
“Practice believing that the world can change radically”:

Interview with Malka Older

Anke Schwarz

Technische Universität Dresden

For the Latin American Futures edition of CROLAR, Anke Schwarz had a written conversation with Malka Older, author and Faculty Associate at Arizona State University School for the Future of Innovation in Society, on speculative fiction, contemporary dystopias, and the future of borders and nation states. Older’s cyberpunk *Centenal Cycle* trilogy is a finalist for the Hugo Award for Best Series. Her latest publication is the 2019 short story collection *...And Other Disasters* from Mason Jar Press. The interview was conducted in August/September 2020.

Anke Schwarz: In a 2019 Op-ed for the New York Times (Older 2019a), you envisioned a fictional supranational *Latinamérica Unida* bearing similarities to the European Union. Can you fill me in on your motivations for drawing up that vision? How did the public react to that fictional glimpse into the future?

Malka Older: It was a moment – not unlike now, not unlike most of the moments in recent memory – in which most of the discussion and imagery around Latin America in the U.S. was negative, disdainful, and generalizing (in the sense of focusing on images of a few locations and ignoring the rest), so I really wanted to put forward a vision to remind people that Latin America is large, diverse, powerful,

and potentially much more powerful. I actually wrote and submitted two pieces, one of which was about democracy and therefore not tied to a specific region, and even though I worried about not interesting some readers, I was also glad when my editor chose the Latin America piece, because it felt so important to put that out into the world. More broadly, I also think that the question of supra-national organizations and sub-national autonomies/decentralization is one of the critical ones in governance in this period.

The reactions were largely positive. The only real negative reaction came from people saying things like, “oh, that’s impossible, look at how x country and y country fight over nothing,” to which I responded that European countries had literally been in a massive war not very many decades before the EC was founded and still squabble quite a bit.

AS: Who was the target audience of your intervention on the New York Times?

MO: Most obviously, of course, people who read the NYTimes. USians without a lot of direct interest in or knowledge of Latin America. I was really extremely pleased with all the reactions I got from people in Latin America or Latinxs in the US, and so so happy that it gave them interesting

ways to think about the future, but when I came up with the concept it was about drawing attention to a region to which I don't think that group of people – USians without particular ties to the area – pay much attention. And it's really unfortunate that they don't. Yet, what infuriated me was that when the New York Times translated the piece into Spanish, which I was of course thrilled about, they changed "Latinamérica" to "Latinoamerica". Why should it be LatinO america?

AS: Can you explain your anger about this wording? What was lost in this translation?

MO: "Latinoamerica" is the accepted term, but when I was looking for a name for my future, unified Latin America, I couldn't see the sense of having the adjective masculine when the noun was feminine. It was like it was referring to the people (also a feminine noun in Spanish – *la gente*) instead of the place but with a generalized masculine or some other machismo bullshit. I even looked around a bit but I couldn't find any reasoning behind it. And part of the value of imagining things in the future is to notice where there is no reason for something to be the suboptimal way it is and revise it into something better.

AS: Given drone warfare and authoritarianism, femicide and racist violence, climate crisis and the current pandemic, are we living in a "SF dystopia"?

MO: Mmm, yes. And also no. On the one hand, most "SF dystopias" are not what I

in my personal nomenclature would call dystopias. They tend to be books about dark times and the people who lead their home to better times. And we're very much living in a situation like that, with some horrific things being perpetrated, mainly by people in power, and lots of other people working (usually in less photogenic ways than in the movies) to try to make a better world. In fact, I think the label "dystopia" is often used to distance those works from reality and make us feel like we're not living in a world in which, for example, children are made to fight as soldiers or women are forced into reproduction or legally bound to their husbands. We know that those things happen, but for the most part they happen elsewhere and we don't have to think about them; then, when they are presented to us in a fictionalized form happening closer to home, we pretend they are futuristic and dystopian and identify with the heroes fighting against them.

AS: If these heroes enter as figures of hope in "SF dystopias", how can we be hopeful in the current conjuncture?

MO: Okay, so, in terms of being hopeful... while in some ways it is easy and certainly important and necessary to see all the terrible things in the world, we have in fact gotten a lot better in a lot of ways. The rate of femicide is appalling (and, wow, Mac Pages just auto-corrected femicide to feticide, which is indicative right there), but at least now, in most but by no means all of the world, it is considered a bad thing (if not bad enough to legislate more strongly

against). That was very different one hundred, two hundred years ago. Poverty, hunger, child labor, racism – although I wouldn't say we're doing well on any of these, we have improved. The arc is still bending towards a better world, if slowly. And it is on us to continue to bend it, and doing that requires being hopeful.

AS: Elsewhere (Older 2019b), you suggest moving beyond the nation-state system with its territorial contestations, arbitrary border-drawing and colonialist legacies. From your point of view, what could replace that territorialized system?

MO: One possible scenario is what I describe in my *Centenal Cycle* trilogy, starting with *Infomocracy*. There is still a territorial element, but it's much smaller – involving only however much territory is required to house a set of roughly 100,000 people – and it is only to create a cohesive unit; the government chosen by that group can be anywhere (or nowhere, in the sense of entirely distributed) in the world. Alternatively, it's possible to imagine a situation with no territoriality at all, in which people choose allegiances – even overlapping allegiances – and pay taxes and receive benefits as a result of that choice, with no relation to location. One country could begin by offering limited, pay-per citizenship to anyone anywhere in the world, and potentially trigger a competition to access taxes. Of course there are some complications, but they are not insurmountable and no more ridiculous than some of the contradictions in the current system. I am not suggesting

pay-per citizenship as the way to go, but for someone who looks at things through the capitalist mindset, sometimes demonstrating examples that make more sense to capitalism but contradict certain other norms are helpful for starting to think differently about parameters and frameworks. I would far rather have a borderless world; or perhaps a world with extremely fungible borders used mainly for administrative convenience (e.g., having a local authority to appeal to for whatever).

AS: In the three books of your *Centenal Cycle* (Older 2016, 2017a, 2018a), nation states are mere remnants of the past, having been widely replaced by a global system of micro-democracy. Can you take us through the storyline of how this deterritorialization of imagined countries and communities in your trilogy came about?

MO: When I wrote the book, I did not think of it as a particularly plausible scenario, but rather as one that I was using as a thought experiment to explore some issues in the world today. However, since then I've begun to feel that it is in fact slightly more plausible. One possible route I see, hinted at in the books, is through multinational corporations. These are entities that are not states, and avoid many of the responsibilities and constraints of statehood, but also put themselves on the same level as states when it suits them – for example, when bringing suit against states. These corporations have their own cultures and tax structures and rules,

often as enclaves within a number of different states. Moreover, many of them are extremely good at manipulating public opinion. I can see some of them deciding that, yes, they would like to be States of a sort, and moreover that some form of (pseudo-)democracy could work quite well for them.

But back to answer your first question about how this happens in the book! To sketch it out in general terms – because again, when I initially wrote it, it wasn't particularly important to me how it happened, but rather as a thought-experiment scenario to reflect our own world – the nation-state system, for various reasons, comes to a tipping point in which the combination of non-state actors, corporations, internal reform and protest movements, the effects of environmental degradation, etc. have made it fairly clear that nations as such are no longer a going concern and maybe nobody really wants a large territory anymore because it's too expensive to deal with everything that can go wrong. The UN, itself evolving into a new form, tries to manage the transition, and at around the same time two large civil suits in the US are won in favor of the plaintiffs, one against diet soda companies, for lying to the public, and the other against cable news, ditto. The large damages, invested, provide enough initial capital and interest to set up and run Information.

AS: Which techniques do you use to render futures present in your writing?

MO: They're similar to rendering any

imagined world present – sensory details, specificity, and so on – with a few additions. We expect technology to be different in the future, either substantively or superficially (e.g. user interfaces). I had some ideas that had just been floating around my head – things I would like to see, or imagine should be possible – and I added others, sometimes in response to plot needs. Another technique is taking objects – physical or conceptual – out of the present and imagining them into the future with accompanying wear and tear.

AS: Can you tell us a bit more about the concept of narrative disorder? In your *Centenal Cycle* trilogy, Mishima and Amran are on the spectrum of this disorder, which seems to be an asset for their work as Information spies. Elsewhere (Older 2018b) you described its symptoms as “narrative addiction and narrative perception”. How would you locate that between bingeing on Netflix, day-dreaming, and alt-right “alternative facts”?

MO: First, let me link to an essay (Older 2017b) where I explain a bit more about it and a short story (Older 2017c) about Mishima that also goes into more detail. The addiction is very much about bingeing on Netflix. However, the perception part is usually less about facts than moods, or pacing, or images, or inflection points. The issue with narrative disorder is not so much saying, for example, “the economy is doing well” or “the climate isn't getting warmer” in defiance of the facts but more like “we got into the same taxi from opposite doors during a rainstorm so probably we will fall

in love” or “I should stand up and take charge here regardless of what I know about the situation because there has to be a hero and that is obviously me” or “I should definitely carry a gun because I will be able to tell the bad guys from the good guys and also not miss because gun fights are easy to understand in the moment.” It’s about the way a narrative unfolds, and imagining that narrative unfolding occurs in real life. Now, in life as in the books, sometimes this works out to be true, whether because of chance, or because (what do I know?) maybe there is some real narrative basis to life, or – and this is the one I find most interesting – because a lot of people are subject to the same disorder around the same tropes and sort of act them out (e.g., if the other person who got into the taxi also expects meet-cute->romcom, there may be flirting because of that expectation on both sides). However, there are also plenty of times when that narrative sense misleads us.

AS: When you gave a talk about [Speculative Resistance](#) at the 2018 Personal Democracy Forum (Older 2018b), one question from the audience was: “How do we get more people to think of the impossible?” Could you re-answer that for CROLAR?

MO: Read more speculative fiction, for starters. Practice, like anything else; practice believing that the world can change radically, that the past may give us indications and clues about the future but that it is by no means certain as a predictor. For me it’s important at this

junction – perhaps always – to combat the idea that “progress” is unilinear, indeed that increased industrialization and technology is necessarily “progress” – really, to question all of our ideas about what the future can and should look like. A future that looks like Darfur could be post-apocalyptic, or it could be a sustainable, healthy adjustment. We’d need to know a lot more about what was going on to decide which. But either way, there’s no guarantee it won’t happen.

AS: What are you reading right now? Which fiction and non-fiction works on Latin American and other futures would you recommend?

MO: I’m always reading a lot of different things at once and in quick succession. I just reread *Transportes González e Hija* (which is available in English as well as in a quite Mexican Spanish – Escandon 2005a and 2005b) and started the series of detective novels by Michael Nava (1986 ff.). Borges is always a good read for thinking about impossibilities. And I’ve been involved in two projects recently that I’m excited about: [The Caribbean Futures Institute](#), what it says on the tin and has just put out this wonderful anthology (Lord & Buckell 2020), and [Constelación Magazine](#), a new speculative literary journal that will translate stories to offer bilingual Español-English content.

Bibliography

Caribbean Futures Institute, The: <https://>

- caribbeanfuturesinstitute.com/ (Last access 10/02/2021).
- Constelación Magazine: A Bilingual Speculative Fiction Magazine, at: <https://www.constelacionmagazine.com/> (Last access 19/12/2020).
- Escandón, María Amparo (2005a): *González and Daughter Trucking Co.: A road novel with literary license*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
- Escandón, María Amparo (2005b): *Transportes González e Hija. Una vida sobre ruedas*. Madrid: Maeva.
- Lord, Karen & Buckell, Tobias S. (eds.) (2020): *Reclaim, Restore, Return: Futurist Tales from the Caribbean*, St. Claire: The Caribbean Futures Institute/ NGC Boca Lit Fest.
- Nava, Michael (1986): *The Little Death. A Henry Rios Mystery*, Emeryville: Alyson Publications.
- Older, Malka (2016): *Infomocracy. Book One of the Centenal Cycle*, New York: Tom Doherty Associates.
- Older, Malka (2017a): *Null States: Book Two of the Centenal Cycle*, New York: Tom Doherty Associates.
- Older, Malka (2017b): *The Narrative Spectrum*, at: <https://firesidefiction.com/the-narrative-spectrum> (Last access 19/12/2020).
- Older, Malka (2017c): *Narrative Disorder*, at: <https://firesidefiction.com/narrative-disorder> (Last access 19/12/2020).
- Older, Malka (2018a): *State Tectonics. Book Three of the Centenal Cycle*, New York: Tom Doherty Associates.
- Older, Malka (2018b): Speculative Resistance at #PDF18, Personal Democracy Forum 18, at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yC8hyksvKOc&feature=youtu.be> (Last access 10/02/2021).
- Older, Malka (2019a): "The United States Should Welcome a Strong, United Latin America," in: *New York Times*, June 17,, at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/17/opinion/future-united-latin-america.html> (Last access 10/02/2021).
- Older, Malka (2019b): "The Kurds Are the Nation-State's Latest Victims," in: *Foreign Policy*, October 31, at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/31/turkey-syria-kurds-nation-state-latest-victim/> (Last access 10/02/2021).
- Older, Malka (2019c): *...And Other Disasters*, Baltimore: Mason Jar Press.