

**NorthAmeriCon '17 / NASFIC 2017**  
**A convention report by Evelyn C. Leeper**  
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## **Introduction**

This is a convention report for NorthAmeriCon '17 (NASFIC 2017, and henceforth referred to as just NASFIC), held in San Juan, Puerto Rico, July 6-9, 2017, with a little bit of sightseeing thrown in (because a separate report would not be worthwhile).

It is with some trepidation I start this report. We had never attended a NASFIC before. For a long time we always went to Worldcon, and for the recent years where we skipped the overseas Worldcon, the NASFIC seemed like a misguided attempt to be a substitute. But a NASFIC in Puerto Rico was very appealing for a couple of reasons: I am half Puerto Rican, and we could take a tour of the Arecibo Telescope. And of course, I figured it was a chance to connect with authors and old friends and all that.

Well, I am still Puerto Rican. There will still be a tour of Arecibo, but we did not win the lottery for the limited-size VIP tour. (However, we do get to ride the bus with them and Brother Guy Consolmagno SJ, who is the Director of the Vatican Observatory (a.k.a. "The Pope's Astronomer") and will be leading the VIP section of the tour, as well as being a Guest of Honor at the NASFIC. And as for connecting with lots of people... The list of attending members posted a few weeks before the convention had fewer than 250 names on it. I recognize only about a dozen. (I am told that

Puerto Rican fandom does not have a tradition of pre-registration, but this does probably mean that familiar mainland authors and fans will not be there in big numbers.) So clearly I will be meeting new people.

(It occurs to me that I will be undoubtedly the person with the most Hugo nominations at NASFIC. In fact, I may well have more Hugo nominations than the rest of the convention combined!)

In addition, there is no film program, which for Mark is a real disappointment. The problem was as much that no one volunteered to run one as the small size of the convention.

And there are concerns other than the convention. Zika has declined somewhat, but is still a concern, and most of the water in Puerto Rico does not meet Federal standards. We are bringing insect repellent for the first, and plan on drinking bottled water for the second.

Well, the program was just posted [22 Jun 2017], and it is like a small regional (or sub-regional) convention: five-and-a-half tracks, including one gaming, one of readings and roundtables, and a half track of special events. What I find amazing is that even with the very limited program, there is still almost a full dance card for me of things to do.

I will note that this is possibly the earliest a NASFIC/Worldcon program has been made public that I can remember. (Although after the NASFIC, Finland was also early.)

### **Flying Down to San Juan**

We finally got around to using our accumulated miles with United, so we saved money on the flights as well as got in right before they announced they were increasing the number of miles needed for free flights. This is a good thing, because flying has become so unpleasant that we may well give it up except for obligatory family events and overseas tours. At least on those, someone else arranges the flights, you can check a bag with no charge, and you get meals on the plane included. I am always concerned because Mark's carry-on is just slightly over the new size limits. We had a 27" suitcase, but it was so old that it had no wheels and also had a wheel punched in it. So about five years ago we bought a new set of luggage for an upcoming trip: a 27" and a carry-on, each with four of the new 360-degree wheels. About a year later, the airlines started announcing smaller limits for carry-on bags. So now every flight I worry that they will decide that the "carry-on" bag is too large and insist that we check it.

This trip was close, but the problem was more the bulging of the bag. They announced early that they would be making people in later boarding groups check bags, especially if they were too large. Mark's bag was bulging a bit, but he had only a small bag as his personal item. Luckily last night I threw a folding duffel into my suitcase as a backup personal item, so we took a bunch of stuff out of the carry-on and put it in the duffel, along with the small bag, and the carry-on no longer bulged. (Going home is less critical--we just have to be sure that nothing irreplaceable is in bags they may insist be checked, but medications will not be an issue, and the CPAP is actually an older one Mark uses just for travel.)

All this merely added to my belief that flying (domestically) is terrible. As I said, at this point, I have pretty much decided that I will fly to obligatory family events, and we will fly to overseas tour destinations, but unless either 1) one of us is a Guest of Honor at a convention, or 2) one of us is nominated for a Hugo at a Worldcon, I am not flying to any more conventions, or for that matter, any more vacations. We can drive to anything east of the Mississippi, and even west of that if we make it a long vacation.

Why is the Spanish map on the airplane labeled with "Nueva York" and "Alejandria", but "State College" and "Johnstown"?

And when did the seat controls change so much? It is as bad as learning our new Prius after eighteen years with our old car. The controls for the overhead light are now integrated into the controls for the screen in front of you (brightness, volume, etc.), which you access by waving your hand in front of it, then pressing the blue light that comes on. You could call the flight attendant and ask them, but the call button is part of this integrated system.

Also, you now plug your earphones in below the screen, meaning if someone outboard from you wants to get out, you need to unplug the earphones.

Someone talked about how hard it is to change the habits of a lifetime. All your working life, you are told to save for retirement. Then when you retire and realize that by any reasonable expectation, you have enough money to support you for the rest of your life, you need to start thinking about spending what you have. And sometimes there is the additional fact that you are older and should not be shoveling snow, or climbing up on tottery stepstools, or standing in the heat and hauling luggage around--you should hire someone to shovel, buy a really sturdy stepladder, and take a taxi.

So in San Juan there is a very cheap airport bus, but I am not sure who it is for, as you are not allowed to bring luggage onto it. (Basically, whatever you have has to fit on your lap.) Also, since it runs only every thirty minutes, and there is one change, we could end up standing in the heat a long time. (It may well be more for people who work at the airport than for people who are flying.) So we opted for a taxi. The irony, of course, is that for most conventions we have flown to, we had no public transit choice, and so always took a taxi or shuttle. And if we drove, the parking costs were ridiculous.

It turns out the taxi was also a good choice since there was really no indication of where to catch the bus (and at least one web site indicated the bus from the terminals to the transfer point had been discontinued!) and it was raining.

We arrived at the Sheraton Puerto Rico Hotel & Casino so early that our room was not ready, but after about a half hour they had a room for us. We unpacked and rested up until about 3PM, waiting for the rain to pass and the heat to diminish somewhat.

The concierge gave us directions to the nearest supermarket, which he claimed was a twelve-minute walk. It was definitely more than that, because he had us walking around three sides to the hotel to get there!. But even coming back, it was twenty minutes--and that was mostly downhill, versus uphill going there. The supermarket--Pueblo--charges for bags, but I had my tote bag from Worldcon 1991 with me. I do not know if this is just Pueblo, or whether there is a law about it (like in California), or what.

There do not seem to be a lot of good places to get breakfast near the hotel, so we picked up a box of granola, but we could not find any insect repellent wipes (which someone recommended as easier to use than the squeeze bottles we have). In fact, they did not seem to have *any* insect repellent, even though they had lots of sunblock (for example). You would think that with Zika still present, stores would carry some sort of insect repellent. (I remember when you bought it in stick form, like Chapstick.)

We stopped on the way and had lunch/dinner at Los Pinos Café (which contrary to what you might think, has an 'n', not an 'ñ', in the name). Mark had a sautéed pork chop with fried ripe plantains; I had mofongo with chicken. Mofongo is one of the traditional Puerto Rican dishes: green plantains mashed with garlic and then fried. We also had Diet Cokes--apparently Puerto Ricans do not have the aversion to diet sodas that Mexicans in New Jersey seem to. This is good, because we will not be

drinking tap water in restaurants (though we did take ice with our soda), and we do not want to drink calorie-laden sodas all the time.

The hotel seems a bit disorganized--they accidentally put us on a "do not make up the room list", which did not get sorted out until Friday. Our key cards also stopped working either Thursday or Friday and had to be re-authorized. Even when they did make up the room, they often shorted us on coffee (two decafs but only one regular, or vice versa) or plastic glasses. They did provide free bottled water, and it turns out that the Sheraton also has their own water purification system.

### **Sightseeing**

We arrived early afternoon on Tuesday, and had two full days for sightseeing, the Wednesday before the convention and the Monday after. Given that the art museums we wanted to see were closed on Mondays, we opted to do museums the first day, and Old San Juan (which even if some of the museums there close, there is plenty to do and see) the last.

The more we looked, the more dismal the food situation near the hotel looked, especially for breakfast. Wednesday morning we decided to go with Macchiato Coffee-Deli, which was actually closer to the hotel than the various places we saw Tuesday afternoon, but a block off the route we took and fairly well hidden, so we would not have found it if we were not looking for it. We got huevos rancheros, very good hot chocolate, and a cafe macchiato. With tax (11.5%) and tip this was \$17--not cheap, but cheaper than the hotel. For some reason the lunch/dinner prices at the hotel do not seem quite as bad as the breakfast prices, which is good, because during the convention we will not be able to go anywhere else in the time we will have for lunch.

We also had a chat with the owner about the current Puerto Rican financial crisis. He said I was the first "American" (I assume he meant "mainlander") to say that of course the Federal government should bail Puerto Rico out.

It turns out that there are no buses running east from anywhere near where we were to the museum area, so we had to walk *back* to the hotel to get a taxi. The restaurant owner suggested Uber, but we have no smartphone and our stupidphone does not work here, even to make a phone call.

The high cost of the taxi (\$17 with tip) was made up for by the cheapness of the Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico: \$3.35 each, senior price. Given that we spent about four hours there, that was a pretty good deal. (It was also balanced out by the transportation cost coming back: 25 cents each for the bus.)

The Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico covers art from the Spanish colonial era to the present, even though there is also the Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Puerto Rico. The art ranged from the very traditional to the sort of modern "installations" that do nothing for me. I mean, is a bale of used clothing really art? I particularly liked the very large painting of Jorge Luis Borges--no surprise there.

Again, we had a long conversation, this time with one of the docents. There was a modern art piece titled "After the Ark" which consisted of a couple of dozen tiny plastic animals in small plastic vials half filled with water. This got the conversation started, talking about global warming, and we talked for fifteen or twenty minutes. The docent was in his eighties and had been a lawyer, but was enjoying this second "career."

There was also a sculpture garden, which was unique in my experience of art museums in that it did not have either titles or artists' names on the sculptures. This leads to the philosophical question of

the relative importance of the art itself versus the artist and his/her creativity.

We spent four hours in the Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico and it was about 2:30 PM when we left, so we decided we did not have time for the Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Puerto Rico. We walked a few blocks to Libros AC, a recommended bookshop (and cafe). For those of us used to Barnes & Noble, or even Waldenbooks, it was pretty small (fewer books than a Waldenbooks, for example). Of course, since almost all of its stock was in Spanish (even the science fiction--"Juego de tronos", anyone?) the number of titles easily available at reasonable prices is much smaller. (Books from other countries in Latin America are more expensive than books from the United States.)

We had a couple of recommendations for lunch. However, the higher-rated (Medio Mixto) seemed to have changed names (hence probably ownership) and also had extremely loud music which we could hear on the street even though the doors were closed. So we opted for the other, Hacienda San Pedro, which was basically a coffee shop with a few sandwiches. Mark had a ham and cheese baguette and a "Naked" (some sort of green bottled fruit/vegetable beverage). I had a Caprese sandwich on a ciabatta roll and an iced latte. (As with the Diet Coke at dinner yesterday, I decided to assume the ice was safe enough.)

The cashier was able to give us very easy instructions on where to catch the bus, and we had to wait only about ten minutes for it. I verified with the driver it went down the street (Avenida Ponce de Leon) to Calle Miramar, and so when we got to as close to Calle Miramar as the bus was going (about two blocks away), the driver called back to us that this was our stop. Great service for twenty-five cents!

The sidewalks really need work, but of course Puerto Rico has no money to do it with. So they have holes and are very uneven, meaning you have to watch your step because it would be very easy to trip. If you are wearing sunglasses, it can be even riskier, since it is harder to see where the hazards are.

We returned to the room about 5PM to discover that it had not been made up. It took until 6:30 PM (and a phone call and two reminders to the desk) to get it done, and even then they did not vacuum! The main thing, though, was getting more bottled water and coffee. Every day, each room automatically gets two free bottles of a cheap brand of water, and you can call for more. There is also a bottle of Dasani, which is \$5. In some sense we came out ahead, because they replenished our cheap water with Dasani bottles, whether by accident or as recompense for the delay, we do not know.

In preparation for the trip to Arecibo, I was trying to decide whether to wear my "Chimelis" t-shirt, in case there were any family members in the area. But Arecibo is an hour away from Ciales (my father's birthplace). While I was checking the Google maps I thought, "I'll look up his address there and look at the satellite image." We had visited it in 1992 and all that was there was the foundation of a demolished house. Well, it is a good thing we went there then, because now 4 Calle Palmarito no longer exists, because Calle Palmerito itself no longer exists. It had been only a block long 25 years ago, and I guess the whole area was bulldozed and turned into more modern houses or something, with more regular streets.

### **Arecibo**

Thursday, 8:00AM

This was organized by NorthAmeriCon '17, and was much cheaper than a commercial tour (\$18 vs about \$90 for commercial tours), though this did not include a visit to the caves of Rio Camuy as all the commercial tours do. We left the hotel at 8:00AM Thursday, and took the autopista at first, then

curving mountain road through small towns and villages. Unlike a lot of tours, there were no lectures on bus, but as fans we had lots of conversations going.

We arrived on schedule at Arecibo, even including the rather strenuous climb up the hill from the parking lot, but there were several groups ahead of us, which delayed the start of our tour by about 45 minutes.

There is a Visitor's Center with a display about astronomy in general and the work of the observatory in specific. Most of the exhibits have been updated to downgrade Pluto, but things like a metal solar system model are a bit too expensive to update, so some remnants remain. There is also an orientation film, followed by a talk by one of the "guides" and a view of the telescope itself from a balcony overlooking it.

One interesting fact: The dish itself is perforated, and there is a whole eco-system under it. It is not quite at the level of the bison herd over the Fermilabs accelerator, but it is something.

We had not won the lottery for the VIP Tour, but while that would have been nice, it was not quite as described. The preliminary description sent out indicated that Brother Guy Consolmagno, the Vatican Astronomer and one of the Guests of Honor of the convention, would be leading the VIP tour. This was not the case. What the VIP tour had that the regular tour did not was a trip down to the edge of the dish itself, in groups of five, and a tour of some of the living areas for the scientists. This was somewhere between fifteen minutes and a half hour in length. (According to one person who did go on the VIP Tour, a couple of decades ago they did take people to the control rooms, but no more.) Several of us did get a chance to talk to Brother Guy briefly, either about Arecibo, or whatever. For us, it was a discussion of how Filthy Pierre got his name at MIT, and how when he took his vows and got rid of his possessions, it was "very liberating." (He could not have gotten rid of all his possessions, because he was wearing fannish t-shirts throughout the convention that I am reasonably sure were not Vatican issue.)

There was a snack bar where one could get hot dogs, chicken nuggets, empanadas, pizza, fries, and sodas. We availed ourselves since it was clear we would not get back until close to 3:00PM, rather than the initially projected 1:30PM, and the panels started at 4:00PM.

### **Registration**

We registered easily--with a convention this small you do not really have long lines. My badge and name tent were both wrong. I normally use "Evelyn C. Leeper" as my registration and badge name; sometimes it shows up as just "Evelyn Leeper", but that is okay. This time I decided to specify my badge name as "Evelyn Chimelis Leeper"--"Chimelis" being my birth name which I now use as my middle name. Since my father was born in Puerto Rico and still has distant relatives here, I figured it was remotely possible someone would recognize it. Somehow, though, my badge said just "Evelyn Leeper" and my name tent said just "Evelyn Chimelis". Not a big deal, though perhaps confusing for people coming in late to one of my panels and missing the introductions.

The badges also did not show where the wearer was from. I do not know if this is some new privacy concern, or just a decision that was made, but even just the state/district/territory would have been nice. (It turned out there were a fairly high number of people from New Jersey.)

### **The Future of Education Thursday, 4:00PM**

**Brother Guy Consolmagno SJ, Marie Guthrie (m), Matthew David Goodwin, Helen Gbala, Sandra Manning**

Description: "Technology has taken us to the point where almost everything we want to learn can be found on the internet or on an app. Can we eliminate the physical buildings in favor of virtual classrooms? If so, how would it work? (bilingual)"

Estimated attendance: 25 people

Guthrie began by noting that many years ago, radio was going to revolutionize education. Then it was television, then computers, then the Internet, and now smartphones.

Manning said that there is a lot of technology available now as tools, and said that soon the only buildings left would be for special needs education.

Brother Guy said that in his education, it was the social experience that was most important. When he got to MIT, he was shocked to realize that, while he was the smartest kid in his high school, everyone there had been the smartest kid in their own high school. Now, he said, they have all already met each other. But you still need to get out of the house, both on a daily basis and in the sense of moving out and living away from your parents.

Goodwin thought that virtual reality was the key, and also artificial intelligence. Gbala, on the other hand, said that you would always need a physical location for the infrastructure of education. You also need different learning styles for different students. Guthrie seemed to interpret this as the various levels as well (primary/middle/high/college/graduate).

Brother Guy said that certification is still important, but it is difficult. You have to first decide what you want the students to know, and then determine how you know that they learned it?

Guthrie said that many current students could not pass the 1910 college boards, but I think one needs to remember that college in 1910 was supposed to be for the super-smart: only 5% of high school graduates went to college (and a high percentage of students never even went to high school). Now it is about 70%. (although 50% of them never graduate).

Manning mentioned a problem Mark has noted--with easier 24/7 access to the Internet, it is incredibly easy for students to cheat in all sorts of ways. It also raises the question of whether memorizing a lot of things that are easily accessible on-line is the best use of education. Someone in the audience said that we do not need memory, we need analysis.

In a discussion of home schooling, Brother Guy pointed out that this eliminates mentors--those teachers who so influenced earlier generations. This led to various audience members suggesting "self-contained" educational systems such as educating babies with artificial intelligence, using robots to teach autistic children, and so on.

However, this again raised the question of socialization. Manning said this was now done through social media, leading one audience member to ask what happens when the student has to handle social issues in real life. When do they learn to control their temper? When do they learn how to share limited resources? Social media do not prepare someone for work in an office.

Brother Guy recommended some books that look at education: *Among Others* by Jo Walton, *Chalk* by Paul Cornell, and the non-fiction *The Shepherd's Life* by James Rebanks. And he pointed out that "book learning" is not the only education, saying he talked to someone who was working in Africa and said, "Everything I read [about Africa] was true but it was all so different from what I expected."

Goodwin thought that a big problem was that students are not motivated to learn and have o curiosity. (I wonder if this is a side-effect of the "cocooning" of children these days. Children used to be on their own a lot, and could explore and investigate the world around them. Now if a neighbor sees a ten-year-old playing alone on his own front lawn, he calls the child welfare people.)

At some point I noted that this was almost entirely about some sort of *formal* education, with a goal towards a diploma or a certificate or something. What about just learning for the sake of learning? The panel said that there are opportunities for free-form education, with a lot of colleges putting their lecture courses up for free on the web, and such companies as "The Great Courses" and "Modern Scholar".

Gbala said that the panel had not even talked about the problem of global inequality in education. And Guthrie said that before one can talk about changing education, one needs to provide the basics for students: food, a safe home, and so on.

### **Off-World Vacation Hot Spots**

**Thursday, 7:00PM**

**Chris Gerrib, Brother Guy Consolmagno SJ, Tyrell Gephardt, Jan S. Gephardt, W. A. (Bill) Thomasson (m)**

Description: "You're the travel agent - sell us your best vacation package to the stars."

Estimated attendance: 25 people

I had hoped for a description of some of the more interesting environments we have discovered (or postulated) "out there," but was at least partially disappointed.

The Gephardts (mother and son) had interpreted this as a free-form "fantasy destination" panel. So their first one was the planet "FOY" ("Fountain of Youth") where time flows backwards. They also had "Home--The Optimized Experience", where no phone call is ever a telemarketer, the Internet is instantaneous, the rain may never fall till after sundown, and by eight the morning fog must disappear... Sorry, I drifted a bit there.

Gerrib was more true to the actual panel description; he said that Mars was ideal. It is close, so the trip would not take too long. It has a slightly lower gravity than Earth, meaning that it is friendly to the elderly and those with mobility issues. The weather is calm. And it has dramatic geology (such as Valles Marineris, ten times longer, six times wider, and six times deeper than the Grand Canyon). But he noted, there was one requirement: "You have to have potatoes; it's the national food of Mars."

Brother Guy disputed the geology aspect, saying that the Grand Canyon is about as big as the human eye can appreciate; anything bigger is too big to take in. He felt that the Pluto-Charon system would be a good destination, and noted that Bill Higgins has suggested a cablecar between the two.

He also warned that we should not be guilty of planetism. He recommended the canyons of Miranda for rock climbers (the gravity is low enough to make it safe). The fountains of Enceladus was another suggestion, but he said he did not want to name too many, since he was working on a book involving a ship visiting all these.

Thomasson thought a two-week science fiction convention would fit very nicely on a ship traveling at 1G acceleration to Saturn and back.

All this reminded me of Lawrence Watt-Evans's, "Why I Left Harry's All-Night Hamburgers":



"You want to see wonders and marvels, huh? ... You want to see buildings a hundred stories high? Cities of strange temples? Oceans thousands of miles wide? Mountains miles high? Prairies, and cities, and strange animals and stranger people? ... But kid, you can see those buildings a thousand feet high in New York, or in Chicago. You've got oceans here on your own world as good as you'll find anywhere. You've got the mountains, and the sea, and the prairies, and all the rest of it. ... You want to see spaceships? You go to Florida and watch a shuttle launch. Man, that's a spaceship. It may not go to other worlds, but that *is* a spaceship. You want strange animals? You go to Australia or Brazil. You want strange people? Go to New York or Los Angeles, or almost anywhere. You want a city carved out of a mountaintop? It's called Machu Picchu, in Peru, I think. You want ancient, mysterious ruins? They're all over Greece and Italy and North Africa. Strange temples? Visit India: there are supposed to be over a thousand temples in Benares alone. See Angkor Wat, or the pyramids--not just the Egyptian ones, but the Mayan ones, too. And the great thing about all those places, kid, is that afterwards, if you want to, you can come home. You don't *have* to, but you *can*. Who knows? You might get homesick some day. Most people do. *I* did. I wish to hell I'd seen more of my own world before I volunteered to try any others."

[If you want a more serious, yet still science-fictional, look at off-world vacation spots, there is *Vacation Guide to the Solar System* by Olivia Koski and Jana Grcevich, published by Penguin Books in 2017.]

**Opening Ceremonies and the Meet the GoHs Ice Cream Social**  
**Brother Guy Consolmagno SJ, Daína Chaviano, Javier Grillo-Marxuach, Pablo Vazquez,**  
**Paula Smith, Tobias S. Buckell**  
**Thursday, 8:00PM**

Description: "Join us as conchair Pablo Vazquez officially kicks off the convention and introduces our amazing Guests of Honor. An Ice Cream Social will follow. (Thanks to DC in 2021 for financial support towards the Ice Cream Social!) (bilingual)"

Estimated attendance: ? people (but very well attended)

One of the advantages of a small convention is that events like the Opening and Closing Ceremonies are usually well-attended. Because there are fewer items of any sort, all of them seem more important, and the special events are not swamped by everything else.

**Reading**  
**Friday, 10:30AM**  
**Brother Guy Consolmagno**

Estimated attendance: 30 people

Brother Guy read from a work in progress, *A Nimitz for the Empress*, which is writing with with Michael Carroll. He describes it as a way to write about stuff in the solar system in a narrative framework. (He chose Chapter 6, "Io".) The premise of the book is that aliens (Cygnians?) are piloting a converted USS Nimitz aircraft carrier around the solar system.

Brother Guy said he chose Michael Carroll in part because Carroll wrote an accurate book about dinosaurs that even evangelicals liked (*Dinosaurs! (Exploring God's World with Michael and*

*Caroline Carroll*)).

One of the lines the audience liked was, "So Io is becoming ionized."

The book (or this chapter, anyway) was a lot of info-dump, so there is certainly a subset of fans who will love it. It did have the feel (sound?) of a YA novel in that sense.

**Really Weird Science**  
**Friday, 12:00AM**  
**Kevin Roche**

Description: "Or, an introduction to Quantum Computing. IBM Research scientist Kevin Roche will guide you on a general-audience tour into the baffling world of qubits and entanglement, including IBM's new Q division and its Quantum Experience, where you can actually write and run a program on a real quantum computer via the web (or a Raspberry Pi!). Kevin promises no complicated math (it makes him dizzy)."

Estimated attendance: ? people

Roche is part of IBM's quantum outreach program, but if he is trying to reach T. C. Mits, he needs to both slow down and explain better.

He started with the idea that the atomic model of orbits in an atom that we all learned in school (well, all us old folks) is wrong. As he put it, "Things got fuzzy."

He started by listing some basic principles:

1. The Uncertainty Principle for complementary properties
2. Superposition (between observations, the electron is in a superposition of all allowed locations)
3. Quantized Energy
4. Entanglement (entangled particles have a property that is correlated). Entanglement persists across distances. Measuring one particle determines the other but does not measure it.

Chemical bonds are hybridized orbitals (e.g. benzene rings).

A qubit is an artificial atom with two or more energy level gaps. Scientists tried many ways to create them ...

... and then I got completely lost.

**Life and Work in a Real (Benevolent) Monarchy**  
**Friday, 2:00PM**  
**Brother Guy Consolmagno SJ**

Description: "Brother Guy describes his day-to-day life in the Vatican, with an eye to how that compares to the ways that such places are depicted in fantasy novels."

Estimated attendance: 40 people

This was definitely one of the best talks of the convention.

Brother Guy said that this talk came from one titled "Working and Living in a Medieval Structure" (meaning a virtual structure such as a university or the military or the Church) rather than a medieval building, though there was some of that as well.

Brother Guy is the Director of the Specola Vaticana, or the Vatican Observatory. In the Vatican there are two hierarchies, a clerical one and a secular one. (The ambassadors to other countries, strangely enough, come from the Church side.) Because of when and how the position of Director of the observatory was created, Brother Guy's immediate boss is ... the Pope.

The Observatory itself started with the calendar form undertaken by Pope Gregory XIII in the 16th century. Brother Guy showed a short clip from a British Pathé film about the Observatory which somehow looked very Vernian. But there are no telescopes in Vatican City itself any more; now they are in places like Tucson, Arizona.

The Papal Palace where Brother Guy lives and works dates from 1690, so it is not quite medieval, but close. At one time his office was right above the Pope's, leading him to say, "I was the one guy in the Catholic Church above the Pope."

One of Brother Guy's stories is about his MIT ring. Apparently it looks a lot like a bishop's ring, and when he is wearing his clerical garb, people are constantly calling him "Your Excellency" and trying to kiss the ring.

One of the best parts of the talk was next, when Brother Guy read Dan Brown's description of the Vatican Observatory (page 162ff of *The Da Vinci Code*) and then compared it with the reality. About the only accuracies were Secchi (he was real) and that the library does have 25,000 volumes. But for example, Brown describes the library as looking like the Long Room at Trinity College in Dublin, while the photograph Brother Guy had showed it to be more like the computer room at your local public library. The "travertine marble staircase" was in reality a narrow spiral stone stairway worn down by donkeys and mules carrying things up to higher floors. And so on.

The first topic was "Living in Old Structures". Brother Guy said that fantasy novels often overlook the realities of what they premise. In reality, old buildings need constant repair. In the case of the Vatican, they also needed to have upgrades for electricity, plumbing, heat, and of course, the Internet.

High ceilings create echoes and hearing issues. Singing carries better than speaking, leading to more emphasis on singing. This is also why operas and musicals could be performed before amplification, while ordinary dramas could not. Brother Guy gave us the trivia bit that Bing Crosby was such a phenomenon because he was the first singer to be trained to use a microphone and amplification. (Oh, yes, the tapestries in those old buildings were not just to control the temperature--they also killed the echoes.)

Some other harsh realities: old buildings hold moisture, which condenses, which causes mold. Animals kept in the building also bring vermin and smells. Sanitation is a problem (someone has to carry all the washing water up to the higher floors to wash those floors and everything else that cannot be brought down for washing. None of this ever seems to show up in fantasy stories.

These old buildings have very thick external walls, because they have to support the upper stories. The building where Brother Guy lives gets its water from a first century cistern.

Some questions rarely answered in fantasy stories are "where does the food come from?" "who cooks the food?" "where does the staff come from?" and "who trains the clerks and others to read

and write?" (The Roman emperors imported their bodyguards so that they had no local interests or connections.)

Government depends on infrastructure. Where does the money come from? How is it stored? How does the economy work? Where are the cities and why are they there? Brother Guy pointed out that a city he was familiar with, Detroit, grew big artificially because Henry Ford rather arbitrarily decided to do everything there, and so it is not surprising that it is shrinking. However, cities that grow naturally tend to remain until something cataclysmic happens--a war, a flood, a plague.

What does the ruler do all day? In the case of the Pope, he gets up at 4AM so he can have a little time to think and plan before the day starts. Then he signs papers, has meetings with his staff, has meetings with VIPs, has meetings with other people who want to see him.

In this regard, Brother Guy said that while Pope John Paul II liked holding audiences, Pope Benedict hates them. But the fact is that love 'em or hate 'em, the Pope is probably stuck with them.

Brother Guy said that the real trick of working in a hierarchy is politics: convincing people to do what you want to do.

Brother Guy said that some fantasies do get it right. He recommended *The Goblin Emperor* by Katherine Addison (a pen name for Sarah Monette). It shows the reality of limited power at the top, with most of the power in middle management, as well as the importance of personal connections, unwritten rules, and "back door" access. And the characters know that the real trick to getting something is not giving a favor and hoping for one in return, but of asking the other person to help you.

Another recommendation was the "Godstalk" series by P. C. Hodgell. which understands that you cannot rule if your subjects do not want to be ruled, that personal baggage limits you, and that family and friends are sources of power.

What Brother Guy listed as "take-aways" of all this were:

- | The importance of personal connections
- | The importance of middle management
- | The importance of tradition and continuity
- | The desire to be close to the king

One personal benefit for people working in the Vatican Observatory is that there is no need to write papers or grant requests every three years, so science research can proceed much more smoothly and be much more long-term.

(Brother Guy was wearing a badge ribbon that said, "Yes to Reason / Yes to Faith", which probably sums him up pretty well.)

### **Alternate Histories Outside the West**

**Friday, 3:00PM**

**Evelyn Chimelis Leeper (m), Mel White, Pablo Vazquez, Sandra Manning**

Description: "Go beyond America and the UK, to other civilizations and their alternate pasts. (bilingual)"

Estimated attendance: ? people

[I have difficulty taking notes while on a panel, especially when moderating it. So I'll include my background information.]

As of a few years ago, a large plurality of alternate histories in the United States were about the Civil War or World War II. This may have changed somewhat, and this is not true of most other countries. This is because people focus on what they (or their audience) know best. There are two ways to widen to the scope: in time and in space. But US/UK alternate histories set long ago still tend to stick with "Western" history.

Some suggestions for underused alternate histories with a Hispanic focus:

- | The Maya defeat the Spaniards (must survive 9C collapse)
- | The Reconquista fails 1492
- | Columbus fails 1492
- | The Aztecs defeat the Spaniards 1520
- | The Incas defeat the Spaniards 1572
- | Gran Colombia survives 1831

Other world empires that are possibilities:

- | Rome survives
- | Chinese
- | African
- | Mongols

And then there are even alternate universes (e.g. Aristotelian science).

I also had a bunch of examples which I will just list in chronological order of divergence; feel free to look up the details:

- | Richard Garfinkle. *Celestial Matters*
- | Harry Harrison: "Eden" series
- | Ray Bradbury: "A Sound of Thunder" (little change)
- | Howard Waldrop: "The Lions Are Asleep This Night"
- | Poul Anderson: "In the House of Sorrows"
- | Steven Barnes: "Insh'Allah" series (*Lion's Blood/Zulu Heart*)
- | Robert Silverberg: "The Gate of Worlds" series
- | Chris Roberson: "Celestial Empire" series
- | Aliette de Bodard: "Xuya" series
- | Christopher Evans: *Aztec Century*

### **Science For World Progress**

**Friday, 4:00PM**

**Kevin Roche, Jan S. Gephardt, Mike Substelny (m), Mel White, Douglas Drummond**

Description: "Where do you want to be in 10 years? 20? What if our efforts were poured into solving world problems through science, and how are we doing that now?"

Estimated attendance: [unknown] people

Substelny said that for the purposes of this panel, we were to assume that science was real and science is good, and we were to avoid politics.

White said that people keep trying to predict that we will solve what are called "wicked problems": problems where we cannot define the beginning or the end (e.g., racism).

Roche said that what might make some problems more tractable is we are now trying to use many small sensors instead of one big one, and crowd-sourcing science.

Substelny said he expected to see progress with stem cell research and personalized medicine. Drummond predicted teleforensics, better software engineering (smarter compilers, etc.), and high-speed rail. Gephardt thought we would see more widespread clean water and sanitation, new energy sources and batteries, and a "circular economy" (one in which items were designed with their end in mind to make them easily re-purposed or biodegradable). In the latter category might be the clay cups in which we got chai in India--they lasted about a day or two, but then crumbled back to dust. Gebhardt also foresaw 3-D printing of organs.

[I had to leave early for my own panel, so did not get everything discussed.]

### **FANZINES!**

**Friday, 5:00PM**

**Paula Smith, Juan Sanmiguel, Evelyn Chimelis Leeper, Helen Montgomery (m)**

Description: "SF Fandom started with fanzines, and while our attentions have shifted elsewhere, they are still alive and kicking. Our panelists discuss the fanzines they write and read, and why you should be doing it too. (bilingual)"

Estimated attendance: 10 people

[I have difficulty taking notes while on a panel, and this was a particularly rambling panel/discussion.]

There was a wide variation in the fanzines the panelists produced--media zines, literary zines, paper zines, e-zines, ... It was interesting, but not the sort of thing one can convey easily. (This is, in general, my view of fannish panels. They tend to be less focused than the other panels I am on or go to.)

### **"Earth-like" Exoplanets: What Do They Mean for Alien Life?**

**Friday, 5:00PM**

**Abel Mendez, Ctein (m), W. A. (Bill) Thomasson**

Description: "We're discovering new planets at a rapid pace, and some of them seem like they might look an awful lot like home. What could we expect from life in the great unknown? (bilingual)"

Estimated attendance: ? people

[This was a panel I wanted to attend but could not. Luckily, Mark was able to and took notes for me, so this is primarily his report.]

Ctein said that the most interesting question is "what planets could evolve?"

Thomasson said that life assumes cells, and is very complicated; the odds of doing it are low but it did happen once.

Mendez said that there are ways to get energy, but you need a long time to build complexity. Ctein said that photosynthesis is a good way to get energy from light.

Ctein said that this was a bothersome question, but we will have much better data this century to answer it. We cannot tell how likely it is to have happened elsewhere. "We are ignorant on the verge of knowledge."

Thomasson admitted that there may have been two origins, but we don't know. Ctein said that if that was the case, one tree of life got dominant early on. Mendez thought that once you have life you get other forms of life.

Someone asked the panelists their view of panspermia. Ctein defined it, and then said that at one time it was considered unlikely. Now we have no idea, which is why we are careful with Mars probes. Mendez's response was, "Who knows? I would like to believe it is possible." It is *physically* possible. He said that Mars has the ingredients of life, but not life itself.

Ctein said that by any reasonable test we have not found life. In fact, we have found poisonous perchlorates on the surface of Mars, so we would have to dig down. And no good answer to the Fermi Paradox really stands up.

Someone in the audience suggested that maybe we cannot see it. Ctein said that we can look at the signatures of life. Mendez noted there are limitations for life.

Thomasson re-iterated that we are on the verge of knowledge. (Brother Guy Consolmagno says we are not far from telescopes that can examine surfaces of exoplanets.)

Ctein said there are low levels of methane in the Mars atmosphere, usually a sign of life. Searching for life is a promising goal. With really good telescopes we will analyze the atmosphere. Using us as sample, radio waves are sent for only a short interval. (Already we are not broadcasting radio waves so much as using fiber optics and other non-broadcast sources.) We will eventually decide radio waves a lost cause.

Thomasson said that carbon was the most likely basis, since it can form single, double, or triple bonds. If carbon and silicon compete, carbon will be the basis. Ctein said that silicon dioxide is useful, but does not do well with atmospheres.

There was a discussion of TRAPPIST (Transiting Planets and Planetisimals Small Telescope). Mendez said that TRAPPIST has candidates, such as Proxima-b. Ctein said there are more Earthlike planets found by TRAPPIST, including three in "our" orbit (well, the equivalent orbit around another star).

Ctein said there was a distinction between where life can live and where it can evolve. Mendez said that the problem is solar flares. In the long term just having the right conditions is a problem.

An audience member asked if the presence of the moon has affected us (in terms of the evolution of life). Mendez said that it had been thought that we needed the moon, but that is no longer believed to be true.

Ctein said that Mars is chaotic where it is in orbit. A discussion of importance of having a moon and a magnetic field followed. Ctein thought that radiation is overrated as threat.

Thomasson said that intelligence gives a genetic advantage. (Clearly not everyone agrees with this. One need only note that sharks, crocodiles, and other "non-intelligent" species have survived for much longer than humans. Sharks have been around for 420 million years, crocodiles for 200

million. Dinosaurs of all species were around for 165 million years. Humans at 5 million are hardly any evidence of the superiority of intelligence.)

**Latinx Themes in Movies and Television**  
**Saturday, 10:00AM**  
**Isabel Schechter (m), Javier Grillo-Marxuach, Marcos Rodriguez**

Description: "Our panelists and audience talk about their favorite characters and stories, and take a look at the positives and negatives of how Latinx characters are portrayed. (bilingual)"

Estimated attendance: 15 people

Schechter started by asking the panelists for their favorite representations of Latinx characters in movies and television. Grillo-Marxuach said he was happy about the direction "Star Wars" is taking. When the first film came out, it was "phenomenally white." Now in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* there is Oscar Isaac (who is Latino. It is true that he dies, that then he comes back, so it does not follow the pattern of the Latino (or black) always dying first. In *Star Wars: Rogue One* the Latino (Diego Luna) even retains his accent!

Rodriguez described B'Elanna Torres, played by Roxann (Caballero) Dawson, as a half-Latina, half-Klingon on *Star Trek: Voyager*. The problem was that her Klingon temper seemed to reinforce the idea of Latins as hot-tempered. And on *Star Wars* everyone, whether played by a Latinx or not, is an alien (because it is a galaxy far, far away). The best representation he could think of was Vasquez, played by Jenette Goldstein. (Though Goldstein is Jewish, she also has Brazilian and Moroccan background.)

Schechter liked Diego Luna in *Star Wars: Rogue One*. She thought Edward James Olmos as Admiral Adama in *Battlestar Galactica* was the worst, because he was "coded as white."

So far as I can tell, "coded as white" means that there is never any indication given of a character's possible non-white heritage. There was a definite though unexpressed and unnoted conflict on this panel: On the one hand, people did not want to see Latinx actors whose characters reflected nothing in the way of Latinx culture or heritage. On the other, they did not want stereotypes and "funny hats"; one panelist said when they wanted to cast a Latina for one of the characters on his show, he said he would not change any of the dialogue to reflect this--no calling her mother "Mami", no cooking rice and beans, etc.

Grillo-Marxuach said that in *Caprica* (the prequel to *Battlestar Galactica*), Esai Morales played a character in a marginalized minority. Grillo-Marxuach said that he got used to seeing Latinx characters die first. *Cowboys and Aliens* had some of the worst portrayals. In films like *The Hunted* and *G. I. Joe*, "the minorities drive the truck" and are there to be killed off by the bad guys to confirm that they are the bad guys.

Rodriguez thought that Jimmy Smits as a drug lord in *Running Scared* was one of the worst portrayals. On the other hand, he acknowledged that Pablo Escobar is idolized in the projects. Rodriguez said that Hollywood deals in stereotypes, e.g., all terrorists are Middle Eastern. (I am not convinced this is strictly true; I seem to recall a lot of Eastern European and Central Asian terrorists in films, not to mention the home-grown variety.)

Schechter said things were different in non-English-language media, which she thought was more open to Latinos. She pointed out that most of Daína Chaviano's work has been translated in almost every major language except English.



The panelists were asked for recommendations for films with good representations of Latinx characters. Not surprisingly, these were all Latinx or Spanish films. Schechter recommended one of Mark's favorites, *Sleep Dealer* (available on DVD). Grillo-Marxuach listed *Man Facing Southeast* (available on YouTube), *Time Crimes* (available on DVD), *Colossal*, and *Extraterrestre*. Rodriguez recommended Guillermo del Toro's first film, *Cronos* and the Spanish television series "El ministerio del tiempo" (which is supposed to become available on Netflix "soon").

(I would add *The Similar*s, a Mexican film with a "Twilight Zone" feel.)

Schechter added *Eva*, a robot story, and talked more about *Sleep Dealer*. What I found strange was that she left out several major threads in the plot of the latter and focused entirely on the telepresence aspect.

Schechter asked which actors did the panelists like. Grillo-Marxuach named Natalie Morales, but added that one problem is that true series leads are not that easy to find ("even for white guys"). Rodriguez said he would have picked Morales, but would pick Zoe Saldana instead.

**The Legacy of Star Trek**  
**Saturday, 12:00N**  
**George Mustafa, Marcos Rodriguez**

Description: "Representatives from Starfleet Puerto Rico present on the technological advances in use today that were born out of Star Trek as well as the social changes inspired by Star Trek. The presentations closes with an outlook of the future based on ST concepts and actual R&D being done globally. (bilingual)"

Estimated attendance: 50 people

Mustafa began by saying, "Star Trek' made me what I am." He described Starfleet Puerto Rico, a group of about forty people, and told the audience, "You have not seen 'Star Trek: until you have seen it in the original Spanish." (According to him, this is possible on the DVD sets.)

Robert Godard said, "It is difficult to say what is impossible," and this was an underlying theme of the presentation. When it premiered on 8 September 1966 "Star Trek" became a vision of tomorrow, in technology, in philosophy, and in values.

Rodriguez took over the presentation at this point, and it was primarily a list with annotations.

In technology inspired by "Star Trek", we have:

- | Flip phones
- | Bluetooth earpieces
- | Personal Access/Display Devices
- | Flat screen displays
- | Navigational systems (GPS)
- | Phasers (tasers--in fact, the inventor specifically credits "Star Trek")
- | Tricorders (recently all over the news)
- | Universal Translator (in-ear translation in real time)
- | Visor (visual enhancement devices)
- | Automatic doors (not entirely true--H. G. Wells wrote about them in *When the Sleeper Wakes*, the first one was invented in 1954, and the first one was installed in 1960)
- | Replicator (3D printing--not quite the same)

- | Voice interfaces (Alexa and other voice recognition)
- | Transparent aluminum
- | Holodeck
- | Transporter (done on a very small scale at Delft University)

Mustafa talked about space exploration:

- | Inspired a lot of engineers and astronauts (astronauts Mae Jamieson, Mike Fincke, and Terry Virta were actually on "Star Trek")
- | The Space Shuttle "Enterprise"
- | Concept of warp speed

Cultural contributions include:

- | Racial equality
- | Multi-culturalism
- | Gender equality
- | First interracial kiss on network television ("Plato's Stepchildren, 22 Nov 1968) (This is actually not true. If you consider "Hispanic" a separate race, then there were many interracial kisses on "I Love Lucy". If not, there is still the 5 Jan 1966 episode of "I Spy" with a kiss between France Nuyen and Robert Culp. And a December 1967 episode of "Movin' with Nancy" had a kiss between Nancy Sinatra and Sammy Davis, Jr. For that matter, the 6 Oct 1967 "Morrer, Mirror" episode of "Star Trek" has a kiss between Barbara Luna and William Shatner a year before "Plato's Stepchildren".)

There is the fairly well-known story of how Nichelle Nichols was going to quit the show until Martin Luther King, Jr., told her she had to stay because she was the best role model African-Americans had on television.

Philosophical contributions were given as quotes from characters:

- | "The prejudices people feel about each other disappear when they get to know each other." [James T. Kirk, "Elaan of Troyius"]
- | "The greatest danger facing us is ourselves, an irrational fear of the unknown. But there's no such thing as the unknown--only things temporarily hidden, temporarily not understood." [James T. Kirk, "The Corbomite Maneuver"]
- | "Inside of you is the potential to make yourself better ... and that is what it is to be human. To make yourself better than you are." [Jean-Luc Picard, *Star Trek: Nemesis*]

Someone in the audience asked what people do in a fan group like Starfleet. Mustafa's answer was supposed to be inspirational, but it made the group begin to sound more like a cult.

### **How to Make Religions in Fantasy/SF Stories Real**

**Saturday, 1:00PM**

**Amanda Lamkin (m), Jonathan Brazee, Brother Guy Consolmagno SJ, Lee French**

Description: "What is likely to change with culture, what is likely not to change? How do you make an invented religion "believable" not only for the reader but also for the story characters?"

Estimated attendance: ? people

Lamkin asked the panelists for good examples of religion in fantasy or science fiction. Brazee said

he was very impressed with "The Nine Billion Names of God" by Arthur C. Clarke, and *A Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter M. Miller. Brother Guy said he looked for books that understood the role of religion in society. There are a lot of bad examples, where everyone is controlled by an evil religion. Anne McCaffrey's "Dragon" books have harpers instead of religion, but do not address the question of what happens if you have a bad master harper. For a good example, he gave *The Curse of Chalion* by Lois McMaster Bujold.

Lamkin talked about the banter between C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien over religion. Brother Guy observed that in the "Lensman" books (for example), there are good guys and bad guys. But in Tolkien's works, even the bad serve a purpose, and even the good can fall. He also said what many others have--that children reading the "Narnia" books do not realize that they are religious.

Brazeo said that in his writings he had a group that looked like the Amish, but encourages drinking, dancing, and enjoying life. Lamkin says in her works the society has banned religion and a pride in heritage. French has a race where people have a racial memory of their creation story, etc.

Brother Guy said that it important to try to understand why people believe something different. He said that Robert Sawyer, for example, tries to write about religion, but he does not get it because he is not in it.

Lamkin said that authors have problems using future religions in future settings. She gave an example of Jesus returning, and joining an anti-GMO group--I am not sure whether it was an existing story or just an idea. (You would think that someone with the peculiar genetics of Jesus would have no problem with genetic modifications.)

Brother Guy said that however you write it, people will read into it what they expect.

Brazeo says that he avoids identifying his fictional religions with specific real religions. French avoids delving too deeply into religions other than her own, and recommends this as a good rule for writers.

Brother Guy said that Jo Walton gets flak for being anti-Christian in her "Just City" trilogy, but the point-of-view character is Apollo, who *would* be anti-Christian. People tend to think the point-of-view character is the author, but that is often a mistake, although authors need to believe at least somewhat in what they are writing. He said, "Charles de Lint drives me nuts because he's almost good," but he does not seem to believe in his fantasies.

French said that authors, even devout ones, tend to avoid writing about their own religion. Lamkin pointed out that the stakes are higher when you are writing about your own faith.

Brother Guy said that there was a problem with putting religion in a story. It is like Chekhov's Gun: even a casual reference has to become important later on. The same, he said, was true of race or ethnicity.

An audience member said that some authors seem to think that religion will wither away, but he did not agree. Brother Guy observed that when he "came out" as religious, other scientists did also.

Panelists recommended various books that got it right. Lamkin liked *Small Gods* by Terry Pratchett, and Brother Guy again mentioned the "Godstalk" trilogy by P. C. Hodgell.

There was some discussion of *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman, and Brazeo suggested that one of the new gods was the god of traffic.

Brother Guy wondered whether quantum mechanics was like eastern mysticism, as people often say?

He did know that there are major gods in the Hindu pantheon who are minor gods in the Greco-Roman one.

Braze said that most gods were not gods of just one thing, and in particular, in many pantheons, every god is a god of war. (The example I think of is that Poseidon is the god of the oceans, but also the god of horses, and some archaeologists theorize that Troy was destroyed by a tidal wave, which would have been attributed to Poseidon, and the Trojan Horse is another way of attributing the victory to him.) The Sparrow by Mary Doria Russell, and *A Case of Conscience* by James Blish) is that Jesuits are always shown with no sense of humor.

**Latin American SF  
Saturday, 3:00PM**

**Shaun Duke (m), Berto Melendez, Daína Chaviano, Matthew David Goodwin**

Description: "Join our panelists for a conversation about Latin American SF and a discussion on authors or works that mix different country's traditions and customs within the genre. (bilingual)"

Estimated attendance: 35 people

Duke began by noting that Latin America is many countries, many cultures, and many languages. (In addition to Spanish, Portuguese, and French, there are dozens of indigenous languages.) Melendez said that in spite of this huge variety, there are really only four areas with any real science fiction literature: Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, and Central America (presumably including Mexico). (I would add Brazil, but since none of the panelists were Brazilian or Portuguese (or Francophone), they concentrated on literature written in Spanish.)

Chaviano observed that different geographic and political environments affect the writings of authors. She named in particular Daniel Salvo, a Peruvian author who incorporates the Inca heritage in his science fiction.

Goodwin recommended the anthology *Cosmos Latinos* edited by Andrea L. Bell and Yolanda Molina-Gavilán as a good starting point for English speakers, though it was mostly works from Mexico, Argentina, and Cuba. He said that the science fiction literature of these areas is very vibrant these days. Melendez said that students in Puerto Rico do not learn much about these literatures, since the schools focus more north than on Latin America. But Melendez said that he did learn about Puerto Rican and Latin American authors, but he would like to see more genre works included..

Chaviano said that in the United States, science fiction is not considered real literature. In Latin America, it is difficult even to publish science fiction. This is in spite of there being laws to promote native authors. And you do not find science fiction or writings about it in academia. However, the University of Chile is soon going to have the first Latin American academic conference about science fiction.

Chaviano said that to understand diversity we need to read works from other places, and not just Latin American authors, but also such writers as Cixin Liu and Aliette de Bodard.

Melendez said that one problem is that translations need to be very accurate. [Well artificial intelligence solve this?] Duke said that Carlos Ruiz Zafron works with the translator on the translations of his works, and it is well known that Jorge Luis Borges did the same.

Goodwin recommended *A Planet for Rent* by Yoss, works by Angelica Gorodischer, and *The Invention of Morel* By Adolfo Bioy-Casares. The last is considered too high-brow to be science

fiction, along with the works of Borges.

Chaviano recommended Salvo's collection *El primer peruano en espacio* which is unfortunately not available in English. However, there is a reasonably priced Kindle edition of the Spanish edition. This is important because books are generally more expensive in Latin America than in the United States, and the shipping charges for a hardcopy book from Peru would not help. She particularly recommended the stories "El arco", "Clase de historia", and "Quipucamayoc".

Goodwin recommended Pedro Cabiya, especially *Wicked Weeds: A Zombie Novel* and *The Head*, Rafael Acevedo, José Vasconsuelos (*The Coming Race*), and Juno Diaz. Duke recommended Reynaldo Arenas, *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria E. Anzaldúa, and Javier Pavía Fernández.

I asked Goodwin a question I had been wondering about: how does one pronounce the title of his anthology *Latin@ Rising*? I understood that "Latin@" was supposed to be gender-inclusive, and it works in writing (though I suspect "Latinx" will win out), but how does one say the name of the book when speaking. The answer is "Latino Rising"--which is why "Latinx" ("la-TEEN-ex") will win.

[For those interested in Brazilian science fiction, Gerson Lodi-Ribeiro is the premiere literary critic of that genre.]

[And I hope people appreciate that I tried to get all the names and titles spelled correctly here. It is hard enough to get unfamiliar names in cultures more closely related to the English language--understanding unfamiliar names from less familiar cultures, spoken in a variety of accents, in rooms with less than perfect acoustics--well, it is a challenge. This is one reason that real-time captioning or even ASL can be a real challenge. I will always remember when a secretary taking notes at a diversity meeting wrote about contacting the "80L" instead of the "ADL"!]

### **The Singularity: Mechs or Shapers?**

**Saturday, 5:00PM**

**Tobias S. Buckell, W. A. (Bill) Thomasson (m), Paula Smith, Mel White**

Description: "Vernor Vinge has suggested the immanence of a Singularity, in which progress will be so fast ordinary humans will be unable to keep up. Bruce Sterling has written about a universe in which humans are divided between cyborgs (Mechs) and genetically engineered Shapers. That's two versions of the Singularity. Which will we see? Or will it be something else entirely?"

Estimated attendance: 15 people

Smith began by saying that in 1969, artificial intelligence was ten years away--and it has been ever since. But at some point Moore's Law should take effect.

White said that she does not believe in the Singularity. All sorts of things have been claimed to be as earth-shaking as the Singularity, including learning to read silently. (She places that somewhere in the 4th century B.C.E., which is undoubtedly more accurate than the traditional assignment to the 9th century and St. Ambrose or even later.) All the previous "revolutions" were not crises the way the Singularity is described.

Smith disagreed, saying that Gutenberg's invention of movable type caused the Thirty Years' War (by making it possible for Protestantism to spread more successfully).

[At this point, I think the panelists may have been talking past each other in that there was no clear

definition of what "the Singularity" was. If by definition it as a crisis point--as derived from its mathematical definition--then these past revolutions were not singularities.]

Smith felt that individuals have hit the wall of progress, and this is partly what is driving people to see the Singularity coming. For the Greeks it was escatology, but for our generation it is the Rapture of the Nerds. However, as William has noted, the future is unevenly distributed.

One of the standard aspects of the Singularity is uploading consciousnesses, but Smith says that is old science fiction. She does not believe we will become godlike, but she does believe we will reach a point (if we have not already) when some people cannot keep up.

Buckell said that AIs need a learning period. (The phrase "they do not spring full-blown from the brow Zeus" comes to mind for some reason.) In *Brown Girl in the Ring* by Nalo Hopkinson, AIs function as loas, or lesser gods. And Moore's Law is tailing off; things it is applied to turn out to be more an S-curve than exponential. (Moore's Law original had to do with the number of transistors per square inch on integrated circuits. In 1965, Gordon Moore said this number would double every year for the (then) foreseeable future. In 1975, he changed it to every two years. Either way, eventually the transistors would have to be smaller than atoms.)

Thomasson said the panelists had mostly talked about AIS, but Vinge also talked about human augmentation and hyper-networking in such works as "Fast Times at Fairmont High" and *Rainbow's End*.

Buckell pointed out, "We are now at the Internet of things." In Britain, some company had their teakettles doing data collection on how people boil water, not for any specific purpose, but because they could. People envision using Karl Schroeder idea of "thalience" by spreading "smart dust" over (for example) a forest such that the forest becomes an entity with its own rights and legal standing. (Rivers in New Zealand and India have already been granted status of legal persons.)

Smith said the flip side of all this progress is that the Singularity divides humanity into two classes--those who afford the advantages of the Singularity, and those who cannot.

White said that we are starting to see body modifications at places like Burning Man that tend toward the "uncanny valley." But different cultures react differently and have different "uncanny valleys."

Buckell says that a lot of what is predicted is like the Borg, which looks horrible from the outside but empowering from the inside. People complain that cellphones are artificial, but paper and books are just as artificial.

White says that standard wisdom is that humans are designed for a circle of 150 friends, but she has many more than that, especially electronic friends. (I suspect that what the standard wisdom refers to as "friends" are not the same as what White is calling "friends." Is she counting all her Facebook "friends" as friends?) Smith said that if you have a circle of 150 real, physical friends, you are stuck with 150 real people and the interactions are a much wider bandwidth than with on-line friends. Someone pointed out that you can "filter out" e-friends in a way that you cannot with real people.

White thought that this filtering happens now with news sources: some people watch only Fox, others watch only CNN. Buckell thought that this was less common or less severe on-line. White thought it was used as re-enforcement rather than primary sources.

An audience member thought that the smart dust would be *determining* what the trees "want," rather than just *interpreting* it, because trees have no inherent intelligence to augment. (This seems to be an example of the intentional fallacy, and also of the notion that evolution has a purpose or direction,

especially towards intelligence. Evolution's only "direction" is towards whatever produces to most offspring.)

**Alien Abduction Masquerade Party**  
**Saturday, 7:30PM**  
**Paula Smith**

Description: "We'll kick things off with a live performance of 'The Capture' - a 1976 Hugo-nominated slide show & reading with script by Robert Aspirin and art by Phil Foglio, featuring original cast member and GoH Paula Smith. What happens when aliens kidnap the attendees of a science fiction convention on a cruise liner? Find out, and then enjoy your alien abduction as much as they do, with a Masquerade party, costume showings, and dance. Food provided, cash bar available."

Estimated attendance: ? people (but well-attended)

We went mostly for "The Capture" and I have to say that Hugo standards must have been lower back then. It was mildly amusing, but there were several dramatic presentations were far more worthy. The other finalists were *A Boy and His Dog* (the winner), *Dark Star*, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, and *Rollerball*. One could argue that *Jaws* was a horror film, but we will let that slide. David Cronenberg had *Shivers*. The most faithful adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein (Terror of Frankenstein)* came out that year. I am sure there must have been some "Doctor Who" episodes. Even *Doc Savage, Man of Bronze* was better than "The Capture".

Anyway, there was supposed to be a masquerade, but there seemed to be a long time with nothing happening, so we called it a day.

**Forgotten Books**  
**Sunday, 10:00AM**  
**Evelyn Chimelis Leeper (m), Lee Billings, Daína Chaviano**

Description: "Panelists (and audience members) discuss the books they've loved that have gone out of circulation, and thus the merits of used bookstores. (bilingual)"

Estimated attendance: 20 people

[It is difficult to moderate a panel and take notes at the same time, so this will be sketchy.]

Chaviano started by recommending Jules Verne's *The Begum's Fortune*, which she said she had been unable to find in English. It turns out that there have been two translations, one a badly translated and heavily abridged version that was published in a series of Verne novels by Ace books in 1968, the other a much more accurate translation in 2005 published by Wesleyan University as part of their Verne series.

Billings recommended *The Interior Life* by Katherine Blake, a more recent book described by Jo Walton as being "published by Baen in what seems to have been a fit of absentmindedness, as Baen are generally really good at branding, and you could go a long way without finding something less typical Baen than this."

I stuck with authors rather than titles, and suggested that Arthur C. Clarke, Larry Niven, Theodore

Sturgeon, and Mike Resnick were at one point extremely popular, but so far as I can tell, no longer read.

I also put in my plug for José Saramago, Nobel Prize winner who wrote mostly science fiction and fantasy, yet is unknown within the field. (In the audience, only one person had heard of Saramago, and since he reads the MT VOID and has seen all my reviews of Saramago's works there, he does not count.)

Billings recommended the "Crossroads" series by Nick O'Donohoe and books by Anne McCaffrey. Her description of "Crossroads" sounded similar to James White's "Hospital" series, and he is another author who is no longer read.

Chaviano (and others) suggested that most of the forgotten authors are forgotten because they are dead, or have stopped writing for some other reason. The exceptions, such as Philip K. Dick and H. P. Lovecraft, seem to stay in people's minds because they are the inspiration for movies, or graphic novels, or other more popular media. Another mechanism for keeping authors in the popular eye is school reading lists, which is one reason why books such as *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes, *Dune* by Frank Herbert, *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. LeGuin, and *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler are still best sellers.

Ben Yalow suggested another reason for the recent "Great Forgetting" is that the editors who knew the various authors mentioned have all retired relatively recently. I guess that means that, while the old editors might re-issue a book by (for example) Larry Niven, it would not occur to the newer editors.

The audience suggested various works and authors: *Silverlock* by John Myers Myers. Michael Moorcock books not in any of his series, Frances Hodgens Burnett, and Fritz Leiber.

**YA is Not Just for Kids Anymore  
Sunday, 11:00AM**

**Helen Gbala (m), Brother Guy Consolmagno SJ, Douglas Drummond**

Description: "Harry Potter and The Hunger Games are just the tip of the iceberg. Our panelists will share their favorite YA works that are suitable for adults."

Estimated attendance: 15 people

[I arrived at this somewhat late, so I missed the beginning. They were talking about the new "not-a-Hugo" YA Award to be voted on at Worldcon this year.]

Someone asked if the award was limited to novels, and was YA short fiction even being published any more? Brother Guy said yes, certainly in *Boy's Life* but also other places.

There was also mention of a YA novel that won the Best Novel Hugo for 1968, well before the current flowering, *Rite of Passage*. Brother Guy observed that it was a reaction to Robert A. Heinlein's juveniles, and that because of it (?) (and other reasons) Heinlein detested the author, Alexei Panshin.

Drummond said we were returning to "hot rod" stories, where the young protagonists are always building something or tinkering with something. It used to be hot rods and radios, but now it is computers and maker spaces.



Gbala claimed that the only science fiction work to win a Newbery Award was *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle. (Quite a few fantasy novels have won.) I am not sure I agree: *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* by Robert C. O'Brien certainly has some science fiction elements.

Some recommendations were made. Brother Guy named Diana Wynne Jones and Pamela Dean; Gbala listed Garth Nix and Monica Hughes. Drummond mentioned Tom Swift, Jr., but Brother Guy warned that it had "interesting science errors."

Gbala noted that most YA novels are purchased by adults, but whether this meant that most YA novels were *read* by adults, or that the adults were buying them as gifts for those in the YA age range was not clear.

### **Miscellaneous Convention Stuff**

Over 600 people were members of one sort or other. They had originally planned for about 600 "warm bodies", but the warm-body count was actually about 200, making this the smallest NASFIC ever, and possibly Mark's and our smallest convention ever (not counting a couple of one-day cons in Michigan in the mid-1970s). Boskone 1971 (a "relaxacon") previously held that position, with a warm body count of 211. At NASFIC the highest badge number I saw was #279; someone else saw #295. But apparently after the Presidential election many Canadians who had bought attending memberships decided they did not want to visit the United States and did not attend.

There was a special rate for Caribbean members, but I got the impression that few, if any, from that area took advantage of it.

The good news was that the convention knew about the "shrinkage" early enough that they were able to renegotiate the hotel space (and possibly the hotel bloc) down to a smaller size so they did not have to pay for space they did not need.

The convention was so small that there were no daily newsletters. There were no room parties.

The "Dealers Room" was one table of gaming materials. The Art Show was a dozen 4' x 4' panels and a table. There were about a half dozen tables of exhibits (including a large one from the Puerto Rican "Star Trek" group). There were two bid tables (Ireland in 2019 and New Zealand in 2020) and one table for a seated convention (San Jose in 2018); these also had flyers for other conventions as well. All these were in a single room.

Maybe because the art show was small, a third of the art sold and every artist had sales. All the art was returned within a couple of days, and two of the artists were paid at the convention.

There was a salsa dance with a live band on Friday which we did not attend.

The freebie table was minimal, but did have a lot of science fiction trading cards. We were able to use the message board to get someone to share a taxi to the airport, but we seemed to be the only ones using it.

There was no Green Room separate from the Con Suite. (Given that panels now prep via email rather than in the Green Room, there did not need to be, and it is not clear how much they are needed elsewhere, other than providing different amenities (e.g., coffee in the Green Room but only sodas in the Con Suite). This Con Suite emphasized cookies and candy to the extent that Mark nicknamed it the "Sugar Shack". Philcon tends toward veggies, cheeses, and other more healthy items, but the hotel requirement that NASFIC serve only packaged food made this difficult, though they did have

BabyBel cheese. They also had "Malta India Light", a non-alcoholic beverage that someone described as tasting like a peanut butter sandwich--a not inaccurate description.

The bilingual aspect specified for some panels seemed entirely unnecessary. It was good to have it just in case, but the convention--at least that I saw--seemed to be entirely people who understood and spoke excellent English. And I do not think that there were any Caribbean memberships sold. (Puerto Rico is not in the Caribbean.)

The biggest problem was the temperature--not that it was too hot outside, but that the Sheraton was chilling the convention area as if they believed that the "North American" in the name meant that everyone came from Nome, Alaska--and missed it. Had the convention been selling long-sleeved souvenir shirts, they could have made a fortune!

In short, it was a lot better than we expected such a small con to be. We got chances to actually meet the Guests of Honor, the panels were interesting (with a limited schedule, they wisely avoided what we call "the drunk panels"--late-night, supposedly funny panels that tend to flop), the trip to Arecibo was great (and a \*lot\* cheaper than a commercial tour!), and our biggest complaint was the lack of choice of reasonably priced restaurants within 15 minutes' walk of the convention. (Avenida Ponce de Leon was 20 minutes for us. There was a supermarket there as well as restaurants, and that helped.) The food costs were not the convention's fault, or even the restaurants'--with a sales/restaurant tax of 11.5%, you are adding more than 25% to the base menu price on everything. And the portions at the Metropol and Los Pinos were really big enough for two, once you figured that out. However, the hotel coffee shop prices for breakfast were outrageous! (We ate in the room or at Macchiato Coffee-Deli.)

### **More Sightseeing**

Today was Old San Juan, since pretty much everything there is open on Mondays (unlike most museums). We waited a bit for the bus, but decided to take a taxi, since the bus stop had no seats or shade. In Old San Juan there are free trolleys to take you around. We took one full circle just to get an overview, and then a bit of a second time to get to our first stop. This route was in an enclosed vintage trolley which is supposed to be air-conditioned, but when we had to change trolley cars after the first circuit, we discovered the air conditioning in the second one was not working.

Our first stop was Casa Cortéz ChocoBar. Mark had a European hot chocolate (very thick), I had a Fortaleza (so thick you could literally stand a spoon up in it), and we split a chocolate pizza (about the size of a single slice, but the "crust" is a pastry and the topping is chocolate and marshmallow). With tip, this was \$20.

We then took a different trolley route around the periphery of Old San Juan, this one an open trolley, so the air conditioning worked by default. It took us right up to the entrance of El Morro, the main fortress of the island. (From the road it is about a two-block un-shaded walk to the entrance; only the trolleys are allowed up the walkway.)

We availed ourselves of the opportunity for me to buy a National Parks Senior Lifetime Pass for \$10. Mark has one that covers me as well in most cases, but there are a few things (like tours) where each person needs their own, and if Mark goes to that great park in the sky first, his pass is not transferable. We had not bought one when I turned 62, but when they announced the price was going from \$10 to \$80 at the end of August, we decided it was time. (We were lucky that El Morro--technically one of the parts of San Juan National Historic Site--had the senior passes; many National Parks have run out. You can get them on-line or by mail, but that is an additional \$10 handling fee.)

We had visited El Morro before (in 1992) and obviously the basic structure had not changed, though I am sure the exhibits were almost all new. The kitchen exhibit had several utensils hanging by the hearth. These were all rusty, which gave the impression that the food cooked there would be unhealthy, gritty, and taste of rust. But when the kitchen was in use a few hundred years ago, the utensils would *not* have been covered in rust, and displaying them that way is misleading. I realize it is probably cheaper to use antique utensils instead of crafting new ones of the same material and style, and that the rust on them might be all that is holding them together, but still ...) It is like the display of the gowns of the First Ladies that we saw in the University of Hartford Museum of American Political Life. They were all pretty faded and shabby looking, but they had one that was a re-creation from new material which looked the way the gown originally looked. What a difference! (Sadly, the University of Hartford Museum of American Political Life closed in 2004.)

We climbed down one level to the batteries, but decided not to climb all the way down (and then back up). The 77 steps down and then up (mostly in the sun) was quite enough, thank you.

We waited quite a while for the trolley in the sun (though at least there were places to sit) and took that back to the Plaza de Armas. (We decided to skip the other fortresses.) We were sitting in the shade, making notes and such, when we were greeted by another fan, and we chatted with him for a while. (With the convention as small as it was, it was easy to recognize people from it.)

Around 4PM, we decided to have dinner, and went to El Meson Sandwiches, highly recommended in TripAdvisor. Mark had a tuna sandwich, and I had a grilled chicken sandwich. The biggest problem was that the menu was only on the board above the counter, and was written in spidery letters that were hard to read. Sandwiches with long, tiny descriptions were completely illegible to us, and they had no paper menus to give us either. It was okay, but not exceptionally Caribbean.

Then we took the trolley back to the bus station, where we caught the bus back to the hotel. Here we got to sit in the shade to wait, so waiting a half-hour or whatever was not a great hardship.

Back in the room we did the same thing we had done the night before--watched a couple of old science fiction movies on YouTube on our netbook.

One difference this trip was that I did not always carry my HP 200LX with me. The tablet was more useful for the information I needed, and I took notes for the convention on a steno pad (as always) and for sightseeing in a small pocket notebook. The HP is the heaviest of the pocket devices (e-reader, tablet, and palmtop). (Well, actually, I think the GPS is heavier, but we decided not to bring that.) While it is true that during most of the sightseeing, we did not have WiFi, we did find it in some cafes and restaurants.

The only reason (other than weight) is that it is getting harder for me to read the HP screen, and at some point I will have to migrate some of its functions to other devices. (For example, I can still do data entry and processing of the book catalog on it, but I also download a fixed copy to the tablet regularly for read-only (off-line) access.

What is really interesting is that one of the flight attendants actually recognized the palmtop, saying "I haven't seen one of those in years!" He was surprised it still worked; I told him there was a place in Iowa that did repairs on them.

Oh, and we had to go through a USDA check before our flight back to the mainland. It seemed long, but luckily it moved very fast.

## **Restaurant Summary**

Here is a brief summary of some restaurants we went to while in San Juan:

Macchiato Coffee-Deli: About a ten-minute walk from the Sheraton near the Convention Center. Good huevos rancheros--we never even tried anything else!--and lattes, macchiatos, and so on. (I never found out if they had plain coffee.) Quite reasonably priced, especially when compared to the hotel coffee shop, and very friendly staff. Recommended.

Metropol: The restaurant in the Sheraton near the Convention Center. The prices seemed reasonable for a hotel restaurant, but even more so when we saw the size of the portions! One plate is enough for two moderate eaters, especially if you get a sampler. The Fiesta Cubana had congrí rice (rice with sausage mixed in, tamale, carnitas, cassava, pot roast, and spiced shredded beef for \$16.99

Ficus: Right next to the Sheraton and Convention Center, so very convenient, but primarily a bar with a very limited menu. The tacos were decent, but missing the radish and spring onion that usually comes with them.

Los Pinos: On Avenida Ponce de Leon, about a fifteen-minute walk from the Sheraton near the Convention Center. It has two locations, basically next door to each other--the menus are identical, but the further one is much quieter. The first day we had Mofongo with Chicken, and Fried Pork Chop; the second we ordered the appetizer sampler platter, which the waiter kept telling us was too big until he realized that 1) we were sharing it, and 2) that was all we were getting. It had carnitas (fried spiced pork), fried plantains (tostones), fried chicken pieces, fried calamari, fried mozzarella sticks, surullitos (hush puppies), and cheese empanadas. Apparently the magic word in Puerto Rico is "fried"!

Hacienda El Pedro: Coffee shop near the Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico. Very limited menu, but decent flatbread sandwiches.

Casa Cortés ChocoBar: Located in Old San Juan. The European hot chocolate is very thick, but the Fortaleza is the ultimate--you literally can stand a spoon up in it. It is really chocolate pudding. Just about everything on the menu has chocolate: the salmon is in chocolate butter, the grilled cheese sandwich has chocolate. and the club sandwich is served on a chocolate brioche. There are a few items that do not list chocolate, but if you do not want chocolate (or are allergic to it), you should ask first to be sure! A must-do for the chocolate lover.

El Meson: Located in Old San Juan. Okay sandwiches, but their only menu is up on the wall above the prep area, and written in a "thin letter" font such that only people with good eyesight or binoculars can read it. There are no paper menus.