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## ***DIVERSE FUTURES: SCIENCE FICTION AND AUTHORS OF COLOR (2021) BY JOY SANCHEZ-TAYLOR***

Review by Alexandria Nunn

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**Sanchez-Taylor, Joy. *Diverse Futures Science Fiction and Authors of Color*. The Ohio State University Press, 2021. 188 pp.**

Joy Sanchez-Taylor's *Diverse Futures: Science Fiction and Authors of Color* (2021) hits a sought-after middle point between a work long overdue and a study that could not be more relevant to our current cultural moment. Critical Race Studies and Science Fiction (SF) have converged for years, of note in the critical work of Isiah Lavender III's *Race in American Science Fiction* (2011) and especially in the literary canon of Octavia Butler. Nevertheless, it is only in recent history that the extent of their intersection has been fully appreciated. Emboldened by renewed public interest, Sanchez-Taylor calls to attention the work that has already been done in the field while gesturing to imaginative possibilities for SF authors and critics in our modern moment. Social media (a near SF concept in and of itself) has given authors of colour a new means of being heard and understood within and outside of their fiction. *Diverse Futures* is best understood as a time capsule for SF authors of Black, Indigenous, and peoples of colour (BIPOC) in the last thirty years. It functions especially well as an introduction to the form, the history, and the rise of SF with a Critical Race bend. I would argue the best way to approach this book is as a primer for BIPOC SF rather than a laser focused analysis.

Sanchez-Taylor opens *Diverse Futures* on a personal note, as she shares her experience growing up as a woman of colour and lover of classic SF. For Sanchez-Taylor, the two identities particularly felt at odds in a culture where SF frequently meant male-dominated, majorly white protagonists bent on conquest and exploration. Sanchez-Taylor saw that her identities were being 'missed,' both in predominantly white SF spaces and in her community of origin which often questioned the merit of this supposedly white genre for non-white persons. This personal bend proves to be the perfect beginning point because, as Sanchez-Taylor discovers, she is but one person in a sea of other readers of colour wondering the exact same thing. Underlying questions of belonging pushed Sanchez-Taylor to further research the history of SF by people of colour for readers and fans of colour in order to, in her own words, "raise awareness about how authors of colour are combatting the idea of SF as a 'white' genre by writing their racial and cultural experiences into these genres" (2). The text goes on to demonstrate how authors and readers of colour have been speaking back to SF's homogenous standards for decades, though due recognition of their revolutionary advocacy is comparably recent.

Sanchez-Taylor's theoretical framing is intriguing. She emphasises futurisms, that is, Afrofuturism, Chicanafuturism, Indigenous Futurism, etcetera, as a means by which to conceive the past and presents of BIPOCS in the US. All these futurist forms emphasise what it means to exist as a person of colour in the future, whether it be as a black, as Latinx or as any other non-white person.<sup>1</sup> Authors and creators of colour frame Futurism as the realm of possibility while still acknowledging the reality of a present in desperate need of improvement. Sanchez-Taylor lends voice to that present, which is easily the book's greatest strength.

As *Diverse Futures* gets into chapters, however, it foregrounds a lot of large topics in quick succession. Each chapter discusses a different concept as portrayed by various authors of colour. Chapter One, "Space Travel and First Contact Narratives," lays the study's foundation by attending to the troubled portrayals of alienness and alien being in SF discourse. Aliens, after all, are seldom allowed to be truly alien but rather draw upon something with which we are already familiar. For example, a many-tentacled many-eyed alien still has eyes and tentacles because the author can only fathom what they have already seen. This becomes a particular problem when aliens are coded as a racialised or gendered Other. Utilising the works of Octavia Butler, Gina Ruiz, Celu Amberstone, and several others, Sanchez-Taylor illustrates how authors of colour return to invasion narratives and reshape them into their own, whether it be in featuring 'unconventional' heroes or by putting characters in uncomfortable situations. Authors of colour, Sanchez-Taylor argues, are particularly attentive to the intricate relationship between the colonised and colonising because of their own relationships with ancestors, family members, and peers living under colonial rule. The black female protagonist of Octavia Butler's *Dawn* (1987), for example, is brought to mediate on behalf of the extra-terrestrials and reluctantly bear their children, paralleling the fraught and painful history of women of colour in the United States who were often forced to bear their oppressors' children. Of all the chapters, the first is the fullest and sets the foundation for later chapters. However, it may be best understood as two chapters in one, with invasion in the first half and the aftermath of invasion/colonisation in the second. Sanchez-Taylor presents indispensable research in an inviting manner, moving seamlessly from topic to topic, but includes upwards of five authors per chapter and cannot always give each writer the full focus they may receive otherwise. It would be best to re-read this chapter before continuing, or utilise it in a teaching seminar where the works and authors can be discussed in depth.

Building on the opening chapter, Chapter Two, "Race, Genetics, and Science Fiction," participates in the ongoing work to break biology away from cultural constructions of race. Sanchez-Taylor explains how the conflation between race and biology is nothing new, coming to popularity in the early and mid-nineteenth century as a justification for the mistreatment of enslaved and indigenous peoples since they were not viewed as equally human in comparison to their white counterparts. Genetics and genetic engineering have played a significant role in SF as in bad-faith science like eugenics, so the overlap between fact and fiction here is less hypothetical than in some more light-hearted examples. The brutal way in which Butler's Lilith has her DNA and child stolen can only be so distant from the forced sterilisations and child separations of twentieth and twenty-first century America. Once again, Sanchez-Taylor works with several key texts and their authors to

assess how persons of colour have rewritten the script in response to real-world biological racism. Each author gets equal focus here and a lot more time to develop. Sanchez-Taylor draws a parallel between the technologizing of non-white flesh made into machinery or bare life in service to a capitalist upper class and the literal cyborging of flesh in SF in service to corrupt dystopias. This is the same parallel noted by Wendy Hui Kyong Chun in her article "Race and/as Technology" (2009) wherein she argues race exists comfortably between a technological creation and a lived reality that forms and re-forms against biological constructions of race (although Sanchez-Taylor herself does not reference Chun's work).

Chapter Three, "The Apocalypse Has Already Come," offers a sobering challenge to how we perceive SF and reality as separate. Sanchez-Taylor begins with an exploration of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, where the American public and media criminalised and dehumanised starving black families amidst the wreckage of a destroyed New Orleans. Using the works of Colson Whitehead, Gabby Rivera, Ling Ma, and others, Sanchez-Taylor asks her reader to consider if the post-apocalypse of fiction can really be distinguished so much from the reality of daily oppression for select non-white peoples. In particular, this chapter's focus on how Colson Whitehead and Ling Ma's zombie novels reframes the act of killing monsters as horrible, insisting that characters develop empathy with creatures often depicted as mindless and sub-human. Sanchez-Taylor reveals how the inability of Whitehead and Ma's protagonists to kill zombies or enjoy zombie-hunting is because they can empathise with individuals who have been made zombies/monstrous authors by their country, integrating questions of race, monstrosity, and the human instinct for self-preservation in a nuanced analysis. Likewise, the fact that the zombie cannot be mindless machine-gun fodder is an active talk-back to the dehumanisation that often accompanies who the zombie has been written to represent. The final chapter and conclusion shifts to restorative work, answering the question: if SF habitually and consistently works against authors of colour and their creations, how do we proceed? In Chapter Four, "Our Knowledge is Not Primitive," Sanchez-Taylor recognises the significant progress of the 2010s. In a world where indigenous knowledge and non-western knowledge is construed as outdated or foolish, Sanchez-Taylor considers the possibility that non-western medicine, practices, and even rituals can be just as scientific as the spaces we may traditionally conceive as part of SF. Of the texts she uses to convey that point, Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl the Ring* (1998) most clearly elucidates this tension between Western and non-Western forms. Resisting SF expectations that the scientific answer be the Western one as well, Hopkinson's protagonist sees the potential horror that comes with a detached and opportunistic western approach to medicine and embraces the empathetic even subjective indigenous practices her grandmother and mother teach her. Similarly, what western society relegates to a home remedy is lacking not in science or practice but in the perception of being scientific. The book convincingly argues that SF as a category must grow to accommodate all science, not simply the science with which the western world is familiar. In essence, Sanchez-Taylor rightly argues a re-definition of science is at hand.

One indispensable contribution Sanchez-Taylor introduces throughout the book is the idea of double estrangement; that is being estranged from your own existence through the other world of SF and being estranged by your real existence through lived encounters with racism. Estrangement

happens twice over when a reader of colour finds a racist caricature of what is apparently the distant, utopic future. Double estrangement acknowledges and defines that sense of removal from future narratives and is an incredibly helpful means by which to describe BIPOC interactions with SF. Any critique or praise of *Diverse Futures* would begin and end with its information load. Sanchez-Taylor discusses an average of four texts per chapter across four chapters, excluding a hefty conclusion. Every ounce of the information worthy of books onto itself and, while it never steers from its core point, it can be overwhelming. As an introductory guide, it is rather formidable. Persons looking to learn more about a topic they have never considered would do well to start here before moving on to more narrow studies, such as Sami Schalk's *BodyMinds Reimagined: (Dis)Ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (2018), which as the title implies takes up a particular subset of BIPOC and SF by examining black women and posthumanism. *Diverse Futures* book has a great assemblage of ideas and literary texts to draw in any readers new to the intersections of race and SF.

Throughout this text, Sanchez-Taylor questions what constitutes science, art, being, and which parts of these definitions have been limited or erased by westernisation. I suspect the book is rather involved because it would be much easier to write a book about the ways in which BIPOC lives and culture have not been limited or erased by westernisation. It is hard to call a book too full when not a word on the page is inaccurate or irrelevant to what SF is becoming. Every bit of it needs to be heard and heard again, if only over several books and several dialogues. In this regard, Sanchez-Taylor's reading may be best viewed as an exploration of things that have been and of things that must come. *Diverse Futures* has the DNA of a love letter to what has been done, a literary study of what might be, and a survey of American Race and SF in the twenty-first century.

## NOTES

1. Sanchez-Taylor uses the term Latinx to refer to persons of Latin American background across the gender spectrum. While the term has been subject to controversy outside and within Latin American communities, I use it here in conjunction with Sanchez-Taylor's original intent for the purposes of this assessment.

## WORKS CITED

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## BIONOTE

**Alexandria Nunn** earned her doctorate from University of Maryland College Park, United States of America. Her research focuses on futurity and Blackness in twentieth and twenty-first century multiethnic American Science Literature, Film, and New Media.