



Genre Wormhole #3: Realism at the End of Time

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Image from a performance of *BILONGO LILA*. Photo: Katie Dorame; courtesy of the artist.

When I was finishing up my studio visit with artist Sofía Córdova at the Headlands Center for the Arts, they (Córdova uses both she and they pronouns) asked if I needed to take a candid picture; I wondered about “needed,” and Córdova explained that since both my previous columns had featured informal portraits of the artists, they’d assumed it was a requirement of the gig. I appreciated the exchange particularly because, considering that the first two photos were (in my mind) more happenstance than requirement, it struck me as expressing something about form: how difficult it is to evade, and that a pattern (in this case, two snapshots) seems to tug at us psychically (and sometimes physically: I’m thinking of the way our bodies respond to a beat), requesting its own continuation.

Córdova was right of course in that, intentionally or not, there was a pattern evolving; I was just slower than they were to notice it, which doesn’t surprise me since their own work exhibits a virtuosic and kaleidoscopic handling of form. Córdova is a world-builder, and their work, like the forms they seems particularly compelled to draw from and push against – science fiction, pop music, and styling – has a Gesamtkunstwerk quality, arranging patterns at different scales and from different genres to create the effect of vast spaces, new universes.

When I first met with Córdova to discuss their work, they were finishing up their project *BILONGO LILA: Nobody Dies in a Foretold War*, a performance that brings together several years’ work with science fiction and performance tropes. *BILONGO LILA* draws its audience into a world 1500 years in the future; it’s dystopian in its portrayal of a complete ecological collapse, but equivocally utopian in its imagination of new possibilities the current order’s destruction

could offer to othered, subjugated, or subaltern bodies. In this liberatory vein, Córdova's work offers creative participation and a degree of autonomy to its participants (in *BILONGO LILA*, a cohort of "dancers and musicians who are of color, and/or identify as women, trans, and/or queer") and loving, textured attention to bodies in their particularity, difference, and transformation.

As a weird kid who longed for anywhere, anything else, I read my way voraciously through the science fiction section of the New Orleans Public Library, Nix Branch. I was first drawn to Córdova's work for the aspects of science fiction that saved me in middle school: its densely imagined particulars, the performativity and vibrancy of its other worlds, the shimmer of its life. I still love that Córdova's work does what science fiction can also, at times, do: create room to move, make surprising images that telegraph joy or resistance when the now feels intolerable. And yet as I come to know their art better, I also appreciate and respect its fugitive nature, what Córdova calls its slipperiness.

Córdova and I discussed the demands placed on them to create art that "appropriately" represented their identity categories, whether as a Puerto Rican person, a person of color, or a femme-presenting person, and how constricting those demands become. Such demands are forms with their own expectations, determining which work is seen as legible and which work isn't; they're also connected to histories of colonial oppression. Being the colonized body means knowing that you are required to be the dominant culture's other – to frighten, to titillate, to entertain – and that if you refuse your role the whole structure will push back violently for fear of coming unmoored.

We are all subject to structural forces, forms larger than ourselves. Yet it would be hard to deny the impact a subaltern identity has on one's internal map, making a person less free to choose their context and the lens through which they'll be read. Part of the success of Córdova's work is its strategic and various drive toward slipperiness; that is, its own liberation. Córdova is a canny formalist and an expert (a "nerd" as we say in sci-fi) in multiple genres, but their knowledge is propelled by a desire for freedom (their own and that of the collective) that makes the work vital and emotionally resonant.

As I was going through Córdova's web site, I was curious about the first appearance of ChuCha Santamaria, Córdova's pop music alter-ego (after her death and resurrection, they transformed into XUXA SANTAMARIA or XXSM, the music-making arm of Córdova's art practice). I wonder if I've found the proto-ChuCha in the video *La Vedette de America* from 2012:

On their website, Córdova describes the video as "created in response to the expectation that artists of color make art solely about the experience of the marginalized other." Dancing and lip-syncing to the music of Iris Chacón (the famous Puerto Rican entertainer whose nickname "la Vedette de America," America's Showgirl, titles the piece), Córdova shows how wearying such performance of identity can be by literally falling apart, allowing the audio and the dance to degrade over the video's runtime. This earlier work is an interesting marker for continuity and change in Córdova's work, for how their strategies have evolved over time.

One way to address being "othered" as an artist is to lean hard into that expectation, reflecting it back while amplifying and parodying it. *La Vedette* shows a use of that strategy, with Córdova taking on (tower of fruit on her head) the racialized, gendered performance of Latina identity

in order to gradually dismantle it. Though this performance is not marked as one by ChuCha Santamaria, there are strong similarities: the appropriation of a famous Latina performance identity, the critique of enforced Latinidad. However, when Córdova assumes the ChuCha identity, there are also significant differences.

"La Vedette de America" wears black pants and a white shirt in a nod to Bruce Nauman and the history of white male performance, and particularly its reception as unmarked, ahistorical, free. She is, in a sense, embodied critique. During our interview, Córdova said, "I realized that I was in a position where I was expected to perform Latin-ness, so I was going to over-perform it, but that became just another binary." Córdova's work with the ChuCha persona and, later, XUXA SANTAMARIA shows how they complicate that binary, throws it off-kilter. While ChuCha Santamaria plays with elements of appropriated identity, her songs are original, written and scored by Córdova with the assistance of collaborator Matthew Gonzalez Kirkland. Her narrative is invented by Córdova as well, an elaborate plot drawing on science-fiction messianic tropes: her first album "starts with the 'discovery' of Puerto Rico in 1492 and ends in the far future with ChuCha's death (and... subsequent resurrection)."

Not to say that ChuCha Santamaria is not critical of colonialism or gendered Latinx performance – far from it. But by building out the identity in multiple directions, Córdova makes the character more difficult to pin down and brings her into hi-gloss multi-dimensionality. Is the artist formerly known as ChuCha Santamaria a sci-fi messiah, Ziggy Stardust meets the Kwisatz Haderach, or a "flossy" "Puerto Rican syndicalist"? Yes.

In her book *Forms*, Caroline Levine defines the network as "a set of connections that link [discrete] elements." It expands as it links node to node, and networks, which can be (as Levine lists out), "economic exchanges, legal systems, military alliances, churches, communications, transportation, and linguistic meanings" organize and enmesh our lives as they criss-cross, sometimes amplifying each other, sometimes at cross-purposes. As a world-builder, Córdova is a network-builder as well, and thinking about networks has helped illuminate her process for me. A network that's growing is always both articulating itself and moving away from its own center, shifting in response to conditions. Córdova's work is similarly additive, and, acting as a network of nodes, combines ideas so inexhaustibly that it can't be pinned down.

When I spoke to Córdova, I noticed that they often referred to their work in negative



From *Echoes of A Tumbling Throne (Odas al fin de los tiempos)*; work in progress, 2014-present. These are selections from SIGILOS, pigment prints corresponding to each of the characters in the piece printed as banners on silk. Image courtesy of the artist.

terms, as what it was not, which seems related to resisting one-dimensional ideas of their practice. At times, Córdova said their work was not sci-fi, cli-fi (a.k.a. climate change-related fiction), hurricane art, Afrofuturism, or personal, although they also elucidated complicated relationships with and affinities to those terms. This strikes me as a tactic rather than a contradiction, because it's true – and important – that Córdova's work is not any one of those terms simplistically or unilaterally. It's at once all these things, none of them, and a critique of them. In the blurring between terms, it finds its freedom. Córdova leaves her dimensional portals open, within projects and among them. Looking at projects on Córdova's artist webpage, many are open-ended (e.g. 2012–present). And when one project closes, its topics and terms remain available to transmute in future works.

I want to take a closer look at the idea of the negative as a strategy for Córdova, of value in how they re-calibrate for new projects. Referring to the role of Afrofuturism in their work, Córdova said, "Sun Ra's Afrofuturism can't be today's, because there's historical context that has shifted. That work was amazing and avant-garde and weird, but I can't use unchecked optimism in the same way (I should add, I don't think Sun Ra's Afrofuturism is optimistic itself, but people's contemporary read and appropriation of it are). When I'm thinking about the liberation of queer and colored bodies in the future, I also have to recognize that it could all go left anyway. Because of what we're doing to the Earth – our species could not make it." By defining their work against historical Afrofuturism, Córdova opens the question of how to both celebrate and mourn, how to think Afrofuturism and climate change in the space of the same universe.

The question of ecological catastrophe motivated a turn in Córdova's work after their "weird and totally psychedelic and unmoored" Bilongo Lila performance, the culmination of the project they had "built in collaboration with trans, queer, colored bodies." In their next series, they moved to take seriously the prospect that "our collective vision of the end is anthropocentric": that liberation might come, but with no humans around to see it. That prospect was embodied in Córdova's discovery that Miharu Takizakura, a 1000-year-old cherry tree in Fukushima Prefecture, Japan, had been irradiated by the Fukushima nuclear disaster and actually left unharmed, "blooming and beautiful for no one to see."

Miharu Takizakura first appeared in Meltwater Pulse, Córdova's show at the Mills College Art Museum, as the artist was beginning to think about ecological collapse, using doomsday "prepper" materials and taxidermied "mutant" birds.

The tree became the center of a post-apocalyptic, human-free landscape in Córdova's City Limits show *The Gentle Voice that Talks to You Won't Talk Forever*. As the artist described it, they were "thinking of a vision of a landscape where flora and fauna are resilient [...] they metabolized it [human damage] and turned pink."

This shift away from human bodies does not leave Córdova's landscape devoid of feeling. The beauty of the cherry tree brings to mind the Japanese cultural concept of *mono no aware*, or "the pathos of things," the cultivated feeling-state in which gazing on beauty calls up the melancholy of its impermanence (cherry blossom, its loveliness heightened by its transience, is the quintessence of *mono no aware*). Córdova raises the stakes on *mono no aware* by making the mortality of the human species, not the individual, the idea reflected by natural beauty, further heightening the emotions involved.



Bilongo Esmeralda. Image courtesy of artist.

The pink tones of *The Gentle Voice*, though posited as a radioactive side-effect, also evoke human affinities, reminiscent not only cherry blossoms but also of femme queerness, a vibrancy evoking the ghosts or afterimages of the celebratory queer bodies of Córdoba's prior tableaux. The images in *The Gentle Voice* also evoke the author's own emotion as a creator struggling with "the problem you run into when you can't hide your subjectivity and the way work gets read is predetermined." That is, the colonized body, like Miharu Takizakura (which "polls frequently rank as the #1 tree in Japan") is a tourist attraction, an object to be consumed for the Western gaze. The tree, blossoming for no one, reflects the fantasy of a world in which the colonized body could thrive visibly without being objectified, as well as the painful irony that the only landscape in which such freedom is imaginable is an empty one. They/she ate our candy, indeed.

As with much in Córdoba's work, the idea of the self that absorbs all damage and comes out even more powerful (Miharu Takizakura as superhero avatar) functions on multiple levels, and as both fantasy and reality. If the post-apocalyptic landscape is a way to imagine the self free from scrutiny, and to register the reality that we, as a species, "might not make it," it also brings to the fore two scientific truths about a science fiction-approved fact: mutation (as seen in the exhibit's beautiful/eerie pink glow). Mutation is a record of ancestral trauma, reflected in damage at the cellular level. Mutation is also a driver of change, of unforeseen futures, and thus of both dystopias and the possibility, however faint, of a swerve toward something better. Like the well-known Fanon quote from *A Dying Colonialism*, Córdoba reads in their video *Sin Agua*: "The challenging of the very principle of foreign domination brings about essential mutations in the consciousness of the colonized."

Writing about Córdoba's multi-faceted work, I think about the way it returns to science fiction as a mode, and what capacities science fiction offers for Córdoba to build on. Caroline Levine calls these potentials of a form its "affordances" – what its qualities allow it to do. (For instance, because of its strength, steel can bear structural loads). One thing science fiction can do is consider the historical at an individual scale, since its tropes – such as time travel, dimensional portals, alternate worlds theory, and alternative histories – allow us to imagine the past and future as present and accessible. Science fiction thus overlaps with the mystical and the

visionary with its sense of an otherwise, an otherworldly, lapping at the shores of the present day.

Science fiction also creates encoded systems, in a way that makes it a fertile ground for unconscious operations. Science fiction authors have used the genre's relationship to allegory to address injustice; popular science fiction and horror are also perennial guides to the collective unconscious of a time period. Projection at its worst is responsible for some of the historical racism and misogyny of science fiction, H.P. Lovecraft's bigotry undergirding his Cthulu Mythos being a prime example. However, science fiction's indirection also makes it useful for achieving Córdoba's self-stated goal of slipperiness.

By discussing otherness through mutation or colonialism through interplanetary exploration or racism through interspecies contact, the self can evade not only the dominant culture's surveillance, but its own, the self-policing learned through a lifetime of training that, to survive, one has to stay in line. At its best, science fiction creates work that is clearly social and political, but also multivalent and messy – nonbinary experiences that are, as Córdoba says, closer to the actual mystery of existing in an othered body.

The last installation I'll discuss, Córdoba's *Where Thieves Go After Death* activates all those potentials of science fiction and then some.

The work began in 2017 with Córdoba's residency at the Arizona State University Museum in Phoenix. They arrived planning to make work about the desert – "The desert is challenging to me because I'm from the tropics... I find it perplexing" – and continuing their work with depopulated spaces. But, as they said, "I get there and it's 110 degrees; I can't escape my body feeling like shit and everything becomes water, water, water. How did it get here? How did native peoples get it? Colonial erasure came back in."

Human beings returned to Córdoba's project to mark their historical eradication from a landscape of air-conditioned towers and chlorinated pools, with decorative foundations everywhere, but with no public spigots for water.

The artist was studying saguaro cacti, filming her environment on walkabouts, and researching the canals built by native peoples when Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico, the impact of which still reverberates in lives lost, damage, and PTSD for residents suffering through an ongoing crisis exacerbated by an inept, underfunded, and indifferent USAmerican recovery process. Córdoba was suddenly in a position in which environmental apocalypse had come to them and everything they cared about.

In this dire situation, only a vast network could encompass the artist's grief and give her room to move. The video *SIN AGUA* includes the artist's research, stills and footage from Hollywood films, the life of cacti, Hurricane Maria, the Biosphere, "the landscape breathing," social media posts, native dance, the history of colonialism, a pilgrimage for water that became about the health of the artist's family and the survival of Puerto Rico. One thing the video doesn't have is overt science fictional content. It is not set 1500 years in the future, but in the here-and-now, and its soundtrack, scored by Córdoba, offers the abrasive rasp of desert field recordings, not the pop pleasures of XUXA SANTAMARIA.

However, science fiction is not absent from the project. Rather than plot, science fiction is present as technique. Córdova, as much of a Grand Master as any Asimov or Moorcock, has so thoroughly internalized the genre's forms that she can use them in creative and subterranean ways. The title of the installation itself, *Where Thieves Go After Death*, is drawn from Ursula K. Le Guin's science-fiction classic *Left Hand of Darkness*. The narrator describes a desert planet (which has been ravaged and mined by its inhabitants, like a far-future Earth) to his interlocutor as being akin to, in the interlocutor's culture's mythology, "the place thieves go after death."

The phrase holds layers of meaning, summoning up the thought of a hell of our own making and of revenge on those responsible for human and planetary destruction. It also brings to mind Córdova's own act of explanation: like Le Guin's narrator, they are bridging cultures and time periods in an attempt to articulate how we've reached this impasse – seeding the desert with decorative fountains but offering no water for the thirsty.

Córdova described their experience of making art in a frenzy of fear and grief during Hurricane Maria: "I lost it. I don't want to trivialize the language of mental illness, but I felt I went through a momentary madness. Shooting footage outside in 110 degree heat with homeless people catatonic in the shade, I saw the whole history of where I was visible to me at once... the past, the future. The golf dads as if they were superimposed on the native people building trenches. It was like Philip K. Dick in VALIS when he has visions of ancient Rome over the suburbs around him."

Listening to Córdova, it occurred to me that *Where Thieves Go After Death* did not need overt science-fictional content, because it was itself a dimensional portal between, as Córdova said, "my home place and another planet." Between a water-wasteful present and a more resourceful past; between the ravages of colonialism in Arizona of the past and present-day Puerto Rico.

Córdova's current, ongoing work continues the artist's voyage into a uncanny, expansive world that strands together personal material, historical elements, and techniques from science fiction, making a whole that's difficult to define and unmistakably their own. They are editing two years of footage from Puerto Rico to make a piece that, as they say, "uses people fantastically as well as realistically," slipping between hurricane moments, quotidian conversations, her parents as Orishas (or Techno-rishas), songs about hurricanes, and future scavengers of apocalyptic terrain.

There's so much more I wish I had time to say: about syncretic religion in Córdova's work; about their thinking around Blackness and Puerto Rican identity; about their fantastic level of science-fiction nerd knowledge. (While hanging out, they brought up, among everything else, Gene Wolfe's *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* and James Tiptree's "Love Is the Plan, the Plan Is Death.") Maybe someday I'll write the essay about James Tiptree and Drexciya in the work of Sofía Córdova. But, alas, I must go, and so I want to close by discussing a final formal issue: the relationship between science fiction and realism.

Córdova told me that they thought at one point that they had left science fiction behind, but realized instead that they were becoming a better sci-fi writer, "more grounded in reality." They described the way they've begun to use personal material as "a little anchor that's in our space-time," and that their comfort with letting the present speak for itself allowed them to range

more widely into other pasts, futures, and possibilities. Science fiction has been described as a literature of ideas in opposition to character, and thus posited as the opposite of realism. But current literary realism feels thin, pale, and impoverished in contrast with the density of Córdova's fictions and histories, which are both world-depicting and world-making.

Caroline Levine refers to Dickens' *Bleak House* as a kind of "narratively networked sublime" whose "complexity captures something all too ordinary at work" – that is, each of our locations at the intersections of a variety of networks. Similarly, Córdova's science-fictional realism feels true to our networked, media-encrusted reality, each day of which is as dense as a nineteenth-century novel with its chatter of social networks and smart stuff. Our space is crammed with objects and our objects are crammed with time: stacked, digitally traceable, bearing their pasts and futures with them.

If we want to survive what we have made, we need to learn to reference and carry deeper histories along with us. Córdova is doing that work. They have metabolized our current crisis and used the affordances of science fiction and the emotional urgencies of their past difficult year to make a realism that is powerful in its affecting ordinariness and its expansive sublimity.