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Latinx Futurism in *MAÑANA: Latinx Comics from the 25th Century*

Olivia Bernard

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History is rarely written by the marginalized, and in much the same way, minority voices are often just as absent from visions of the future. Now, genres like Afrofuturism are breaking the silence by imagining futures that uplift people of oppressed races, genders, and cultures. Like many groups previously excluded from science fiction, the Latinx diaspora has also begun to ask what lies beyond the decolonial and what such a future would mean for Latin American identity. *MAÑANA: Latinx Comics from the 25th Century* is a comic anthology that seeks many answers to this question. Compiled by Joamette Gil, an Afro-Cuban artist who owns an independent press dedicated to uplifting underrepresented creators, *MAÑANA* opened the doors for anyone to tell their story instead of following the typical exclusive pitch process. Gil believes that reflecting on the past is a difficult but necessary project to heal the present, which can leave the future seeming a blank and dangerous space (Tai). She explains, “MAÑANA takes the beauty and richness of Latin America and moves it forward 1,000 years from the birth date of our current struggles, as a reminder that history is long and that its arc is ours to determine” (Tai). *MAÑANA* explores how Latin America’s future and past intertwine as the creation of new interstellar identities mix with Latinx cultural heritage. The anthology presents a vast range of possible worlds that challenge traditional sci-fi tropes by placing postcolonialism,

158). She references the massacre of the Aztecs and Native Americans and points out that “When people claim a place as their own and there are already people there, it never ends well. It ends in genocide, devastation, war” (Terry and Rosales 158). Lucinda directly calls out Grewell’s “master-plots” of science fiction colonization when she says, “We weren’t seeking out a place to conquer or explore. We’re refugees” (Terry and Rosales 159). The scientists decide to try another way, and Lucinda is chosen to be la emisaria, “a representative, to ask for permission to live among them peacefully” (Terry and Rosales 159) by learning their language. By advancing this alternative, “Emisaria” poses a radical challenge to the “space colonization” trope as Lucinda rejects “a space that has been and is still being inscribed by the efforts of colonizers” (Grewell 29) despite the pressures of desperation. Through this scenario, humanity gets to atone for its colonial past.

The theme of displacement is also a prominent one in both *MAÑANA* and other Latinx literature. Displacement manifests as a character’s desire to leave home to find oneself, often in the form of returning to a cultural homeland, but at the same time feeling guilt and sadness about leaving what they know. Alex Hernandez and Jemma Salume explore this impulse in their story “Sea Change,” which uses allegory to examine displacement. In their future, a marine trematode infection causes the birth of web-handed green babies, known disparagingly as “flukes.” Like the children of immigrants who seek to understand their cultural heritage, these children are drawn to the ocean, which calls to them in “an ultrasonic song sung with tongues that pulse in Spanish and Haitian and Creole and English” (Hernandez and Salume 145). Renny, a fluke teenager from Nueva Habana, must reconcile their desire to seek an uncertain life in the sea with their father’s pain at seeing them go. Renny’s father is also an immigrant who struggled to return to a Latin American home as a child, escaping from a sinking Florida to Cuba. By using their father’s experiences to

explain their own desires to him, Renny and their father reach, if not an understanding, then at least an acceptance.

This corresponds to the generational disconnect that haunts many immigrant families and has been explored by other Latinx authors. In Cristina Garcia's novel *Dreaming in Cuban*, Pilar Puente runs away from her stifling immigrant mother to return, like Renny's father, to Cuba. During her escape, Pilar dreams that a strange spiritual group of people "lift me up high and walk with me in a slow procession toward the sea. They're chanting in a language I don't understand. I don't feel scared, though" (Garcia 34). Her dream resonates uncannily with the descriptions in "Sea Change," where Renny describes "the haunting chorus" (Hernandez and Salume 152) of the depths. The prominence of the ocean, mysterious songs, disconnect from the term "home," running away despite parental disapproval, an uncertain destination faced without fear: these are the refrains of first-generation children leaving to find themselves.

"Sámaras" and "Emisaria" also examine displacement. The former, obviously, deals with the horrid choice given to immigrants on Earth, who are not just once but twice displaced—first from their birth country to the USA, and second from their new homes to either stifling ghettos or to the unknown in space. Florencio struggles to find a place for himself in the Palace. Anaïs Mohit, an agent of the government who comes to subdue him and seize the resources of the Palace, ultimately turns to his cause and observes that "sometimes you just need to leave somewhere to understand it" (Faierman and Zela 55). The states of both leaving and returning, between which immigrants are often caught, give a fresh perspective on old homes and new that one can't see from within. "Emisaria" explores displacement to a lesser degree but still features a future where the whole of humanity is now displaced from Earth, on the brink of a mass migration to escape a home that has become unlivable—a parallel to how immigrants often must flee

unsafe situations in their home countries. “Emisaria” also hypothesizes about how the new location should respond to the displaced: by being “willing to listen” (Terry and Rosales 159).

On that note, the significance of language is another theme that ties these stories together. “Emisaria” is most straightforwardly about the power of language to tie together and understand new cultures. It imagines this as a mutual process; rather than the expectation that immigrants simply assimilate into the dominant language, “Emisaria” suggests that both must learn each other’s languages to be on equal footing. Lucinda and the aliens whom she meets have learned each other’s tongues, and Lucinda greets them in Spanish, unseating the assumption that English is (and should be) the universal language (Terry and Rosales 162). The central thesis of the story is Lucinda’s mother’s favorite phrase, which guides Lucinda in her trip to meet the aliens: “Un idioma, una vida” (Terry and Rosales 162)—one language, one life. Life and language are all but synonymous, and communication is the universal connection across cultures.

In some ways, this conflicts with other Latinx authors’ perspective on language. They instead discuss their struggles with *not* having learned the language of their culture. In her entry to the essay anthology *Wild Tongues Can’t Be Tamed*, Zakiya Jamal describes the sense of imposter syndrome she felt when she encountered others who “switched in and out of Spanish with ease, having conversations I could barely follow” (137). Her grandmother never taught her children Spanish because “she wanted them to be fully assimilated into the US” (Jamal 138) to avoid discrimination. Ultimately, however, this led to Jamal feeling “inauthentic” and alienated from other Latinx people. From this point of view, language is not the universal liberator; it can be just as exclusive as inclusive. Instead, Jamal posits that cultural connection must be more than language. It is also traditions, food, dance, song, and other threads that tie communities together.

“Sámaras” also grapples with language and the meaning it can give or take. As mentioned earlier, Florencio struggles with (not) naming the Palace, and at times words seem to fail entirely in this otherworldly space. When he speaks about manifestations of the Palace, his description is obscured by a black bar in the text. When Anaïs asks him about it, he says, “There’s not really a shorthand for it” (Faierman and Zela 53), indicating that the description is invisible/inaudible to both us and the characters and therefore indescribable. Communication remains important, though. As the two share an alien fruit, Florencio observes that the Unnamed Palace “feels like it’s communicating, especially when you eat these. But whatever it’s trying to say is larger than I can get a handle on” (Faierman and Zela 53). The power of food as communication aligns with Jamal’s assertion that culture extends beyond language to include things like food. If the Palace can be understood as an alien culture, then this is one of the ways Florencio has found to connect with it. Yet it’s still easy to lose one’s identity to the new surroundings; Anaïs must remind herself who she is, and Florencio assures her that though “I know it feels like you’re losing yourself, but you won’t. Just trust me. This will pass” (Faierman and Zela 53). Anaïs’ disorientation can be seen as an analogy for how immigrants struggle to maintain connection to themselves and their culture in a new land that need not be hostile to threaten to engulf them all the same.

Similarly, Renny’s attraction to the ocean song could be understood as being drawn to a mother tongue that they never had the chance to learn, like Jamal’s complicated relationship to the Spanish language. Though the song is in “Spanish and Haitian and Creole and English” (Hernandez and Salume 145), it’s still inhuman and haunting, implying a disconnect from what Renny knows on land. Like “Sámaras,” “Sea Change” touches on the power of names; the word “fluke” itself is of particular significance. Its meaning is layered:

“A flatfish or the part of an anchor that slams into the seabed, the gentle curve of a whale’s tail, the killing end of a harpoon, a brightly colored lure dangling from a hook. A miniscule, bloodsucking trematode. An incredible chance occurrence. A slur for those born like me” (Hernandez and Salume 146). These layered and contrasting definitions once again highlight the nuance and ambiguity of language. Words have hidden meanings that can lead to confusion or disconnect.

In the context of Latinx literature, the word “fluke” can be an allegory for the difficulty of naming an identity, which many of the authors in *Wild Tongues* struggle with. “Afro-Latinx” has a similarly complicated meaning for many. While Jamal embraces it, other authors feel its connotations lead to issues. Janel Martinez, in “Abuela’s Greatest Gift,” writes that “the term Afro-Latina seemed to take on a new meaning among those who see it as simply a trend, not an existence that comes with an unquestionable understanding of self and how you’re perceived in the world” (229). With this in mind, “Sea Change” bears one incredibly striking omission: the story never gives any word other than the stated slur “fluke” for the trematode children. Perhaps, as a new group, they’ve never had the chance to name themselves outside of the disparaging dominant land culture. In fact, “Renny” is not even the main character’s real name. It’s a nickname, given by their father, that’s short for Renacuajo—tadpole, polliwog. Readers never learn their real name. So when Renny swims off with their ocean kindred at the end of the story, it seems that perhaps they will find a new name and new identity for themselves beyond the above water world that has imposed labels on them for so long.

Latinx futurism is a young genre, brimming with potential. The future is a ripe place to explore the themes of Latinx literature and their kinship with Latinx stories of the past and the now. Science

fiction is a genre ripe for reappropriation by the marginalized, who will likely find it a powerful conduit through which to deconstruct colonialism, reimagine communication, analyze language, and come to grips with a turbulent history and present. Narratives like these can serve as warnings or aspirations, tales of freedom or repression, finding identity or losing it, here on Earth or far off in the cosmos. The stories of *MAÑANA* are just the first of many vibrant possible futures for the Latinx community.

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