BOOK REVIEW:

Diverse Futures: Science Fiction and Authors of Color

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Joy Sanchez-Taylor. *Diverse Futures: Science Fiction and Authors of Color.* Ohio State UP, 2021. ISBN: 978-0814257975.

Joy Sanchez-Taylor's *Diverse Futures* celebrates, critiques, and discusses how people of colour can be found in "alternate and future worlds" (5), drawing on work being done by BIPOC Hugo-award winners such as N.K. Jemisin and start-up internet publications such as *Fiyah*. This project decentres whiteness by focusing on stories by and about Black, Brown, Indigenous, Asian, Latinx, and other racialised people. Meanwhile, Sanchez-Taylor acknowledges the conceptual challenge of presenting this diverse material in a unified way. Sanchez-Taylor focuses on the North American context, and SF authors of colour tend to represent a "variety of races and ethnicities" in the countries currently known as Canada, Mexico, and the US due to histories of "colonization, immigration, and forced migration" (9). Overall, this book considers how to centre BIPOC SF authors in this scholarship without also making them solely emblematic or merely representative. Put differently, Sanchez-Taylor writes about race, ethnicity, and futurity within SF and which is by authors of colour without explicitly posing the problem of representation (as in a standing-in-for) in political terms. In this way, *Diverse Futures* tries presenting a formal solution to the critical problem implied by its title; diversity, which I read as both a critical concept and a methodology, brings together many SF writers and critics without making claims for a "unified" tradition of writing or for recommending a singular critical approach to Sanchez-Taylor's chosen texts.

Yet "diversity", at least for most people studying or teaching in post-secondary institutions, also has a valence of administrator-speak. In the wake of ongoing police brutality, specifically sparked by protests following the murder of George Floyd in early 2020, equity, diversity, and inclusivity committees have been meeting to assess the systemic forms of racism lurking in plain view at their own university or college campuses. For example, in an anti-racist workshop presented by Chúk Odenigbo and Future Ancestors Services last spring at Trent University, my own institution, we learned how the concept of diversity requires a normative standard. Conversely, anti-racist approaches take aim at racism rather than centring whiteness. I add this here for several reasons: first, I simply think Future Ancestors is a group that many SF enthusiasts interested in *Diverse Futures* would be happy to know of. They are an "Indigenous and Black-owned, youth-led professional services social enterprise that advances climate justice and systemic barrier removal with lenses of restorative anti-racism and ancestral accountability" (https://www.futureancestors.ca/). Second, I take their point about anti-racism. How does their framing of the diversity concept work for the book under discussion? Is it meant as a code word? A Gramscian swap, like hegemony for ideology, in order to escape the censors? Or does it do a different kind of work here? Third, I am cognisant of being a white descendent of settlers writing from the traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. I am cognisant of how it come across for me to engage critically with a book the centres diversity, even when I also admire it.

Alongside diversity as an organising concept, *Diverse Futures* promises to offer a critical metanarrative when it introduces the concept of "double estrangement" – a phrase that might have been another appropriate title for Sanchez-Taylor's book. A tantalising critical formulation, double estrangement unites famous ideas from Darko Suvin and W.E.B. DuBois, and Sanchez-Taylor here proposes that science-fictional estrangement becomes the target of a secondary defamiliarisation, so that what was reified as the traditional extrapolative or analogical leap can now be read as an expression of whiteness, a normative assumption about the new or the strange. Double estrangement represents a defamiliarisation of the internal conflict experienced by racialised or colonised people within a critical inversion of science-fictional estrangement. What these BIPOC SF authors make legible is that to be true to the utopian impulse of SF, one has to submit it to its own narrative logics, and thus … but here is where metaphors fail me. Blasting off into a whole new terrain? Seeking a new horizon? Exploring alien worlds? Such language comes from an unestranged SF. Sanchez-Taylor's concept demands we find better language for an anti-racist SF.

In other words, BIPOC authors alter

established science fiction tropes to highlight the racial estrangement that DuBois describes ... as ... the knowledge that peoples of color are always forced to view themselves through a lens of whiteness .... For people who are more likely to identify with the alien "other" in traditional science fiction than with a white human narrator, science fiction becomes a space where authors of color (who are typically fans of the genre themselves) can employ recognizable aspects of science fiction – tropes like the alien, time travel, and immortality – yet also rework these tropes to make room for non-Eurowestern cultures. (7)

Double estrangement provides a possible throughline to connect and organise the book. Unfortunately, the work of explicitly *thinking* double estrangement is left to the reader. Instead of using this tantalising concept as a lens for each of the book's four major tropes, Sanchez-Taylor offers vivid yet mostly individual descriptions of featured texts that demonstrate how diverse authors take up and rework the trope in question. Sanchez-Taylor's book is critically minded, and yet readers will have to connect ideas from chapter to chapter themselves.

Overall, the book follows four key tropes or SF situations: first contact, genetics, apocalypse, and Indigenous knowledges. Each chapter addresses an impressive range of prose texts – the only film allotted space is Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* (2008). These texts include criticism, novels, and short stories. "Space Travel and First Contact Narratives" includes works by Gina Ruiz and Celu Amberstone; "Race, Genetics, and Science Fiction" features work by George Schuyler and Larissa Lai; "The Apocalypse has Already Come" reads Sarah Vourvoulias and Gabby Rivera among others; and "Indigenous and Eurowestern Science" interprets works by Tananarive Due and Carlos Hernandez. Each chapter establishes the trope in question through criticism, analyses significant pairings of texts, and uses a second pair of texts to further discussion before finally drawing to a close with summative authority. These tropes gather texts not frequently considered together to demonstrate how the racialising subtext of SF can be made explicit and subsequently critiqued, embraced, or elevated. The chapters work well as case studies and would certainly be helpful to a lecturer as they prepare for discussion of the texts or tropes in question.

Focusing on the third chapter (and on post-apocalyptic settings) in particular, Sanchez-Taylor meaningfully pushes back against distinctions between state-dominated dystopia writing and post-catastrophe storytelling by centring the long-lasting impacts of colonisation, settlement, and slavery in the Americas. By titling her chapter "The Apocalypse has Already Come", she centres the kind of double estrangement at work in BIPOC SF. The chapter opens with the criminalization of certain racialised characters in Vourvoulias's *Ink* (2012) and Rivera's "0.1" (2019). Later, Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011) and Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018) provide stunning examples of double estrangement. Whitehead and Ma adopt the post-apocalyptic mode – a way of writing SF to imagine a storyworld after a cataclysmic event – *not* in order to present exceptional everyday heroes who rise to the task of surviving, but to question the very notion of the genre from within. Both books feature racialised protagonists who are, as Sanchez-Taylor notes, unexceptional and think of themselves in that way. Here, the white survivor last-man trope (yes, they are typically last men), is doubly estranged: not only are two racialised characters centred in these stories, but both find ways to resist the exceptional. For Mark

Spitz in *Zone One*, this technique provides a way to be passed over in an education system where standing out as a black man risks safety. Meanwhile in *Severance*, Candace Chen, a second-generation immigrant from Fuzhou province known for manufacturing and industry, finds ways to blend into New York as a Bible product coordinator.

With every turn, Sanchez-Taylor demonstrates the real necessity for a paradigm shift in studying genre writing that could bring about fuller, richer discussions of SF across the critical field and the fandom. The book's conclusion, "How Long 'Till Black Future Month?", borrows its title from Jemisin's collection *How Long 'Till Black Future Month* (2018) and offers an exciting overview of recent developments in SF communities, fandoms, and publishing that showcase diverse futures for SF. Here the research and critical narrative come together to present a sense of the grassroots work being done by Asian, Black, Brown, Indigenous, and Latinx authors, fans, and publishers to extend the reach and increase the visibility of such audiences and creators of SF.

Ultimately, *Diverse Futures* effectively breaks – and breaks with – genre-focused definitional struggles around SF. The definitional work so often pursued in SF scholarship is connected by Sanchez-Taylor with gatekeeping, and gatekeeping with the inertia (my words, not hers) of white supremacy. As such, her book implicitly periodises its archive around two formative grassroots movements: #racefail and Jemisin's Hugo Awards speech for *The Stone Sky* (2017). Despite the described failings of Elizabeth Bear's workshop, the anti-racist criticism that followed provided many people of colour, on Sanchez-Taylor's account, with the opportunity to recognise one another as SF people: "the use of Twitter hashtags and online threads can be a unifying experience for fans of color" (153). *Diverse Futures* responds to gatekeeping by admitting everyone. Though I applaud it, one worthwhile risk of this approach is that Sanchez-Taylor's book sometimes omits information for readers in the service of its horizontal politics: a SF canon still exists today, just in a new and more openly collaborative form. Here, *Diverse Futures* draws on as many voices as possible, making it a valuable resource with which to think. It's an invitation nearly out of breath in its earnestness: "here are the words I've read, please add to them!"

The book offers a rich, descriptive approach to its impressive archive. I think there is so much more to be discussed here, which nicely adds a layer to my understanding of Sanchez-Taylor's title. "Diverse futures" names SF storyworld futures full of Asian, Black, Brown, Indigenous, Latinx characters (and everything beyond or in between); it describes the experiences and life worlds of the authors of SF; and it characterises a goal for SF criticism as well. Because it is among the first of its kind, the book does impressive work to lay out its materials, introducing so many SF authors and critics (some of whom have never been written about in this way) and letting the texts speak for themselves along the way. It is an important index for SF scholars interested in thinking deeply about BIPOC SF authors, SF publishing, and SF criticism.

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