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A poet who writes tattoos

Francisco Alarcón writes about liberation and celebration in a bilingual world

By Kathleen Holder

After developing an international reputation as poet, educator, scholar and activist, [Francisco Alarcón](#) is gaining a new epithet among some of his youngest fans: "Bellybutton Guy."

The moniker refers to both the origin of the word Mexico and a title poem of Alarcón's second award-winning children's book, *From the Bellybutton of the Moon and Other Summer Poems*:

Whenever I say 'Mexico'/I hear my grandma telling me/about the Aztecs and the city they built/on an island in the middle of a lake/'Mexico' says my grandma/'means: from the bellybutton of the moon'/'don't forget your origins my son'/'maybe that's why/whenever I now say "Mexico"/I feel like touching my bellybutton.

At the public schools where Alarcón frequently visits as a guest poet, he says children grin and pat their navels when they see him coming down the halls. Alarcón's bellybutton poem and nickname, and his obvious delight in sharing the story with a class of UC Davis students, reveal much about the Spanish and classics lecturer: He carries an umbilical-like connection to family, community, culture and the natural world, and an infectious sense of joy.

"Everything he does is a celebration of life-in all its diverse incarnations," says associate music professor [Pablo Ortiz](#), who is setting a number of Alarcón's children's poems to music. "He's one of the most energetic people that I've ever known," Ortiz says. "He's a powerhouse. He's a force of nature, like storms and the wind."



As well as writing poetry, Francisco Alarcón directs the *camus* Spanish for Native Speakers program in the Department of Spanish and Classics.
Neil Michel/Axiom photo

A whirlwind of interests and activities is hinted by descriptions of Alarcón in articles, papers and book chapters written about him: educator, community activist, gay advocate and a leading Chicano poet. Alarcón has published a dozen volumes of poetry, including three for children, and his works have been included in numerous anthologies. Two of his books have been translated into Gaelic in Ireland: *Body in Flames* and *Of Dark Love*. *Body in Flames* has also been translated into Swedish.

Director of UC Davis' model Spanish for Native Speakers program, he also has published several textbooks for teaching Spanish at the college and high-school levels, and co-edited with Spanish and classics associate professor [Cecilia Colombi](#) a volume of essays for teaching Spanish to native speakers.

A third-generation Californian whose family founded the Los Angeles County town of Wilmington, Alarcón moved to Guadalajara, Mexico, when he was 6. He returned to California when he was 18 to attend California State University, Long Beach, and later did his graduate studies at Stanford University. His parents were cannery workers who didn't finish high school but raised seven children who all became professionals. Alarcón's four brothers and two sisters are a surgeon, an architect, a priest, a dentist, an engineer and an advertising agency executive. His family was named Los Angeles County's 1999 Latino Family of the Year.

Alarcón started writing poetry when he was 13. "I wanted to transcribe the songs my grandmother used to sing. Sometimes I would forget the lines so I would make up those lines."

He thought at the time that the songs were traditional Mexican folk songs but later learned that the words were his grandmother's own.

His link to his grandmother and her native Nahuatl language would lead him years later to write what is widely considered to be one of his most important books: *Snake Poems: An Aztec Invocation*.

The impetus for the book goes back to Alarcón's Ph.D. studies, when he was conducting research in Mexico City on a Fulbright fellowship in 1982-83. There, at the National Museum of Anthropology and History, he discovered a manuscript completed in 1629 by a Catholic priest, Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón, hired by the Spanish inquisition to record the native spells and myths.

Alarcón believes the priest, who tortured some of the Indians to complete his task, is a distant relative of his.

Snake Poems, published in 1992, combines translations of the priest's texts, the native incantations and original poems by Alarcón. The book won the Before Columbus Foundation's 1993 American Book Award.

"Most poets really write one long poem, a poem about their life," Alarcón says. "[Snake Poems] is a part of that process. This is going back in time. For me, this is very central to

who I am."

Others say the book also reclaims parts of a culture that was brutally suppressed.

"What Francisco did in that book is to invert a lot of those spells, so that rather than poems of possession they become songs of liberation and celebration," says [Jack Hicks](#), a senior lecturer in the English department and director of the Art of the Wild program.

Hicks sees Alarcón as tapping an ancient oral tradition, writing poetry as invocation to ancient powers, as opposed to many modern Western poets who view their works as "closed constructs." When Alarcón gives public readings of his work, he first burns sage and recites invocations in Nahuatl to the four directions, inviting his listeners to stand and participate. "You get a sense from the beginning that this is a poetry that sees power alive in the soil and the universe around us, and that by using language, we can invoke those powers," Hicks says.

Alarcón has been a frequent instructor at the weeklong [Art of the Wild](#) workshop held each summer at Lake Tahoe. "He's a real draw as a poet nationally," Hicks says. "He's very dynamic. He's a good performer, which is an important part of the oral tradition."

Alarcón says he sees his poetry as an open-ended dialogue, with readers bringing their own meaning to the works. "I think a poem is incomplete by nature. It's the reader or the listener who has to really complete the poem." Many of his poems are short, written in clipped lines. His style invites comparisons to Japanese haiku. But while haiku traditionally seeks harmony with nature, Alarcón's work often reflects a dark turmoil. Even his children's poems are sometimes political, such as one titled "Strawberries:"
Sweet tender hearts/Oh! left by children working the fields.

Alarcón said his mentor during his graduate studies at Stanford, the late writer Arturo Islas, once challenged him. "One day he said to me, 'These are not poems.' I said, 'Precisely. They are tattoos.'

A tattoo comes from the flesh," he explains. "A tattoo is not at peace. It's in conflict." Hence, the title of his first collection of poetry, *Tattoos*, which was published in 1985 and won the Ruben Darío First Prize for Latin American Poetry.

Alarcón's Fulbright fellowship and the resulting book ended up being a detour away from completing his doctoral dissertation. But he says, "I think if I had gone through the traditional academic career, I would never have done what I have done."

He came to UC Davis from UC Santa Cruz in 1992 to direct the Spanish for Native Speakers program. He also teaches popular courses on Chicano culture and Latino literature in the United States. "I really love what I do. I see it not necessarily as work but more as a vocation."

One work in *Snake Poems*, "Ode to Tomatoes," became the seed for his first children's book, *Laughing Tomatoes*. Tomatoes were sacred to ancient Mesoamerican people.

Alarcón says he wanted to help fill a huge void in Spanish and bilingual children's literature. Although 33 million people in the United States speak Spanish as their first language, 9 million of them in California, he said few books are written in a bilingual format for children.

"I think kids are starving for that," says Alarcón, whose poems are printed side-by-side in Spanish and English. In recent years, he has also written in Nahuatl. "Now here I am a 45-year-old man trying to go back to the language of my grandmother. It's very important for a writer like myself to relearn the language of my ancestors."

Alarcón also hopes to nurture future generations of Latino writers through his many appearances as a guest poet in public schools. He has been involved for the past 15 years with the San Francisco-based California Poets in the Schools program. In addition, he exchanges poems and feedback with students at Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., grade schools through a new on-line writing project, LitLinks, a program started by Children's Book Press with the support of grants and private donations.

After *Laughing Tomatoes* came out, he visited nearly 50 schools. "I wanted to make a point with the publisher that there is a market."

Point taken, says David Schechter, director of outreach programs for the Children's Book Press in San Francisco, which published three books of Alarcón's children's poetry and will soon release a fourth. "We were wrong and he was right," says Schechter, who credits Alarcón with persuading the 25-year-old publishing house to begin publishing poetry for children. Alarcón now serves as an editor, translator and director for the nonprofit publishing house.

"He's found a new vocation working with children," Schechter says. "The kids love him. They act like he's a rock star. They start screaming across the schoolyard when they see him."

"Partly he's a poet and partly he's an inspiration and role model, especially for Latino children."

In January, *From the Bellybutton of the Moon* won the [American Library Association's Pura Belpré Honor Award for Latino literature](#). *Laughing Tomatoes and Other Spring Poems* won the biennial award in 1998, as well as the National Parents Publication's Gold Award. *Bellybutton* is also on the 1998 [Américas Commended List](#).

Two other books will complete the seasonal series, all illustrated by San Francisco artist Maya Christina Gonzalez and published by Children's Book Press. *Angels Ride Bikes and Other Fall Poems*, was released in October. Alarcón is working on the fourth, *Iguanas in the Snow and Other Winter Poems*.

Now Alarcón is collaborating with Argentinean-born composer Ortiz on a musical version of the first two children's books. With grant funding from the UC Institute for Mexico and the United States, they recorded the first half of a compact disc in Mexico in December. Ortiz said performers include some of the most famous musicians and singers of Mexico,

including the Cuarteto Latinoamericano and harpist Mercedes Gómez.

For Alarcón, none of his myriad activities are separate from the other. "Everything is related," he says. "My work as an educator is related to my work as a writer and as a critic. Everything comes together in my own life."

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