

**CHILDREN'S LITERATURE SIN FRONTERAS: *MESTICISMO* AND ECOPOETICS
IN FRANCISCO X. ALARCÓN'S *ANIMAL POEMS OF THE IGUAZÚ***

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ABSTRACT. Francisco X. Alarcón's *Animal Poems of the Iguazú / Animalario del Iguazú* (2013) successfully represents a milestone in its author's career, as it brings together stylistic choices and philosophical concepts that he had developed in earlier works for adult and children readers. In particular, and working from an animal-rights, posthumanist context, Alarcón fleshes out the notions of ecopoetics and *mesticismo*, a neologism he coined to blend mysticism with mestizaje. Through those concepts, the author invites his readers to imagine a borderless continent, thus challenging hierarchical divisions and dominant discourses in children's entertainment. In their stead, Alarcón advocates for a reclamation of Mesoamerican thought and practices as a pathway to developing positive images of linguistic and cultural diversity, ecological awareness, and new ways of reading and living.

Key words: Ecopoetics, Mesoamérica, Children's entertainment, Linguistic diversity, pan-Americanism, Travel, Posthumanism; Counterhegemonic discourses

Writer and educator Francisco X. Alarcón (1954-2016) was a prolific poet and notable children's books author. Critic Marcial González celebrated Alarcón as one of "the strongest voices in contemporary Chicano poetry" (179), an appreciation shared by other scholars and readers. Alarcón's work for children has also received multiple accolades, to which I will refer below. As it happens often with authors who write for both young and adult readers, however, Alarcón's work has been analyzed in a somewhat reductive manner that addresses either one or the other segment of his overall output, a split that the author rejected: "I see my work, including the book[s] for children, as making up one long poem—the poem that is my life" ("Francisco" 44). In that spirit, I intend to analyze *Animal Poems of the Iguazú / Animalario del Iguazú* (2013) by connecting that bilingual book for children with the author's essayistic production and, also, with some general features of his poetry, regardless of the audience for which it was intended.

Animal Poems, superbly illustrated by Maya Christina González, was the last book for children published by Alarcón. Previously, he had authored five other books for that public. The first four (also illustrated by González) focused on the seasons of the year: *Laughing Tomatoes and Other Spring Poems / Jitomates risueños y otros poemas de primavera* (1997, winner of a National Parenting Publications Book Award; Pura Belpré honor book in 1998), *From the Bellybutton of the Moon and Other Summer Poems / Del ombligo de la luna y otros poemas de verano* (1998, Pura Belpré honor book in 2000), *Angels Ride Bikes and Other Fall Poems / Los ángeles andan en bicicleta y otros poemas de otoño* (1999), *Iguanas in the Snow and Other Winter Poems / Iguanas en la nieve y otros poemas de invierno* (2001, Pura Belpré honor book in 2002). The fifth book, entitled *Poems To Dream Together / Poemas para soñar juntos* (2005, illustrated by Paula Barragán) received a 2006 Jane Addams Award Honor Book citation for—among other things—promoting the "importance and rewards of working together to create a world built on respect for variation and association" (Griffith).

In an interview with Frederick L. Aldama, Alarcón spelled out his reasons for authoring books for children, including a sense of giving back to the community, countering prevailing ethnocentric messages, celebrating and promoting bilingualism, and providing Latina/o children with opportunities to see themselves in literature ("Francisco" 44). All of these reasons emphasize the ethical component of his decision, which could have resulted in overly didactic and overdetermined narratives, but Alarcón succeeded in maintaining an intriguing, playful tone in his books, largely as a result of the form he adopted: short-line poems full of imagery and an abundant number of striking metaphors. I will analyze that choice next, as part of my discussion of the major elements of Alarcón's poetics.

Major elements of Francisco X. Alarcón's poetics

Metaphors and short lines are the main features of Alarcón's style, whether he writes for adults or for children. His first book, *Tattoos* (1985), made that stylistic choice evident by featuring poems there are brief and, at times, composed of just one metaphor, as is the case with "Eyes / Ojos":

wounds	heridas con
with open	las puntadas
stitches	abiertas (n.p.).

Also from *Tattoos*, “Roots / Raíces” shares in the strong imagistic nature of the book as a whole, and it was later included by Alarcón in *Laughing Tomatoes*, further erasing the boundaries between poetry for adults and for children:

I carry	mis raíces
my roots	las cargo
with me	siempre
all the time	conmigo
rolled up	enrolladas
I use them	me sirven
as my pillow	de almohada (5).

Francisco X. Alarcón’s choice of poetic short lines connects him to a tradition that goes back to the 17th century. From that period, the author acknowledged inspiration in Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón’s *Tratado de las supersticiones y costumbres gentílicas que hoy viven entre los naturales desta Nueva España* (1629), a work that he partially incorporated (and responded to) in his *Snake Poems* (1992). More recent writers whose influence Alarcón recognized as well include Federico García Lorca and William Carlos Williams (“Francisco” 42). Initially criticized for using the short line in a literary context that favored expansive, narrative poems, Alarcón explained his choice in terms that make evident its potential for communicating with active readers:

It is the incompleteness of the short line—and not the more complete and imagistically determined longer line—that I’m drawn to. For me, the greater the degree a reader/listener has to fill in blanks in the imagery, the more powerful the poem. The less detail, the more possibility there is for the poet and the reader/listener to meet at the site of the poetic line (“Francisco” 42).

In the case of Alarcón’s poetry for children, I argue, the combination of textual blanks, undetermined imagery, and short, memorable lines becomes essential for creating empowering literary spaces for young readers, whose willingness and ability to embrace the playful aspects of his works may be fueled in part by their familiarity with other meaningful cultural forms like riddles that (unbeknownst to them) have prepared them for the complexities of the written word. In so tapping into his readers “funds of knowledge,” Alarcón’s poetic choice effectively builds on his audience’s own cultural capital to create a more meaningful and respectful literary dialog.¹

By calling attention to the playful aspects of Alarcón’s poetry, I do not intend to deny or obscure the many elements of social criticism and counterhegemonic discourses present in his books, some of which—in fact—I intend to analyze below. Still, as I suggested in my 2006 history of Chicana/o children’s literature, Alarcón’s books are among those who more consistently and intentionally bring to the fore the elements of fantasy and imagination, even as he deals with gender, social, and even political aspects:²

Building upon a rich tradition of semi-conceptual poems and poetry of the everyday (as in Pablo Neruda’s *Odas elementales* and in [Ernesto] Galarza’s mini-libros), Alarcón appeals to the imagination of his Chicano/a and non Chicano/a readers by subtly teaching about metaphor (“each tortilla/ is a tasty/ round of applause/ for the sun,” *Laughing* 16), culture, history, and—above all—language. After planting

words on the pages like seeds, Alarcón hopes for a reader to make those seeds grow. (Martín-Rodríguez, “Chicano/a” 31).

In Alarcón’s case, therefore, I understand playfulness and fantasy/imagination to refer not so much to the thematic content of his books as to the communicative situation he intends to establish with his audience. Alarcón does not see his readers as naïve children (or adults) who need to be taught lessons (no matter how important) or made aware of certain values or issues; rather, the reader for him must be an active participant in the construction of meaning through the completion of textual blanks and the fleshing out of sparse details. As he states in the “Afterword” to *Laughing Tomatoes*, “poems are really incomplete until someone reads them” (31). The ensuing creativity expected from the audience is of paramount importance for the development of language skills and a sense of identity.

A second major element I would like to highlight in Alarcón’s poetics is his pan-Americanism, a social, political, and aesthetic concept that challenges and deconstructs the borders that separate nations and, more importantly, families. In “Reclaiming Ourselves, Reclaiming America,” the author stated his beliefs in unequivocal terms: “America is a continent and cannot be monopolized by a single country like the United States. America has no borders. It actually runs from Alaska to Patagonia” (237).³

This borderless understanding of the Americas has two distinct manifestations. At the hemispheric level, it translates into an imagined community (and communion) of Native peoples throughout the continent, of particular relevance for approaching *Animal Poems of the Iguazú*. In a North American context, Alarcón’s conceptualization challenges the political boundary between Mexico and the United States. Among Alarcón’s last poetic efforts, the Facebook page Poets Responding to SB1070 (founded in April 2010), and the book *Borderless Butterflies* (2014), were a response to the political and military instrumentalization of an artificial border that separates what nature has always connected. Thus, in the book he uses the image of the monarch butterflies that cross the border every year unimpeded (“the ultimate borderless / migrant creatures” 31), to contrast it with the fate of those who die trying to make it across (converting the border in an “unmarked / tomb for / thousands” 156), or who cannot be reunited with their loved ones because of that “Wall / of Laments / for families” (156). The utopic resolution of that border conflict, in the poem “Tankas sin fronteras / Borderless Tankas,” involves a process of fusion between human and animal, a cosmic transformative unity that resonates with the contents of *Animal Poems* as well, as we will see:

oh imagínate
el mundo sin fronteras
toda la gente
soñando volando libres
como mariposas monarcas

los poetas caen
como estrellas fugaces —
dan luz al cielo
brevemente a los ojos
y para siempre al alma

o imagine
this world without borders
all the people dreaming
flying free everywhere
as monarch butterflies

poets come down
as shooting stars —
they lighten the sky
so briefly the eyes
and forever the soul (157).

A borderless planet where people can move around (fly/dream) without restrictions may sound as (un)realistic as John Lennon's famous song "Imagine" (whose echoes, I believe, are felt in the poem), but the second stanza clarifies what makes the utopian possible, namely the ability of the poets to briefly illuminate the senses while transforming forever the minds/souls of their readers.

This leads us to the last element of Alarcón's philosophy and aesthetics that I would like to highlight before proceeding to the analysis of *Animal Poems*: the interrelated concepts of *mesticismo* and ecopoetics. In "Reclaiming Ourselves," Alarcón explains his neologism as follows:

Mesticismo purposefully combines *Mestizo* and *misticismo* (mysticism), in order to differentiate it from *mestizaje*. *Mesticismo* comes out of the experiences that the dominant cultures have confined to the realm of the "other" and the "marginal," those people and cultures condemned to live dangerously in psychological and cultural borderlands. *El mesticismo le da vuelta a la tortilla* (*Mesticismo* turns things around) and sets out a fluid way of thinking about relations in which any notion of self must include the "others," equally trespassing neat demarcations like subject/object, human/nature, us/them, and other similar dichotomies common in Western thought and mythologies. (240-241)

In *Borderlands/La frontera* (a text Alarcón cites in "Reclaiming Ourselves"), Gloria Anzaldúa had already combined a reassessment of the mestiza/o identity with a challenging of dualities and with mysticism, sensing that mystic poets like St. Teresa of Ávila were already inhabiting the psychological and even physical borderlands later experienced by Chicanas/os, historical differences notwithstanding. Anzaldúa's poem about St. Teresa ("Holy Relics"), moreover, deconstructs subject/object and us/them dualities while firmly denouncing violence against women. The poem's utopic cry for the reunification of the dispersed "holy relics" also amounts to a kind of "turning things around," while endorsing the overall plea in *Borderlands* for a fluid understanding of identity as a process, and for developing a tolerance for ambiguity. Expanding both on Anzaldúa's work and on the Chicano Movement cherished notion of *in lak ech* (you are my other self), recently embraced by Mexican American Studies teachers in the Tucson Unified School District,⁴ Alarcón's *mesticismo* leads him to an ecopoetics that sets out to deconstruct additional Western-based dichotomies previously left unchallenged, such as human/nature.

Ecopoetics, as Alarcón understands it, "calls for a new global awareness of the oneness of all living creatures and of nature as a whole" ("Reclaiming Ourselves" 241). As a process of cultural reclamation, it "stress[es] the deep sense of interconnection linking the poetic self and nature. Ultimately this poetic self dwells in the collective consciousness and/or sense of oneness with the surrounding ecosystems" (243). Eschewing anthropocentrism, then, Alarcón embraces a type of posthumanism and, in so doing, he shifts the lens from an exclusively identitarian "who are we" to the broader ecopoetics question "where are we."⁵ This, as I will discuss below, explains in great part the strategy of situating *Animal Poems* in one of Latin America's most impressive national parks and of ceding voice and perspective to its animal inhabitants, decentering the human and—in fact—turning humans into objects of contemplation, rather than speaking subjects.⁶

While some readers may be tempted to interpret Alarcón's ecopoetics focus as a manifestation of a recent critical fad, the poet is cautious to connect this turn of the century ideology with ancient Mesoamerican beliefs and practices. After noting that in Mesoamerican mythologies, humans were always presented interacting with animals, plants, and the forces of

nature in very close and profound ways, Alarcón urges us to recognize that Mesoamerica is not a collection of artifacts from the past in a museum, but alive and well in contemporary native and mestizo peoples (242). As Arturo Aldama has noted, Alarcón's reclamation of the Mesoamerican past (what Hartley has called his "deliberate political construction of a 'Mesoamerican' perspective" [286]) challenges linear conceptions of history, while embracing a "flesh and bones," embodied approach (123). The sensorial aspects of this process are further clarified in the following quote from Alarcón's "Reclaiming Ourselves": "America must be able to see, hear, touch, taste, and smell this America. This may well lead us to new ways of seeing, reading, feeling, thinking, creating, and living. Why not envision, for example, a new ecopoetics grounded in a heritage thousands of years old that holds that everything in the universe is sacred?" (241). *Mesticismo* and ecopoetics are thus intertwined in the poet's effort to do away with Eurocentric and anthropocentric inherited ideologies.

Alarcón's interest in history is also concerned with the erasure of the Mesoamerican past from the dominant records, and with the possibility of effecting a recovery: "Behind the seeming monoliths erected by the 'official history,' there are some forgotten cracks and gaps that sometimes hold the real story. This is the suppressed and mostly unspoken history of the native peoples of this continent, and of their descendants" ("Reclaiming Ourselves" 234). Interestingly for our purposes, the idea that the "real history" of Mesoamerica is to be found in *cracks* and *gaps* brings us back to the poetics of the short, incomplete poetic line. To recover Mesoamerica's suppressed history, attention to the unsaid and to the elusively said are essential, thus requiring the same hermeneutical strategies Alarcón demands of the reader of short-line poetry. Faced with incompleteness, the historian (like the reader) must play an active role in constructing meaning out of gaps, cracks, and indeterminacy.

That process is best exemplified by Francisco X. Alarcón's own reading of and response to Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón's cited treatise on Aztec magic and curing practices in both *Snake Poems* and in "Reclaiming Ourselves," where he says about his engagement with his 17th century forerunner: "The ultimate irony is that a Chicano poet also named Alarcón, some four hundred years later, using the colonial Alarcón's writings, learns 'to undo what is done' by writing a postmodern *tonalamatl* (spirit book) with a diametrically inverse sense of urgency: reclaiming of an ancient Mesoamerican ecopoetics" (243).

Much as *Snake Poems* served as an oppositional *tonalamatl* to Ruiz de Alarcón's attempt to suppress Aztec beliefs and practices, I contend that *Animal Poems* also functions as a *tonalamatl* in which Francisco X. Alarcón taps into native Latin American philosophies, beliefs, and languages to explore and expose the cracks and gaps through which the reader can participate in the reconstruction of a suppressed history. If "Reclaiming Ourselves" was based on an epiphanic visit to Isla Mujeres,⁷ *Animal Poems* is based on an equally memorable set of visits to the Iguazú National Park, which were instrumental for the poet's ability to give final shape to his ecopoetics, not only through *mesticismo* but also through the influence of posthumanism and animal studies.

Animal Poems of the Iguazú: Travel, Nature, History, and Borders

Readers of Chicana/o literature are familiar with poetry and narratives of travel. However, the dominant pattern in those writings involves a connection between travel and migration, from Tomás Rivera's masterpiece *...y no se lo tragó la tierra* (1972), focused on Texas migrant workers

and their trips to the Midwest, to more recent works like Reyna Grande's *Across a Hundred Mountains* (2006), involving immigration from Mexico. At times, readers also encounter characters traveling south to Mexico to visit family, reconnect with roots, and similar identity-related journeys, as in Erlinda Gonzales-Berry's *Paletitas de guayaba* (1991). Travel as leisure is featured very sporadically in this literary tradition, with Rudolfo A. Anaya's *A Chicano in China* (1986) providing a notable precedent and exception. Prevalent socioeconomic conditions affecting Chicana/o communities may be responsible for the relative scarcity of non-immigration related Chicana/o travel writing, even though many authors have made the transition from their families' working-class status to the middle class.

The same dominance of immigration-related travels holds true for Chicana/o and Latina/o children's and young adult literature. Books by René Colato Laínez (*From North to South / Del norte al sur*, 2010) and Duncan Tonatiuh (*Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote*, 2013), for example, explore deportation and immigration, as do many others, including Pam Muñoz Ryan's *Esperanza Rising* (2000).

In that context, *Animal Poems* may appear to be an oddity, set as it is on the Argentinian side of Iguazú National Park. However, as I hope to demonstrate, far from being peculiar, *Animal Poems* represents a logical expansion and illustration of Alarcón's poetic and philosophical interests, while contributing to a larger impulse in Chicana/o letters to erase the boundaries between the margins and the center, the inherited culture and the culture one acquires. Like Chicano poet Tino Villanueva, who appropriates and embraces Homer's character in his recent *So Spoke Penelope* (2013), Alarcón also expands Chicana/o cultural capital by asserting his right to transcend any boundaries that would typecast or see him as an immigrant, a minority, or a marginal subject in any other way.⁸ Presenting himself as a traveler by choice (not a migrant), Alarcón decenters geography (by disrupting expectations of who can/should travel where) as well as—to a certain extent—social class (by presenting young readers with an implied Chicano subject who travels and writes from a no-longer working class position).

That particular freedom of travel which *Animal Poems* reclaims is connected with Alarcón's overall views on America as a continent (discussed above), as well as on the inherent futility and unfairness of political borders. "Sin fronteras / Without Borders" makes this explicit:

para todos nosotros	for all of us
animales silvestres	wild animals and
y plantas de la jungla	plants of the rainforest
no hay límites	there are no limits
sólo una Tierra	only one Earth
sin fronteras	without borders (25).

Alarcón's overall posthumanist approach in *Animal Poems* (by which human beings all but disappear, relinquishing space and voice to fauna and plants) is rather effective in uncovering and deconstructing the dichotomy technology/nature.⁹ A nature-centered view of the continent allows young readers to better comprehend how irrational political borders are, as ridiculous as asking a butterfly to show a passport or a visa when flying from one place to another. By the same token, and in the context of the increasing presence of hi-tech mechanisms of control at the U.S.-Mexico border, the anti-natural aspects of technology are presented as a clear danger not only to people, but also to sustainability and ecological balance. Within *Animal Poems*, "¡Qué plaga! / What a Pest" and "Hormigas gigantes / Giant Ants" contain the most explicit condemnation of the

mechanical in opposition to the natural. In “¡Qué plaga!,” Alarcón gently introduces the topic through a playful metaphor that, in the first two stanzas, invites the young reader to guess what the final two reveal:

que plaga más plaga esos grandes mosquitos con ruidosos motores	what huge pests these big mosquitos with noisy motors
del lado brasileño del Parque Nacional Iguazú	high on the Brazilian side of the Iguazú National Park
¡cómo nos molestan a las aves en nido estos helicópteros	we nesting birds get really annoyed by these helicopters
con humanos que ni siquiera pueden por sí solos volar!	carrying humans who can't fly by themselves! (20).

Normally touted as a sign of progress and advancement, technological ingenuity is here presented as a deficiency among humans, who lack the natural abilities animals possess. In “Hormigas gigantes / Giant Ants,” people are depicted so absorbed in the gadgets they carry as to miss the natural wonders about them (“holding digital cameras / taking lots of photos / of each other / ignoring the great / and tiny wonders / all around them” 21). As such, humans are like single-file marching giant ants with no useful purpose other than gazing at one another, unable to feel or connect with nature.¹⁰

It is in this sense that *Animal Poems* can be considered to be a *tonalamatl*, a spirit book that exposes the flaws in some of modernity’s dominant discourses so as to reconnect readers with Mesoamerican-inspired ecopoetics. Just like in Mesoamerican mythological texts, animals here address their human counterparts (readers, in this case) to reestablish a link that technology had severed. Children are invited to stop pointing cameras to one another (or to the landscape) and to learn to see nature from a perspective that breaks the separation within its animal, mineral,¹¹ and vegetable realms. Given Alarcón’s poetic preferences, discussed at the beginning of this article, it should come as no surprise that his most effective tool in redirecting the children’s gaze should be based on the metaphor. By presenting their referents not as we would normally see them (i.e. through a “photographic” lens), but in a defamiliarized manner, metaphors demand an active cognitive process that forces the reader to think differently. “Tucán / Toucan,” for instance, invites the audience to see an otherwise invisible connection between animal and plant: “for a beak / I have two / papaya slices” (6), and so does “Las mariposas / Butterflies”: “we are / the multicolored / flowers of the air” (16).

Therefore, if in *Isla Mujeres* Alarcón was inspired to develop the concept of *mesticismo*, his visits to the Iguazú allowed him to further test the continental unity of America and to exemplify those “new ways of seeing, reading, feeling, thinking, creating, and living” that a new ecopoetics would bring about (“Reclaiming Ourselves” 241). Writing as a Chicano whose Mestizo way of thinking is influenced by Mesoamerican and north-American Native peoples (see note 10),

Alarcón seeks in Iguazú not so much the company of his fellow visitors (as “¡Qué plaga!” and “Hormigas gigantes” demonstrate) but the inspiration of nature and of the local Native peoples and languages. In this manner, he steers away from hierarchies such as tourist/local and North/South, to establish instead a South-to-South dialog (or what I termed earlier an imagined community and communion of Native peoples) that permeates *Animal Poems*. Symbolically, the first stanza of the first poem in the collection (“Cataratas del Iguazú / Iguazú Waterfalls”) already cedes voice and interpretive authority to the local Natives, preventing the visitor’s gaze from imposing a foreign meaning or epistemology:

Iguazú significa
“aguas grandes”
en guaraní

Iguazú means
“big waters”
in Guaraní (5).

This impressive rhetorical move, occurring as it does at the beginning of a U.S. Spanish/English bilingual book for children, effectively conveys to the young reader the existence of other languages with alternative views of the world beyond those most familiar to her/him. Somewhat later in the book, in “Mito guaraní / Guaraní Myth” and “De azul / Blue Job,” that alternative worldview is fleshed out, as the poems retell two Guaraní myths, according to which clouds were born in the womb of the Iguazú falls (12), and God painted the sky blue

con el extracto
de la semillita
del ñangapirí

with the extract
from the tiny
ñangapirí seed (13).

The last line cited epitomizes Alarcón’s desire to yield epistemological authority to the Native voices. Even though the reader has been able to make sense of Guaraní stories thanks to the narrative voice that retells them in Spanish and English, the word “ñangapirí” resists and refuses translation, remaining forever indigenous and free from linguistic mechanisms of appropriation (paraphrase, comparison, footnotes etc.), an element further strengthened in the Spanish version in which the word is the final one in the poem.¹²

The significance of incorporating Native thought and language into *Animal Poems* cannot be emphasized enough. As Huerta and Tafolla have noted (in a different context), the ideology of colonization “continues to represent indigenous populations as unintelligent and primitive, discounting their history, cultural practices, languages, and complex knowledge” (145-146). The repeated presence of Guaraní words and beliefs in *Animal Poems* brings attention to the cracks and gaps in the official history, thus allowing readers to glimpse into the forgotten and suppressed history of America. Alarcón’s respect for Guaraní knowledge and language somehow corrects what official history has done to conceal their presence, and it complements his vindication of Aztec thought and speech in *Snake Poems*, a text that (as we saw above) the poet called a postmodern *tonalamatl* that could work to “undo what is done” (“Reclaiming Ourselves” 243).¹³

The final aspect of *Animal Poems* that I want to discuss involves this notion of undoing what is done as well, this time in connection with the field of children’s entertainment. Numerous scholars have called attention to the “history of perpetuated cultural inaccuracies and stereotypes” (Naidoo 59) in the representation of Latin (and Latina/o) America in children’s literature. In many cases, this is a direct result of the heterological nature of most of those books, written by authors who do not belong to the culture(s) they represent and whose attitude towards them is often

condescending, at best. The problem is even more severe and persisting in the area of children's film, dominated until recently by the Disney studios, and this is where Alarcón's *Animal Poems* can be said to best "undo what was done." Without attributing authorial intention in that regard, I suggest that *Animal Poems* may be read nonetheless as a powerful response to the Disney studios's representation of South America in the travel films *Saludos amigos* (1942), *South of the Border with Disney* (1942), and *The Three Caballeros* (1944). Though these films were produced several decades before the publication of *Animal Poems*, they were repackaged for the home video market in 1995, 2000, and 2008, thus making them available to the exact same generation(s) of readers that may have encountered Alarcón's children's books.

A product of the Good Neighbor policies of the 1940s, and sponsored by U.S. governmental agencies, *Saludos Amigos* is a partially-animated travelogue that begins with the Disney artists boarding a plane en route to several countries in South America, and then follows their exploits (and those of their animated characters) there. Much of the intellectual drive behind the film can be described as ethnographic, as it tries to explain customs, fauna and geographical accidents in several South American countries to a U.S. audience. As a consequence, Latin Americans are presented as foreign and peculiar in dress, speech, and culture, but rendered understandable through the mediation of the good-natured Hollywood artists and of the narrator of the film, who provides all kinds of descriptions and clarifications. This heavy-handed presentation strategy is radically different from Alarcón's: while the latter prefers metaphors and the openness of the short poetic line (an occasional footnote notwithstanding), the Disney film relies on long explanations and explicit similes that reduce Latin American cultural practices to a subordinated kind of knowledge, understandable only through a U.S. mediating lens. In that light, the Argentinian gaucho is presented as a sort of cowboy,¹⁴ and Brazilian carnival is nothing but a mixture of Mardi Gras in New Orleans and New Year's eve in New York City. Unlike Alarcón, who highlights the Guaraní language and beliefs (at times, as we saw, refusing to explain or translate for his readers), the Disney animators effectively silence Latin America so that they can speak *for* Latin America.

A second way in which Alarcón's *Animal Poems* undoes the legacy of the Disney travelogues is in its attitude of respect toward Latin America's natural and cultural patrimony. In the introduction to his book, Alarcón stresses the need to protect and "preserve *Ybirá Retá* ('Land of the Trees' in the Guaraní language) for future generations" (n.p.), a message reinforced in the last poem of the collection, "Mismo destino verde / Same Green Fate," in which he urges his readers:

escuchemos	let's listen to
la verde voz	the green voice
de la selva	of the rainforest
...	...
aprendamos	let's learn
los distintos	the distinct
alfabetos vivientes	living alphabets
...	...
sí, hagamos del mundo	let's make the world
una <i>Ybirá Retá</i> real—	a true <i>Ybirá Retá</i> —
una Tierra de Árboles	a Land of the Trees (30, 31)

The potential pun at the end of the English version, which evokes and rephrases the “land of the free” line in the U.S. national anthem, is not the only element that deemphasizes and challenges ethnocentric U.S. perspectives (like Disney’s); the exhortative “let’s listen” and “let’s learn” demand relinquishing authority and voice to the observed cultures, implicitly condemning such previous discursive practices as the imposition of heterological perspectives typical of the Disney films.

Moreover, the conservationist message expressed in “Same Green Fate” through the voice of the native species (“*protect all of us / for the Earth’s fate / for your own sake*” 31) demands a respect for natural resources that contrasts with the message in the Disney movies, which present natural and cultural resources as if they were there solely for the benefit of the visitor. In *Saludos Amigos*, for example, Donald Duck parades through Latin America without ever paying for anything he consumes or takes with him, and *The Three Caballeros* is literally based on the premise that Latin American countries send gifts by mail to Donald Duck. *South of the Border with Disney*, in turn, tellingly presents the returning Disney studio artists going through U.S. customs with overstuffed suitcases containing all kinds of crafts and souvenirs (including a gaucho’s horse!), thus suggesting that anything and everything in Latin America is there for the taking.¹⁵

Conclusion

Francisco X. Alarcón’s *Animal Poems of the Iguazú* represented a milestone in his writing career, cut short by his untimely demise in 2016. I argue that *Animal Poems* is both emblematic of his general poetics and style and the culmination of a theoretical search that started with *Snake Poems* and “Reclaiming Ourselves” in 1992. In the first sense, *Animal Poems* maintains Alarcón’s focus on the short, incomplete poetic line full of metaphors and other images that demands an active reader. At the same time, in his last children’s book Alarcón was able to flesh out such important elements as *mesticismo* and ecopoetics, both central to his more recent philosophy.

Guided by an ethical impulse to counter U.S. ethnocentric messages prevalent in children’s literature, Alarcón set this book in the Southern Cone, perhaps surprising some critics and readers who might have expected a more obvious kind of Chicana/o content/background. Doing so, however, allowed him to claim a connection with Native American peoples from all parts of the continent, which highlights his belief in a borderless America. Alarcón celebrates native knowledge, myths, and languages in a way that exposes children readers to scenarios that go beyond their own immediate social contexts. For U.S. Latina/o children, who may have faced racism and linguistic-based forms of discrimination in their daily lives, *Animal Poems* provides a vindication of non-dominant languages and beliefs that such readers may find empowering.

Alarcón’s focus on animals—rather than humans—and the fact that he makes those animals address the reader from their own endangered habitat produce enough of a separation from the everyday as to allow his ideas on ecopoetics and *mesticismo* shine through. Unlike Disney’s cartoon animals (who dress, act, and think like humans), the fauna in Alarcón’s book represents a 21st century iteration of the animals found in Mesoamerican and Native American myths and texts. In that way, they not only make the reader aware of the plight of the Iguazú in present day, but also provide a sense of historical and ancestral depth for mestizo and Latina/o readers.

More than a travel book, then, *Animal Poems* is a *tonalamatl*, a spirit book that undoes what dominant discourses in children’s entertainment (and elsewhere) have done to promote ethnocentrism, the Othering of the Latina/o and of the Native, subtractive bilingualism, and a

consumerist notion of identity and self-worth.¹⁶ In their stead, *Animal Poems* proposes a wholistic sense of “who we are and where we are,” a positive image of linguistic and cultural diversity, ecological awareness, and new ways of reading, feeling, thinking, creating, and living.

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¹ The term "funds of knowledge" was popularized by Norma González, Luis C. Moll, and Cathy Amanti, in their edited 2005 book of that title. Their "Preface" defines the term as follows: "The concept of *funds of knowledge* . . . is based on a simple premise: People are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge" (n.p.).

² Naidoo and Quiroa have also stressed more recently the significance of works that are not issue-driven: "While it is important to focus on themes such as immigration and language development and use, it is equally important to provide Latino youth with books that are light-hearted and less issue-driven" (62).

³ Alarcón originally published this essay in the context of the 1992 commemoration of Christopher Columbus's first landing in the Americas. That earlier version is available in publications such as *Without Discovery: A Native Response to Columbus*, edited by Ray González (pp. 29-38). A decade later, the essay was reprinted with an expanded section on ecopoetics. I am citing this later version.

⁴ See *Precious Knowledge*, in which featured teachers explain the empowering effects of this concept for their students.

⁵ I am echoing Theresa J. May's concluding formula in "Greening the Theater" (100). Posthumanism questions anthropocentrism by blurring the differences between human and non-human.

⁶ See, for instance, the poem "Observant Monkey," in which "a very observant / brown capuchin / monkey thinks: / *how weird are / these monkeys / that all dress up / and ride past / on top of / rubber boats!*" (*Animal Poems* 24).

⁷ In 1517, Francisco Hernández de Córdoba landed in Isla Mujeres, beginning the process of exploration and conquest of Mesoamerica. Centuries later, Alarcón describes a personal

epiphany while visiting the site, and he concludes: "In order to understand history and be able to exorcise the past, we need to relive this history in flesh and spirit. We need to reenact all the misunderstandings, confrontations, and contradictions, all the suffering and havoc brought about by the so-called discovery of this continent by Europeans. I spent the rest of that day among the ruins of the temple of Ixchel in wonder and an altered state of consciousness. I was also overwhelmed by a sense of inner sadness and voiceless rage, mourning, anger, and despair" (236).

⁸ For more on the process of the expansion of the Chicana/o cultural capital (and on Villanueva's *Penelope*), see Martín-Rodríguez's "Un canto de amor a la literatura," especially p. 366.

⁹ In addition to "¡Qué plaga!" and "Hormigas gigantes" (which I discuss immediately below), humans are featured in "Mejor diversión / Better Fun" and "Bendición del Iguazú / Iguazú Blessing." The former deals with cruising the river on a rubber boat, and the latter contains the Iguazú Falls's blessing to its human visitors. The next poem in the book, "Mono observador / Observant Monkey" is a reflection on the river cruisers from the perspective of a monkey.

¹⁰ Alarcón's rejection of technology is not exclusive of his works for children. In an interview with Aldama, the poet clarifies some aspects of his chapbook *Loma Prieta* (about the 1989 earthquake of that name) as follows: "*Loma Prieta* is also an indictment of technology. I don't believe that technology is going to provide the answer to all the suffering that we have in the world today. I agree with the Hopi Indians that a long winter is coming, and that technology is just going to bring this winter on faster" ("Francisco" 48).

¹¹ Alarcón devotes one poem ("Tierra colorada / Red Earth") to connect the vegetable and the mineral worlds by comparing the red earth to plants or vegetable products such as peppers, cinnamon, and chocolate powder (26).

¹² An additional poem, "Tortuga de río / River Turtle," is based on Native myths, as clarified by the poet in a footnote.

¹³ For Conway, speaking of *Snake Poems*, "El descubrimiento del saber indígena funciona para aliviar el sufrimiento de un sujeto marginado dentro de la modernidad norteamericana, para restablecer genealogías oscurecidas por el tiempo, encauzar un saber ecológico matriarcal y explorar la identidad chicana como un terreno de identidades en conflicto" (21).

¹⁴ To further erase Latin American distinctive identities, in that particular animated segment of the film, Goofy plays the role of the Gaucho.

¹⁵ For more on these films, see Burton, *passim*.

¹⁶ In his classic study of Disney, Giroux criticizes the collusion of commercial and entertainment interests, concluding: "One consequence is that consumerism appears to be the only kind of citizenship being offered" (160). I am claiming that Alarcón effectively promotes an anti-commercial, ecological identity instead. The poem "Better Fun" makes this explicit: "cruising the river / on a rubber boat / at full speed / . . . / beats by far / any amusement park / attraction."