

SOFÍA CÓRDOVA



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BACKED UP INTO DAWN



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INTERVIEW BY

Lorgia García Peña is the Mellon Professor of Race, Colonialism, and Diaspora at Tufts University and the founder of Freedom University Georgia. She is the author of *The Borders of Dominicanidad* (Duke, 2016), *Translating Blackness* (Duke, 2022), and *Community as Rebellion* (Haymarket, 2022) and was a 2021 Freedom Scholar.

Deliberate Illegibility

Sofía Córdova's World-Making: A Communal Praxis of Becoming

In this post-2020 world, universities, museums, galleries, and other institutions of learning have vowed to decolonize themselves and reach for racial justice. We have seen moments like this before—in the wake of the civil rights movement, for example—as legal actions forced institutions to strive for inclusion. We have seen how many times efforts to be better have failed because the structures sustaining our society are still very much grounded on white supremacy, capitalism, and colonial legacies of oppression. In this climate of both anticipation and trepidation, the work of Sofía Córdova gives me hope—radical hope—for it comes with all the sincerity, awareness, and *ganas* required to make us think and do that which we have claimed to do as scholars and artists for so very long: to abolish what does not serve us, and co-create new ways to belong, to thrive, and to live in joy. Córdova's art, grounded on the subjective experiences that constitute herself and on a desire for co-creation of better worlds, invites us to think in ways that can be, if we so choose to let them, transformative. On the occasion of her solo exhibition at Tufts University Art Galleries, I conversed with Sofía Córdova about art-making, world-making, and the radical hope her art invites us into.

WITH THE ARTIST

Sofía Córdova (b. 1985, Carolina, Puerto Rico; based in Oakland, CA) makes work that considers sci-fi as alternative history, dance music's liberatory dimensions, colonial contamination, climate change and migration, and most recently, revolution—historical and imagined—within the matrix of class, gender, race, late capitalism and its technologies. Recent works have included performance, video, music, sculpture, taxidermy, and installation. She is one half of the music and experimental sound outfit XUXA SANTAMARIA.

Lorgia García Peña:

How do your subject, position, and identities shape your work?

Sofia Córdova:



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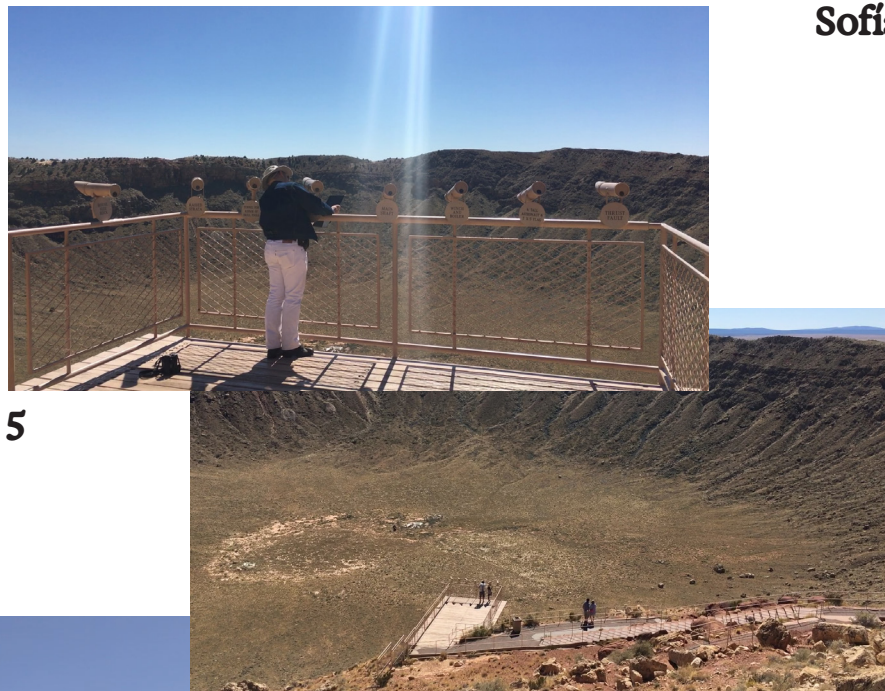


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My original entry into art was as a very serious, formal photographer, coming into my practice during the heyday of the Düsseldorf school, which prioritized formal image-making, a picturing of the world somewhat flatly, over subjectivity. ■ I quickly had a crisis when practicing art in that way because significant parts of myself were being denied by both the institution and, ultimately, myself. As a young artist I had come to believe, mainly through my education, that to be a serious artist I had to make work that didn't fuss too much about the pains and struggles of my life. ■ Once this error became apparent, I was able to see and name the ways that the art academy and its machinations and violences (market, hidden wealth, Eurocentrism) had enabled me to do the work for them, to deny myself in the service of making art objects. It was at this point, around age 24, that I paused reading theory—for a bit—and focused more on novels and experimental criticism. ■ The confluence of these voices allowed me to see that even while pushed to the margins, there was a realm of art-making that was intentional in its aim to, in some way or another (novels, music, sound), bring forth experiences that more closely resembled my own as a Puerto Rican woman (which is what I described myself as at the time). Over the years, this initial encounter with self has morphed into a site of struggle, confusion, and, ultimately, power. ■ My work is deeply constructed by my understanding of self as a Black Antillean, as a descendant of slaves and an Indigenous peoples exterminated, as a colonial subject both under Spanish royal rule and currently U.S. imperial rule, as a woman, as a queer person, and, perhaps most recently, as a mother. ■ The inherent “slipperiness” of these identities—both in how they are handed to me as part of a gendered and racial taxonomy that originates with patriarchy and whiteness themselves, and how they are interchangeable within my actual lived experience—has allowed me to understand the ideal function of my work as one that defies a fixed definition or a fixed point of entry. ■ While this might mean that the work is only legible to some people some of the time, I am heavily invested in my legibility—and crucially, my illegibility—being deliberate. To me, the Caribbean is a black hole in which the past, present, and future continuously collide. How could I make works that reflect an easily understood, fixed, and singular reality?

Lorgia García Peña:

Migration, multilingualism, and border-crossings all seem to take center stage in your work. Can you talk about your engagement with these experiences in your life and in your work?



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Sofía Córdova:

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I'm very influenced by the conditions of the diasporic ebb and flow that many of us experience. As a Puerto Rican, as someone from Borikén, I am saddled with a U.S. citizenship given to me so that bodies could be extracted to go to war in the name of the United States. So my relationship with that document is inherently painful and violent. This event, of course, sits atop a history of colonization painful and violent long before WWI. ■ This means that from the start I am, in this relationship, externally defined by my colonial subjecthood, by the cost of a citizenship not requested, by the histories that led to that moment, and so for me the movement I experience (and experienced, ancestrally) through the Atlantic is a political one. This relationship also imposes English language atop an already colonial tongue and establishes a class hierarchy between the island and the "mainland," wherein I grew up believing that eventually I would have to leave the island to get an education so I could eventually work. ■ On the opposite side of the coin of this citizenship arrangement, I am keenly aware of the many whose migratory journeys completely sever any possibility of a return home due to the brutal immigration policies of the very country I hold the passport for without my consent. There is practically no space in my process where the issues of state, borders, colonial contamination and the way it literally controls our movement over the planet are not considered, even if simply as present through myself, the maker. ■ I think too of the constant re-formation of identity I experience daily as being mirrored in some ways by that tidal coming and going, and that process is not tied to landmass. If I think back on when I started making works that eluded a direct and singular meaning, the event that shifted my thinking was the moment I left Puerto Rico for the first time—the moment that marked me as not belonging there fully anymore, but not belonging in the United States, ever, either. ■ Like much in my formation, this painful experience when sat with became, out of necessity, a source of strength. I started seeing this statelessness as a form uniquely suited as a spring for critique. Critique of U.S. Empire, critique of whiteness, critique of neo-colonialism, of capitalism, and so on. Once becoming more comfortable in that space, the work automatically started to inhabit that fluidity, which is of course a similar fluidity to what many of us experience when in this country through our racialized, gendered, and class-determined identities. ■ My work is, by the mandates of these conditions, inherently multilingual, is inherently concerned with movement. Ultimately, this means I'm vehemently against borders. I am ever dreaming of an Antillean bloc with internationalist aims.

Lorgia García Peña:

There has been a move towards sci-fi narratives and timelines, particularly for young Caribbean artists of color and queer identifying womxn¹ (I am thinking, for example, about the work of Rita Indiana and Nelly Rosario) in confronting colonial violence and historical legacies of oppression. Can you talk a little about your engagement with sci-fi and the potential of this genre as a tool for storytelling?

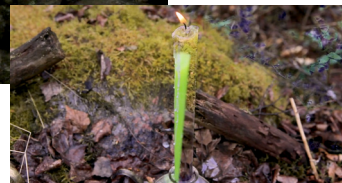
Sofía Córdova:



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I first started working with sci-fi in 2012, through the series *Echoes of a Tumbling Throne* (*Odas al fin de los tiempos*). ■ At that moment, the Western world was fleetingly obsessed with notions of the apocalypse, based on the Mayan prediction of the “end of days,” and it was in the zeitgeist in ways that weren’t interesting to me. By contrast, *Echoes* sought not to describe apocalypse but what life could be like on the other side of complete destruction with an emphasis on what that new mode of being and living could look like for Black, Brown, Indigenous, Colonized, Queer +/-or Trans peoples. ■ This new world is not devoid of the trappings of the old. Climate change became central to the story I was telling—particularly because of how it is first experienced by front-line communities, the Caribbean for example. But it was also emphatic that whatever happened, a new world is possible and knowledge of that alone holds all the power. ■ It is my hope that although psychedelic and seemingly ambivalent at times, my work offers that notion as something we have to hold communally: we can write this new world into existence, and only as a shared labor. ■ As that work progressed and I became a better student of sci-fi as a genre, a better student of the work done by those who, like me, wanted to create a world wholly other to ours (Delaney, Le Guin, Drexciya, Tiptree, Morrison), I came to learn that its power isn’t just in telling stories that operate as alternative history, in its narrative force. In fact, the greatest power it gives us is speculation itself—the power to imagine differently, to confront time, history, systemic and binding thinking itself. ■ This is why my latest works, while still operating deeply in the realm of fantasy, have strong anchors in lived experience. Whether in the recapturing of forgotten histories (the nonlinear or circular time of Queer, Women, Black and Indigenous peoples), or through the real testimony of folks about living through, say, a hurricane or immigrating to the United States “illegally,” or state neglect, or gender violence. ■ I believe the merger of the two—the lived experiences and the fantasy—gives credence to the real struggle of daily life for those of us marked by empire and colony, patriarchy and whiteness, while imagining what those lives might look like if truly free, because we have yet never been truly free.

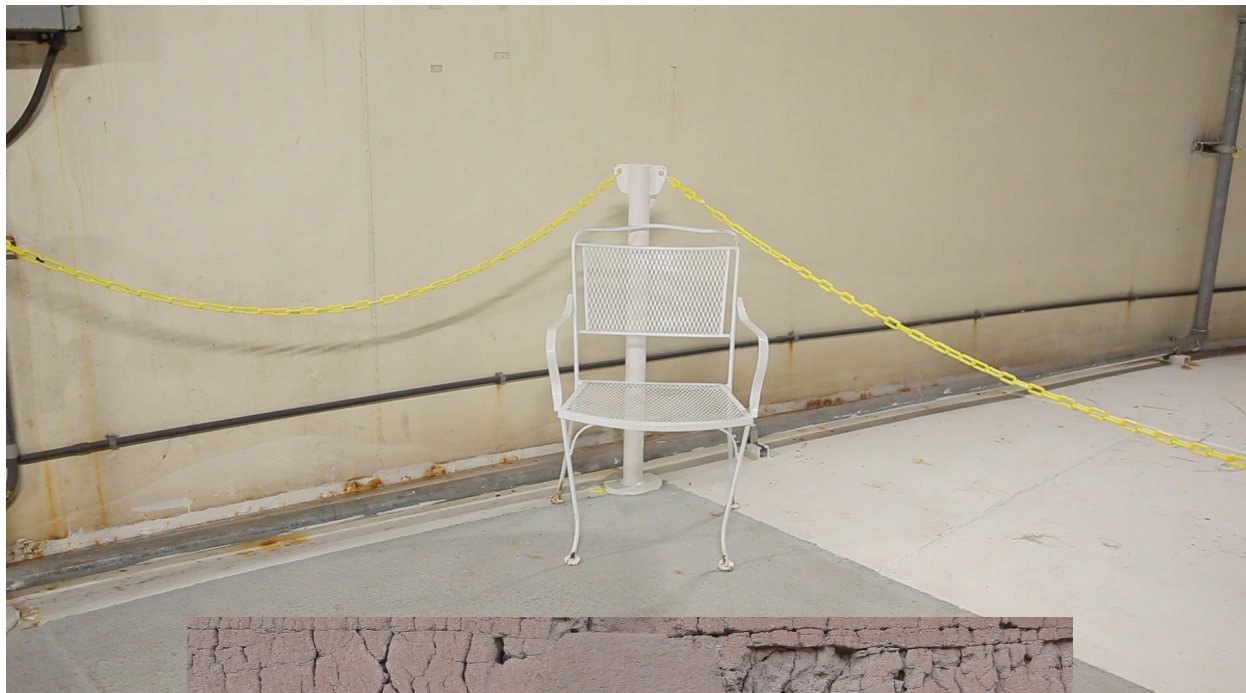
¹ Throughout this text, interviewer and artist use *women* and *womxn*. This is a reflection of the instability and fluidity of these terms, presented as such and not in opposition to each other.

Lorgia García Peña:

Your work clearly critiques racial capitalism, bordering, and other systems of oppression. How do you navigate being within “the belly of the beast,” to cite that famous quote by José Martí, being part of the art-capital world and critiquing it?

Sofía Córdova:

To be quite honest, especially during the reckoning the pandemic has brought to every aspect of my life—leaving no quarter for a compromised position—I have strongly considered leaving the arts altogether. ■ I can't justify the way that every aspect of this industry (a dear friend and poet suggested to me eons ago that calling it the art world sidesteps how it is in fact the “art industry”) is tied to extraction and essentially money laundering for the rich, the very people my work is tasked with undoing. ■ Then I have to slow down and remind myself that long before those systems were even imagined, people were making art. As part of ritual, as part of magic, as part of survival. I am then forced to realize that to quit is to deny those histories, those ancestors, and my own power as a conjurer of worlds, of the world I want to see instead of this one. ■ In terms of how I navigate it: I tend to work with performance and sound, which are unstable and time-based, and which have never been very attractive to collectors who seek objects. These works ideally, conversely, have a wider reach because of digital proliferation allowing them to reach those who can't afford the work and/or feel excluded by art institutions. ■ With the works I'm producing for this exhibition at Tufts University Art Galleries, for example, I am attempting that the resources the work draws from, whenever possible, be aligned with its political aims. This includes the people involved with the production, who come from an extended friend network—including housing provided by the artist group FICTILIS [*who, as Museum of Capitalism, had a previous exhibition at TUAG*] and a studio space provided by Co-Prosperity [*an artist-centric organization between Chicago and Catskill, NY*]. ■ It is still an imperfect process, no money is clean, but I feel strongly that my own internal commitment to disavowing the harmful, wealth-amassing practices of the art world, and how that money is funneled to artists strategically, is at least a solid experiment in how to produce a work. Doing so without necessarily activating the dark money pyramid of institutions, the bankers, oil barons, and weapons manufacturers on their boards, or the many who just by believing in these resource streams as the sole power in funding art ultimately protect them from critique.



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Lorgia García Peña:

Can you talk a about process and the ways you engage with the people depicted in your video performances? In *dawn_chorusiii*, for example, I see that the text is the same for some parts of the performance while I also see how the women share their personal stories. How much is scripted, and how much is their own narrative? How do you balance your creative process with the responsibility of letting others tell their own stories?

Sofia Córdova:



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The shift in my practice from only working with myself in performance to instead working with other performers, musicians, dancers, actors, and participants was originally activated by the realization that if my works were concerned with picturing, imagining, mimicking plural and liberated futures, the work itself must be built collectively. ■ My work must be built by many, because the worlds it is calling into being are places where emancipation has to exist totally, for all. Because of this, I have long had an internal struggle and dialogue over the practices and processes of building performance and video where I'm inviting people to offer something of themselves (their voice, their story, their image). I'm certain my process is still imperfect, but with works such as *dawn_chorusiii*, the way collaborators entered, were with, and left the piece—the process was perhaps the piece in itself. ■ For the project, I put out a call to various women's shelters and resources, including Gum Moon and El/La Para TransLatinas, because I believe collaborators should come to the work, not be singled out. The six women who ultimately participated in the piece did so in various degrees. They were instructed to think on their experience of migration and tell the story in whatever way they so chose, so omission and embellishment were encouraged. ■ Throughout 2020, I would speak to them one-on-one for many hours over the phone or over WhatsApp messages, and those are the recordings you hear "in conversation" (under/above) with the scripted lines. ■ We then started meeting in summer 2021, and through a series of workshops each participant painted a backdrop for the filmed portions of the work. It was at this point that two participants decided that wasn't the way they wanted to be portrayed, and so we started working with animation and photo drawings to tell their stories. ■ During these workshops I contracted Yellow Chair Collective, a therapy collective which is staffed by people who are all migrants themselves, and they held workshops on trauma and grounding exercises so as to hopefully mitigate some of the feelings of trauma that surfaced during our time together. This collective was hired for the duration of the project and was also on call for people facilitating the project, as the entire crew was composed of folks who'd migrated into the U.S. and were queer women. ■ For the final filming (which took place over two days), I prepared a script after listening to their recordings over and over (I transcribed them by hand three times to really learn them). I wanted the script to be terse and in some ways not to function as informative. This was done to avoid re-traumatizing anyone during the filming, and to provide a counterpoint to the more emotionally intense audio from our interviews.

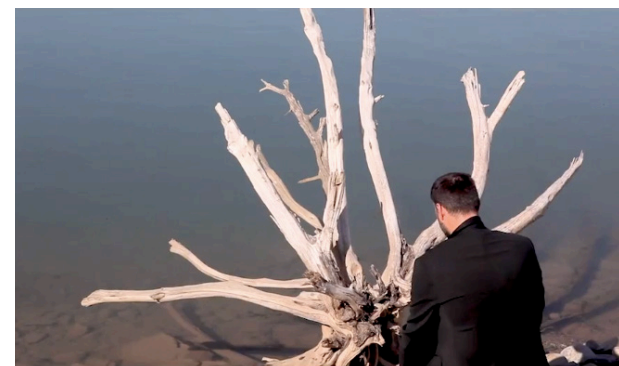
I share my process here not to present it as some sort of example of an ethically pristine practice. I'm not sure there is any ethical production under capitalism, but I really held that my role as "director" in this piece was less as a spearhead and more as a container. Sure, I made many aesthetic decisions throughout—it is a work of art, and as an artist I like to work with mystery and disorientation. ■ But I was firstly committed to holding all these stories, to telling them with integrity while also telling them, hopefully, in a way not familiar to the United States imaginary, which enforces a vision of migration that is dehumanizing, while reinforcing a vision of the U.S. as a kind and caring sanctuary, of depicting "successful immigration" as a "happily ever after" ending. ■ Many of us know that does not approximate actual reality—the journey is never finished, there is no care here other than the care we provide for each other.

EXHIBITION CURATOR

Abigail Satinsky Curator
and Head of Public Engagement,
Tufts University Art Galleries

BROCHURE

Emily Guez Graphic Designer
Puritan Press Printer



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IMAGES-STILLS FROM DIGITAL VIDEOS

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|---|---|----|---|
| 1 | GUILLOTINÆWannaCry
Act Green: Sauvage, Savage,
Salvaje, 2022 | 9 | dawn_chorusi:LAPREKUELA.
2016-2021 |
| 2 | dawn_chorusi:LAPREKUELA.
2016-2021 | 10 | dawn_chorusi:LAPREKUELA.
2016-2021 |
| 3 | SIN AGUA ii. subtle suffering,
2017-2022 | 11 | SIN AGUA iii. where thieves
go after death, 2017-2022 |
| 4 | SIN AGUA ii. subtle suffering,
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go after death, 2017-2022 |
| 5 | SIN AGUA iii. where thieves
go after death, 2017-2022 | 13 | dawn_chorusi:LAPREKUELA.
2016-2021 |
| 6 | SIN AGUA iii. where thieves
go after death, 2017-2022 | 14 | dawn_chorusi:LAPREKUELA.
2016-2021 |
| 7 | SIN AGUA iii. where thieves
go after death, 2017-2022 | 15 | dawn_chorusi:LAPREKUELA.
2016-2021 |
| 8 | dawn_chorusi:LAPREKUELA.
2016-2021 | 16 | GUILLOTINÆWannaCry
Act Green: Sauvage, Savage,
Salvaje, 2022 |

Sofía Córdova: Backed up Into Dawn

ON VIEW

August 30–October 23, 2022



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with a performance by XUXA SANTAMARIA

FRI, OCT 21 ■ 12PM

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