Recall this Book 126

E.G.Condé/Steve Gonzalez on

Hurricanes, Fiction, and Speculative Ethnography [EF, SG]

April 4, 2024

Elizabeth:

Hello, everyone, and welcome to our episode of *Recall This Book*. I'm really excited today to welcome Steve Gonzalez, who is a former student and current colleague in anthropology, dear friend, and fellow writing group member. Hello, Steve.

Steve Gonzalez:

Hello. Thank you so much. It's a pleasure to be on the show.

Elizabeth:

Delighted to have you. So today we're going to talk about Steve's new novella, *Sordidez*, and his work in anthropology and speculative fiction, and the boundaries between those endeavors. Steve is a graduate of Keene State College in New Hampshire, and he has an MA from Brandeis, and a PhD in anthropology from MIT, the history of anthropology, history and science and technology studies. The title of his dissertation is *Cloud Ecologies: An Environmental Ethnography of Data Centers.* It's a really exciting work. It's based on fieldwork in New England, Arizona, Puerto Rico, and Iceland. And he currently holds a postdoc at Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany.

So Steve, I'd love to start just by having you introduce for us the book that we're discussing today, your novella, and begin with a brief reading so people can get a sense of the beautiful language.

Steve Gonzalez:

Thank you for that kind introduction. So today I want to talk about my novella, *Sordidez*. It's a work of climate fiction and indigenous futurism, and the story is in part inspired by my experiences as a Puerto Rican growing up in the

diaspora, but also as a scholar who has spent a lot of time in Puerto Rico looking at infrastructure and identity, and the intersection of those two things.

So I'm going to read a little bit from the introduction or the first chapter, which is called Huracán, Heart of Sky.

"It was dusk when Teddy came for us. His breath was thick and wet as it swept through the forest. Not even the coquis dared to chirp with him there, rummaging in the brush. I can still remember the wails of the trees as he flayed their barks, as he dismembered them limb by limb. I was huddled with my family when his tongue slithered through cracks in our zinc roof, bored holes in the tarp that we hoped would shield us. Someone screamed when the roof caved in, splintered under the weight of a fallen yabisi, its pale trunk cracked like bone beneath his invisible fist.

Then Teddy descended, jaws bared, his saliva oozing down on us in wicked rivulets. Hands clasped, we pleaded to our creator for quick deaths, but death never came. Instead, as if our zemis had heard our prayers, Teddy's voice caught in his throat. Silence. It was as if the engine of the cosmos had suddenly shuttered its industry, giving way to quiet entropy. And that's when I remembered what the gobernadora had said on the radio the night before, her warning not to trust the stillness. No habrá paz en medio de la tormenta.

When it was so quiet that I could hear my heart drumming in my ears, I clambered out of the wreckage. My sisters cursed at me for my foolishness. But soon they followed, curious. Where the roof had collapsed, bleached bark and serrated metal parted like the petals of a hideous flower to reveal him, grinning, en gordo in the pallid sky. Below, the jungle had withered to a tangle of brown as if his breath curled with unseen flame. A coconut palm whined and crashed. Its death echoed over the mountains, twisting into something that reminded me of laughter. I lifted my gaze to the sky to search for the face of the Taino deity that legends say takes the shape of a storm, arms curling like serpents to set the clouds into a devastating spiral. Huracán."

And I'll stop there.

Elizabeth:

That's wonderful. I was kind of hoping you would pick that passage, actually. So there's so much to talk about, but one thing that I'm just reminded of as I

hear it again is the population of the scene with so many different kinds of beings, right? I mean, it's a world that's full of creatures and full of life. The descriptions of the trees that are wailing and whining, and the way in which you describe the huracán. Can you tell us a little bit about the etymology of huracán, and where you're getting some of this personification?

Steve Gonzalez:

Yeah, that's an excellent question. So for me, growing up in Puerto Rico, one of the things that you notice is how loud it is as a place. And what I mean by that is it's loud with people, but it's also loud with all kinds of creatures that thrive in a tropical setting. And so in particular, one of the things that you notice when you're in Puerto Rico at night are the coquis, which are these little frogs that sing in a really distinctive way, and they're only found in Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and a few other places on Earth. And so it occurred to me that in order to conjure or capture that, I had to describe the richness and the vivid intensity of just the things that live there.

And huracán is actually a word that is also in Yucatec Mayan languages as well as the Taíno languages, the Taíno-Arawak languages, which are indigenous to Puerto Rico. And Huracán is an aspect of the divine creatrix, Guabancex. So Atabey/Guabancex. And what she does is she curls her arms into a spiral to form this hurricane with the help of two other chiefs of the easterly and western winds. And so there was this sense of liveliness, but also this sense that in the Taíno world as we ... Both in the contemporary indigenous practices, but also historically, there is this sense that the world is alive. And so the Taíno are animists. And so the world, not only living things but rocks and storms and everything has a kind of vitality suffused through it. And that is what I was hoping to capture in that passage by-

Elizabeth:

Yes. And you did a wonderful job.

Steve Gonzalez:

Thank you.

Elizabeth:

And you mentioning that, it's true that the presence of sound is really great, and the ways in which you ... And I've never been in a very severe hurricane, but I've been around the tail edges of quite a few. And that is one of the ways in which the reality changes. The relationship to sound is just completely different, and the kind of embodied quality of it. So that's fantastic.

Steve Gonzalez:

And I think for me, one of the things that really creeped me out in my experiences in hurricanes is just how quiet it suddenly gets when you near the eye of the storm, when you near the center of it. And so rather than conveying or giving you a sense of peace because it's so quiet, you actually have this profound sense of dread because the world has suddenly become silent.

Elizabeth:

Overly silent. Yeah.

Steve Gonzalez:

Yeah.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. That's great. So in the book, as a whole, which has a very layered and rich plot and characterizations, it's not simply a mythological account. It's very deeply invested within contemporary politics and politics of the future. That may have something to do with the name of the hurricane. Would you like to tell us a little bit about why you called it ... We have this strange practice that we name storms, which itself could be a whole ethnographic study.

Steve Gonzalez:

Yeah. So actually, the next passage after where I stopped reading, I explain why the hurricane is named Teddy, which is, as anyone who follows NOAA, or the National Atmospheric and Oceanic Administration, there is a sampling of random names that is preordained every year. And so the fifth storm will always be called Paul in 2024, because it has been preordained as so. And then once you exceed the number of names that have been ascribed, which is something like 20 names, then it goes into Greek letters. So then there's Alphas and Omegas and Zetas and Thetas, and all those variations.

But I decided to name this hurricane Teddy because I wanted to evoke how Puerto Rico became part of the United States imperial project. And so Theodore Roosevelt, being the president at the time of the Spanish-American War, and the person who famously set foot on the island and declared that it was now part of the US of A, I thought it would be really interesting and important to feature that into the plot by way of this hurricane, as a reference back, because this is a story about Puerto Ricans becoming free and becoming something different than what they are currently. So their relationship to land, to themselves, to identity, their sense of who they are in the wider world is shifting, both in the present but also in this fictive future. So not to spoil too much, but Teddy means the arrival of a new kind of Puerto Rico that is no longer tethered to the United States.

And it was also part of how America became an imperial power, was by these colonies from Spain and then projecting that whole image of America as empire vis-a-vis the Monroe Doctrine and so forth.

Elizabeth:

Well, also disavowing it by creating these legal fictions that are supposedly different from colonies. Yeah, and I mean, the hurricane is just a great way to encapsulate so many of the themes because it is this seemingly natural phenomenon that's clearly also a social and a political effect of colonialism and capitalism and the generation of carbon that that produces. And one notices

that it used to be in August, you'd only be at the A's or B's or C's in hurricanes, and now you're already at the J's. It's quite frightening.

Steve Gonzalez:

Yeah, right. And it becomes a headline once you get into the Greek letters.

Elizabeth:

Right, exactly. Anyhow. So you're able to do things. You and I have talked a lot about this, and this is something that I think is a broader conversation too. You're able to do a lot with language in the genre that you're working in that's different, maybe not better or worse, but very different than what I would imagine, for instance, the genre that you write in your dissertation. And yet some of the same ideas are in play. In some ways you're telling a very similar kind of a story. Can you tell us a little bit about how you work with that and does that pose challenges for you?

Steve Gonzalez:

Yeah, yeah. So that's a really great question. So one of the things that I love about speculation and speculative practices in fiction is the ability to play with structure, in form, and metaphor, and to kind of utilize all of the descriptive tools that we have in our conversations with one another, but also as storytellers. And there are less limits to that kind of experimentation and play in the fiction world than there are in the academic world.

However, I do think that is to some degree changing. And in anthropology in particular, we as ethnographers are storytellers. We're telling stories and we're making decisions about what stories to tell, how to tell them, how to analyze or interpret them, but also what we include, what we omit, what we highlight, what we emphasize, what we overlook. Those are all choices that we're making, and so there is a lot of creativity that I think is ... It is part of the scholarly practice of anthropologists, but I do think that with fiction, it allows you to put things together, put things against each other, and not necessarily take a stance on what the interpretive angle is. Sometimes you're involving the

reader in a way that maybe you're involving your peers that you're communicating, or the scholarly community that you're communicating to differently. There's a different level of involvement, and there's a certain level of resolution or unresolvedness that I think fiction allows for that's-

Elizabeth:

Can I ask you about one thing you just said? Taking a stance. Because on the one hand, it's like you ... Yeah. When we write an article or a book or something in a scholarly mode, we're supposed to have an argument, we're supposed to have evidence, hopefully the evidence should have some relationship to the question and the argument. And I think those are very important endeavors. And in that sense, you could call that taking a stance, but it's also true maybe that in writing fiction or poetry or other so-called creative genres, you can enact a stance in a different way. And in a sense you are ... I mean, it's reductive to call it an argument. I think my literary scholar friends would want to poke me in the eye if I called a poem as having an argument. But it's not completely dissimilar either, right?

Steve Gonzalez:

Yeah. I mean, I think that writers are lying if they're telling you that they're somehow not making social commentary or not taking stances on certain issues. But I think maybe the difference is just the explicitness of it, or even just the staging of it, that we can stage these points of view that we might not be allowed to even empathize with, for instance, because they're so terrible. Some of these characters that we invent are so awful and terrible people that we might not ever be able to empathize with them in the way that voicing them directly, being their voice, allows. But yeah.

Elizabeth:

Right, or it would be presumptuous to do that, right?

Steve Gonzalez:

Yes. Right, right.

Elizabeth:

It would be presumptuous to do that in a ... Yeah.

Steve Gonzalez:

Right. I mean, I think that there are certainly trade-offs that we make when we choose how to express what it is that we want to say in either a scholarly or an artistic voice. And I think that there are certainly ... I hope that anthropologists and ethnographers will start to see speculation and fiction more as a resource, but I don't think it is ever a substitution for the kind of rigorous, reflexive, and situated practice that we do with ethnography where we are making very clear who we are vis-a-vis other people, and how we acquired the knowledge that we did, citationality, all of those things that fiction writers don't have to always do as much or can obscure using these techniques of point of view and so forth. But I do think that there is so much promise in at least trying to think and embrace the already fictive and speculative dimensions of how we represent our data, which we are doing all the time, just maybe not thinking of it in those terms.

Elizabeth:

Right, exactly. I think that's exactly right. And there have been really fairly dramatic changes in the acceptability of these kinds of things. There's a journal called *Anthropology and Humanism*, which has now sections on poetry and fiction and creative nonfiction, and there are several other journals and blogs and other kinds of things that are working in this way. It's a part of, and this leads me to another question, of a shift towards what's now being called multimodal ... I think it would probably have been called multimedia in the past, anthropology that includes not only things like this, but also film, audio work and other kinds of practices. And you yourself have extended in some of this as well. Can you tell us a little bit about your film work?

Steve Gonzalez:

Yeah. So I've always been kind of searching for expressive opportunities or experimental opportunities with my scholarship. And the first time I really did this was as part of a documentary filmmaking course. I made a documentary about the computer club at MIT called SIPB, or the Student Information Processing Board. And this was an ethnographic film, the first I have ever made.

And it was a really interesting process because I had to do essentially an ethnography of this group and film it. I am used to doing ethnography, but not used to doing ethnography and filming people. And the whole interactional frames are ... There's a lot more vulnerability in doing that and then displaying it in the world because you lack the ability to curate the version of yourself that you want people to see as easily. And there's this rawness to it, which is really exciting, and so I really loved that process. And I also made a point to visibilize myself as a filmmaker, as an ethnographer, in this community as an outsider. And that was incredibly interesting and instructive and difficult.

Elizabeth:

Can you say what you mean by visibilize there?

Steve Gonzalez:

Yeah. So I think in a lot of ... And there's a lot of film scholars have written about this, I think, that there's this documentarian gaze, which sometimes replicates that kind of Donna Haraway view from nowhere, that naturalistic observation that is-

Elizabeth:

The god's eye view.

Steve Gonzalez:

The god's eye, or the magnification of this male gaze that does not have a body. So I made a point to sometimes film myself in the shot, to also just film short memos of myself talking, film myself filming. I was very meta. Had people film me filming. And it was a really fun experience in that way, with reflexivity, to think of it in those terms.

But I also ventured into speculative filmmaking. And so this was a collaborative project that I did in 2020. And the funny part about this is that this was for the Society of Cultural Anthropology's annual meeting, and they were doing an experiment, which was a virtual meeting format, 100% virtual. And it was distributed in 2020. It was this big experiment. Little did anyone know that the virtual experiment would become the blueprint for what our next few years would look like. COVID-19 and all of that. So the organizers saw the future.

But we made this film called *World Without Clouds.* I made this film with a few other anthropology scholars, Jia Hui Lee, Luisa Reis Castro, Gabrielle Robbins, Julianne Yip. And this was a film that was based on the simple premise of what would happen if clouds one day became extinct. And the films followed a group of scientists who were anthropologists turned ... Almost linguistic anthropologists of clouds, who were trying to communicate with the clouds and ask them why they were leaving, and to try to save them in a way that was ... And it very much mirrors Franz Boas and his salvage anthropology, trying to preserve these indigenous cultures and languages before they disappeared and this urgency. So in some ways it was playful, it was a critique, it was satire. It was a mix of a lot of different elements, but it was very fun, the process of putting it together.

Elizabeth:

So speculation is part of it, has been part of it, right?

Steve Gonzalez:

Yeah. And there's almost this prescience where people these days ... And also there was a moment when this happened a lot, when people would call, they would make it very clear that what they were talking about in their fieldwork happened between this year and this year, and referring to ethnographic present and being very really, really specific about when that ethnographic present is, because even just with the life cycle and the timelines of how books are released and publishing and so forth, we have come to see that often we're talking very much about the past by the time our findings are out there in the world. And so there's this sense of speculation that I think is ... Even when we publish an article or when we think about what it is that we're studying and why we're studying it, we're often animated as I was, I think, by this sense of what will this mean in the future? Will it mean nothing? Is this a blip, or is this going to be the next big thing?

Elizabeth:

Right, right. Yeah. There's an article written by the anthropologist George Marcus called *The Unbearable Slowness of Being an Anthropologist Today*. I think this is becoming more and more acute as communication becomes quicker and quicker. I mean, Ursula K. Le Guin, whom we had a podcast episode about few months ago, is a great example of this. And she was the daughter of a well-known anthropologist, Alfred Kroeber. And her queer, feminist, Daoist fiction is very ... Anarchist maybe too, is very much premised on this idea of a kind of speculative anthropology, as well as people like Octavia Butler, her work. Kindred is one that comes to mind. And probably, Steve, you might be able to think of others that you might put into this category as speculative anthropology.

Steve Gonzalez:

Yeah, yeah. So one book that comes to mind recently, and is also the winner of the Hugo, was the book by Arkady Martine called *A Memory Called Empire*. And there's also a sequel called *A Desolation Called Peace*. And these two books are very much inspired by ... I believe that Arkady's ... I think it's her father or grandfather was an anthropologist. And she herself was trained as a Byzantine

historian. And so there's this deep speculative and sociopolitical kind of ambit in her work that really is the foundation for a lot of her storytelling. And so rather than focusing on some technological premise, the premises are more sociological or political.

To your point on Ursula K. Le Guin, I think a lot with her and her famous carrier bag theory as an instruction manual or a blueprint or a manifesto on the importance of speculative fiction, but also how to speculate. And one of the things that really has stood out to me as a creative, but also as a scholar, is just this idea of gathering, of foraging for elements and combining them together because that is often what we do in ethnography. We set out to study X. In my case, data centers and how they operate.

And in the course of doing that, we accidentally stumble upon things like solar farms or indigenous revivalist communities in Puerto Rico, for instance, Taino communities, that I did not intend to study at all in the course of studying data centers, but it just so happened that they came before my path. So there was this sense of gathering and putting together different elements that is very much like ethnography, all the different archives that we're working with. Some of them are our own, some of them are others, some of them are visual, some of them are audio, some of them are a transcript, some of them are photos.

But in the same way, I think in my novella, *Sordidez*, I am drawing from a bunch of different sources and materials. And so I'm drawing from mythological texts and historical texts, but also my own experiences. I'm drawing from family stories. I'm drawing from various other works of fiction, and responding to them in a really subtle way. And so that to me has always been such an inspiration, is that carrier bag theory, because it's so true to how I think we create, we assemble, by foraging these components and putting them together in new and creative ways.

Elizabeth:

So Steve, can you tell us a little bit about what you have planned in the future, either with your fiction or your scholarship, or both?

Steve Gonzalez:

Yeah. So I think on the subject of the fiction, this story, *Sordidez,* is actually one of many stories that are set in the same kind of literary universe. And so I had this idea to tell a set of interconnected stories. And many of them are inspired by my life, but also by fieldwork and so forth. And a theme in a lot of the stories is infrastructure, because that's what I study. But I do have other stories in mind to continue this longer story, this longer form of interconnected storytelling. And so there will be more stories that explore things like the intersection of supercomputing and shamanism, for instance. So I've been very obsessed with quantum entanglement and shamanic divination, and the ways that they intersect or speak to each other or at each other or across each other. And so the next book project will be exploring those intersections, but I also will continue to think about climate as a character, climate as something that is both relentlessly local, but also global and interconnected and strange in unexpected ways.

Elizabeth:

Fantastic. So maybe this is a good moment to shift to the recallable books portion of our conversation. This is where we suggest things that if people find this conversation interesting, they might wish to pursue in other directions. So Steve, do you have something to suggest to our listeners?

Steve Gonzalez:

Yeah. So I have a book that ... So one of the things in *Sordidez* that is, I would say ... It is science fiction, so the technological premise or fictive technology in it is something I call the hydrophage. And the hydrophage is a climate weapon which rapidly desertifies a landscape. And so much of the story is based on this, but it's actually based on a real event in history. Back in the late 16th century in what is today Mexico City, Ciudad Mexico, where ... The project was called the Real Desague de Huehuetoca. So it was a massive drainage project, a hydraulic project that the Spaniards hoped to implement in the new world, to make it more like Spain because they couldn't deal with the floating gardens

and the wetness of the world of the Mexicas. And the book that does such a good job tracking this is called *Dreaming of Dry Land* by Vera Candiani.

Elizabeth:

We'll put this on the website.

Steve Gonzalez:

And it's a really fascinating historical and philosophical meditation on coloniality and climate change and terraforming and geoengineering and all those things that thread between them.

Elizabeth:

Great. Okay. So my contribution will be less scholarly. I'm going to suggest that people go to check out the TV show *The Expanse*, which finished several years ago. I think it has about seven seasons. I can't remember which streaming service it's on, but we'll post that. But it's really a kind of speculative anthropology of the solar system, or let's say the inner solar system, with Earth and Mars as two powers, and then the asteroid belt, which is really almost like ... It's certainly like a colonial space or colonized space, has something like maybe the Caribbean, particularly because it has this kind of archipelago quality to it. And yeah. The writers of the show just do a really great job politically, linguistically, socially documenting these worlds and speculating about them in relation to geopolitics in the Earth in the 21st century. So I recommend it highly.

Steve Gonzalez:

I've seen a few episodes, and I was very intrigued. So I will just echo that recommendation from just the first few.

Elizabeth:

Great. Thank you. And thank you so much, Steve, for joining us. This has been a terrific conversation, and we will certainly place links to your book on the website so that folks can get a hold of it, as well as the various things that we discussed here today.

Steve Gonzalez:

Thank you so much for having me on the show, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth:

And thank you, dear listeners. I invite you to check out some of our other episodes, including a recent episode about Ursula K. Le Guin, as I mentioned, as well as Martin Puchner's book, *Culture: The Story of Us*, and a contemporary or a current series, a three-part series on *Violent Majorities, Indian and Israeli Ethnonationalism* with hosts Lori Allen and Ajantha Subramanian. So without further ado, thank you, listeners and goodbye until next time.

Recall This Book is the creation of John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry. Sound editing is by Khimaya Bagla, and music comes from a song by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy. We gratefully acknowledge support from Brandeis University and its Mandel Center for the Humanities. We always want to hear from you with your comments, criticisms, or suggestions for future episodes. Finally, if you enjoyed today's show, please forward it to five people or write a review and rate us wherever you get your podcasts. Thanks for listening.