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Author Bio

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Abstract

The subject of Alarcón's English language novels is identified without difficulty in publicity materials as deeply Peruvian and yet the marketing also presents him as a 'World' writer. I explore how naming where Alarcón's writing is 'from' and where it is going relates to the place of Latin American culture globally. Working with the idea that literature should have a 'place', I examine the politics of (self)translation in Alarcón with reference to the period of armed internal conflict in Peru (1980-2000) to argue that an understanding of (self)translation as a process can contribute to our idea of what World Literature is and what national literatures are from a specifically Latin American perspective. In an interplay between foreign and domestic that differs from the more familiar strategies of codeswitching in Latinx writing, Alarcón both enables and resists the translation of other parts of the world onto Peru/Latin America.

Keywords: Alarcón, Peru, translation, world literature, latinx, armed internal conflict in Peru

Daniel Alarcón (b.1977) was born in Lima, Peru, moved to the USA at the age of three and was brought up in Birmingham, Alabama. He has written two novels and two collections of short stories (as well as a number of uncollected stories) all in English. Reviews highlight his literary bilingualism, his dual nationality and his presumed dual cultural inheritance. The varied categories of the prizes Alarcón has been awarded are further testament to how the world of publishing and marketing registers the blurring of linguistic and national boundaries in his work. In 2007 he was simultaneously selected as one of the ‘Bogotá 39’ (thirty-nine most talented Latin American authors under the age of thirty-nine) by the UK based Hay Festival, awarded Best Book of the Year by the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *Chicago Tribune* as well as being named as one of the *New Yorker*’s ‘20 under 40’ American writers. The reviews quoted in the inside cover of the Harper Collins (2007) edition of his first novel *Lost City Radio* speak of how he writes ‘mixing elements of Márquez and Orwell’. A *Washington Post* reviewer describes *Lost City Radio* as a ‘deeply Peruvian story’, in which the plot could be ‘straight out of a novel by Mario Vargas Llosa or Carlos Fuentes’ except that the characters are speaking English (Arana). His most recent accolade (the award of a MacArthur ‘Genius’ grant in 2021) makes explicit reference to the transnationality and pan Americanism of his writing.

Alarcón appears to be doing the work of translators for them, producing already translated texts that present Latin American reality for an Anglophone global audience. My argument is that he does do this, but that the labour of translation is deliberately highlighted. I will use the ideas of the untranslatable and of self-translation to think about this labour and to show that as Alarcón negotiates the articulation and representation of Peru and the Global South through a

comparative perspective in the novel, he provides a way of understanding what it is to be in, and between, languages and cultures.¹ The novel is set in an unnamed Latin American country, ten years after the end of a civil war that must now never be mentioned by order of the dictatorship in power. The rebels have been destroyed but many people are still victims – trying to find loved ones killed or displaced during the violence. The central character, Norma, hosts a radio phone-in programme where she tries to reunite separated families. She herself is looking for someone – her husband Rey (possibly a terrorist himself) is also missing. When a young boy from the jungle provinces appears in Norma’s studio with a possible lead about Rey, the novel unfolds in a series of flashbacks to tell Rey’s story and switches between the city, the mountains, and the jungle to provide a vista of the country leading up to and during the conflict as well as in its aftermath.

As a writer of Latino extraction in the U.S.A., Alarcón fails to fulfil several of the stereotypical expectations associated with this label (for example, having the U.S.A. as a subject matter and representing Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican or Dominican experience primarily, using codeswitching between English and Spanish) a failure which could be attributed to the growing diversity of Hispanic and Latin American cultures in the U.S.A. and Alarcón’s desire to emphasize that complexity rather than resolve it.² It is important to emphasize that other authors took different paths to questioning the predominance of certain types of ‘Latino’ experience and in particular the language of its expression (English). Anthologies such as the 2009 *Se habla español* collection of short stories edited by Edmundo Paz Soldán and Alberto Fuguet, published contemporaneously with *Lost City Radio* demonstrate that English or Spanglish did not need to be the primary language of expression for this group.³

Alarcón’s discomfort with the narrowness of the Latino label is shared by the publishing giants and promoters behind his books which try to locate him instead in a global understanding of Latin America rather than a US-centric one. Harper Collins puts an orange and sepia washed

photograph of street children running away from something on the cover of *Lost City Radio* - an image that is strongly reminiscent of the visual language of the film *City of God*, which had been released only five years before the novel's publication to worldwide acclaim. Although the drug war criminality of the film, set in Brazil, is far from the concerns of Alarcón in the novel, the drive to link the two is clearly commercially expedient. It also points to the general renewal of interest in Latin American culture in the early to mid-2000s.⁴ The Hay Festival, which provided the context through which Alarcón first came to international prominence in 2007 similarly sought to revisit the term 'Latin American' from a global perspective with its website claiming it would 'ask what it means to be Latin American and whether this is still a definition of any relevance' (Hay Festival Website).

The strategies of the Hay Festival and of Harper Collins around the promotion of Alarcón's writing, though driven by specific market circumstances and a political context, are symptomatic of a more profound, and hardly new, cultural conundrum: working out the place of Latin America in world culture. The touchstone reference in these debates is often the essay 'El escritor Argentino y la tradición' by Jorge Luis Borges, first published in 1953. Here Borges refutes the idea that a national tradition should constrain a writer or be the measure of their value. Borges's reasoning resonates with the contemporary arguments around the value of World Literature and significant recent readings of the essay (Carlos J. Alonso (2008) and Beatriz Sarlo (2007) notably) emphasize interpretations about marginal identity and cultural equivalence. So, just as Borges famously claims there is no need for camels in the Koran for it to be an Arab book, there is no need for Machupicchu to appear in Alarcón's texts for them to be Peruvian. And Alarcón does appear to studiously avoid this particular effect of authenticity - the invocation of local colour in the form of very specific topography, flora or fauna. In his work, the push towards the global or universal would indeed appear to imply a determined

move away from the obvious regional or national detail. But Borges does not dismiss the value and lure of the local completely and neither does Alarcón.

For Jean Franco and Alberto Moreiras, the radical potential of local colour resides in its intensity. Moreiras describes it as a kind of ‘over-semioticization’ (2001: 99-100); a moment that can constitute a resistance to hegemony through its intensity. For Franco, ‘in the age of global flows and networks, the small scale and the local are the places of the greatest intensity’ (1999: 21). It is the intensity of the local that arrests the processes of consumption or assimilation, thereby requiring multiple translations and thus questioning the sufficiency of English.⁵

The motivations for emptying out specificity are not exclusively market driven of course. They could be thought of as wreaking calculatedly different effects on the readers depending on how we characterize the audience. For a Peruvian readership, the emptying out of specificity allows the recognition that events, themes or arguments in the novel are of universal application and I will discuss the political effects of this manoeuvre in a moment. For the non-Peruvian readership, blurring specificity has equally political consequences: Alarcón maximizes empathy and identification with his themes through comparison with more globally recognizable things and places. Some obvious mechanisms in the novel (and which act intentionally somewhat like the ticker on an international news channel’s screen) are references to Pol Pot, Vietnam, Palestine, oil spills and basketball games that are designed to reassuringly place the reader in a global current affairs context (8). One possibility is that, by invoking these commonplace associations Alarcón is indulging in what Emily Apter describes, not entirely dismissively, as ‘CNN Creole’ (2006: 161). This effect is picked up on quickly in reviews, with Leo Turner in *The London Review of Books* declaring that though the book ‘clearly takes place in South America, [...] there are fictional towns and regions, and we never know exactly where we are’. The result is a global appeal. Turner continues: ‘This novel says as much about present-

day Iraq or Darfur or Gaza as it does about late 20th-century not-quite Peru' (2007: 18). *Lost City Radio* is a novel about conflict and inequality and its lessons are meant to be applicable everywhere. In an interview with Helen Gordon in *Granta*, Alarcón talks about the referential in the novel as a process of refining or distilling, claiming that in the 'developing world' there are a lot of 'overlaps'. He goes on to cite Joe Sacco's graphic novels on Bosnia and Palestine as influences as well as Anna Politkovskaya's *A Small Corner of Hell* (2003) which deals with conflicts in Chechnya and Grozny, and he draws parallels between the subjects of these texts and the period of internal conflict in Peru in the 1980's. For the description of a key ritual in the novel, *tadek*, Alarcón reveals his inspiration came from Ryszard Kapuscinski's book *The Emperor* (1978) about Ethiopia and mentions that at the time of writing he was also thinking 'about Guantánamo and about racial profiling in the United States' (Gordon 2008). With this range of influences and references, Alarcón explains that he writes a determinedly comparative global fiction: 'I mean, these are not things that are only happening in Peru. It just so happens that I was born in Lima, I'm Peruvian and I have access to that culture and that world, and I have a lot of emotional attachment to it. But you know if I were Pakistani or Kenyan, I could probably be writing a similar novel' (Guthmann 2005).

It is significant that the works Alarcón cites as influences are not Latin American and that they are translations into English. His reading and access to these conflicts and cultures is facilitated through the predominance of English as a global lingua franca and in this reading, globalization is benign, allowing *Lost City Radio* to be part of a culture of political dissent that reflects and responds to injustices in a multifaceted world. Perhaps the most obvious referent to this global dimension of experience in the novel is the representation of the city within it. There are multiple descriptions of chaotic urban sprawl, crowd scenes of traffic, street sellers, signage and a general sense of exhilarating visual and aural spectacle as the noise of taxis honking,

vendors shouting and police blowing their whistles (101) locates the city as being in the Global South. The city in the novel is crisscrossed by the marks of globalization. There is a moment early on in their relationship where Norma and Rey, the principal protagonists, go to see a Bollywood film, despite Norma's protestations that she can't understand Hindi. What follows is a description of the carnival-like screening, emphasizing that the stories the film tells are universal in some way: 'there was no need for translation, [...] the stories were simple' (64). Similarly, the novel itself displays a push to universalize the experience of the developing world. The city is a city in the Global South and yet readers are not wrong to think of it as Latin American. Witness the arrival of a regional bus into the one of the provincial towns as it makes its way to the capital. The division of labour, with the women as vendors and the men doing the hard work, already places the scene globally in a particular geography of economic infrastructure:

Women rose to sell silver fish and cornmeal, cigarettes and clear liquor in plastic bags. Small, wiry men carried packages twice their size to and from the bus. The driver and his passengers ate hurriedly, plates of rice steaming in the nighttime chill. Young men smoked and spat, raised their hats at the girls selling tomato sandwiches. (27)

The goods on offer include street food common in Asia and Africa rather than Latin America (the silver fish), the generic 'cornmeal' that could imply a panoply of Latin American foods from *arepas* (Venezuela and Colombia) to *tamales* and *tortillas* (throughout Central and South America and the Caribbean). The steaming rice again places us anywhere in the Global South while the tomato sandwiches are possibly Indian in origin and the alcohol in plastic bags common in Indonesia. What is clear is that these foods are not those of a First World country. Indeed, Alarcón seems to be trying to create something of a generic Third World feel to this moment – a bus stop anywhere in the Global South of unplanned and unsustainable mass urbanization.⁶

This fluctuation between the local and the global is played out continuously and thickly in the language of the novel. The naming of characters demonstrates this, with Alarcón ranging between determinedly cross-over names that can be easily read in Latino and Anglophone contexts (Rey, Víctor, Norma, Adela) and which are more significant perhaps for their symbolism than their etymological provenance; names that open up the novel geographically to Asia, the Middle East and the Balkans with their Islamic and Slavic resonances (Zahir, Yerevan, Marden, Alaf) and others (Len, Elmer) that appear to bring it resolutely home to middle America (USA). Dislocation and play with references are also features of the naming of places in the novel. The city's non-Hispanic sounding shanty towns (The Settlement, Miamiville, Collectors, The Thousands (106)) are places whose English names could be termed as drawn from 'world' English rather than USA or UK English and are the result of Alarcón working with remembered names from Accra, Ghana where he lived for a period (Moreno and Anderson 2014: 197). For a resonant example of the effect of this fluctuation between local and global, take the description of city rooftops littered with chicken coops, pot-holed roads swarming with mototaxis and vegetable carts (72). The mototaxi here is easily read or translated in English but is in fact a Spanish word (unmarked in the text). Mototaxi does not appear in the OED and a Wikipedia search for it directs one to the page for the term 'auto-rickshaw' which does appear in the OED. In fact, the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* defines 'mototaxi' as a Peruvianism meaning a motorcycle with three wheels and some kind of roof covering used as a means of transport for short distances. The first mototaxis came to Peru in the 1980's from the Indian subcontinent where they are common – as 'auto-rickshaws' in India and Sri Lanka, 'baby taxis' in Bangladesh, and 'tuk-tuks' in Thailand and Indonesia. They are now a common sight in First World cities such as London and Paris. The word 'mototaxi' is then a perfect sign of the global context the novel invokes (the signifier and its signified cruising between continents and contexts) and yet, by being a 'foreign' term,

interpolated into English, it also offers a detail that, through labour in language that requires an almost unwitting translation, reveals a residual and intense locality.

What we have is a twofold movement: the untranslatable hovering on a semantic nub (Apter, Cassin et al.) (that is, an instance of opacity that resists equivalence and substitution) and because this nub is not a philosophical or conceptual word or concept (it's more often located in the texture of the worldscape being constructed) it shares more with discussions inspired by Aixelá's foundational work around the translation of culturally specific items (CSIs).⁷ Aixelá takes a pragmatic approach to the translation of CSIs (as opposed to philosophical one) and offers a set of translation strategies that can be used to mediate instances of cultural asymmetry and difference. Aixelá's set of translation solutions is divided into the categories of conservation and substitution and the translations Alarcón offers often appear similarly pragmatic (as opposed to philosophical) in approach. For example, sometimes Alarcón is interested in producing a diffuse, globally decipherable sense of the Latin American through his translation work. Take 'Mrs Soria's late-night bodega' (53) where the Hispanic name of the proprietor suggests a geographical or cultural provenance while bodega (a Spanish word that has moved into English) requires no translation. This is a world where English becomes Englishes and the Latin American is already translated.⁸ There's a concern here to register how mainstream Hispanic or Latino culture has become around the world, but, perhaps more pointedly, in the USA. There's a tension too, of course, with the sense of the Latin American as a consumer good, a culture emptied out and prepacked for consumption and a more political mobilization, motivated by solidarity and committed to enabling agency. This latter political aim could be thought of as animating Alarcón's very successful internet radio project, *Radio Ambulante*. The Spanish-language podcast, distributed by NPR, tells Latin

American stories from anywhere Spanish is spoken, including the United States, that challenge stereotypes and misconceptions.

Alarcón's use of English in the novel is extremely calculated and self-conscious and hyper-aware of such stereotypes and misconceptions and how translation works dynamically with these concepts. There are micro decisions throughout the novel that mark it out as self-translated or already translated and which are testament to how it registers the effects of translation continuously. A description of downtown has Rey and Norma, walking past 'little bodegas still open, selling gum and toasted plantains, aspirin and cigarettes' (16). The goods for sale mark the consumer universe as in the Global South and recognizably Latin American or Caribbean with its toasted plantains. As previously, the reader is not offered a translation of the term 'bodega'. However, *tostón* [toasted plantain] is translated, in a move that registers the sinuous way Alarcón moves between linguistic and cultural universes and a 'Latin' environment that hovers between the local (requiring translation) and the global (not requiring translation). A similar sinuosity is to be found in the use of the term 'Indian' in the novel and its Latin American resonances. The population of the rural sectors of the country is described as 'Indian' in the novel's nomenclature. In current USA usage, the term 'Indian' to describe the indigenous peoples of the Americas has been steadily replaced by 'American Indian' and, more recently, by 'Native American'. The associations of the word in US English are primarily with the indigenous peoples of North America. In UK English, it would denominate people from the Indian subcontinent. The use of 'Indian' in the novel appears then to not be English at all but a literal translation of the Spanish *indio*, commonly used in Latin America to refer to indigenous peoples. What Alarcón has done is to locate us in a Latin American cultural space through the unmarked translation of this word. Witness the radio programme that Rey listens to with his drunken uncle, and which consists of 'news from the capital or old Cuban songs'

(which give the Hispanic context) followed by ‘a show of weather predictions for Indian farmers’ where the ‘Indians’ are understood to be translated *indios* (54). Certain references to Indians pinpoint location as more precisely Peruvian in an instance of intense locality described previously. In one of the descriptions of the chaotic urban street scenes there is a vignette of a family of ‘indians’ being deposited by a bus on a street corner. These recent migrants stand around looking disoriented until they decide to move off. Alarcón has the children ‘cowering and disappearing’ into the folds of their mother’s dress – conjuring an image of the traditional *pollera* (voluminous skirt) worn predominantly by Andean women that marks them out in the metropolitan environment as having just arrived in the city or not being from it and not yet conforming to western dress codes (145). The woman in her *pollera* is a shorthand for the rural-urban migration that has defined Peru demographically in the last half century and her presence is elicited by the layering of linguistic and visual clues in the text that work with globally recognizable stereotype to produce an instance of the intensely local.

The local undoubtedly has its pull throughout the novel and the internal conflict in Peru is unmistakably its ‘subject’. In a *London Review of Books* book review Alarcón tells Turner how, ‘[t]he general arc of the war as it unfolds in the novel is similar to that of the Peruvian conflict, and everyone will be able to recognise this’. However, he adds that he wanted the novel to ‘exist just above this commonly agreed upon reality’ (2007: 18). The palimpsestic in terms of depth and layering of reference is marked everywhere in the novel as the *pollera* example demonstrates, and Alarcón crystalizes the metaphor in a description of his working method requiring him to have a map of Lima by his desk, ‘that [he] drew all over, renaming the districts, marking on bus routes, making the environment more alarming, more vivid...’ (Gordon 2008).⁹

Significantly, Alarcón’s work has been claimed by Peruvian critics as part of a national tradition of recent fiction about the period of internal conflict and its aftermath. Estrada for example reads the novel as contribution to what he terms the ‘literature of violence’ (2013: 89).

However, he identifies Alarcón's transnationality as a key element of the representation, arguing that the 'distance' it affords the author (he writes of Alarcón being an anthropologist) gives him the ability to open out the representation of the conflict to global perspectives and thus challenge the hegemonic narrative of the conflict (2013: 95). The writing and cultural work reflecting on and inspired by the internal conflict has been significant in Peru, but it remains a highly politicized field.¹⁰ By opening out the local conflict to a global context Alarcón invites reflection on the ideas of blame and guilt that have defined approaches to the period in fiction and in policy.¹¹

In this vein, the narrator asks rhetorically; 'Every angry young man with a rock in his hand – was he a subversive?' (199). The use of subversive as a noun is unusual in English – according to the OED even the adjectival use is relatively rare and tends to be restricted to literate vocabulary associated with educated discourse.¹² In Spanish, and in particular in the Peruvian Spanish lexicon associated with the internal conflict, the noun *subversivo* is virtually interchangeable with that of *senderista* – a member of the terrorist organization Sendero Luminoso. With the pause occasioned in reading by this unusual word in English, Alarcón allows the fingerprints of Spanish, and the grip of a Peruvian world, to become visible. But it is not only this world that surfaces in this example – the stone throwing youth, if he has any global presence in the context of the politically committed journalism the narrator embodies in this section of the novel, is an innocent Palestinian boy. In a single phrase, Alarcón fixes the focus onto the Peruvian internal conflict and destabilizes the mainstream interpretations of it as driven by perverse terrorist ideology through his superimposition of the trace of another conflict where *subversives* throwing stones are understood by a liberal readership as the products of economic and social disenfranchisement. This analysis of the Peruvian conflict will not ruffle worldly liberal feathers but Alarcón's emphasis on complexity and his refusal to

ascribe blame or to attribute virtue unhesitatingly are deeply contestatory for the political consensus that has built up around the narrative of the armed conflict in Peru itself.

Alarcón's critique of post conflict consensus is then embodied in language, which registers translation as an effect that opens up the text to history and contingency. In the novel, the authoritarian momentum to erase any memory of the war is frenetic. Norma sits in a café talking with Victor about the still-missing Rey, and all around is a city that is oblivious in its 'furious movement' and 'fevered charade of reconstruction' (102). In this city, when a shantytown burns down, it is replaced by Newton Plaza (102-3), a name so anodyne that it appears to invoke English as a metalanguage that has completely absorbed other languages, but which in fact reveals the cultural work of translation as process and history. 'Plaza' can be read both in English and in Spanish and this duality is exploited here by Alarcón in a game with language that enacts the very emptying out of historical and cultural specificity the description refers to: a shantytown replaced by a mall. According to the OED entry for 'plaza' the word has two principal meanings: '1) in Spain and Spanish-speaking countries: a public square, a marketplace and 2) orig. and chiefly N. Amer. A large, paved area surrounded by or adjacent to shops and businesses, usually designed as a feature of a shopping complex; (hence) a shopping centre'. The building of the Newton Plaza is '[a] monument to forgetting built atop the ruins of the past' (103). Remembering is associated with a different kind of reconstruction and a different, wholly Spanish, 'plaza'. At one point in the novel, Norma, Victor and the schoolteacher Manau and his mother gather over a half completed jigsaw featuring a photograph of the 'old' plaza – complete with 'Spanish' shoe-shine boys, cathedral and brass band -: 'It was easy to forget that the city had been beautiful once, that its elegant plaza had once been the beating heart of a nation's capital' (194-5).¹³ The plaza before the plaza exists in what the novel calls the 'old language'. The old language has been banned by the dictatorship

and functions both as a critique of enforced forgetting and as an explicit statement about the translated status of the text. It tells us that the novel is set elsewhere – in a place that does not happen in English but that has been translated for us. When the child Victor is seriously injured in the jungle, the elderly women pray for him in the ‘old dialect’ (97) while, when Rey interviews the shanty town dwellers who have emigrated from the mountains to the city to establish their land rights, he has to learn the ‘old dialect’ in order to communicate with them (129). The old language surfaces at moments of crisis and demonstrates how one language can inhabit another. In Alarcón’s practice, the old language, I would argue is Spanish and it leaves its fingerprints all over the novel, littering it with numerous instances of what could be classed as ‘translationese’. These are moments in which words or short phrases appear which, by their awkwardness, signal their status as literal translations and, by their cultural context, their ‘Spanishness’.¹⁴

So, ‘God is merciful’ (219) strikes an archaic note for a native English speaker who could have expected the more modern ‘thank God’. There’s a similar effect with certain forms of address in conversational exchanges. Questions such as ‘Girl, is this your husband?’ and ‘woman, [...] why would you want to go in there?’ open up a sexist and antiquated world where the *muchacha/chica* and *mujer* of the address are implicit. (231, 42). The accompanying use of the honorific ‘Don’ for male characters compounds this sense of a bygone (this time explicitly Hispanic) cultural context which the novel is translating for its Anglophone readership. This procedure is curious and appears, formally at least, very conservative when compared to the kind of codeswitching other Latino authors practice.¹⁵ Alarcón’s technique seems to share more with the use of what Jane H. Hill has called ‘junk Spanish’ – the use of Spanish by U.S. Anglophone speakers to reproduce the subordinate identity of Mexican Americans. Usually, this involves the incorporation of Spanish loan words in a ‘jocular or pejorative key’ and is

‘driven by a racist semiotic’ that functions to reproduce negative views of Spanish speaking people (1995: 205, 208).¹⁶ I would argue that Alarcón’s deployment of stereotype is more akin to ‘tropicalization’, where a similar incorporation of Spanish loan words constitutes a ‘discursive counter-movement [...] that dialogizes homogeneous Anglo constructs of the latino/a as other’ (Aparicio and Silverman, 1997: 796). In this reading, Alarcón’s citing of ‘junk’ uses of Spanish is in order to subvert them. The aim is always to make English and the act of translating into it less neutral and make the reader conscious of English as a language that has a location and history.¹⁷

This interpretation of Alarcón’s use of the effect of translation to challenge stereotype and contest univocality is especially persuasive if we trace examples of the interpolating of words with Latin roots which, given the context of the novel, are closely associated with Spanish. The translation they require of the reader (in the sense of the pause they occasion) means that they allow ‘the characteristics of [the] texts to stand for the characteristics of the cultures they seem to describe’ as Walkowitz writes of the ‘Japanese’ quality of Kazuo Ishiguro’s writing. The notion is that national allegories can be communicated in form as well as theme (*Ishiguro’s Floating Worlds*, 1052). The words in these examples are, though indisputably English, sufficiently abstruse, or obscure to present a small stumbling block for the English reader – their effect is undoubtedly both to estrange the reader and to associate the Latinate/Spanish word with a more learned, lyrical realm of diction than an Anglo-Saxon root synonym might have, an association that constitutes then a powerful refutation of the ‘junk’ associations discussed previously. For example, the diction of ‘recondite corners’ (5) of the nation makes the far-flung regions appear much more remote and exotic than had they been, indeed, ‘far-flung’. Perhaps more strikingly, we have Zahir, one of the characters in the jungle section of the novel, stepping into the forest after seeing the work of a portrait painter who has made pictures of all the missing people in the village, and realising that the village is empty: ‘There

were the sounds of the breathing forest and the cawing of a bird, the distant and susurrant murmuring of water' (215). It is impossible for a bilingual Spanish/English reader not to hear the very common Spanish *susurro* here as the noun giving rise to the adjective. For an English reader, the sound must be inferred from 'murmuring' and remains somewhat mysterious. The effect of this moment of forcing a word simultaneously recognisable in Spanish but 'obsolete or rare' in English according to the OED onto the text is multiply creative and political, exploring English's own forgotten or archived influences from other languages.¹⁸ So, it appears to be both an act of translation (from Spanish) and one of recovery and contextualization (of English).

Despite the evident dangers of stereotype then, we can argue that Alarcón makes these stereotypes work, that they are productive, 'enabling fictions that allow theoretical formulations to take shape' (Castillo 2005: 2). The moments of estrangement he plants in the midst of stereotypes serve to create a pause in the reading process that blocks the easy consumption associated with the style of other parts of the novel. The political ramifications of such a frustration of the reader are interpreted ambitiously by Doris Sommer as directly allied to the 'most basic training for democratic imaginations' and linked to other strategies such as codeswitching, translation, and 'speaking English through heavy accents', because 'they all slow down communication and labor through the difficulties of understanding and reaching agreement' (2001: 180, 175). Emily Apter's thesis in *Against World Literature* chimes in with these ideas too, in particular the notion of translation (in this case self-translation) as authorised plagiarism; a kind of literature that questions property – it is 'deowned' against the swell of corporate privatisation. The untranslatable or the non-linguistic moment would then be the reinstatement of a border guard or checkpoint in Apter's terms – a blockage to the drive to globalize and erase frontiers (2013: 15).

Consider the following exchanges that come in a conversation between the heroine Norma and the prison supervisor who has previously addressed her as ‘woman’ as discussed above. Norma has come to visit the notorious city center prison that holds hundreds of terrorists in the hope of finding her disappeared husband, Rey. The supervisor says of the number of prisoners, ‘We quit counting them years ago’ and then follows with, ‘You’re with me’ to reassure her as they walk along the open corridors (43). The crisp dialogue, the U.S. usage of ‘quit’ and the tough, unsentimental style invokes a very specific literary register – that of the ‘hard-boiled’ detective fiction (primarily associated with U.S. authors such as Hammett, Ellroy and Chandler) that is recognisably one of Alarcón’s influences. This type of writing with its earthy realism and sordid urban contexts provides a striking contrast to the world referenced by the form of address (‘woman’) only lines earlier. The play with literary and cultural references continues when, after a prisoner shouts an invitation at Norma for her to sit on his face, the supervisor responds with cry of ‘Animal!’. The insult of ‘animal’ is of course absolutely intelligible in English and yet it is also a literal translation of the Spanish *¡animal!* - a translation which reads stiffly enough in English for the reader to hesitate at its contrast with the tough vernacular earlier. The awkwardness is heightened in the final sentence of the conversation where the supervisor adds: ‘This is no place for a woman. Are you well?’ (44). The unidiomatic ring of ‘are you well’ fuels the suspicion that we may be reading a translation. It is certainly not the ‘You OK?’ we might expect of a hardboiled version. Alarcon’s writing practice sees him working along Aixelá’s continuum of conservations/substitution in a way that materializes the historical and cultural connections between meanings and languages, making them visible.¹⁹

The reading experience in these passages is therefore stilted, having to shift gears in a text which might best be described as ‘thickly’ translated. By this I mean (i) that the translation process is deeply embedded in the text as an almost forgotten, imperceptible process – it’s a self-translation - and also (ii) in Appiah’s sense where the literary universe presented has

literary and linguistic relations which are ‘relevantly like’ the relations of the ‘original’ text to its culture’s conventions (816). The element to stress here is the determinedly political nature of Alarcón’s choices – he selects the local elements to communicate precisely because they are different, and so allow us to escape both easy relativism and easy tolerance. The aim in the thick translation is to engender a genuinely informed respect for other cultures (Appiah 1993: 816). It is important to log this in terms of the Latin American subject matter, especially because of the deceptive sense of similarity between Western culture and that of Latin America. Molloy has called attention to this danger, saying how easy it is for the hegemonic U.S. or European public and criticism to consume Latin America in the belief that it is ‘the same’ as them (5). Alarcón’s play around the attractions of World Literature and the global culture and audience it invokes exposes this dilemma. On one level, he wishes to invoke the similarity between Latin America and global culture (a cipher for Western culture). On the other, the desire to mark resistance and the alternate is compelling – to display the fact that whatever western inheritance is being invoked in this post-colony is that of the periphery – a non-hegemonic one. This is a curious and difficult place from which to make a stand in fiction and shares certain of the concerns identified by Walkowitz in what she terms ‘born translated’ texts. Notably, the sense of oppositionality through the use of English where the born translated text responds to ‘a call for English language writing designed to frustrate the domesticating sensibilities of the English language reader’ while simultaneously making sure that the English language medium, ‘registers the inequality of languages including the inequality that functions in [itself].’ (Walkowitz 2001: 185). In response, Alarcón proposes a representation where the local is a contradictory instance that affirms ‘a fissured and heterogeneous globality’ (Moreiras 2001: 90). Moreiras refers to Cornejo Polar’s idea of migrant writing here and it may be instructive to think plurally about migration and movement as Cornejo Polar does. In this view, the usefulness of large terms such as the transnational is limited. What we have in Latin

America, and in the global situation more generally is migrants moving back and forth between borders which are porous multiple times, rather than making only one journey from one nation state to another. So, in *Lost City Radio*, we are presented with a regionalism of sorts, but a profoundly critical one. Alarcón's work could be seen then as a demonstration of the need to balance the seduction of the local and untranslatable with the 'need to translate *quand meme*' (Apter 2006: 91). We see in his novel how, while seductively appearing to fulfil the requirements of a kind of World Writing, a profound aesthetic of translatability can find place for the thickness and texture of history, politics and culture (Walkowitz 2001: 173).²⁰

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¹ The key reference to the idea of the labour of translation is Paul Ricoeur in *On Translation* where he sees the translator as the middleman serving two masters – the author and the reader. For the untranslatable see Apter, Cassin, Lezra and Wood's *Dictionary of Untranslatables*. I am particularly interested in how the discussion of the concept has been pursued in relation to World Literature cf Apter *Against World Literature* and Levine and Lateef-Jan *Untranslatability Goes Global*.

² The definition of Latino is taken from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) which defines "Hispanic or Latino" as a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race. Cf Alarcón's 2005 piece 'What kind of latino am I' in Salon.com, a left-leaning, politically progressive (now defunct) digital magazine where he lampoons stereotypical assumptions about latinos.

³ Fifteen years later, the linguistic landscape is even more different with Spanish both a more global and a more (North) American language in publishing terms. See *Contemporary U.S. Latinx Literature in Spanish: Straddling Identities* and *A Translational Turn: Latinx Literature into the mainstream*.

⁴ The apotheosis of Roberto Bolaño's embrace by the English-speaking world could be taken as a good indicator of this renewal. He was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award in 2008 for *2666*. For a sense of the global impact of *City of God* See Bowater's article for BBC news.

⁵ Cf Apter's description of the untranslatable as an 'intransigent' nub of meaning that triggers endless translating in response to its resistant singularity. (*Against* 235).

⁶ According to UN predictions, 70% of the world's population will live in urban environments by 2050. See the Urban Age project at LSE for a good interdisciplinary introduction to the subject.

⁷ Anna Stowe's argument about translating radical cultural specificity is instructive here.

⁸ See David Crystal on global English (31).

⁹ Cristina García's image for self-translation is allusive in this respect. She describes a relationship between the two languages (Spanish and English) as a 'linguistic water table'

where the Spanish mirrors but also changes the ‘surface’ English in a reproduction of a hierarchy in natural geography that is also an image of its questioning (46).

¹⁰ Some very moving and interesting work is emerging in other genres. See Milton’s 2013 overview and more recently, José Carlos Agüero, a historian whose parents were terrorists killed by the security forces and who writes a testimonial text about his ‘guilt’. In terms of fiction, the criticism is that most of what has been produced is metropolitan in terms of point of view with one of two notable exceptions (Faveron Patriau, 67).

¹¹ There are two other novels on this subject that could be argued to have a similar global appeal to Alarcón’s: Mario Vargas Llosa’s, *Lituma en los Andes* (1993) and Santiago Roncagliolo’s *Abril Rojo* (2006). The Nobel laureate’s global appeal is self-evident; Roncagliolo was the winner of the very prestigious Alfaguarra prize for his novel. Both novels were translated into English within three years of their publication in Spanish, and by the same translator (Edith Grossman) and the same multinational publisher – Penguin Random House. Nevertheless, Alarcón’s novel, in English and published by another of the big five global publishing houses – Harper Collins – trumps these two works in terms of the speed and reach of the global market.

¹² Subversive (adj.) belongs in Frequency Band 5. Band 5 contains words which occur between 1 and 10 times per million words in typical modern English usage (OED web).

¹³ The fact that a great massacre in the final years of the war takes place in this square is of course resonant in both a Latin American context (Tlatelolco) and a more global one (Tiananmen). Alarcón is also gesturing at the iconic importance of certain plazas politically in Latin America (Plaza de Mayo). Tamara Mitchell’s arguments around Alarcón’s use of what she calls journalistic ekphrasis are pertinent here and reveal another way of thinking about Alarcón’s geopoetics of the local in an era of neoliberal globalization.

¹⁴ Some linguists indeed argue that we should think of the language of translation as a separate “dialect” within a language, that they call *third code* (Frawley 1984) or *translationese* (Gellerstam 1986).

¹⁵ An obvious reference here is Junot Díaz who notoriously takes a very aggressive stance on the political implications of codeswitching: ‘When I learned English in the States, this was a violent enterprise. And by forcing Spanish back onto English, forcing it to deal with the language it tried to exterminate in me, I’ve tried to represent a mirror-image of that violence on the page. Call it my revenge on English’ (Céspedes, 904). For a good overview of the history of the literary use of codeswitching by Latinx authors see Montes-Alcalá.

¹⁶ cf. Donald Trump and ‘bad hombres down there’ to Peña Nieto in a phone call February 2017. See also Alarcón’s use of ‘peon’ without markings (a borrowing from Spanish, combined with an English element according to the OED) to describe a character who is singled out as an easy target by the government (55).

¹⁷ Cf. Levine’s description of the English of World Literature as a language ‘in transit’ whose journey must be mapped.

¹⁸ Orwell (one of the influences on Alarcón cited by many reviewers) has a very different perspective on the use of Latinate diction in his essay ‘Politics and the English Language’ (1946) where he criticizes it as pretentious and mendacious in intent. The effects he attributes to it (invoking a sense of history, dignifying, glorifying and ‘lending an air of culture and elegance’) could be seen then as exactly the effects Alarcón seeks to use in subversive ways (131).

¹⁹ See Kosick (2020) on the hybrid texts of Cecilia Vicuña for a similar understanding.

²⁰ This is a gloss on a question she asks of self-translated texts.