

## Hegemony and Identity: The Chicano Hybrid in Francisco X. Alarcón's *Snake Poems*

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In *Snake Poems: An Aztec Invocation* Francisco X. Alarcón has written an extended poem which, by renegotiating the power relations between the discourses of Spanish imperialism and Aztec poetic practice, reflects the quest of Chicanos to revive not only their Hispanic roots but, more importantly, their native roots in Aztec culture. *Snake Poems* does this by enacting a process of ethnic, cultural, and spiritual identification through a confrontation between texts: 1) Alarcón's original poems, 2) passages of commentary from the Spanish Inquisitor Hernando Ruíz de Alarcón's treatise on Aztec spells and invocations, and 3) the Aztec spells themselves in the original Náhuatl, the Aztec language. Each of these three layers of text represents a unique and competing people, ideology, and culture, and it is the clash and hybrid fusion of these distinct discourses that Alarcón the poet stages in *Snake Poems*.

Francisco Alarcón presents this clash of cultures through the side-by-side placement of translations of a passage of Náhuatl into English on one page and later of a passage of Spanish into English on another. Each language in the poem functions as a metonym for a particular discursive or ideological system. In this way, Alarcón the poet works directly against the intentions of Alarcón the Inquisitor. Ruíz de Alarcón's goal was to destroy the remaining remnants of "heathenism" and "idolatry" by exposing their persistence in Aztec daily ritual. But the irony of the Inquisitor's *Treatise* is its function today as a means of revitalizing Aztec ritual and belief. Alarcón the poet turns the Inquisitor's

text against itself and thereby reappropriates and recreates the power of Aztec song as an antidote to Anglo-American imperialism. It is through the reappropriation of the transformative poetic vision of the Aztecs that the Chicano poet is able to redeem his "Hispanidad" 'Hispanicity,' his complicity with his namesake and, thereby, with the Conquest and the Inquisition. And this process of identification through reappropriation is what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe refer to as hegemony.<sup>1</sup>

### Textual Dialogue

Francisco Alarcón engages in a hegemonic project by putting three different ideological discourses into an antagonistic dialogue with one another. *Snake Poems*, a book-length poem made up of numerous smaller poems, transforms or remobilizes the ideological function of an earlier text which is itself a transformation of still earlier texts. Francisco Alarcón's book textually negotiates Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón's *Treatise on the Superstitions and Heathen Customs That Today Live Among the Indians Native to This New Spain*, written in 1629, one hundred years after the Spanish conquest of Mexico. The *Treatise* itself negotiates Aztec spells and ritual utterances. As suggested above, Ruiz de Alarcón's *Treatise* remains one of the most important sources of information on Aztec culture and ritual and thus provides us with a view—however skewed by Ruiz de Alarcón's own European prejudices—into the spiritual mindset of the Aztec people.

The purpose of the *Treatise* was to help stamp out Aztec rituals and beliefs. Ruiz de Alarcón was a religious official of the Spanish Inquisition whose job was to decipher and destroy the remaining religious practices of the Aztecs in order to establish more firmly "God's" word on Mexican soil and in Mexican souls. Alarcón the Inquisitor devoted more than ten years to gathering, compiling, transcribing, and translating Náhuatl spells and invocations so that the Spanish missionaries could recognize even the most subtle vestiges of paganism and then wipe them out. The belief was that you had to be able to recognize the Devil in order to conquer him. In his zeal to root the Devil out of Aztec religious and medicinal practice, the Inquisitor often resorted to

torture in order to get his Aztec informants to reveal the hidden sources of Aztec belief in seemingly innocuous incantations.

Ruiz de Alarcón's transcription of these Aztec incantations was itself a form of hegemony. The Inquisitor was reading (and writing) these "texts" against the grain, deliberately wrenching them from their context in the Aztec ideological construction of the relationship between a people, their culture, surrounding cultures, and—more significantly here—the cosmos. For Ruiz de Alarcón, of course, there could only be one true view of "Man's" relationship to the world, whether earthly or spiritual—Catholicism. A long-standing strategy of Catholic imperialism had been the practice of syncretism, the rewriting of pagan beliefs and rituals into a Catholic context.<sup>2</sup> Through this process, the various Aztec deities were transformed into Catholic saints while Tonantzin, the primary Aztec goddess, was rewritten as the Virgin.<sup>3</sup> On the surface, this process appears to work in favor of Catholicism as it rearticulates Aztec practices into a Catholic context, making use of the very practices of the religion the inquisitors wish to replace by subverting that religion from within. But there is no guarantee that just the reverse might occur: what if instead the Aztecs used the new Catholic phraseology to mask the continuing practice of "paganism"? Such is the practice of hegemony—the struggle over symbolic signifiers and practices in an antagonistic process of reinscription. Both the Inquisitors and the Aztecs engaged in this hegemonic process.<sup>4</sup>

Slavoj Žižek comments on this hegemonic subversion:

We are effectively dealing with "spiritual Substance" when a notion which was originally imposed as a means of ideological deception and manipulation unexpectedly escapes the control of its creator and starts to lead a life of its own. The Christian religion, violently imposed on a colonized population by the colonizing power, was often appropriated by the colonized and used as a means of articulating their genuine aspirations. The exemplary case of such a "reinscription" is the Virgin of Guadalupe, the dark-skinned Virgin Mary who appeared in 1531 in a vision to an Indian called Juan Diego, on a hill near Mexico City where Tonantzin, mother of the Aztec gods, had long been worshiped—this apparition marks the moment of the reappropriation of Christianity by the aboriginal Indian population. (141)

This, apparently, is also what Ruiz de Alarcón believed. Unlike his predecessors, this Inquisitor saw that the process of hegemonic reinscription is constantly overflowing with a symbolic remainder. The oppositional ideology has a way both of subtly writing itself into the very processes which were supposed to supplant it and of submerging underground in more quotidian rituals. Ruiz de Alarcón was driven to root out the last vestige of that opposition, even if it meant arrest, torture, and murder in the name of a loving God.<sup>5</sup>

What we have in *Snake Poems*, then, is three primary layers of hegemonic retranscription. Alarcón the poet is rewriting both the texts of the Inquisitor and the Aztecs; Alarcón the Inquisitor is rewriting the texts of the Aztecs; and the Aztecs are rewriting the texts of the local Indian cultures they had conquered in the establishment of the Aztec Empire. But the processes of reinscription are not exhausted here. Alarcón the poet, it must be remembered, rewrites the Spanish and Aztec texts in order to reinscribe the ideology of current Anglo-American imperialism and its subjugation of Chicano culture from the 1840s to the present. His rewriting of Ruiz de Alarcón, then, cannot be seen as the simple rejection of his Hispanic imperialist roots but as a strategic realignment with and recodification of them. Furthermore, the poet's use of Aztec incantations, even in their "original" Náhuatl, must be seen as a late-twentieth century reappropriation rather than a return to some "original" Aztec spirituality (as if that were possible). Aztec symbolism now functions not as an imperialist discourse of the fifteenth century but as an oppositional discourse of the twentieth.<sup>6</sup>

This oppositional recuperation of indigenous languages is not exclusive to the Chicano community, of course. In his article entitled "Globalization, Civilization Processes, and the Relocation of Languages and Cultures," Walter D. Mignolo writes of the rise of language politics in Latin America:

Parallel to social movements and the premium placed on the language issue was the emergence of intellectuals of Amerindian descent for whom their "mother tongue" was naturally an Amerindian language (Aymara, Quechua, Maya, Nahuatl). The emergence of a new community of intellectuals in the cultural landscape of Latin

America fits Gramsci's description of the "organic intellectual": "Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields." . . . Thus, the organic intellectuals of the Amerindian movements (as well as Latino, African American, and women's) are precisely the main agents of the moment in which "barbarism" appropriates the theoretical practices and elaborated projects, engulfing and superseding the discourse of the civilizing mission and its theoretical foundations. (44-45)

For these reasons, then, I have to differ with Macial González's sensitive yet limiting critique of *Snake Poems*; supposed "historical inversion" through its attempt to (re)establish an "essentialist" view of the Mestizo subject. González writes:

But if we are to read *Snake Poems* in this way, as the ideological recovery of an essentialist Mestizo persona, then *Snake Poems* runs the risk of establishing what Bakhtin refers to as "historical inversion," a transposing to the past of what could only possibly exist in the future: social equity and ecological balance. In other words, there has never been a Golden Age or an edenic past; instead, there have been idealizations of the past, such as that of the Aztec agricultural-base empire that had a military machine sophisticated enough to slaughter huge numbers of its own people and enslave many more to work on its farms. Certainly we would not want to recreate this aspect of our Aztec heritage. Mythical idealizations can serve temporarily to inspire cultural nationalist movements against domination, which seems to be an objective of *Snake Poems*, but as Genaro Padilla has explained, "Myths do kill time," which is precisely Bakhtin's point. Myths imply an imagined historical time, a fusion of past and present, history as a frozen temporal moment in which subjects are locked into a space of nondevelopment. (181-82)

In Alarcón's view, however, this project of reappropriating a past Mesoamerican world perspective must be part of what he refers to as the dialectics of *Mesticismo*—a neologism conjoining *Mestizo* and *misticismo*—a dialectics according to which we reject both the romanticization *and* the dismissal of the past. Alarcón calls for a new eco-poetics built on the Utopian application of an ideology which sees "everything in the world as sacred."<sup>7</sup> The

point here is not one of “essentialism”; the point is, rather, one of conscious hegemonic struggle, the deliberate political construction of a “Mesoamerican” perspective as a response to the marginalization process ironically furthered by seemingly anti-essentialist strategies themselves.<sup>8</sup>

### Hegemony and Identification

The key point I wish to make here is that identity is the result of hegemony. Identity may be assigned and passively accepted, or it may be contested and strategically reconstructed. Here is where Laclau and Mouffe’s account goes beyond that of Louis Althusser’s conception of ideological interpellation.<sup>9</sup> While Laclau and Mouffe accept the claim that identity is the result of material ideological practices and rituals which assign to us a given subject-position, their conception of hegemony complicates this picture by drawing attention to the incomplete and indeterminate nature of this identity. Precisely because of this openness, identity is not only something which is ideologically articulated but something which can also be *re-articulated*.

The theory of hegemony developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* provides us with one of the best tools for investigating Francisco Alarcón’s poetic practice. The key concept behind their theory of hegemony is articulation. Laclau and Mouffe define articulation as a practice which “consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity” (113). What this means is that articulation consists of taking hold of empty, ambiguous, “floating” signifiers—such as freedom, democracy, the people—and weaving them into a particular ideological context (suturing them into a political discourse). The significance of any of these terms depends on the work they have to do in a given discourse; and the work that a given concept does in one context can be completely opposite that which it does in another context. A good example would be the use of the word “democracy” during the U.S.-Nicaragua confrontations of the 1980s. Both

Ronald Reagan and Daniel Ortega could at the same time claim to be fighting for democracy while supporting mutually exclusive political campaigns. What this means, of course, is that these floating signifiers have no essential meaning of their own. It would be futile to argue that Reagan's democracy or Stalin's communism or Clinton's humanitarianism are not true to their concepts, since the truth of these concepts lies only in their use. My claim here, ultimately, is that the same is true for the concepts "Chicano," "Aztec," and "God." Each of these terms gains its proper identity through the particular ways in which they are articulated towards particular ideological ends. Francisco Alarcón and Ruiz de Alarcón, for example, certainly do not have the same things in mind when they refer to Aztec spiritual practice.

It is important to keep in mind that articulation is more than simply weaving a concept into an ideological matrix; it is the construction of an ideological *nodal point* by way of that concept. The empty concept (precisely because of its emptiness) stands in as the master signifier for a host of other ideological signifiers. A given discursive object might exhibit the same empirical qualities as it passes from one discourse into another, but it is the new name which confers on these qualities their newly baptised nuance. For example, "Mexican-American," "wetback," and "Chicano" might refer to a more-or-less continuously recognizable set of qualities, but it is the name which does the ideological work, which constitutes the foundation of identity and articulates those qualities into a given ideological discourse. A signifier which is unattached to a particular discourse is referred to as an "element"; the element is a free-floating signifier. Once the signifier is articulated into a discursive totality, it is then referred to as a "moment." Two different logics are operating here: elements operate according to the logic of *equivalence*, whereas moments operate according to the logic of *difference*. As in Saussurean linguistics, the relationship between moments in a discourse is differential—each moment functions in its particularity insofar as it differs from all of the other moments in the discourse. In the process of hegemony, however, these elements can be wrenched from their differential function and aligned to other elements as equivalents. That is, in revolutionary moments

a given moment is broken from its differential function and symbolically conflated with other elements, each one of which symbolically represents opposition to the hegemonic power. In racial politics, for instance, members of different oppressed racial groups might each function as the oppositional term to white hegemony, just as the various European ethnic groups will all be reduced to "white" in opposition to "colored." In the same way, the term "Chicano" tends to reduce the heterogeneous make-up of Americans of Mexican descent in opposition to the Anglo (a term which in extreme contexts, such as New Mexico, includes African Americans, although the term "Hispano" more often replaces "Chicano").

This articulatory practice is possible, Laclau and Mouffe assert, because of the "openness of the social." "Society" is impossible, they claim. That is, the discourse ("the structured totality resulting from an articulatory practice" [105]) articulating any given conception of "society" is never completely closed; if it were, politics would be impossible. But a given ideological totality never exists in isolation, and the signifiers which it sutures into itself are never totally pinned down to one given meaning. This is because the boundaries of a given discourse are fluid and open to the polysemous overflow of signification of particular elements which are not tied to a single discourse but float around in a field of discursivity, a "no-man's land" (111) in which elements are never entirely transformed into moments. It is within this field, marked by the overdetermined character of any identity, that articulation is possible. Laclau and Mouffe write that overdetermination is "constituted in the field of the symbolic, and has no meaning whatsoever outside it" (97). All identity, then, is symbolic, and every identity is "overdetermined inasmuch as all literality appears as constitutively subverted and exceeded; far from there being an essentialist *totalization*, or a no less essentialist *separation* among objects, the presence of some objects in the others prevents any of their identities from being fixed" (104). But the hegemonic function of each discourse is precisely to *fix* identity after subverting its function within a competing discourse.

Laclau and Mouffe summarize these points in the following passage:

We now have all the necessary analytical elements to specify the concept of articulation. Since all identity is relational—even if the system of relations does not reach the point of being fixed as a stable system of differences—since, too, all discourse is subverted by a field of discursivity which overflows it, the transition from “elements” to “moments” can never be complete. The status of the “elements” is that of floating signifiers, incapable of being wholly articulated to a discursive chain. And this floating character finally penetrates every discursive (i.e. social) identity. But if we accept the non-complete character of all discursive fixation and, at the same time, affirm the relational character of every identity, the ambiguous character of the signifier, its non-fixation to any signified, can only exist insofar as there is a proliferation of signifieds. It is not the poverty of signifieds but, on the contrary, polysemy that disarticulates a discursive structure. That is what establishes the overdetermined, symbolic dimension of every social identity. Society never manages to be identical to itself, as every nodal point is constituted within an intertextuality that overflows it. (113)

This all points to the role of antagonism in the process of hegemony. “Antagonism, far from being an objective relation,” Laclau and Mouffe argue, “is a relation wherein the limits of every objectivity are shown. . . . Antagonism, as a witness of the impossibility of a final suture, is the ‘experience’ of the limit of the social” (125). This is the experience Fredric Jameson points to in his claim that History (as the Real) is beyond representation and that History is what hurts. It is unrepresentable because it is the experience of the failure of representation itself (*Political Unconscious* 102). Antagonistic articulatory practices operate in the margins of discourses—that is, in the field of discursivity and overdetermination—where the heterogeneity of moments within the differential logic of the seemingly sutured totality break apart from the dominant discourse and are conflated into a homogeneous equivalential bloc which represents the negativity of the social itself as the production of “frontier effects” (*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* 136). This process of hegemony is at once the deconstruction of the dominant discourse and the traumatic founding gesture of the Law which must be repressed in the newly articulated discourse and the foundation of identity itself.<sup>10</sup>

### The Structure of *Snake Poems*

The question of hegemonic identification structures Francisco Alarcón's entire book. *Snake Poems* is made up of 104 short poems. The smaller poems are extremely variable and in some ways resistant to a seamless cohesion at the level of the larger poem as a whole. While the book could be read simply as a collection of thematically related poems (several of the poems were, indeed, published separately in poetry journals),<sup>11</sup> *Snake Poems* is in fact a sustained meditation on and mediation of the construction of ideological identity. The relative resistance of particular poems to the collection as a whole is itself a way of representing through formal means the question of part to whole, of particular to universal, which underlies all claims to identity. Alarcón's division of the book into the following three parts reflects this:

- I. "Tahui" (the opening section which engages in a process of purification and identification)
- II. "Incantations/Spells/Invocations" (which stages the encounter between the texts of the Aztec sorcerers, the Inquisitor, and the Poet)
- III. "New Day" (which predicts the consummation of a state of renewed identity).

The book as a whole functions, then, as a record of the process of hegemonic identification (following, in fact, the path of the mystic's identification with the world beyond the phenomenal). Critic and poet Alfred Arteaga, in his preface to Alarcón's *Snake Poems*, writes:

There are 104 *Snake Poems*, not an arbitrary number but one chosen for its significance in Native thought. One hundred and four is twice the fifty-two-year cycle of the Mesoamerican calendar. It is as if one cycle occurred in the first translation of Nahuatl thought, Ruiz de Alarcón's *Tratado*, and the second cycle occurs now with *Snake Poems*. The first section of *Snake Poems*, "Tahui," contains twenty poems, one for each day of the Mesoamerican month. The final section, "New Day," contains six poems, alluding to the new era of the Sixth Sun. (xi)

The book as a whole thus goes from interpellation through antagonistic dialogue to the call for hegemonic rearticulation of a counter identity.

### Part I, *Tahui*: Identification as Subversion

Section One, "*Tahui*," is made up of twenty original poems (based, as we saw above, on the twenty days of the Mesoamerican month). This section opens with a passage from the Inquisitor's *Treatise* which reads: "The archers call four times to the deer, repeating four times this word *tahui* which nobody understands today, and then they cry out four times like a puma" (4). Scholars have suggested that *tahui* means "hello! listen!" as when calling out to someone.<sup>12</sup> Its colloquial equivalent in English, then, would be "Hey you!" The poem thus opens with an Aztec version of what Louis Althusser refers to as interpellation—the ideological insertion of someone through this call, "Hey you!" into a given subject-position. This is significant because the section ends with another Náhuatl expression, "*Nomatca nehuatl!*" which means "I myself, I am the one, in person" (154-55). The first section of *Snake Poems* thus goes from *tahui*, "Hey you! You are the one!" to the acceptance of that identity in *nomatca nehuatl*, "I myself, I am the one, in person!" This "I myself" does not refer to the individual shaman uttering the spell, however, but rather to the god the shaman is invoking and with whom he or she is thereby identifying. Significantly, this process takes place within an Aztec rather than a Catholic context. Even this initial identification, then, is posed in opposition to the imperialist efforts of the Inquisition.

The intervening poems in section one enact this process of identification. And it is here that *Snake Poems* is revealed in its function as a process of Chicano self-construction, of identity through identification. The fourth poem, entitled "Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón" after the Inquisitor, emphasizes this function. The poem's format itself underscores the dual nature of this (and any) identification by dividing the poem into two parallel columns, the first in Spanish and the second its English translation. The function of translation itself is crucial to the construction

of identity. As such, it serves a thematic as well as a practical function in the Poet Alarcón's book, as we see in this particular poem in which the Poet, the author of both the Spanish and the English, translates himself, positions his self-identity across the gap separating the two languages of conquest in a poem which purports to interrogate the identity of Ruiz de Alarcón, the Inquisitor:

<i>eras tú</i>	it was you
<i>al que buscabas</i>	you were looking for
<i>Hernando</i>	Hernando
<i>hurgando</i>	searching
<i>en los rincones</i>	every house
<i>de las casas</i>	corner
<i>semillas</i>	for some
<i>empolvadas</i>	dusty seeds
<i>de ololiuhqui</i>	of <i>ololiuhqui</i> . (8)

The Inquisitor was obsessed with the *ololiuhqui*, the tiny hallucinogenic seeds that the Aztecs would brew into a drink for divination. They would turn to *ololiuhqui* to discover which god was making them sick, which person was out to harm them, which thief stole their belongings. The Aztec priest would close himself up in a solitary room for the duration of the hallucinations and then emerge with the answers. "As soon as the intoxication or deprivation of judgment passes from this person," the Inquisitor writes, "he tells two thousand hoaxes, among which the Devil usually includes some truths, so that he has them deceived or duped absolutely" (*Treatise* 60). Here we see the role of articulation in the hegemonic process of identity construction: a process which for the Aztec is an identification with divinity is for the Inquisitor an identification with the Devil. One and the same practice—the visionary quest of the poet-priest—is written into two competing ideological discourses and thereby articulated into two separate and antagonistic identities.

<i>eras tú</i>	it was you
<i>al que engañabas</i>	whom you tricked
<i>y aprendía</i>	and apprehended

<i>eras tú</i>	it was you
<i>el que preguntaba</i>	who both questioned
<i>y respondía</i>	and responded

<i>dondequiera</i>	everywhere
<i>mirabas moros</i>	you saw Moors
<i>con trinchete</i>	with long knives

<i>y ante</i>	and in front of
<i>tanto dolor</i>	so much sorrow
<i>tanta muerte</i>	so much death

<i>un conquistador</i>	you became
<i>conquistado</i>	a conquered
<i>fuiste</i>	conqueror. (8)

This is the irony that *Snake Poems* points to and willfully perpetuates. In his effort to eradicate Aztec spiritual practice, Alarcón the Inquisitor memorialized it in his own book. In Alarcón the Poet's text, the Inquisitor's own words set out to conquer the conqueror.

<i>sacerdote</i>	priest
<i>soñador</i>	dreamer
<i>cruz parlante</i>	speaking cross

<i>condenando</i>	condemning
<i>te salvaste</i>	you saved yourself
<i>al transcribir</i>	by transcribing

<i>acaso</i>	maybe
<i>sin saber</i>	without knowing
<i>el cielo</i>	the heavens. (9)

Through an ironic reversal the Inquisitor Alarcón redeemed himself through the very act which damned him. By condemning others, he condemned himself in posterity; yet through the very means of damning others he redeemed himself by providing for the eventual reappropriation of Aztec rites and invocations by Mexicans and Chicanos seeking to recognize themselves through their ancestors.<sup>13</sup> Yet the Poet, while embracing pre-conquest culture, cannot divorce himself from the conquerors, especially *this* conqueror who shares his name:

<i>soy yo</i>	I am
<i>el de tu cepa</i>	from your tree
<i>el de tu sueño</i>	from your dream
<i>este cenxontle</i>	this <i>cenxontle</i> bird
<i>del monte:</i>	in the wilderness:
<i>tu mañana</i>	your tomorrow. (8-9)

*Snake Poems* thus condemns and redeems the *Treatise* at once. What Alarcón the Poet attempts to bring about is the hybrid textual entity that captures the tension and synthesis of Chicano identity itself.<sup>14</sup> He does this, as I have stated earlier, through a confrontation and dispersal of the languages of the three cultures which the Chicano inhabits: Náhuatl, Spanish, and English. Each language in the poem functions as a metonym for a particular discursive or ideological system. The presence of classical Náhuatl, the language of the Aztecs, does not function simply as a medium of communication but as a stand-in for a particular ideology, a way of life, a people. Spanish stands in for the conqueror, while English functions, ironically for a Chicano poem, as the Utopian ground of redemption or compensation through a process of counter-hegemonic reappropriation.

This function of English is certainly curious in a Chicano poem. In many Chicano poems the split between Spanish and English represents the split between oppressed and oppressor. The Chicano poet's writing in English, then, is usually a complicated and conflicted moment countered by the restorative function of Spanish. We can see this, in fact, in some of Alarcón's earlier poetry. The poem "Carta a América," for example, is written entirely in Spanish—an implicitly political move in these days of "English-only" sentiment. Yet the poem is printed beside its English translation on the facing page. The poem reads as follows (with Spanish and English printed here in columns rather than on facing pages):

Carta a América Letter to America

perdona	pardon
la tardanza	the lag
en escribirte	in writing you

a nosotros nos dejaron pocas letras	we were left with few letters
en tu casa nos tocó ser tapetes	in your home we were cast as rugs
a veces de pared pero casi	sometimes on walls though we
siempre estuvimos en el piso	were almost always on floors
también te servimos de mesa	we served you as a table
de lámpara de espejo de juguete	a lamp a mirror a toy
si algo te causamos fue risa	if anything we made you laugh
en tu cocina nos hiciste otro sartén	in your kitchen we became another pan
todavía como sombra nos usas	even now as a shadow you use us
nos temes nos gritas nos odias	you fear us you yell at us you hate us
nos tiras nos lloras nos niegas	you shoot us you mourn us you deny us
y a pesar de todo nosotros	and despite everything we

seguimos siendo nosotros	continue being us
América entiende de una vez:	America understand once and for all:
somos las entrañas de tu cuerpo	we are the insides of your body
en la cara reflejamos tu futuro	our faces reflect your future. ( <i>Body in Flames</i> 104-07)

Speaking from the position of all Chicanos who have served as domestic objects in the house of Anglo-America (this “we” is clearly not part of the “America” addressed in the title), the speaker underscores the fact that—despite having been denied a voice in constructing the national identity (“we were left / with few / letters”), and despite having been the target of abuse—the Chicano is internal to American identity, “the insides / of [its] body,” as well as the outside reflection of its future. The Chicano marks the “American” both from within and without. The Chicano is the rejected element which constitutes the heart of American identity. As Laclau and Mouffe put it, “The limit of the social must be given within the social itself as something subverting it, destroying its ambition to constitute a full presence” (127). This internal limit must be denied and expelled, “for every language and every society are constituted as a repression of the consciousness of the impossibility that penetrates them. Antagonism escapes the possibility of being apprehended through language, since language only exists as an attempt to fix that which antagonism subverts” (125). Spanish does not function in the above poem, then, as the “true” language which gets to the heart of the matter but as the alien existence of that which, internal to language as such, resides as its internal impossibility, as that which translates English into something Other and which marks from within the unmarked “universality” of English.

In much of *Snake Poems*, however, Spanish is the language of conflictual identity while English provides a view into Aztec culture as it translates the Náhuatl. This raises the question of why the entire book isn't written in three rather than two columns, with Náhuatl, Spanish, and English all side-by-side. To do so, however, would mute the necessarily oppositional function of the poem. The introduction of three parallel columns would neutralize the binary conflict at the heart of this process of identification. Rather than producing a more "democratic" or "pluralistic" openness to a supposedly egalitarian hybrid heterogeneity, the third column would mask the tension between any of the two discourses when in conjunction with one another. In Laclau and Mouffe's language, the alignment of three columns would operate within a logic of difference, whereas the alignment of two columns operates according to the logic of equivalence—the logic in which the differential heterogeneity within a social formation is strategically reduced to the symbolic opposition of two competing forces. The third column establishes a differential relationship which encloses all three voices into a single discourse. Ironically (in view of the standard outcry in contemporary cultural studies against binary logic), it is the binary opposition which allows for the possibility of rearticulation and re-identification. The function of English within *Snake Poems*, then, is to provide a temporary and strategic neutral space in which to stage the reconquest of indigenous identity effectively erased by the Spanish Inquisition in its attempt to draw the Conquest to a close. Alarcón's usual practice of writing in Spanish as a challenge to Anglo-American discourse suggests that what the poet accomplishes in *Snake Poems* is the strategic reappropriation of English itself as an anti-imperialist weapon which will strike at the heart of Anglo domination from within.

## Part II, Incantations/Spells/Invocations: Deconstruction & Reclamation

We can see this reappropriation at work both in the Poet's presentation and translation of Náhuatl texts and his use of the Nahua language and imagery in his own poems. Section II stages

the resurrection of the Aztec voice through the strategic displacement of Ruiz de Alarcón's transcriptions and commentaries and reappropriates the power of those ritual utterances in the poet Alarcón's poems. The poet's arrangement of the incantations reveals an underlying process of spiritual purification, awakening, and discovery. Section II takes us from the initiatory stage of purification and opening of the Penitents, who must purify themselves for this spiritual journey, through the *spiritual* transformation of the *human* by the healer through the use of *natural* remedies. Such an appropriation of these texts runs directly counter to the Inquisitor's intentions.

This reappropriation can be seen in the Poet's treatment of the deer hunting incantation. He first presents the Inquisitor's transcription along with an English translation, as follows:

<i>ye nonehua nehuatl</i>	I'm leaving
<i>nIcnopiltzintli</i>	I, Poor Orphan
<i>nICenteotl</i>	I, <i>Centeotl</i>
<i>ye nichuica</i>	carrying with me
<i>Ce-Atl Itonal</i>	the spirit One Water
<i>yehuatl ihuan</i>	his bow
<i>iacayo</i>	his arrows
<i>in oquichichiuh</i>	made by
<i>in nonan</i>	my mother
Tonacacihuatl	Tonacacihuatl
Xochiquetzal	Xochiquetzal
<i>cihuatl</i>	the woman
<i>ompa icatiuh</i>	who wears
<i>itzapapalotl</i>	obsidian butterflies
<i>yequene eh nichuicaz</i>	I shall carry back
<i>nota Chicome-Xochitl</i>	my father Seven Flower
<i>Piltzinteuctli</i>	Young Lord—
<i>nicanaco</i>	I've come to take him
<i>nichuicaz</i>	I shall carry him back—
<i>ye quichixcaca</i>	already awaiting him
<i>nonan Xochiquetzal . . .</i>	is my mother <i>Xochiquetzal . . .</i> (52)

In the Inquisitor's mind, these hunting incantations include "a pact with the Devil" and therefore demand "great vigilance" on the part of their ministers "in order to banish such infernal su-

perstitutions, because it is not enough to explain to them the disguised poison that these superstitions bring with themselves, nor to arrest them and punish them . . ." (*Treatise* 106).

The Poet's response, on the other hand, is to write his own poem in a spirit of awe and respect, of familial connection and cosmic unity:

*Chicome-Xochitl*/Seven Flower

deer  
father

all  
stems

pointing  
stars. (55)

This is one of the most compact and suggestive of Alarcón's poems. Without any elaboration, he engages in the Aztec poetic convention of *difrasismo*, which already seems active in the name for the deer, *Chicome-Xochitl*. *Difrasismo* is a term used to characterize the Náhuatl metaphorical method of naming an object with a compound of two seemingly unrelated words.<sup>15</sup> The term for poetry itself, for example, is *in xochitl in cuicatl*, which translates literally into "Flower-Song." Both the Inquisitor and the Poet see "seven" and "flower" as bound together to signify "deer." "Flower" could be used in order to suggest the dynamic spirit of the deer, or it could refer to the resemblance of the deer's antlers to a flower or a plant flowering out. "Seven," in this case, could refer to the seven points on a mature buck's antlers. It is more likely, however, that the name refers to the deer's calendaric function and has no metaphorical significance at all—the day of the Aztec calendar, Seven-Flower, is associated with the deer but does not necessarily signify "deer."<sup>16</sup> In any case, the poet identifies the deer to be killed with the deer-god, who functions as a father spirit for the hunter-poet. The next two lines, "all / stems," can be read in a number of ways depending on how one associates them with the preceding and following lines. Is this to mean that the Seven-Flower nature of the deer is all stems, as in stems of a

flower? The deer's antlers could be associated visually with the stems of flowers. If so, then are these stem-antlers pointing to the stars? Or are they to be seen as stars themselves, pointing the way or simply shaped as points? But "all / stems" could be read as a verb phrase, suggesting that all stems from the father deer and ultimately points towards the stars. In any case, the dominant suggestion seems to be that the hunter perceives an underlying relationship of kinship and cosmic unity embodied by the deer he is both invoking for success in the hunt and whom he is about to kill for sustenance and life. Life continues only through death and sacrifice; thus one needs to develop a sacramental attitude towards one's prey.

### Part III, New Day: Reconquest as Rebirth

Section Three of *Snake Poems* is entitled "New Day." This section is made up of six poems, alluding, as we saw in the Arteaga passage above, to the new era of the Sixth Sun. Significantly, while none of these poems refers directly to Ruiz de Alarcón, the Inquisitor, nor to the Spanish Conquest of Mexico, they nevertheless register the violence of that conquest. Despite the Poet's reappropriation of the Aztec relationship to the gods, to the earth, and to their culture in his newly articulated identity, this New Day can only be figured in the nightmarish images of the conquered, stunned, and confused by these mysterious new beings arriving in Mexico.

This nightmare vision can be seen in lines from the poem entitled "New Day":

I saw their glitter  
 their luster  
 are those giant deer?  
 are they laughing?

and I heard  
 listened to  
 the soulbirds:  
 "trees are crying"

a thorn  
 pierced my tongue

and I prayed  
bleeding

. . . soon night turned  
me into a shadow  
big enough to cover  
the whole valley." (146)

This Aztec identity is shattered by events which make the trees cry. The crown of thorns of the Catholic savior pierces the tongue of the Nahua people, forcing them into a foreign way of speaking. The speaker, transformed into a "shadow / big enough to cover / the whole valley," sits in wait for the New Day of liberation and transformation which the Poet Alarcón's text mimes. Significantly, the constructed and *difrasismatic* nature of this fused shadow-self points to the importance of Aztec ritual and the nature of ritual as such: this ritual, like all rituals, must constantly be repeated. It is through the ritual itself that the shadow-self emerges; it is through the Aztec Invocation announced in the book's subtitle that these *Snake Poems* are called into being, are invoked through these flower-songs. The voice which calls the self into being is the indivisible remainder of the subjectivization through ritual of the poet himself.

The final poem of the book, testimony to the utopian desire figured by the longed-for New Day, is entitled "*In Xochitl In Cuicatl*," which, as we have seen, is the Náhuatl word for poetry. As with the earlier poem, "Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón," this poem is made up of two columns, one in Spanish and the other its English translation. Just as the book opened with the poet's attempt to translate himself through an investigation of his complicity with the Conqueror, this poem enacts an attempt at self-translation. The two languages of Conquest, Spanish and English, now engage each other in a Náhuatl framework. Everything on earth is holy, just as in Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, where holiness is inherent in all that is profane. And everything is holy now because everything is poetry, *in xochitl in cuicatl*, flower and song. While at the book's opening the split nature of the tropic movement of *difrasismo* emphasized the split identity of the Chicano poet confronted with the Conqueror who shares his name, now *difrasismo*

underscores the power of poetry, itself dual in nature, to manifest a unity-in-division: “a memory / at once lost / and found // we all together” (SP 150). It is through the construction of the transformative poetic vision of the Aztecs that the Chicano poet hopes to redeem his *Hispanidad*, his complicity with his namesake and, thereby, with the Conquest and the Inquisition. The Chicano becomes the embodiment of *difrasismo*, the suspended unity of conqueror and conquered, of violation and renewal, of flower and song. *Difrasismo* itself, as a shorthand for the logic of *Snake Poems* as a whole, comes to function as the figural embodiment—or perhaps the embodiment of the figure—of the simultaneously antagonistic and redemptive nature of the hegemonic construction of identity.

### Notes

1. See *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.
2. For a detailed study of this process in Mexico, see Jacques Lafaye, *Quetzalcóatl and Guadalupe*.
3. The image of the Virgin played a liberatory role for Mexicanos and Chicanos, however, during the United Farm Workers strikes of the 1960s led by César Chávez. Such is a perfect example of the varying ways a given floating signifier can function in a variety of political ways when articulated into competing discourses.
4. The question of the ideological power of this goddess/Virgin figure plays throughout Alarcón's work, often appearing as the grandmother or matriarch. In an overview of Alarcón's work, Manuel de Jesús Hernández-Gutiérrez writes: “The figure of the matriarch has evolved to the level of goddess, a symbolically omnipotent yet liberating leader. Moreover, as the Virgin of Guadalupe, Tonantzin not only leads other goddesses, such as Coatlicue, Chalchihucueye, and Citlacueye, but also holds for the Chicano people, consisting their continued subordination, the banners of hope and rebellion. . . . In joining Chicano feminists, Alarcón sees matriarchy's revindication as a necessary step in the formation of a nonsexist society.” See “Alarcón, Francisco X.” (Foster 11).
5. For a suggestive account of this process, see Tzvetan Todorov's *The Conquest of America*.

6. We must keep in mind, however, that Francisco Alarcón's appropriation of ancient Aztec ritual utterances performs a spiritual function made possible by this opening up of oppositional space. He has in fact "performed" these Aztec poems in public as part of a revived Aztec religious practice. Alarcón has worked with Roberto Vargas and Rebecca Mendoza in ritual ceremonies such as that staged at the Oakland Art Museum in 1994.

7. See Alarcón's "Reclaiming Ourselves, Reclaiming America."

8. In this way Alarcón's entire poetic project can be seen as an attempt to politicize the margins, whether those margins signify the subordination of ethnicity, class, spirituality, or sexuality. In "The Poet as Other" (*Snake*) he writes: "As a Chicano poet who also celebrates being gay, I have come to realize that I write *desde afuera del margen mismo de la sociedad* (from the outside of even the margin of society), and that for some, even my own *gente*, I represent the ultimate Other" (159).

9. Althusser, especially Chapter 5, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (127-86).

10. This is the paradigmatic moment of Žižek's social analysis, according to which "the Law's *external* relationship to its transgression is *internalized* into the Law's relationship to its own traumatic founding gesture" 155.

11. The acknowledgments page lists the following journals in which thirty of the *Snake Poems* were published: *The Americas Review*; *The Bloomsbury Review*; *City on a Hill*; *Five Fingers Review*; *Guadalupe Review*; *High Plains Literary Review*; *New Chicano Writing*; *Puerto del Sol*; *Poetry U.S.A.*; *Quarry West*; *Red Dirt*; *Tonantzin*; and *ZZZZYVA*.

12. See Andrews and Hassig, Preface to Ruiz de Alarcón's *The Treatise* (322 n. 6).

13. Arteaga writes that "Francisco X. Alarcón's poems reflect the world view and belief systems of Indians in Mexico three and a half centuries ago . . . What Francisco X. Alarcón has captured in *Snake Poems* from *Treatise* is the spirit of the Indian informants, a sense of Native culture alive despite the best efforts to misread and suppress it" (x).

14. "This is my own conflict," Alarcón proclaims, "belonging to two cultures. The border is right here inside me." Quoted in Kenny Ausubel, "Francisco X. Alarcón Rediscovered the Americas" (75).

15. See Ángel María Garibay Kintana, *Llave del Náhuatl* 115-16.

16. For a discussion of the function of calendaric glyphs, see Miguel León-Portilla, *Aztec Society: An Introduction to Nahuatl Culture*.

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