinking the national parameters of the American literary canon in *The Imaginary and its World* (2013).

While scholars of multi-ethnic American literature have been concerned with expanding the literary canon to include a plurality of voices from different cultures in the United States, few critics of U.S. Latina/o literature

have examined how migrations from South America to the United States have affected the representation of Latinas/os in literature and cultural studies in a transnational context in the twenty-first century. By South America, I refer to the geographical region south of Panama/Central America, particularly Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Uruguay, nations that are heritages or homelands to the writers in this collection. At a moment in time when Latinas/os have become the largest growing cultural ethnic group in the United States, it is necessary to look at the diversity within this population, because each group brings its own history, cultural practices, and literary contributions which make the Latina/o community very dynamic and versatile in the United States.

Mapping South American Latina/o Literature consists of interviews with twelve authors who trace their descent from South American countries mentioned above. They discuss their education, literary influences, intellectual formation, and journeys between South America and the United States to demonstrate the historical events that have affected their lives. This original scholarship points to a new direction in trans-American literary studies within a broader context of world literature in the twenty-first century because it examines the global dimensions of authors who move between nations in the contemporary period, not just a one-sided terminal migration from South America to the United States. As these interviews show, the writers answer questions to probe a multi-faceted identity affected by gender, class, languages, race, migrations, urbanization, and social justice.

For this edited collection, I conducted interviews with these twelve authors as a methodology that allowed me to produce new knowledge with respect to a trans-American literary movement. This kind of study can serve as a foundation for critical articles and monographs in research as well as a useful resource for students in undergraduate and graduate courses on U.S. Latina/o literature and culture. I interviewed most of the authors in person in 2013–2015 close to their homes in Los Angeles, Miami, New York City, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Washington D.C. I also had the privilege of meeting a few of them in their heritage cities such as Lima and Montevideo which also helped me better comprehend the author in his/her South American environs. Each segment consists of a brief biography and the interview, offering further understanding of the historical context of South American–U.S. relations. Each interview also emphasizes a different period of migration from the twentieth century to the contemporary period that has affected each author.

The significance of this volume is quite timely because in the post-2000 period, these authors are publishing literary works within a global context that departs from the nationalist approach of the past and thereby, broadening the trans-American literary canon but also conversing with a Latin American literary tradition. The geographical parameters of their stories, for example, are not limited solely to spaces within the U.S., but instead cover a broad range in South America and at times, Europe. Almost all the authors in this project are first generation Latinos in the United States whose families are direct products of South American migrations and, at times, their families in South America are products of other migrations from Africa, Europe, or the Middle East as a consequence of slavery, the Holocaust, and refugee immigration. Furthermore, these writers form part of a diaspora in the U.S. that has been affected by political and/or economic displacement from the 1960s to the 1990s period such as civil wars (i.e. Peru's Shining Path, Colombia's drug war) and dictatorships (i.e. Argentina's Dirty War, Chilean Pinochet's military government) forcing many to leave as emigrants or exiles to countries such as the U.S. Much of this historical context can also be found in books in the Duke Latin American Readers Series I include in the bibliography.

Historically, people of South American background have arrived in the United States since the late seventeenth century, some of whom were trying to escape the wars of independence that their South American homelands were fighting against Spain. Some of the first Chilean and Peruvian immigrants came to work as miners in San Francisco in 1849 during the Gold Rush period. During the Second World War South Americans from privileged backgrounds had opportunities to travel to study at universities in the U.S. according to Oboler in "South Americans" (2005). In another important period in the 1980s the largest waves of South Americans migrated and settled in different regions of the United States as a consequence of economic and/or political displacement from their home countries. In spite of these historical events, South American descent authors are the least known of the Latina/o groups in the United States because they are a small group compared to the more established Latina/o ones like Chicanos/Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans in the U.S., and Cuban Americans whose governments have also had a longer and complicated history with the United States (i.e. Treaty of Guadalupe of 1848, Spanish American War of 1898, and the Cuban Revolution of 1959) according to Bost and Aparicio. Furthermore, it is important to underscore how South America has been at the center of global history before

its ties to the U.S. Before these nations became independent politically in the nineteenth century, they were colonies of Spain and Portugal and, thus, began the process of modernization in the colonial period of the fifteenth century. Cities in South America like Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Lima, Montevideo, Rio de Janeiro, and Santiago have become cultural centers of globalization and urbanization due to the transnational migration of their people discussed in collections such as *The Lima Reader* and *The Rio de Janeiro Reader*. Each nation in South America has not only experienced internal migrations with people moving from the provinces to cities for work and education but these nations have also endured colonial legacies such as African slavery, European, Middle Eastern and Asian immigrations to construct exploding multi-ethnic metropolitan centers. The authors interviewed are aware of these historical disruptions that have affected their lives, their families and ancestors and through the writers' words, they hold onto the memory of these powerful stories.

Many writers in this collection constitute fairly new voices within Latina/o literary studies, some have gained prominence in both, Latina/o literary circles and in venues such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. However, scholars in academia have paid minimal critical attention to the importance of their literary texts in the trans-American literary canon. Ironically, some authors in this collection have received much attention from wider world literature because they address global issues in their texts that reach a readership beyond U.S. borders.

In many respects, this original scholarship advances the critical dialogue initiated by José Luis Falconi and José Antonio Mazzotti's edited *The "Other" Latinos: Central and South Americans in the United States* (2008), a special issue dedicated to South American Latinos in the U.S. in *Latino Studies* (2005) edited by Suzanne Oboler, and scholarship by Marilyn Espitia concerning South American migrations to the United States (2004). These aforementioned works began the critical conversation within the context of historical and migration patterns. On the other hand, *Mapping South American Latina/o Literature* represents an important contribution to the literary and cultural contexts by positioning South American descent authors as creators of new epistemologies between the U.S./Global North and South America/Global South. These Latina/o authors do so by discussing the personal context of migrations to and from their South American nation under specific historical circumstances, be it in the narrative form, poetry, essay, or journalism, an endeavor that has never been done before. Their words serve as testimonies to a kind of oral

history that will record how descendants of South American immigrants have made their cultural and literary marks in the U.S. which are as important as previous generations of U.S. Latina/o authors (Kevane and Heredia 1–18).

Before presenting the chapters which include the interviews with the specific authors, it is important to note some common themes that derived from my conversations with these writers despite the differences in generation, gender, and historical migrations. Unlike the more established Latina/o groups like Chicanas/os concentrated primarily in the Southwest, Latino Caribbeans living in the East Coast, and Cuban Americans settled in Florida, many South American communities are dispersed all over the U.S. forming archipelagos or enclaves in metropolitan U.S. cities in places like Los Angeles, New York, and Miami, where one finds neighborhoods named Little Colombia, Little Peru, and Little Brazil according to Guarnizo, Margolis, and Paerregaard. Even though the authors in this collection may not necessarily come from these communities, they maintain their South American cultural practices through their family ties. It is no surprise, then, that the authors welcomed questions regarding their families and genealogies to show how these histories affected their mixed hybrid identities as transnational writers of today. In many respects, the authors served as translators for family members linguistically and culturally traversing national lines. One also discovers a rich treasure of stories about resilience, hard work, and the dual elements of success and sacrifice as Latinas/os living in the United States. The authors share certain cultural practices related to musical tastes, culinary foods, sports, spiritual practices, and more to maintain their South American cultures alive in the U.S. Past, present and future meet.

Along with family histories, the authors in this collection discussed their education revealing the circumstances that led them to become authors and educators. Although their areas of specialization in college varied from Comparative Literature, English, French, Journalism, Russian, Spanish, and Theatre to Anthropology, Biology, and Environmental Sciences, all ended up as writers. Their professions range from professors of literature, creative writing, and journalism to an editor in publishing. Some, such as Daniel Alarcón, Carolina De Robertis, Farid Matuk, Mariana Romo-Carmona, and Sergio Waisman, are literary translators working with various languages, and many are professors at institutions of higher learning in the U.S. Even though many authors in this collection may publish primarily in English, they do not forget the value

of Spanish or Portuguese and reaching a wider reading audience, be it in the original language or through translations. This attitude shows that the authors are concerned with their respective South American heritage and conscientious of including some of these elements in their writing. By incorporating the references to South American cultural or historical elements in their writings, these authors are changing the literary landscape of trans-American literature and in particular, U.S. Latina/o literature.

By representing iconic figures from history, politics, and popular culture in South America, the U.S. Latina/o authors interviewed are providing a unique vision by broadening the trans-American literary canon in a transnational context. It should come as no surprise that some authors are concerned with exploring historical figures who fought in the independence movements in the nineteenth century such as Venezuelan Simón Bolívar, Argentine José de San Martín, and Ecuadorian Manuela Sáenz. One also finds a revindication of icons in politics and popular culture such as the legendary Brazilian/Portuguese entertainer Carmen Miranda, Argentine female politician Eva Perón, and Argentine tango singer Carlos Gardel. Yet, it is important to remember that these South American descent authors in the U.S. are writing from the Global North to the Global South and, thus, opening a new literary dialogue with South Americans by publishing in English. Essentially, these authors are bringing a new vision of the way they view South American cultures, histories and literatures because they have been formed and affected by North American influences for most of their lives.

As for intellectual formation, many authors shared the significance of reading across global borders. Since many were primarily educated in the U.S. they noted the value of English and American novelists from Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison, and Virginia Woolf to poets/essayists John Ashbery, James Baldwin, and Camille Paglia. At the same time, many expressed the literary influences from Irish, Polish, Russian, and Francophone literary traditions due to common experiences of exile or writing from the margins. But one group many of the interviewed authors returned to was a South American literary tradition, especially the renowned authors of the Latin American literary boom who emerged in the 1960s such as Argentine Julio Cortázar, Nobel Prize winners Colombian Gabriel García Márquez, and Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa, and their precursors Argentine Jorge Luis Borges and Uruguayan Juan Carlos Onetti, and vanguard Latin American poets such as Chilean Pablo Neruda and Gabriela Mistral, Peruvian César Vallejo, and Uruguayan Juana de Ibarbourou.

Some of the authors interviewed (i.e. Daniel Alarcón, Marie Arana, Patricia Engel, Jaime Manrique) have also formed personal relationships, friendships, and professional alliances with South American authors because they have been invited to book festivals at international venues over the years, for example the annual HAY Festival in Cartagena, Colombia, an event that I had the pleasure of attending in 2016. These collaborations between South American and South American descent authors in the U.S. also exemplify a new chapter in U.S. Latina/o literary studies that wishes to build literary and cultural bridges across transnational lines. Moreover, it is significant to underline that these South American descent authors are in general working with authors of various nationalities in projects such as edited collections or translations. In fact, the authors interviewed have had their own works of fiction translated into numerous languages across the globe. One can easily visit the authors' websites and learn of the languages into which their works have been translated or won international awards. This endeavor and effort by publishers has made their works more accessible to a wider world readership that is further expanding U.S. Latina/o literature.

The authors interviewed also shared a strong concern with social justice, especially with respect to gender and racial equality, immigration, and resistance against political or sexual violence, in their texts and in their realities. Some have been social activists who defended the rights of LGBTQ communities of color in the U.S.; others had experience in social work or nonprofit organizations that also influenced their lives or creative productivity in one way or another. For example, Daisy Hernández, Jaime Manrique, Carolina De Robertis, and Mariana Romo-Carmona commented on how revindicating the voices of marginalized communities in history and society was significant in their works. All the authors in this collection recognized the social injustices in their respective South American nations as much as in the U.S. Kathleen De Azevedo, Carmen Giménez Smith and Julie Sophia Paegle pay particular attention to the mythology of female figures in history and popular culture. Over time the authors interviewed have developed the ability to see behind institutional racism and classism that affects a multitude of people across the Americas. Perhaps the U.S. experience of diversity and inclusion enables them to perceive these social injustices across global contexts and makes them aware as transnational cultural ambassadors.

The interviews with the authors in this collection are listed alphabetically. I selected titles that reflected critical elements of where the author was from, had lived or traveled, to inform something about their

identities and places that mattered to them, be they neighborhoods, cities, or states in the U.S. and South America. As a group, these authors represent different generations, but all hold a strong affinity with South America where they maintain strong connections to family members and/or cultural institutes. Many of these South American descent authors are not only of mixed heritages, but they are also multilingual, which opens many possibilities beyond the U.S. and the English-speaking world. These experiences also form part of this critical paradigm in mapping a South American Latina/o literature in the U.S. that is increasingly changing the literary and cultural landscape of the U.S. Some are known in the areas of U.S. Latina/o studies, others in the areas of American and Latin American studies. I also included a sample of their literary awards and honors to show the importance of these authors in contemporary times and their impact in the U.S. and abroad.

In “The Task of the Translator,” Daniel Alarcón tracks his experiences from Peru to Birmingham, Alabama, New York City, Iowa City, and the Bay Area in California. He was born in Lima and raised in the United States since the age of three. As an author, editor, journalist, podcast producer and translator, he has received critical acclaim and international awards for his fiction, journalism, and podcast *Radio Ambulante*. He is not only an active contributor to literary magazines in the United States but he has also played a significant role in Peruvian/Latin American literary circles. He discusses how his experiences as much in Peru as in the United States have made him the writer he is today as a translator of cultures, languages, and worlds that would not reach an English-speaking audience otherwise.

In “Bridges Across Lima and Washington D.C.,” author, editor and journalist Marie Arana traces her journey from her childhood in Peru to her formidable career in book publishing in New York City, journalism at *The Washington Post*, and authoring award-winning books in the U.S. She was born in Lima and raised in the United States since the age of nine. She discusses how learning various languages, living and traveling in different parts of the world have affected her vision of domestic and global cultures. She also notes the importance of recovering history in her works which has taken her research to libraries and archives in South America as well as in the United States. As an advocate of writers and artists, she also organizes events at the National Books Festival in Washington D.C.

In “Dreaming in Brazilian,” Kathleen De Azevedo shares insightful experiences of what it means to reconnect with Portuguese and her

Brazilian roots after returning to visit relatives in Brazil as an adult. She discovered much about Brazilian culture, history, and politics. Born in Rio de Janeiro to a Brazilian mother and Jewish American father, she came of age during a time when few Latina/o representations existed in film and popular culture in the United States. This motivated her to explore the iconic figure of Carmen Miranda and incorporate the Jewish side of her heritage in the first novel written in English about the Brazilian diasporic experience in the United States. As an educator, essayist, and novelist, De Azevedo contributes much to the representation of Brazil and its diaspora through her writings.

In “It Takes Two to Tango Across Montevideo and California,” Carolina De Robertis discusses how she immersed herself in literature at a young age by reading in English while also having a familiarity with other languages. Born to Uruguayan parents and raised in England and Switzerland, she spent her formative years in Los Angeles, California, since she was ten. She explains the importance of returning to her cultural roots in Montevideo, Uruguay, through memory, talking to people on return journeys, and acknowledging the human rights of victims who survived the dictatorship, all of which have made their marks in her critically acclaimed and award-winning novels. As an author, editor, educator, and translator, De Robertis is conscientious of doing justice to the representation of gender, race, and immigration in her literary works and in her social advocacy.

In “Traveling the Caribbean, Colombia, and the U.S.,” Patricia Engel discusses how she developed an interest in writing and the arts when she was a youngster. She was born to Colombian parents and raised in New Jersey to become a fiction writer and essayist. Having lived and studied in New York City, Miami, and Paris, she also informs how her trips to Colombia at various stages of her life have been crucial in her formation as a writer. Her much praised and award-winning short fiction and novels represent the displacement of immigrants and their children in many global contexts, including Colombia, Cuba, France, and the United States. Her narratives not only capture the effects of a civil war and migration but they are also invested in understanding the intimacy in relationships that result from crossing cultural and national boundaries.

In “My Poetic Feminism between Peru and the U.S.,” Carmen Giménez Smith reveals the significance of developing her feminist consciousness in her poetry and essays by paying tribute to Second-wave feminism and her mother. Born and raised in New York City until the age of

ten to a Peruvian mother and Argentine father, she spent her formative years in San José, California. Although she was educated and trained as a poet in the U.S., she explains the importance of returning to Lima, as an adult and becoming immersed in contemporary Peruvian culture and literature. In addition to earning awards and honors for her poetry and memoir, Giménez Smith comments on the current status of poetry in the United States, Latina/o poets in particular, international poets and her engagement with popular culture.

In “Gender and Spirituality in Colombia, Cuba, and New Jersey,” Daisy Hernández discusses her evolution from her time at *The New York Times* and *Ms.* magazine to her experiences at *Colorlines* in the San Francisco Bay Area. During this time, she developed her vision of social justice regarding race, immigration, LGBTQ communities and global health issues. Hernández was born and raised in Union City, New Jersey, to a Colombian mother and a Cuban father. Attentive to the multiple heritages and languages in her formation as a journalist and author, she also became aware of the role of media in disseminating local and global news, realizing that reportage on violence against queer youth of color was rarely told. This affected the stories she selected for her critically acclaimed memoir for which she has earned national and international honors and awards.

In “The Colombiano of Greenwich Village,” we meet author, critic, and journalist Jaime Manrique who has lived most of his life in New York City. He was born and raised in Baranquilla and Bogotá, Colombia, until he was a teenager. While he is a worldwide traveler, having visited countries as diverse as Algeria, Peru, and Spain for his research, he maintains close cultural and literary ties with Colombia. He discusses his literary evolution and transition from Spanish to English since he began publishing his works in the 1970s. He has earned numerous awards and honors in the U.S. and abroad for his works that range from poetry, essays, novels, and autobiography to literary and film criticism. Manrique considers the importance of rethinking canonical authors and recovering marginal figures in Spanish, Latin American, and U.S. Latina/o literary traditions.

In “A Meditation on Parenting from Syria to Peru to the U.S.,” Farid Matuk reflects on how his multiple heritages, languages, and travels to South America have influenced him in becoming a poet, essayist, and translator. Born in Lima, Peru, Farid Matuk left with his Syrian descent family in Peru for the U.S. at the age of six and spent his formative years in Anaheim, California. Having earned honors and awards for his poetry,

Matuk engages both contemporary and historical matters. In particular, he pays attention to how gender roles, historical memory, immigration, and race have affected his outlook on the representation of parenting in his work. As a poetry translator, he is also responsible for introducing a younger generation of poets from Spanish-speaking countries to an English readership in the U.S. and on a global scale.

In “From Dirty Wars in Argentina and Latvia to Listening to Music,” Julie Sophia Paegle discusses the impact of music, folk culture, and literature on her formation as an essayist and poet during her vacations as a youngster in Catamarca and Buenos Aires, Argentina. Born in Utah City to an Argentine mother and a Latvian father, she came of age in Los Angeles, California, and Utah. Having earned honors and awards for her poetry, in her work she pays homage to the ancestors on both sides of her heritages for sharing their stories of survival under severe political and historical events in both Argentina and Latvia. While Paegle has traveled with her family to various cities around the world, she regards nature and the environment as fundamental to our modern civilization by connecting poetic with spatial justice.

In “Writing the Chilena NuYorker Experience,” Mariana Romo-Carmona chronicles important life trajectories from early motherhood and social justice advocacy to her roles as editor, author, archivist, and translator of pioneer Latina lesbian literature. She played an active role in bringing attention to the rights of LGBTQ communities of color in the U.S. with her involvement in small presses, alternative journals, edited collections, and translations. Her participation in these endeavors have been crucial in the advancement of literary and activist voices of LGBTQ communities. In addition to her honors and awards, she has published a novel, poetry, short fiction, and essays in both English and Spanish. Born in Santiago, Chile, Romo-Carmona emigrated as a teenager with her family to Hartford, Connecticut, and eventually made her permanent home in New York City.

In “Returning to the Fervor of Buenos Aires from the U.S.,” Sergio Waisman discusses his transnational genealogy from his grandparents who left Poland to Argentina before the Holocaust to his parents and himself who left Argentina at the onset of the dictatorship, and eventually settled in San Diego, California, when he was ten. He was born in New York City to Argentine parents. As Waisman continued to move within the U.S. as an adult, he began to trace his family migrations that resulted in the writing of his first novel and then its translation from English to

Spanish. All of these experiences have culminated in his career as a literary critic, novelist, and translator of various Latin America writers into English which have brought a wider readership and earned him awards and academic accolades in the U.S. and Argentina.

Even though I have collected a good literary sample of South American descent authors in the U.S., it is worth noting that this segment of U.S. Latina/o literature continues to grow as we go to press. For example, Chilean American poet and essayist Daniel Borzutzky had the distinction of winning the National Book Award for Poetry in 2016 for his collection *The Performance of Being Human* (2016). Colombian American author and actress Diane Guerrero has also gained critical praise for her memoir *In the Country We Love: My Family Divided* (2016). This only attests to the fact that this field is no longer relegated to the margins but is now center stage and will continue to expand.

In closing, I wish to share a moment from my life that opened my eyes to cultures of South American diasporas in the U.S. In the summer of 1986, my father, mother, brother and I made the journey to visit family in a Queens borough in New York City all the way from San Francisco, California. It was bicoastal travel from two important symbolic cities that welcome multicultural immigrant communities from the Golden Gate to Ellis Island. As mentioned earlier, the 1980s was a historical period when an influx of South American immigrants were arriving in the U.S. The neighborhood of Jackson Heights, Queens, in particular was (and continues to be) home to many people of South American backgrounds. One can still find Argentine steakhouses, Colombian *arepa* eateries, and Peruvian *pollo a la brasa* restaurants to name a few. Born and raised in San Francisco, I had grown up in a Peruvian home speaking Spanish and becoming familiar with many cultural practices such as Argentine and Peruvian music, food, literature, and South American fútbol (soccer) cheering for Brazil and Argentina every four years during La Copa Mundial (World Cup Soccer). However, I had never seen such fervor and pride from a multitude of South American fans as on that fateful day of June 22, 1986, when Argentina won the World Cup. The moment Diego Maradona of the Argentine national team made those goals to beat England, he not only won for Argentina but he did it for all the South American nations and their descendants, U.S. Latinas/os. I had never seen so many people waving South American flags on Roosevelt Avenue and literally, stopping traffic. That day became one of many ways that I began mapping South American Latina/o culture, history, and eventually, literature in the United States.



The Task of the Translator: Daniel Alarcón

Born in Lima, Peru, in 1977, Daniel Alarcón emigrated at the age of three with his parents and two siblings to the United States and was raised in Birmingham, Alabama. He received a Bachelor's degree in Anthropology at Columbia University, and a Masters of Fine Arts degree at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. In 2001, he became a Fulbright scholar to conduct research in Lima, Peru. Noted for his refreshing and masterful ability in storytelling in his literary works, he published his first short fiction in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's* and the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, which ignited immediate critical recognition. He also garnered positive critical reviews for his first collection of short fiction, *War by Candlelight* (2005), which was a finalist for the 2006 PEN/Hemingway Foundation Award, and for his debut novel, *Lost City Radio* (2007), whose German translation earned him an International Literature Award by the Haus der Kulturen der Welt Institute in Germany in 2009. He has also been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Lannan Fellowship, and nominated as "One of 21 Young American Novelists under 35" by *Granta* magazine. He further published a collection of short fiction, *El rey está por encima del pueblo* (2009), in Spanish translation in Mexico City and a graphic novel, *Ciudad de Payasos* (2010), in collaboration with graphic artist, Sheila Alvarado. Alarcón's fiction brings a fresh voice to the literary landscape with regards to questions of migrations, urbanization and negotiating constantly changing identities in the twenty-first century.

Essentially, he engages in an endeavor made famous in a classic essay by philosopher Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator.”

Just as significant has been Alarcón’s role as editor in Peru and the United States. He was invited to join the award-winning Peruvian literary magazine, *Etiqueta Negra*, for which he co-edited a special issue in collaboration with the *Virginia Quarterly Review* called *South America in the Twenty-first Century* (2007) which includes fiction, journalism, and photography from an array of contemporary writers, artists and translators from South America and the United States. In 2009, he began to write his “Autobiographical Pieces” online, a collection of personal essays in Spanish, sharing his experiences of traveling abroad, and as a bilingual and bicultural writer. He has also conducted interviews with an international cast of writers in the collection *The Secret Miracle* (2010).

In 2006, Daniel Alarcón participated in the famous Litquake Literary Festival in San Francisco featuring over three hundred Bay Area authors. Before giving a reading at one of the few Spanish bookstores in the city, La Casa del Libro, we met at a lively café in the Mission district (the Latino district of San Francisco) to begin to discuss his works. With jazz and blues flooding the cultural atmosphere, Alarcón shared some thoughts on writing, living and teaching in various parts of the United States, travels abroad and much more. We connected again in 2009 and 2010 to resume the unfinished interview. When I attended the premiere of his graphic novel, *Ciudad de Payasos*, at the International Book Fair in Lima, Peru, in 2010, I witnessed how much Alarcón captivated a diverse audience, including journalists, and readers of varied ages and backgrounds.

Currently, Alarcón is an Assistant Professor in the School of Journalism at Columbia University. He has been the Distinguished Visiting Writer at Mills College and a Visiting Scholar at the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Alarcón reflects on how he became interested in writing fiction and non-fiction.

JH: When I met you in 2006, you mentioned that storytelling was very important to you as a fiction writer, especially considering the role your father played in telling you stories growing up. Could you expand on how this aspect has influenced your writing, be it fiction or journalism?

DA: Most writers are consciously or unconsciously filtering other people’s stories into their fictional work. In my case, I’ve been interested in non-fiction and journalism for a long time. I’ve found this

form to be exciting, interesting, a compelling way to force oneself to ask questions. I enjoy that moment when reporting a piece—whether it be a piece of political journalism or an investigation into some subculture—when you become invisible. It doesn't always happen, but when it does it's very rewarding. The rewards extend beyond the end of a given piece of non-fiction: the practice of paying close attention, observing human relationships in settings that are perhaps outside your comfort zone—all of this is useful when it comes to writing fiction too.

JH: In terms of literary influences, you have stated the importance of Russian and Polish novelists. How have they affected your literary formation?

DA: The Russians were the first writers who really moved me. Dostoyevsky is as responsible as any author for motivating me to write. I was seventeen or eighteen when I read *Notes from Underground*, and the experience was shattering. Later, yes, the Polish—writers like Tadeusz Konwicki, Bruno Schulz, Ryszard Kapuscinski, among others—became very important. They synthesized a kind of madness that I recognized. I guess I'd thought this was Latin American madness, but it turns out it's more universal than that.

JH: What about Latin American or Peruvian authors who affected you?

DA: I'd start with Mexican author Juan Rulfo, not because my style is necessarily similar to his, but because it was through his work that I discovered the importance of reading in Spanish. I read an English translation of *El llano en llamas*, and found it a little boring. I remember thinking *what's the big deal?* A few years later my Spanish had improved somewhat, and I read it in the original. It was just mesmerizing. There was something inherently valuable in the original that was untranslatable. If I really wanted to be a Latin American writer in any sort of regard, I had to be able to read in Spanish. This is a personal choice, naturally, and I wouldn't say that everyone feels this way, or has to arrive at this same conclusion, but it has been helpful for me to read some of the Latin American canon in Spanish. In truth, there are too many authors to mention, too many I've read and hoped at one time or another to emulate. Mario Vargas Llosa is an important writer; certainly, his early work was a great influence. *Conversation in the Cathedral* is a masterpiece. I'm sure close readers can find its influence all over *Lost City*