Arts & Humanities

Daniel Alarcón Tells Stories Without Borders

The writer and 2021 MacArthur fellow chronicles life in Spanish and English, through fiction and fact, in print and on the air.

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Daniel Alarcón (John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation)

Daniel Alarcón ’99CC likes to say that a good story has no borders, an apt sentiment from someone whose life and work transcends many of them.

Born in Peru and raised in the United States, Alarcón has spent his career documenting political and cultural life across Latin America, finding commonalities across the diverse set of nations. But the fluidity of his portfolio is more than geographic. Alarcón, an assistant professor at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism, works in Spanish and English; writes lyrical fiction, carefully reported journalism, and introspective personal essays; and delivers them to audiences in books, in magazines, and on the radio.

"We tend to have these rigid definitions of particular genres, but they've never felt all that different to me," Alarcón says. "Creative work often takes rigorous research. And reporting in a compelling way takes creativity."

While many dabble in different media before specializing in one, Alarcón has been enormously successful across the board. He is the author of four works of critically acclaimed fiction — two novels and two story collections, the latest of which, *The King Is Always Above the People*, was a finalist for the National Book Award. He is an accomplished journalist, contributing regular articles and essays to the *New Yorker* and other magazines. He is a cofounder and host of *Radio Ambulante*, a massively popular Spanish-language podcast distributed by NPR. And he is now a genius, at least according to the MacArthur Foundation, which recently named him to its 2021 class of fellows, crediting his "powerful narrative storytelling" with giving "voice to the diverse experiences of Latin Americans and of Spanish speakers."

"I still haven't really processed it," Alarcón says. "It feels absurd and shocking and great. It's the kind of call you really only get once in a lifetime."

Alarcón was born in Lima in 1977, but he moved to a suburb of Birmingham, Alabama, as a toddler when his parents, both physicians, joined the faculty of the University of Alabama's campus there. The Deep South was a complicated place for the immigrant family to land. There was hardly a thriving Peruvian community ("We used to joke that we knew every Spanish speaker within a two-hundred-mile radius"), and though Alarcón's parents did their best to change that, attracting a steady stream of Latinos to the university and the city, the local culture continued to be defined by the people who had lived in Alabama for generations.

"People there are really deeply attached to the place, to the land itself," he says. "There was always a sense that my family was just passing through."

As the youngest of three, Alarcón was the most American — his party trick growing up was to imitate a Southern accent for visitors — but he says his feelings about Birmingham are complicated. “The history is so fraught,” he says. “I spent my childhood there, and it’s part of my identity. But there’s also a lot that I don’t want to claim, to carry around.”

When Alarcón was nine or ten, his parents started sending him to summer school in Peru, where he delighted in learning Spanish slang from his cousins and playing the kind of soccer that didn’t involve well-meaning suburban moms handing out orange slices at halftime. “Everything was different there,” Alarcón says. “It was liberating.”

Back in Birmingham, Alarcón was a devoted student and an avid reader (of Dostoevsky, Toni Morrison ’84HON, and Gabriel García Márquez ’71HON), as well as an enthusiast of jazz, hip-hop, and rock. When it came time to apply for college, Alarcón, eager to get out of Alabama and live in a big city, felt Columbia was a natural fit.

As an undergraduate, Alarcón majored in anthropology and creative writing. And though he says that “‘studied’ was a generous word” for what he did as an undergraduate, he had several formative academic experiences that shaped his early career. A freshman class with Iranian-American public intellectual Hamid Dabashi helped him rethink the origins of civilization. A semester abroad in Ghana — Alarcón’s first time traveling outside the Americas — was eye-opening and taught him much about colonialism (it was “a fascinating place, and I learned so much about history and about race and culture, and it made me reinterpret a lot of things about both the US and Peru,” he says). Alarcón also started writing fiction at Columbia and developed a friendship with poetry professor Alan Ziegler, who arranged for him to continue taking writing classes after he graduated, while he was teaching tenth-grade English at a New York City public high school.

In 2001, Alarcón won a Fulbright scholarship to study literature in Peru. “And I did that, sort of,” he says. “But mostly I immersed myself in Lima — in the city, in the culture.” He worked at an NGO and taught writing classes in San Juan de Lurigancho, a neighborhood in the hills of Lima, densely populated with refugees who had fled rural Peru during the 1980s, the bloodiest period of the country’s long, devastating civil war.

For Alarcón, like many Peruvians, the war had personal resonance. His uncle, Javier Alarcón Guzmán, a university professor and labor-union organizer, disappeared in the jungle in 1989, presumably killed by Peruvian security forces. While Alarcón was living in Peru, he became interested in learning more about his uncle's life and in piecing together the circumstances of his death and the cover-up that followed. He traveled around the country, interviewing people who knew Javier. He visited the notorious prisons that held people detained during the war, and he started listening to a radio show called *Buscapersonas*, or People Finder, that connected missing people with their loved ones.

While Alarcón's quest could not bring back his uncle, it did inspire his fiction — haunting, imaginative books about war and displacement, poverty and injustice, nationhood and the loyalties that transcend it. He published his first story in the *New Yorker* when he was twenty-six, newly returned from Peru and working on his MFA at the University of Iowa, and came out with his first book, a collection of stories called *War by Candlelight*, shortly thereafter. While still at Iowa, he started work on his debut novel, *Lost City Radio*, about a country in the aftermath of war and a radio program that was helping its people pick up the pieces and find their way back to each other.

Like much of Alarcón's fiction, *Lost City Radio* is not specifically set in Peru but in a fictional country in the aftermath of an invented conflict, a choice he made so that the emotional heart of the story wouldn't be lost in the details of Peru's war. That nonspecificity, he says, helped many of his readers connect to the struggle in a more personal way.

"It's interesting how people around the world reacted to it," Alarcón says. "In Peru, of course, people recognized many things about the conflict. But in Spain it was about Franco. In Chile it was about Pinochet. The name of a place, where it is on a map — those are the least important things about it."

While building a career crafting these inventive fictional worlds, Alarcón was also beginning to work as a journalist, writing long-form articles about political and cultural issues across Latin America. Initially, Alarcón started writing nonfiction for *Etiqueta Negra*, a quarterly literary magazine founded by two brothers who had grown up in a remote village in the Andes and who had little experience in publishing or journalism.

“After I published my first story in the *New Yorker*, they basically tracked me down and asked me to join them,” he says. “I couldn’t believe that something of that quality was coming out of Lima.”

Alarcón became their associate editor, but he continued to write for other magazines, including *Harper’s*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and the *New Yorker*. He has written extensively on soccer, a passionate pastime for many across the continent, including Alarcón. He has reported on devastating gang violence in El Salvador, followed political unrest in Chile, and chronicled the collapse of Puerto Rico’s famed Arecibo telescope. For a piece on Lima’s biggest prison, in San Juan de Lurigancho, Alarcón visited often, even spending the night in a cell.

Radio has always been central to Alarcón’s life. He grew up listening to his father tell stories about calling soccer games for Peru’s Radio Continental, a job he got when he was just fourteen years old. In Birmingham, the family’s radio dial was usually tuned to NPR. Alarcón would fall asleep to *Jazz After Hours*, imagining a future outside his suburban bedroom as the host read listings of shows in faraway cities.

“I was raised believing in the power of voice,” Alarcón says. “It was like a lifeline.”

After Alarcón published *Lost City Radio*, in 2008, the BBC asked him to produce a radio documentary about Andean migration to Lima. Alarcón enjoyed the work but was frustrated that he didn’t have more control over the end product. More importantly, he felt that the piece would be inaccessible to people in Latin America, where the story was most relevant.

“Many of the interviews that I did in Spanish, in Peru and about Peru, were left out of the program, and preference was given to interviews conducted in English. It was frustrating,” Alarcón says. “So that was kind of the beginning of *Radio Ambulante*.”

At the time, Alarcón was living in Oakland, California, with his girlfriend — now wife — Carolina Guerrero, a Colombia native who worked as a promoter and event planner for Latin American cultural organizations. The two started talking about making a radio show that combined personal stories and fiction with investigative journalism and reporting, like *This American Life*, except that the entire show would be in Spanish.

“Every Latino working in public radio had the same idea,” Alarcón says. “But we were the ones who were crazy enough to do it.”

Though neither Alarcón nor Guerrero had significant radio experience, they found a supportive community in the Bay Area’s burgeoning podcasting community, where shows like Glynn Washington’s *Snap Judgment* and Roman Mars’s *99% Invisible* were thriving. They spent a year developing stories and hiring a small team, and in 2012 they launched a Kickstarter campaign that attracted six hundred donors and raised over $46,000, enough to produce the first season. By 2015, the show was averaging 1.5 million annual downloads; the following year, it was picked up by NPR and grew exponentially. Now in its eleventh season, *Radio Ambulante* has a staff of twenty-three and averages eight million annual downloads.

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Radio Ambulante’s mission is to tell “uniquely Latin American stories,” which means many things. There are, of course, stories about immigration and the reasons for it. Recent episodes have featured a woman who lived in a North Carolina church for four years to avoid deportation, two sisters who spent their teenage years separated by the US–Mexico border, and a group of neighbors who formed a human chain to keep ICE from arresting one of their own. But those are only a small part of the repertoire. There are also stories about a village, high in the Andes, where people have inexplicably started going blind; a herd of hippopotamuses in a Colombian

river, far from their native Africa; a group of indigenous women in Bolivia determined to climb a mountain; and a Puerto Rican man willing to do just about anything to get his idol's autograph, to name just a few.

"There's a certain intimacy that's unique to the medium," Alarcón says. "The silences, the emotion when the voice cracks, the information that the accent might give you. You can tell so much from a person's voice. Where they're from, what kind of life they lead."

Though listening to the radio can be a very personal experience — "The way many of us listen now, with headphones, it's literally someone whispering in your ear" — Alarcón and his colleagues realized that they could also use the show to help bring people together. In 2019, before the world shut down, they launched a series of listening clubs in pilot cities, where members of the community could gather to discuss an episode. Alarcón also noticed that many non-native Spanish speakers were using the podcast to practice their language skills. To foster that, he created a companion app called Lupa, which gives English speakers educational exercises related to each episode.

In March 2020, *Radio Ambulante* branched out again, partnering with Vice Media to launch a weekly news podcast called *El hilo* (The thread), under Alarcón's editorial direction. *El hilo* uses narrative storytelling to address timely and news-based subjects, like the spread of COVID-vaccine misinformation across Latin America and whether President Biden has fulfilled his campaign promises to reform immigration policies.

With so many irons already in the fire, Alarcón says that the $625,000 MacArthur grant will not change his day-to-day life, though he says it will give him the space and time to figure out projects he wants to pursue in the future. He'll be teaching a full load at Columbia in the spring, fulfilling his contract with the *New Yorker*, and working on the next season of *Radio Ambulante*. And, unsurprisingly, he's been exploring yet another medium: together with a cowriter, he is working on his first screenplay.

"My goal is to keep telling stories that mean something to me," Alarcón says. "I'm always open to new ways of doing that."

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