



Photo by Vladimir Prieto.

The mountainous landscape of Peru.

LITERATURE

Wandering Players in an Imagined Land

by Erica Hellerstein

There's a certain type of universality to Daniel Alarcón's writing. He infuses his literature with a sense of place that is deeply felt and evocative but not particularly definable — his sprawling landscapes and looming mountains could be situated in Peru or small-town Iowa or the outskirts of bustling Santiago, Chile, or a town you've never visited, one that exists somewhere on the map, tucked away — and that is precisely what makes his literature relatable.

Alarcón is a Peruvian-born, Alabama-bred author and journalist currently residing in San Francisco, whose work has appeared in publications ranging from

The New Yorker to Harper's. He has curly, shaggy dark hair, which is often tied back with a headband. His fiction is generally written in English, but his stories for the podcast *Radio Ambulante* (often compared to *This American Life*) are not. Those are in Spanish, and so are some of the articles that he writes for the Lima magazine, *Etiqueta Negra*. For some, his is a confusing identity, this Pan-American, bilingual mash-up, the son of professional parents who went to an expensive college in New York. They want to know if he's a Peruvian or an American writer, and he wonders why he should be forced to choose.

In a very real sense, though, the ease with which Alarcón navigates through languages and cultures lends his literature a sense of universal understanding and appeal. His latest novel, *At Night We Walk in Circles*, unfolds in a nameless South American country, a place whose borders might be imaginary, but whose troubles are very real.

In a presentation sponsored by the Center for Latin American Studies, Alarcón discussed Nelson, a character in the book who in many ways captures the zeitgeist, the helpless, wandering frustration of our generation's youth. "This novel was about a young man named Nelson, the kind of young man who flows and drifts through his early adulthood and doesn't really make any choices and is kind of wasting his youth," he said.

Nelson is an aspiring young actor who crosses paths with Henry Nuñez, the leader of a legendary guerrilla theater troupe called Diciembre. Nelson gains access to the troupe after earning a major role in a tour of Henry's revived satirical play, "The Idiot President," the original production of which caused Henry to land in jail.

Alarcón used his own experience reporting inside Peru's notorious Lurigancho prison to inform Henry's character and experiences.

Nelson, who recently broke up with his girlfriend and is slowly ambling around life, sees this as a golden opportunity: the big break that will finally begin the rest of his life, his first legitimate acting gig and the first time he steps out of his home city's limiting confines. But of course, as the tour treks further into this nameless country's surroundings, drama ebbs and flows. The troupe runs into Henry's troubled past, which they must reconcile, while the reader is forced to untangle the dramatic pileup of events spun by the novel's narrator: an unknown, omniscient "I" whose identity is not revealed until nearly two-thirds of the book is done.

Alarcón said the two parallel tracks of narrative tension — what's going to happen to Nelson, and who's telling the story — keep the story alive instead of gasping for breath. It's a sensibility that Alarcón said he brings more generally, to all of his writing. "A novel really can't

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A traveling theater group.



Photo courtesy of Egin County Archives.

EXCERPT

At Night We Walk in Circles

by Daniel Alarcón

During the war — which Nelson’s father called the anxious years — a few radical students at the Conservatory founded a theater company. They read the French surrealists, and improvised adaptations of Quechua myths; they smoked cheap tobacco, and sang protest songs with vulgar lyrics. They laughed in public as if it were a political act, baring their teeth and frightening children. Their ranks were drawn, broadly speaking, from the following overlapping circles of youth: the longhairs, the working class, the sex-crazed, the poseurs, the provincials, the alcoholics, the emotionally needy, the rabble-rousers, the opportunists, the punks, the hangers-on, and the obsessed. Nelson was just a boy then: moody, thoughtful, growing up in a suburb of the capital with his head bent over a book. He was secretly in love with a slight, brown-haired girl from school, with whom he’d exchanged actual words on only a handful of occasions. At night, Nelson imagined the dialogues they would have one day, he and this waifish, perfectly ordinary girl whom he loved. Sometimes he would act these out for his brother, Francisco. Neither had ever been to the theater.

The company, named *Diciembre*, coalesced around the work of a few strident, though novice, playwrights, and quickly became known for their daring trips into the conflict zone, where they lived out their slogan — Theater for the People! — at no small risk to the physical safety of the actors. Such was the tenor of the era that while sacrifices of this sort were applauded by certain sectors of the public, many others condemned them, even equated them with terrorism. In 1983, when Nelson was only five, a few of *Diciembre*’s members were harassed by police in the town of Belén; a relatively minor affair, which nonetheless made the papers, prelude to a more serious case in Las Velas, where members of the local defense committee briefly held three actors captive, even roughed them up a bit, believing them to be Cuban agents. The trio had adapted a short story by Alejo Carpentier, quite convincingly by all accounts.

Nor were they entirely safe in the city: in early April 1986, after two performances of a piece titled *The Idiot President*, *Diciembre*’s lead actor and

playwright was arrested for incitement, and left to languish for the better part of a year at a prison known as *Collectors*. His name was Henry Nuñez, and his freedom was, for a brief time, a cause célèbre. Letters were written on his behalf in a handful of foreign countries, by mostly well-meaning people who’d never heard of him before and who had no opinion about his work. Somewhere in the archives of one or another of the national radio stations lurks the audio of a jail-house interview: this serious young man, liberally seasoning his statements with citations of Camus and Ionesco, describing a prison production of *The Idiot President*, with inmates in the starring roles. “Criminals and delinquents have an intuitive understanding of a play about national politics,” Henry said in a firm, uncowed voice. Nelson, a month shy of his eighth birthday, chanced to hear this interview. His father, Sebastián, stood at the kitchen counter preparing coffee, with a look of concern.

“Dad,” young Nelson asked, “what’s a playwright?”

Sebastián thought for a moment. He’d wanted to be a writer when he was his son’s age. “A storyteller. A playwright is someone who makes up stories.”

The boy was intrigued but not satisfied with this definition.

That evening, he brought it up with his brother, Francisco, who responded the way he always did to almost anything Nelson said aloud: with a look of puzzlement and annoyance. As if there were a set of normal things that all younger brothers knew instinctively to do in the presence of their elders but which Nelson had never learned. Francisco fiddled with the radio. Sighed.

“Playwrights make up conversation. They call them scripts. That crap you make up about your little fake girlfriend, for example.”

Francisco was twelve, an age at which all is forgiven. Eventually he would leave for the United States, but long before his departure, he was already living as if he were gone. As if this family of his — mother, father, brother — mattered hardly at all. He knew exactly how to end conversations.

No recordings of the aforementioned prison performance of *The Idiot President* have been found.

survive, can't hold itself up, if it doesn't have two parallel tracks, at least, of questions, of narrative momentum," he said. "Otherwise the whole structure collapses. And I know that because I wrote the first draft of this book that had no tension in it and floundered and was like a sleeping cat of a novel."

After more than five years of writing, that dozing creature of a story transformed itself into *At Night We Walk in Circles*. Beyond just this novel, though, Alarcón said that all of his writing has been colored by the time he spent in Peru a couple years after graduating from college, right before September 11, 2001. He went out at night, played soccer, and watched protests as he bussed into town on the way to work. That's when his life as a writer began. "Everything I've written since has been affected by that experience," he said.

He also talked about his decision to keep the South American country nameless. Though the book includes many nods to Peru — ceviche, the Andes, small towns reeling from violence — the location is never explicitly defined, a deft move that gave Alarcón room to play and shielded him from the ranks of scrupulous fact-checkers, eager to tell him he had gotten something wrong. Instead,

with an imagined landscape, he could create, unfettered, while anchoring the reader in a universal human experience that extends far beyond Peru.

"How do you know Peru is real?" he asked. "How do you know it exists? How many of you have been to Narnia? It's literature; it's art. It doesn't matter if you can find it on a map... It doesn't matter if it's real or not. I had one gentlemen say to me, 'I've never been to Peru, but it sounds a lot like Pakistan.' The problems that I was writing about in Peru, he told me, you change the names but it's the same thing. And I think there's some sort of universality in it" — the human experience without boundaries or borders.

Daniel Alarcón is the author of *War by Candlelight*, *Lost City Radio*, and *At Night We Walk in Circles* as well as a visiting scholar at the Center for Latin American Studies. He spoke for CLAS on February 11, 2014.

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Daniel Alarcón on the Berkeley campus.



Photo by Orit Mohamed.