

# Geopoetics, Geopolitics, and Violence

## (Un)Mapping Daniel Alarcón's Lost City Radio

by  
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*Daniel Alarcón's 2007 novel Lost City Radio positions post-civil-conflict Peru in relation to episodes of violence from across the globe by deploying two opposing cartographic impulses. First, the unnamed fictional nation of the novel shares historical, topographical, and sociopolitical traits with modern Peru. At the same time, the text refuses tidy association with Peru, principally by folding violent conflicts from a host of geopolitical spaces into the fictional nation via journalistic ekphrasis. This results in a unique geopoetics that serves to catalyze the localized reality of postconflict Peru as a means of interrogating the efficacy of human rights discourse in the neoliberal era on a global scale and bringing into focus the current inequity of responses to the global refugee crisis.*

*En la novela Lost City Radio (2007) de Daniel Alarcón, el Perú de la posguerra se representa en relación con episodios de violencia de diversos países a través de dos impulsos cartográficos contradictorios. La nación ficticia (sin nombre) comparte rasgos históricos, topográficos y sociopolíticos con el Perú contemporáneo. A la vez, la novela no permite asociación simple con el Perú al incorporar conflictos violentos en diversos espacios geopolíticos a través de la écfrasis periodística. El resultado es una geopoética única que sirve para catalizar la realidad local del Perú de la posguerra con fin de interrogar la eficacia del discurso de los derechos humanos en la época neoliberal a escala global y puntualizar la crisis global de refugiados.*

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Postwar Peru has been the site of a methodical excavation to uncover crimes against humanity and the unknown fate of thousands of disappeared Peruvians. Since the end of the armed conflict of the 1980s and 1990s, demands have been made to account for the human rights violations committed by both Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path), the primary guerrilla insurgency group involved in the civil war, and the Peruvian state's armed forces. Decades after the effective defeat of the Senderistas in 1992 and President Alberto Fujimori's self-coup of the same year,<sup>1</sup> as well as the official conclusion of the armed conflict and the Fujimori regime in 2000,<sup>2</sup> political candidates continue to position the abuses and terror of the period as central to their campaign platforms. This has been evidenced as recently as the consecutive 2011 and 2016 presidential elections in

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which Ollanta Humala (Partido Nacionalista Peruano) and Pedro Pablo Kuczynski (Peruanos por el Cambio), respectively, narrowly defeated Keiko Fujimori (Fuerza Popular) on promises of democracy and the defense of human rights (Becerra, 2016; Saona, 2012).

Equally revelatory is the government-sanctioned 2001–2003 investigation by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CVR, 2003), which was mandated to investigate the crimes against the Peruvian people by the state, the Shining Path, and the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement during the years of conflict (1980–2000). Concurrent with this state-supported authority, various private and international initiatives have arisen with the explicit objective of salvaging the collective memory of the Peruvian people and pursuing truth and justice in the postconflict period. Foundations like the Lugar de la Memoria, la Tolerancia y la Inclusión Social (2018) seek to encourage reflection and dialogue about the civil conflict, generate knowledge and information about the causes and consequences of the war, and recognize and honor victims. Similarly, the Equipo Peruano de Antropología Forense (2011) bears the burden of searching for the estimated 15,000 disappeared Peruvians whose whereabouts have yet to be ascertained. Finally, the establishment in 1985 of the Coordinadora Nacional de Derechos Humanos, the umbrella organization for more than 60 nongovernmental organizations and human rights groups active in Peru (Youngers, 2003: 14), marked an important moment for human rights discourse as a partner in the pursuit of justice following internal conflicts.

The search for truth and the clamor for reconciliation are in no way unique to modern Peru. From apartheid South Africa to Montenegro and Panama to Zimbabwe's Matabeleland disturbances, official truth commissions have been created to investigate and expose large-scale repression and violence. The U.S. Institute of Peace (2011) lists 33 such commissions and 12 related commissions of inquiry. Often these commissions are also tasked with providing recommendations for preventing future occurrences of similar abuses, evidencing the importance of both uncovering the extent of past human rights violations and determining a pathway to avoiding their repetition. The earliest of these 45 entities was established in 1974, and the most recent are still actively receiving funding for ongoing investigations. Given the sustained perceived need for truth and reconciliation commissions and their increasing number, two conclusions become clear. First, the social violence and state oppression that precipitated them have yet to be remedied. Second, there is a continued dependence on human rights discourse as a means of grappling with violence in the current epoch.

This brief detour expounding on the localized violence that has afflicted Peru over the past 40 years and reflecting on similar crimes against humanity across the globe throughout the past century is a pertinent antecedent to the following analysis of Daniel Alarcón's novel *Lost City Radio* (2007). Set in an unnamed country enduring the aftershocks of a terror-filled civil war, *Lost City Radio* is punctuated by analeptic leaps that unveil the violent bloodshed wrought by both revolutionary and state forces during a prolonged civil conflict. Moreover, it meditates on the long-term effects of civil war, particularly the persistent displacement of affected communities—typically indigenous people and individuals from the lower economic classes—that generates internal migration in the narrative present. The following analysis examines the

violence of *Lost City Radio*'s past and present as a means of analyzing the agency of human rights discourse in the face of burgeoning neoliberalism. In particular, my reading attends to the ways in which the novel highlights the plight of refugees of violent conflicts, in many ways anticipating the current refugee crisis that civil conflicts and neoliberal economic policies have precipitated throughout the world. In closing, I consider how *Lost City Radio* catalyzes the localized reality of postconflict Peru in order to interrogate the efficacy of human rights discourse in the neoliberal era on a global scale.

To do so, I show that the novel develops a unique geopoetics that accounts for shifting socio- and geopolitical relations that have arisen with neoliberal globalization. I borrow the term "geopoetics" from Jacob Edmond (2016: 299), who explains that "texts shape space, and space shapes texts. Through this double recognition, a geopoetic framework recognizes that spatial imaginaries and geopolitical realities are dynamically interrelated. A new geopolitical reality requires a new spatial imaginary and so '*a new symbolic form in order to be understood*' (Moretti, 1999: 17)." Art and literature, as Edmond points out, are positioned to make legible shifting geopolitical norms and the synthetic nature of human spatial relations. My reading of Alarcón's novel posits that *Lost City Radio* advances a novel geopoetics that positions civil-conflict Peru in relation to episodes of violence from across the globe. It accomplishes this by deploying two opposing cartographic impulses. On the one hand, as prior scholars have noted, the unnamed fictional country of the novel shares historical, topographical, and sociopolitical traits with modern Peru. *Lost City Radio* centers around the upheaval wrought by a civil conflict between two entities that strongly resemble the late twentieth-century Peruvian state and the Shining Path. However, my analysis takes into account an element of the novel that has not yet been sufficiently addressed by scholarship, namely, the ways in which the text not only refuses tidy association with a single national entity but also folds myriad violent conflicts from a host of geopolitical spaces into the fictional nation.

In my reading of Alarcón's novel, I seek to show how this unique geopoetics results in what I call a narrative pantopia and illuminates the emerging spatial and sociopolitical relations of neoliberal globalization, even while the norms of the nation-state remain operative. Alarcón's novel makes manifest the need to rethink politics and spatial relations, particularly the synthetic borders of national modernity, in light of neoliberal globalization's transnational economic and migratory flows. I begin by examining the ways in which the unnamed nation of the narrative resembles contemporary Peru. Specifically, I consider how the fictional nation's topography, history of violence, internal migration patterns, and demographics encourage readers to map the narrative's unnamed nation onto the Peru of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. I then turn to an examination of the ways in which the narrative simultaneously works against this geopolitical specificity, showing how the novel *unmaps* the narrative's location. To do so, I consider the use of proper nouns and present an analysis of what I call "journalistic ekphrasis," the narrative description of literary, graphic, and photographic journalism. Finally, I interrogate the implications of this mapping and unmapping, attending to the novel's cartographic demand for a reimagination of sociopolitical relations in light of increasingly globalized spatial norms and neoliberal economic policies.

## MAPPING LOST CITY RADIO AS FICTIONALIZED PERU

*Lost City Radio* revolves around Norma, a radio personality whose late-night show “Lost City” seeks to reunite families with loved ones who went missing during the unnamed country’s civil conflict, which ended a decade prior to the narrative present. The radio show’s proverbial hands are tied, however, as its host, callers, and in-studio guests are not allowed to broach explicitly political topics or discuss details of the war. When there are no loved ones to reunite—an occurrence that happens so frequently that Norma and her producers often resort to staging fake reunions—Norma pronounces the names of citizens who have disappeared but whose loved ones have not given up hope of finding them. Ironically, she cannot utter the name of her own missing husband, Rey, since he is on a list of members of the Illegitimate Legion, the subversive guerrilla group that staged the violent insurrection against the government. Norma’s quiet existence as an unconfirmed widow is interrupted by the arrival of a boy, Victor, who is escorted from the jungle Village 1797 by his schoolteacher, Manau. Victor has abandoned his village after the death of his mother, Adela, as part of the slow exodus of the village’s young men metonymically represented by the departure of his best friend, Nico, who chooses to leave his family and friends because of a lack of educational and economic opportunities. Victor’s connection to Norma is much deeper than initially suspected: he is the child of an affair between Adela and Rey, and the truth of their bond unfolds through labyrinthine analepses that reveal decades of information.

That the unnamed nation of *Lost City Radio* resembles Peru is undeniable given their many historical, linguistic, and topographical similarities. The capital of the novel is a coastal city surrounded by mountains, and a nearby desert provides a remote locale, the Moon, where state forces took prisoners of war for interrogation during the civil conflict. As the past violence of war fades into the less overt political repression of a police state in the narrative present, internal migrants flock to the capital because of the destruction wrought in the rural jungle and mountain regions during the civil conflict (Alarcón, 2007: 41, 87). Thus, there is both topographical and sociohistorical resonance between the nation’s fictional capital and Peru’s capital city. Lima is an arid coastal city surrounded by mountains and, more distantly, the Amazonian jungle. Furthermore, Lima has grown exponentially in the aftermath of the internal conflict as rural Peruvians have been forced to leave their small towns, first to escape the violence of the war, which primarily occurred in remote areas of Peru, and later for economic reasons (Coral, 1994: 10, 22).

*Lost City Radio* also incorporates the linguistic realities of Peru, as the internal migrants of the narrative encounter linguistic difficulty upon arriving in a capital that often does not acknowledge or respect their indigenous languages (Alarcón, 2007: 134). Moreover, the war strategies deployed by the Illegitimate Legion bear striking similarities to those of Peru’s Shining Path. Just as war exploded in Peru on the eve of the May 1980 presidential elections, when Shining Path guerrillas burned ballot boxes in the small Andean town of Chuschi (Roncagliolo, 2017: 92), the fictional war of *Lost City Radio* begins with a fire that destroys the mayor’s office in a small jungle town (Alarcón, 2007: 54), an act of insurgency that is attributed to the Illegitimate Legion. Finally, Norma

recalls the many blackouts that plagued the fictional capital city throughout the civil war (Alarcón, 2007: 199), which evokes the blackouts that were deployed by the Shining Path in Lima as part of a “sabotage campaign” that sought to sow chaos and desperation in the capital city (Masterson, 1991: 280).<sup>3</sup>

Previous scholars have noted many similarities between the Peru of the late twentieth century and the fictional nation of Alarcón’s novel. Liliana Wendorff (2009: 111–112) describes how Alarcón drew inspiration for the fictional radio show of the novel from a Peruvian program called “Buscapersonas” (Person Finder). Amrita Das (2015: 34–35) examines how The Thousands, a district in the unnamed capital city that frequents Alarcón’s fiction, resembles San Juan de Lurigancho, a shantytown in Lima located east of Lima Centro and north of the Rímac River. Das’s reading focuses on a short story from the 2007 collection *El rey siempre está por encima del pueblo*, which also features The Thousands without naming Lima or Peru. Finally, Stacy Balkan (2010: 91–92) takes as a given that the unnamed nation of *Lost City Radio* is Peru, reading the capital of Alarcón’s novel as a postmodern, postindustrial borderland that functions economically largely through the subjugation of displaced migrants from the countryside.

Shifting from the historical to the biographical, Larry Rohter (2013) notes that the central role of enforced disappearances in the novel draws on the intimate experience of loss in Alarcón’s family, as his uncle, Javier Alarcón Guzmán, was disappeared in 1989 and likely killed by Peruvian state forces because of his activities as a labor union activist and a university professor.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Peru’s Office of the Search for Disappeared Persons found that 20,329 people were reported missing between May 1980 and November 2000 (ICRC, 2018). Given the abundance of still unaccounted-for Peruvian citizens (overwhelmingly hailing from the country’s rural indigenous communities), the Office has created a searchable database on persons forcibly disappeared during the civil conflict.

Despite the biographical particularity regarding Alarcón’s uncle and the historical parallels to Peru of the 1980–2000 civil war, enforced disappearances also serve as an initial link to global forms of repression. One of the most common forms of violence across the globe, enforced disappearances have been defined and codified as a crime against humanity in the International Criminal Court (ICC, 2018: 3–4). The ICC was created in 1998 in response to severe crimes that affect the international community, including genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and aggression, and is recognized by 120 countries as an international justice system. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC, 2012) lists 30 countries as having practiced enforced disappearance and has established August 30 as annual International Day of the Disappeared in order to raise awareness and seek a remedy to the persistence of the practice. Alarcón situates this global phenomenon as a constant undercurrent in *Lost City Radio* by making it the focus of Norma’s radio program and the central cause of her melancholy existence as Rey’s unconfirmed widow.

## UNMAPPING *LOST CITY RADIO*: A NARRATIVE PANTOPIA

If a reader were ignorant of Alarcón’s biography—he was born in Lima, moved to Alabama with his family when he was three years old, and has split his time

between the United States and Peru ever since—the unnamed nation of *Lost City Radio* could easily represent a number of Latin American or other developing countries.<sup>5</sup> My reading of the novel will now explore this cartographic opacity, which *Lost City Radio* not only permits but formally installs within the narrative via two mechanisms. First, across the novel, proper nouns defy geographic specificity. Second, Alarcón drew inspiration from myriad real-world historical conflicts when penning his novel. In an interview with Helen Gordon (Alarcón, 2008), he describes the debt that his narrative owes to a variety of sources:

I certainly found Joe Sacco's books on Bosnia and Palestine very helpful when I was writing the novel, and I read an amazing collection of Anna Politkovskaya's work, *A Small Corner of Hell*. Chechnya and Grozny, from her descriptions, seem like Eighties Lima—but Eighties Lima on methamphetamine. Then, as another example, there's something in the novel called *tadek*, which . . . actually comes from a Kapuscinski book on Ethiopia (*The Emperor*). At the time I was thinking also about Guantánamo and about racial profiling in the United States.

Below I explore how these conflicts not only serve as inspiration but are incorporated into the novel via journalistic ekphrasis, the literary description of print or visual journalism.

Throughout *Lost City Radio*, proper nouns defy categorization, contributing to the novel's resistance to national and regional specificity. The novel offers a patchwork quilt of ethnicities and nationalities in terms of its cast of characters: Norma, Victor, Rey, Elmer, Len, Yerevan, Marden, Alaf, Zahir, Adela, Elijah, Trini, Nico. From Alaf (a transliterated spelling variant of the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet) to Yerevan (the capital of Armenia, a country with a war-torn past) and Zahir (a reference to Islam and the exegesis of the Quran), the given names of *Lost City Radio* emphatically point to a host of cultures. Placenames are even more ambiguous. Victor, for instance, comes from Village 1797, whose numbered name is indicative of the violent unmapping that occurred in the nation following the civil war: "Before, every town had a name; an unwieldy, millenarian name inherited from God-knows-which extinct people, names with hard consonants that sounded like stone grinding against stone. But everything was being modernized, even the recondite corners of the nation" (Alarcón, 2007: 5). In a gesture that stands as a sort of synecdoche of the geopolitics of the novel, Victor repeats this process of unmapping when he finds one of his father's old maps and scratches out the original city names, replacing them with their modern, assigned numbers (109). Similar to the numbered towns, the generic names of the capital districts could locate them anywhere in the world: Asylum Downs, the Metropole, The Settlement, Collectors, The Thousands (106). Although the fictional nation's topography points to Alarcón's native Peru, the proper nouns of the text trouble the nation's indexicality.

Complementary to the cartographic opacity achieved via generic proper nouns is the striking manner in which Alarcón folds the historical realities of various national communities into the fictional space of *Lost City Radio* through what I call journalistic ekphrasis. Strictly defined, ekphrasis is a literary mode that designates "the imitation in literature of a work of plastic art" (Krieger, 2003 [1967]: 90), which "explicitly represents representation itself" (Heffernan, 1991: 300). The exemplar of ekphrasis is no doubt John Keats's "Ode on a

Grecian Urn," which unambiguously describes and elaborates upon the scenes appearing on the surface of an ancient vase. Ekphrasis may be deployed to various ends. The ekphrastic description of a statue in a poem may exalt a particular style or critique the outdated norms of tradition. Ekphrasis of a patriotic mural may highlight national values or disparage political dogma. A description of Gothic architecture may reveal the psychological state of a character or set a tone. Renate Brosch (2018: 404) observes that recent popular novels avail themselves of ekphrasis in order to reflect on gendered modes of viewing (the male gaze) and power structures of visibility. Azucena Castro (2013: 8–9) finds that the use of photographic ekphrasis in Tomás Eloy Martínez's 1995 novel *Santa Evita* complicates the history-fiction binary by rendering photography's documentary valence fictional. Finally, Steven Wagschal (2005: 107) makes room for *implicit* ekphrasis by developing the term "veiled ekphrasis." In contrast to traditional ekphrastic description like Keats's ode, which explicitly names the object that the poem describes, "veiled ekphrasis" contains implicit engagements with pictorial representations.

My analysis of *Lost City Radio* adds to these possible ekphrastic effects. I contend that the novel contains multiple instances of veiled journalistic ekphrasis of real-world violent episodes from across the globe to two principal ends. First, similar to the proper nouns described above, the references to world historical events complicate the designation of the novel's fictional nation as Peru. Alarcón maps various geopolitical conflicts onto a single literary space, thus rendering the nation of *Lost City Radio* a narrative pantopia. Second, these particular historical allusions underscore the violent nature of the ascendant epoch of neoliberal globalization, and, like the fictional war at the heart of Alarcón's novel, these historical conflicts have resulted in political instability and widespread displacement of refugees.

The first instance of journalistic ekphrasis assumes as its object a famous photo taken in the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Early in *Lost City Radio*, the president gives a "famous Independence Day speech" in the fictional capital's main plaza, with the "masses overwhelming the confines of the plaza, overrunning the fountain, pushing up against the steps of the cathedral," and cheering "like good workers" (Alarcón, 2007: 14–15). This fictional president is soon to face the uprising of the Illegitimate Legion, and three years into the war the same plaza is razed and replaced with Newtown Plaza (117), which becomes the oft-referenced city center of the novel's capital. The fictional history of Newtown Plaza is notably comparable to that of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. On October 17, 1945, tens of thousands of citizens, many of whom were union workers, arrived at the Plaza de Mayo to protest the detention of Juan Domingo Perón. He was soon released and later elected president, and each year on that day he would deliver the Día de la Lealtad (Loyalty Day) speech in the Plaza de Mayo to commemorate the protests and his release from prison (Lerman, 2005: 81–82). The famous photo, "Las patas en la fuente" (see Figure 1), taken during the 1945 protest, became Perón propaganda and markedly resembles the Independence Day scene from *Lost City Radio*. Moreover, like the fictional president of Alarcón's novel, President Perón later faced a military coup, an incident that was preceded by the June 16, 1955, "bombardeo de la Plaza de Mayo," which resulted in the deaths of more than 300 civilians and



**Figure 1.** *Las patas en la fuente* (Feet in the Fountain) (photographer unknown, Archivo General de la Nación, Buenos Aires, Argentina).

the destruction of the plaza (Lerman, 2005: 91–92). Alarcón’s description of this photo subtly transposes the context and history surrounding it into his novel.

*Lost City Radio* also proffers veiled ekphrastic descriptions of events that occur outside of Latin America. One scene related to Rey’s imprisonment strikingly parallels a sequence of panels from Joe Sacco’s graphic novel *Palestine* (2001). Called “comics journalism,” *Palestine* illustrates and narrates Sacco’s trip to the Middle East during the first Palestinian Intifada (1987–1993), an uprising in response to Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. One section tells of Sacco’s visit to Ansar III, a prison opened to accommodate the overflow from arrests of suspected Palestinian insurgents (Sacco, 2001: 82). A particularly moving account told to Sacco by prisoners occurs during the early years of the Intifada, when the inmates learn that Israeli forces have killed Abu Jihad (nom de guerre of Khalil Al-Wazir), cofounder with Yasser Arafat of the insurgency group Fatah. In honor of the fallen leader, the prisoners end the morning prayer by lining up in silence for a minute of tribute (see Figure 2, left). The Israeli guards respond with violence, shooting rubber bullets and spraying tear gas (Sacco, 2001: 90). The prisoners also recount a subtle form of resistance that involves “singing nationalistic or folk songs,” to which the guards would respond with verbal warnings and tear gas (see Figure 2, right).

An amalgam of these scenes plays out in *Lost City Radio* when, in search of Rey, Norma visits a prison for Illegitimate Legion sympathizers. A prison official walks her and Elmer, a colleague from the radio station, around the building, and she searches the men’s faces for her husband. At one point, the rowdy prisoners become quiet, organize themselves into rows, and begin to sing. The official orders a young guard to fire a warning shot near the front row of prisoners, but the inmates continue singing, unfazed. Finally, the official nods permission to shoot an inmate, and a man in the third row, shot in the stomach, “slumped to his knees and tumbled forward, prostrate in the dust. His burnt-copper back arched, his arm buried beneath him. He was praying” (Alarcón, 2007: 48). In a veiled ekphrastic echo of Sacco’s comics journalism, which

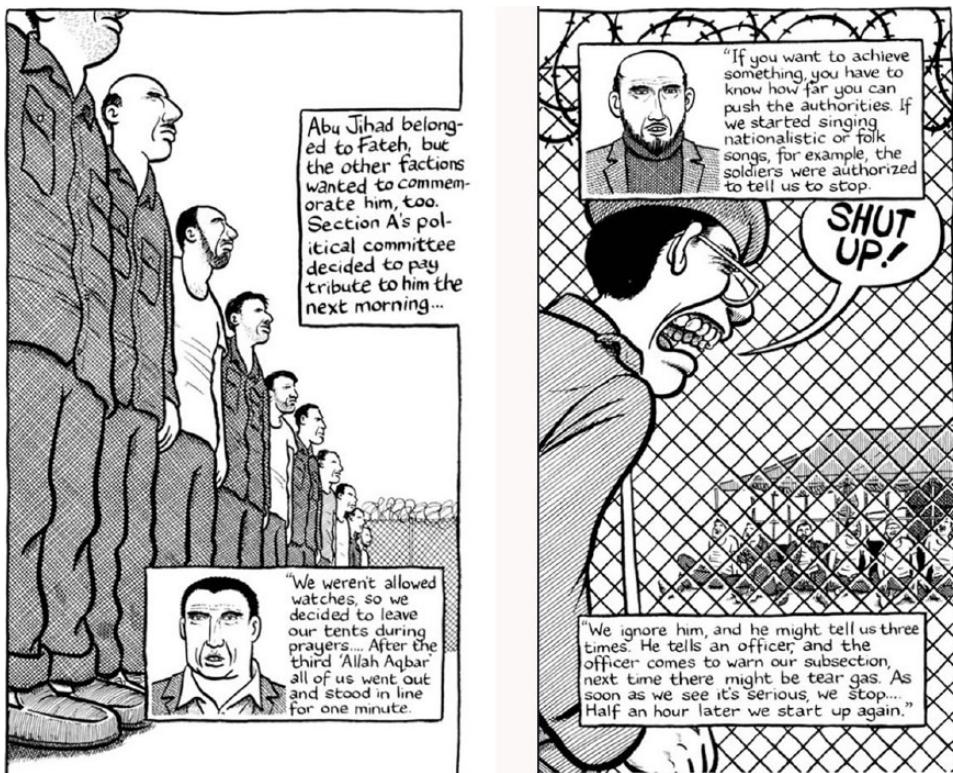


Figure 2. Left, Tribute to Abu Jihad (Sacco, 2001: 89); right, Prisoners singing (Sacco, 2001: 90). © Joe Sacco, courtesy of Fantagraphics Books ([www.fantagraphics.com](http://www.fantagraphics.com)).

illustrates the Ansar prisoners' quiet rebellion following the final "Allah Aqbar" of morning prayers (Sacco, 2001: 89), Alarcón adopts the image of the prayer as the tragic end to the prisoners' defiant song.

In addition to these more traditional examples of ekphrasis, which obliquely represent visual artifacts (photos, graphic novels) in narrative, Alarcón weaves in less conventional forms of ekphrasis by describing iconic scenes from narrative journalism. There is precedent for studying ekphrasis of nonvisual artifacts. Scholars such as John Hollander (1988) have expanded the definition of ekphrasis to include literary descriptions of imagined items. Mack Smith (1995: 246–249) and Mai Al-Nakib (2005) study the ekphrastic representation of music in narrative. Notably, Linda Hutcheon evaluates newspaper articles as objects of ekphrasis in the literature of Julio Cortázar and John Fowles (discussed in Heffernan, 1991: 313). These scholars thus establish a precedent for including imagined or everyday items and nonvisual cultural artifacts such as journalism as potential objects of ekphrasis.

The most overt instance of journalistic ekphrasis in *Lost City Radio* is the description of *tadek*, a practice that Rey writes about in a newspaper article at the beginning of the civil war. He recounts that it was once a commonly accepted form of justice in indigenous communities of the nation and, although it had nearly disappeared, had reemerged in the narrative present (Alarcón, 2007: 115–116). *Tadek* is deployed when a crime has been committed that has no known culprit:

The town elders chose a boy under the age of ten, stupefied him with a potent tea, and let the intoxicated child find the culprit. . . . [A] boy stumbling drunkenly along the muddy paths of a village, into the marketplace, seizing upon the color of a man's shirt, the geometric patterns of a woman's dress, or a smell or sensation only the boy, in his altered state, could know. The child would attach himself to an adult, and this was enough. The elders would proclaim *tadek* over and lead the newly identified criminal away, to have his or her hands removed.

As Alarcón (2008) explains, *tadek* is a literary representation of an Ethiopian indigenous tradition—*lebasha* (thief-catching) (Garretson, 2003: 242), which was outlawed during the 40-year totalitarian dictatorship of Haile Selassie. Alarcón similarly folds other instances of violence from across the globe into his novel. For instance, the sniper shooting that incites the oft-mentioned Battle of Tamoé calls to mind Sarajevo's Sniper Alley, which became infamous during the Bosnian War for both sides' uninhibited shooting of civilians, particularly children, as residents of Sarajevo were forced to cross the deadly thoroughfare.<sup>6</sup> In a parallel manner, the final battle of the civil war in *Lost City Radio* is instigated by the killing of a child by sniper fire while crossing a dangerous principal avenue, and it is unclear whether the bullet that hits her was fired by an Illegitimate Legion rebel or a military sniper (Alarcón, 2007: 239). In this way, Alarcón maps Ethiopia of the Selassie dictatorship and Sniper Alley of the Bosnian War onto the narrative pantopia of *Lost City Radio* via journalistic ekphrasis.

Finally, Alarcón weaves into the novel Anna Politkovskaya's *A Small Corner of Hell* (2003), a work of narrative journalism that chronicles the Second Chechen War, during which post-Soviet Russia sought to consolidate its territory and Chechnya sought independence and national autonomy (Derluguian, 2003: 17). The text collects dozens of chronicles sent by Politkovskaya from Chechnya to her newspaper, *Novaya Gazeta*, in Moscow. In one section (33–38) she recounts huddling with a group of civilians during a firestorm. One man, a land surveyor named Vakha, talks about his family and cares for a child that is crawling among the people huddled on the ground. The day after the bombings, she discovers that Vakha has stepped on an unmarked land mine and been killed instantly. Later, while investigating the Khatuni concentration camp, she learns that prisoners are often kept in pits no more than four feet deep where they must crouch for days, weeks, or months. After visiting the Khatuni concentration camp, she is detained under suspicion of being a Chechyan militant and is tortured and interrogated without being charged. *Lost City Radio* entwines Vakha's death and Politkovskaya's experience in the pits of the Khatuni concentration camp into the character of Rey, Norma's disappeared husband.<sup>7</sup> In the early days of the war, Rey is arrested for traveling without identification and transported to "the Moon," a remote desert location where the armed forces take suspected insurgents to be tortured and rehabilitated (Alarcón, 2007: 18). As they approach the Moon, Rey and his fellow prisoners must carefully walk in the footprints of the lead soldier, as they are passing through a minefield. During his detention at the Moon, Rey is kept in a pit too narrow for him to sit or kneel in (120). As with the prisoners tortured in the Khatuni concentration camp, no evidence is brought against

Rey, and he is not formally charged with any crime. Once he returns from the Moon he works as a land surveyor drawing maps and recording land rights in the shantytowns on the outskirts of the capital (131). In these subtle ekphrastic resonances with the violence that has plagued post-Soviet Chechnya, Alarcón creates a geopolitical link between his fictional national community and the still unstable Russian Federation.

### **LOST CITY RADIO'S GEOPOETICS AND THE GLOBAL REFUGEE CRISIS**

In his examination of the modern German novel, Russell A. Berman (1986: 3) underscores the importance of geographic references in literature: "Geographical designations, even the apparently most objective, are never neutral. Names, distances, and directions not only locate points but also establish conceptualizations of power relations. The nomenclature of space functions as a political medium." Taking Berman's assertion seriously raises the question of what is at stake in the unique geopolitics of *Lost City Radio*. As demonstrated above, the novel contains an internal tension due to its oppositional mapping-unmapping gestures. It at once encourages geopolitical association with Peru and refuses tidy association with Alarcón's birth nation by leaving the fictional space unnamed and incorporating ambiguous placenames throughout. Moreover, numerous instances of journalistic ekphrasis fold global episodes of violent conflict into a fictional nation that otherwise closely resembles Peru. To what end does the narrative contain such cartographic ambiguity?

Given that the geopolitics of *Lost City Radio* charts two maps—a localized map of a fictionalized Peru that captures the aftereffects of internal conflict and a globalized map that imposes episodes of violence from across the globe on the unnamed nation of the novel—I here point to two complementary functions of space in the novel. First, as shown above, the local map of Peru underscores the internal displacement and pervasive economic disenfranchisement that persist in post-civil-conflict societies. The narrative focuses on the estrangement of families and communities at the macro level (Norma's radio show, "Lost City") and at the micro level (in the characters of Victor and Nico, who both leave their remote jungle community, and the disappeared Rey). This estrangement serves as an index of the ways in which enforced disappearances and internal displacement have led to the dissolution of rural communities in the Andean and Amazonian regions of Peru (Lambright, 2015: 8).

By extension, the continued displacement in the postconflict present underscores a second form of violence. As Lisa J. Laplante and Kimberly Theidon (2007), Fernando Rosenberg (2016), and Juan Poblete (2015) have shown, the postconflict transition to democracy is integral to the "reconciliation" component of truth commissions and transitional justice. This correlation is made explicit in the introduction to the Truth and Reconciliation report (CVR, 2003), which opens by stating "In 2000 Peru began a new transition to democracy," thus coupling the objectives of human rights and the implementation of democratic governance. This democratic transition is often considered synonymous with the application of neoliberal policies and market reforms that evacuate

politics of contingency and the potential for radical change (Rosenberg, 2016: 61). Furthermore, as Poblete (2015: 94) has demonstrated in the Chilean context, the democratic transition and forced neoliberalization of postconflict societies impose particular ways of conceiving of politics and organizing social interactions. This means that, as neoliberal globalization becomes dominant, the violence of the conflict period is transformed and extended into peacetime. Ulla Berg (2015: 8) has studied a similar phenomenon in Peru, in which

escape from the violence of the Sendero Luminoso insurgency/counterinsurgency and rural poverty were the main push factors that propelled rural-to-urban migration and urban middle-class transnational migration in the 1980s. Democratic instability and growing inequality as a result of Peru's transition to a full-blown neoliberal economic regime in the 1990s produced unprecedented and upwardly spiraling emigration which continued through the first half of the decade of 2000 to 2010 not just from countryside to city, but away from Peru.

*Lost City Radio* locates this displacement at the center of its narrative.

At the same time, the geopolitics of Alarcón's novel shifts the focus from the local to the global by folding myriad violent conflicts into one fictional imagined community. This gesture works to highlight the inequities and failures of both human rights discourse and neoliberal policies in the current epoch, particularly as it relates to responses to the refugee crisis. Notably, developing countries are far more likely both to experience civil conflict and to provide asylum to refugees from violence. The most recent annual report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2018: 6) shows that, on average, 44,400 people are displaced, both internally and as refugees to countries of asylum, every day because of conflict or persecution. The vast majority of this displaced population originates in countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Somalia (UNHCR, 2018: 15)—what the United Nations Terminology Database (UNTERM, 2013) deems “least developed countries.”<sup>8</sup> Despite having less wealth, greater barriers to sustainable development, and fewer resources (infrastructure, social services) to respond to the influx of refugees, developing regions such as Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan host 85 percent of the world’s refugees (UNHCR, 2018: 17). Moreover, the violence and displacement caused by civil conflicts are exacerbated by neoliberal economic policies. These neoliberal policies widen class differences and generate increased migration of individuals seeking social, economic, and political stability.

In *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900*, Franco Moretti (1999: 17) identifies a host of reasons to attend to the geography of a given text. Citing Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, Moretti observes that the maps of modern novels often reveal “the geo-political reality of the nation-state.” Taking Jane Austen’s novels as an example, Moretti shows how the characters’ travels and the marriages of protagonists symbolically sketch the contours of the English national community. Zeroing in on the city rather than the nation, he unveils an implicit topography in the pages of a given novel, and he shows how London emerges as a stratified urban space, with the upper-class West End standing in opposition to everything east of Regent Street, which does not merit elaboration in Austen’s novels.

*Lost City Radio* makes a similar gesture in the age of neoliberal globalization. Alarcón's novel becomes a staging ground from which to consider the efficacy of human rights discourse as mediator between burgeoning neoliberal globalization and the persistent inequalities and violence that accompany this transformation in developing regions. The tension that arises between the localized nature of the fictional nation—which resembles contemporary Peru in terms of topography, history of conflict, and demographics and in relation to Alarcón's own biography—and the global realities of historical violence that are mapped onto this fictional nation through journalistic ekphrasis becomes a productive means of recognizing and conceiving of the shortcomings of current humanitarian discourse and international policies that attempt to respond to and compensate for the shifting sociopolitical relations of neoliberal globalization. *Lost City Radio* deploys a unique geopolitics that leverages the localized reality of postconflict Peru to interrogate the efficacy of human rights discourse in the neoliberal era on a global scale. The resulting narrative pantopia makes clear that the current iteration of international law and human rights discourse have been unequal to the task of mediating between continued national laws and norms and the sociopolitical anomie and growing inequities spurred on by neoliberal globalization.

## NOTES

1. On April 5, 1992, Fujimori dismissed or dissolved other branches of the Peruvian government, including the Congress, local government offices, the judicial system, and various ministries, declared a state of emergency, and suspended the constitution. He would rule with near total authority for nine months, taking advantage of the unchecked power to reform laws so that he could serve as president for consecutive terms and consolidating power with the military to rule with the support of the armed forces (see Root, 2012: Chapter 2; Youngers, 2003: Chapters 4 and 5; and Parodi Trece, 2000: 280–284).

2. Despite the declared defeat, residual factions of the Maoist group continue opposing the current government and participating in Peruvian politics both violently and nonviolently. In 2011 the group attempted to form a political party and nominate a presidential candidate, although their application was denied. Likewise, remnants of the group continue waging smaller-scale guerrilla activities, particularly in the Huallaga Valley and the jungles of Ayacucho (Laplante and Theidon, 2007: 232).

3. Raúl Mendoza (2007) writes that the blackouts were a mark of the production of terrorism and plunged the country into fear and despair and observes that electricity and light are now symbols of progress, order, and safety.

4. The dedication page of the novel supports Rohter's assertion, simply stating "Q.E.P.D. Javier Antonio Alarcón Guzmán 1948–1989."

5. In fact, one review notes similarities to Brazil, Argentina, and Chile without naming Alarcón's native Peru as a possible setting (Amidon, 2007).

6. A British officer serving in Sarajevo for the United Nations says, "These people couldn't care less where you come from, or what you do. If you're in range, you're a target" (Burns, 1992).

7. A story in Sacco (2001: 97) resembles the Russian pits described by Politkovskaya. The Israeli security forces (the Shin Bet) used uncomfortably small "coffins" in which Palestinian prisoners could not sit or kneel.

8. UNTERM (2013) considers least-developed countries those that have lower gross domestic products and face obstacles to economic growth. Lack of access to education and health care, agricultural instability, and vulnerability to natural disasters also influence a country's designation as least-developed.

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