

Daniel José Older on the *Shadowshaper Cypher* Series: Part I

Interviewed by Taryne Jade Taylor

Daniel José Older is a Latino speculative fiction writer best known for his young adult series *Shadowshaper Cypher*, middle-grade series *Dactyl Hill Squad*, his adult urban fantasy series *Bone Street Rumba*, and his work as lead story architect for *Star Wars: The High Republic*. Older's forthcoming publications include *Ballad & Dagger*, the first novel in his new YA series *Outlaw Saints* (May 2022). This interview focuses on Older's *Shadowshaper Cypher* series and considers the intersections of young adult literature, urban fantasy, Latinx culture, and activism.

Taylor: I'm starting with the question that I'm the most uncomfortable asking about the *Shadowshaper Cypher* series. I feel like I'm Wick right now asking this question [the problematic Anglo anthropologist in the series]. I see Sierra's role as Lucera as similar to a Santera. Is there a connection between shadowshaping and Santería?

Older: Oh yeah, totally. It's not a direct one for one connection. It's not an analog for Santería because it exists in a world that also includes Santería, this world. But it's influenced and inspired by it, and I'm a practitioner. One of the most direct connections is actually just knowing folks within my own community who grew up in the tradition. I didn't grow up in Santería. I do have it in the family, but it was tías, but people I know who were kids coming up with parents who were priests and Santeros and stuff—like their experience of what we call the supernatural, our ghosts and like spirits is just so much more pure. And they're still connected to that.

Pure is a weird word, but certainly just their own sense of their own power, spirituality is just something that is just very natural to them because they grew up in houses that totally understood spirit and divinity and how to work it and how cool that was, but also how that could serve to alienate them a little bit from kids; the rest of the world, basically, westernized “normal” households that don't do that—Judeo-Christian Westernized (households). And that can be weird.

I remember talking to a young friend of mine. He was in his early twenties at the time, but I'd known him since he was a teenager and in my God family. And he was like, “Man, sometimes I think about how it would be so cool if the pizza man knew that because in our tradition, sometimes they take away things from you when you're initiated, stuff that they tell you not to eat; they're kind of like taboos, but they're personalized.” And he was like, “It'd be so cool if you could just talk about that normally instead of being like, ‘Oh no, yeah, I'm allergic to that or whatever,’ and to have a code for it.” You can just tell. And it's really stuck with me. These are simple things that are really basic, like how the pizza man takes your order, but that matter too, especially when you're a young person, that sense of normalcy.

When I went to Cuba, it just jumped out at me how it actually is like that. There are a lot of people who just have an understanding of the religion across the board so that you don't have to explain it. I ordered something at one of those little bodega stands, and asked for it without something. And the guy was like, oh, and he assumed that it was one of my personal taboos of the religion, which it wasn't, but it cracked me up because I immediately was like, wow, there is a place where it's normalized. But anyway, spending time with those folks and just knowing them and what they grew up with, a lot of that is in the conversations that Juan and Sierra have about

Juan growing up, knowing about shadowshaping and Sierra not knowing—the differences there and what that meant. And, for him, it's so normalized that he takes it for granted, too. And that's the thing. But yeah, shadowshaping is essentially about spirit work, and it's about spirit work directly, how it connects to creativity. And that is certainly something that we do a lot, in the Santería tradition.

Taylor: I was hesitant to ask, since I'm not a practitioner, though I do have family who are. It reminded me of when Tee was institutionalized in the book for telling Ms. Rollins about shadowshaping, and Tee gave the speech at the protest talking about how white America worships the dead in a very different way and how white culture would look at anything like Santería as almost like fantasy, as if it can't possibly be real, and there's denigration of it. For example, Izzy's interaction with the teacher: why wouldn't it occur to Ms. Rollins that this could be a cultural heritage as opposed to deciding that it's so far afield of what she knows that it must be a psychiatric issue?

Older: Yeah, exactly. That's it exactly.

Taylor: Thinking about genre, a conversation that might apply to your work is Grace L. Dillon's work on Indigenous futurism and Indigenous sciences, which asks questions about where we draw the lines and categorize works as speculative fiction when we're often looking at it from a white, Western perspective and not thinking about cultural differences that impact what is accepted as real versus the fantastic. Even with Santería, some scholars would categorize truths for practitioners as fantasy and, therefore, want to categorize realist fiction as fantasy or vice versa—since Santería is not an analog for shadowshaping, people outside of the tradition may be tempted to simplify what you're doing and categorize it as only Santería and not acknowledge your world-building. When you wrote *Shadowshaper*—which I know you wrote as YA—did you set out to write it as urban fantasy?

Older: No, I actually found out that urban fantasy was a thing after I was already well into the book. I wasn't that familiar with the term, if at all. The real model was more *Harry Potter*. In retrospect, I had a realization that the books that I loved the most in the *Harry Potter* series were the ones that skewed more toward urban fantasy. My favorite one was *Order of the Phoenix*, which is where they spend more time in London, hanging out with the crew. And there was something about that that really felt like a spark. Then, as I did find out about urban fantasy, I started to read more up on it, and it was very white, which really jumped out at me, especially because the word urban itself when you don't have the word fantasy after it, is a code word for Black and brown folks in publishing.

So it was really jarring, especially given that, suddenly, when the fantasy aspect comes in, it just becomes so super white. And with that whiteness comes certain understandings of the city that are different from mine—from ours. So much of it read like tourist books. Not all of it—there's really great urban fantasy out there written by white people, but the main thrust of it felt very much like outsiders of the cities that I knew. And that's also my take of people who live in Chicago, who read books set in Chicago and are like, that's not Chicago, that's the suburbs. I usually found the two extremes: it was either a horrific city where nobody ever slept and everybody did drugs and shot at each other or it was like just this like picture perfect little provincial bakery city. There are certain parts of Brooklyn like that, but either way, neither of these extremes wanted to deal with

the fact that most of the cities are neither of those and are a little bit of both of those. Those are cartoons.

And then one of those visions is actually actively taking over another one in a very real way, which is gentrification, and that matters. It's a very real and gigantic historical moment that we're living in, and we haven't talked or seen enough talk about it until more recently. Now that people of color write it as urban fantasy, we see it, but when urban fantasy was a mostly white genre, it didn't do it with gentrification at all to my knowledge, or barely. Or if it did, it was a de-racialized version that didn't really speak about the reality of it. So that bothered me; that felt like a tremendous form of erasure and just denial. As someone living in Brooklyn at the time, even if you take politics out of it, it's everywhere. You can't not see gentrification unless you're really trying. You have to be actively trying not to, willfully, to miss that gigantic movement of people that is happening. And one of the reasons we miss it, to be fair, is that it's a slow motion, in many ways kind of forced migration. But it still matters and it's tough and emotional for each person getting evicted. That was something that just really jarred me.

And it really genuinely, as a reader, really jumped out at me as someone's living in the place being described and, and in the midst of that. Those types of things were just pieces that I really had to put into my own work. *Shadowshaper* was like, in some ways, a response to *Harry Potter* and the extreme whiteness of *Harry Potter*, which is the series I loved at the time and, in some ways a response to urban fantasy and this, and similar things. The main thing I didn't feel from those stories was the true love of like being of the city and being in the city. And that's just something that as a born and raised city child...I love the city and it's a place that feels like home—it protects me in different ways and I feel safe in it, and that's just not something that I never felt. So that's something I wanted. That's why Sierra's community is so important to her. And that's why we start out with her and just her neighbor hanging out because those are the relationships that really do matter in a lot of ways.

Taylor: That's so interesting because what struck me when I first read *Shadowshaper* is that the only urban fantasy writer I was seeing that wasn't creating these weirdly only white cities was Charles DeLint. I love Charles DeLint, but he was doing it in a very problematic culturally appropriative way. His Latino characters, his Indigenous characters, they were stereotypes. Your book was a breath of fresh air.

Older: That's great to hear. That's what I set out to do. Breath of fresh air.

Taylor: Some writers' attempts can feel forced. One of the things that struck me about the *Shadowshaper* series is how subtle the LGBTQ+ characters were introduced as LGBTQ+. You couldn't ignore that it was happening, but it didn't feel like, "Oh, I have to make sure that I'm inclusive." I'm thinking of Izzy and Tee's relationship, or even in the novella *Ghost Girl in the Corner*, when Desmond, just casually drops that he's gay. I love the way that you did that. And I wondered what was your process for being inclusive and writing LGBTQ+ characters in an authentic way?

Older: I'm glad you read the novellas; I love those books. Because they're only on eBook, people don't know about them as much, but I'm really proud of how they came out. Some of it is just strategy, in the sense of anything you're introducing, any element, whether it's something more like overtly around identity or something complicated that, that has a certain weight to it, or just

any detail about a character, like how they dress...you're always starting to strategize as an author around how to bring that in and make it seem natural, especially when it is something more weighted, is the way to think of it. It goes back to any question about diversity; it always comes back to just the question of telling truth.

It's a craft point that needs to be considered, like with the gentrification stuff. That all is really just about telling the truth, which is the writer's job. Obviously, there's many truths, and we're always trying to figure out which ones to get in there because you can't tell them all. But, especially for this up-and-coming generation of young people, it's just not that big a deal. I mean, that's obviously a huge stereotype in a way and a generalization, but just so much of what I know of the young people from the activity that I see online and the kids that I talked to in schools, and it's not about having these huge beats of like—YOU GUYS—of course that still happens and that's important, but a lot of writers before me have done a lot of the hard work of normalizing queer relationships, and that's something that had to happen in literature because it wasn't normalized.

Literature itself has really stigmatized gay relationships for so long. And again, folks are doing work to undo that and folks are doing work culturally and organizational work and everything else. That work has worked in a lot of ways. We see it in this generation of kids who don't across the board have to have a big moment about it and it's just a normal day. It's her and her girlfriend and that's just what it is. Again, that's not true across the board, but it's something that I see a lot. I felt like it was important to honor that. And to shout out to the kids who are like way ahead of the game, compared to where we were at, in my generation coming up where it had to be made a big deal out of on every level. It would've felt like a big distraction to kind of veer off. And these kids have known each other for years at this point. And so, you know, whenever Tee and Izzy came out of the closet, if they even had to...or maybe they just, hopefully, went about their business and started dating. Either way, even if they did, that would have been years earlier because they just go that far back. It also would have felt artificial to their relationships to suddenly be like, wait, one of us is gay. You know, let's have a moment about it, but that's not real.

Taylor: I was struck by the end of *Shadowshaper Legacy*, when Santo and El Tuerco reunite; it was so nice and happened so quietly. Queerness wasn't made to seem unusual and it extends far back into the shadowshaper history, showing queerness is accepted in this world.

Older: Absolutely. I mean, of course there were always gay people. That shouldn't be a question, but it is because history has been so straightified by straight people and that's so messed up, especially when we're talking about cultures that have had to, for various reasons fly under the radar or be essentially outlaws in their own communities. This is the way that I imagined some of those communities surviving—and all we have is our imaginations a lot of times when we're thinking about these worlds; they find alternate ways to express themselves, to love each other and to be themselves and outside of the norms. And that's my hope for them. This was my way of honoring that.

Taylor: Along those same lines, I don't know what the publishing conventions there are for when you're dealing with sex in YA—but it often seems either avoided or overdone. In the *Shadowshaper* series when Sierra finally gets together with Anthony and compares him to Robbie, it clicked to me that the sex was incorporated naturally. You quietly acknowledge she and Robbie have been intimate before and now she is going to be intimate with Anthony. This felt like a really

honest portrayal of teenagers and sex as opposed to overwrought ideas of either hyper-sexualized relationships completely avoiding sex.

Older: That's that is what I was going for, similar to questions of sexuality amongst your friends, or identity, those are big deals and they are important. And at the same time, in certain people's lives and in some of our own lives, they manage to not be that important or they just don't necessarily require a big beat in a book that's about something else. Sometimes it's just something that you have to get in there by implying that it happened in the past and then figuring out what, how does that matter for the present? Because the past only matters in as much as it matters to the present in terms of narrative structure. Millions of things happened in the past for Sierra, but the ones that matter for now are the only ones that matter for the book.

To that end, yeah, she's thinking about a current situation, and all she has to compare it to is her last dude. And since he's a character too, it's especially pertinent. It was a good opportunity to have this conversation that different intimate experiences sit differently for different reasons, and different people are at different places with their own intimacy. Robbie is in his own way kind of new at it and Anthony's a little more experienced. As a whole, we tend to kind of stigmatize experience. We do it a lot more towards women than men, almost to the opposite effect, but it still gets stigmatized a lot across the board.

I didn't want to have a moment to be like, look, Anthony knows what he's doing and it matters, in terms of pleasure, but also in terms of consent and how these two people communicate because the key thing about Anthony for Sierra is that he listens to her and he really pays attention. Not consent in the sense of like consent or non-consent, but consent in the sense of like, is he tuned into her pleasure and that matters. Those are important questions that, sex or not, couples of any age should be asking each other: Does this person listen to me? Because that's what it all comes back to. It's going to play out in intimate spaces, but it's also going to play out in mundane spaces. Those same problems that Robbie is having about not listening are exactly why he didn't get the girl at the end, which people complain about sometimes, but the kid wasn't ready.

Taylor: It was a subtle commentary on masculinity and straight relationships. We see Robbie is just not ready to be emotionally committed—like in all the times he's ignoring her texts. We don't know what he's doing because it all takes place off the page for the most part, but we know that he's not really being available to her emotionally. This became clear in the second novella *Dead Light March*.

Older: Yeah, that's very true. When you find somebody that has a power like yours, and you didn't even know you had that power, and then this person comes along and they have that power, too, and they teach you about it. This whole world is opening up to you and Robbie's kind of her guide into that, that is a very intimate connection. That was something I wanted to really lean into in their initial attraction in book one, but also like make it clear that it's not enough. That spark and that romance and that excitement of having magic together is cool. It's good for about a book and then you gotta step up and deal with each other as a couple, or you gotta step out of the way when the bass player shows up.

Taylor: This also played off with what you did with the other characters, for example Sierra's crew shows how younger generations can identify as unified people of color, as opposed to like

separating themselves based on national origin etc. Was that your thought process when you were creating Sierra's crew?

Older: Yes and no; at the base of it is really what I said earlier. You can't walk down a block in New York and not have like five different nationalities around you. You walk into a bodega and it's literally a global experience and that's so cool. And also, something that is kind of lacking even in the diversity conversation sometimes it just becomes very static, and that's not a symptom of us not having the conversation—people of color have the conversation in all its many layers, but when publishing fails as deeply as it has around showing the true nature of this world, which is quite diverse, then the consequence of that is that the conversation is very flat when you finally get to have it; you're just barely scratching the surface.

In the past couple of years we've seen YA, in particular, get much deeper because there have been more opportunities to do that because we had to fight to get them, and people of color are writing more books and getting to tell our stories more. But it's taken awhile, and it took activism for that to happen. It just was really natural and obvious to have kids that have parents from different parts of the Caribbean and across the board and also not just that, but from all over. That just seemed really normal. It's less about them having a sense of unity because they do, but they also don't. They're very clear on where they come from, which isn't lack of unity, but they do have like very strong ties to their people outside of their group of friends.

They get along because they all get along and they like to talk trash in the same way and they just have a good time. They're all kind of artsy nerds, but never at the cost of who their families are. They never blend into an anonymous murk. They're all very clear on who they are and where they come from. And even some of them that come from the same places have different relationships to those places. Izzy is a couple of generations removed from her Jamaican heritage and Tee is from Martinique; they just had connections, but her family was a much more recent immigrant family and those are the differences that come through and in small ways that matter. It's really about leaning into those differences and letting them play out the way they probably normally would have to the best I know from my experiences as a son of an immigrant from the Caribbean and just see where it takes them.

Taylor: Following diversity movements in the speculative fiction fan community, such as *Race Fail*, *We Need Diverse* books, *People of Color Destroy Science Fiction*, etc., I noticed that more change happened in YA science fiction and fantasy than in adult science fiction and fantasy. Why do you think it is that YA seemed to be more open to change and have more BIPOC writers emerging onto the scene and being accepted by agents and publishers?

Older: That's a great question. I've gotten it a couple of times and I never quite know the answer because it's something I noticed too, and everyone sees it and we're all like, Hmm. Part of it is this: adult fantasy is a very entrenched world. Period. It's got long established gatekeepers and guardians and everyone has been around forever and in some ways is crusty. There's new blood and there's change happening and we can see it. And there's obviously new generations coming up all the time. Publishers like Tor.com are really doing amazing work. Overall, YA is making more moves. You have younger writers as a whole working in YA who were more recently teenagers.

The readership itself has a turnover because people aren't young adults forever. Obviously, adults read young adult fiction at startling numbers. That can't be ignored, but, ultimately, you're

still writing. You're supposed to be writing for teenagers. Those teenagers are constantly in motion. You write a book that's not going to get published for two years, probably, and half the people you were thinking about aren't even teenagers anymore. That's just the nature of publishing, but that turnover of readership, influences things. There's a different kind of need to have a certain amount of finger on pulse when you're writing for young people than when you're writing for old people, and I say that as someone who has done both and has been both. I do think that changes things.

Young people have much better bullshit meters than older people. They're not here to be condescended to and they smell it out way ahead of, of older readers, because it happens so much more often to them and so they don't put up with any shit. You have to know that if you're going to write for them and you have to be on the money and they are, as we talked about earlier, they are more radical as a whole than we were when we were that age and that is a good thing. And you know, that old crusty thing, doesn't fly with them in the same way that it does with people that grew up reading old crusty stuff and continue to read old crusty stuff, for better, for worse. Look, there's value in some of that old crusty stuff. I read it. I don't think it's all bad. But it is dusty and it needs a good dusting to get in shape. That turnover of readership matters in this conversation in a way that we haven't fully explored yet as a community.