

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

Interviewed by Taryne Jade Taylor, PhD

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. His next novel, *Ballad and Dagger*, will be released May 3, 2022 and is the first YA title in the Rick Riordan Presents imprint. Learn more about Older and his work at <http://danieljoseolder.net/>

In Part I, published in *Label Me Latina/o's* June 2021 special issue on YA Latinx Literature, concluded with a discussion about why Young Adult fantasy is more inclusive than adult fantasy. In Part I, Older explains "adult fantasy is a very entrenched world" with "long established gatekeepers," whereas the readership of YA has more turnover of readership which influences what is produced as you must have your "finger on the pulse when you're writing for young people." Part II continues this conversation.

Taylor: In a lot of interviews and a lot of pieces I've seen written about the *Shadowshaper* series, one of the things that people talk about are all the political themes: the books deal with gentrification, imperialism, Black Lives Matter, and more. Do you think YA enables you to engage more with these issues because of what you mentioned earlier — having to keep your finger on the pulse and that the younger generation is more radicalized in a lot of fabulous ways? Is that why you think there's more space to do that in a way that doesn't seem forced or didactic?

Older: Honestly, I don't think that actually has anything to do with age. If you read my adult series, the *Bone Street Rumba*, that takes place in the same world as *Shadowshaper*, and it's pretty similar in terms of issues coming up and the way that it is very much in the same vibe, because that's just how I write. How it's perceived may be different. It's a good question, but I don't know. At the end of the day though, like I was talking about, I used to ask a lot of writers about their strategies for bringing politics into the work. And the majority of writers would just deny it entirely and just be like, no, no, I don't do that. I just let it play out for itself. And I'm always like, that's not a thing.

First of all, it's not true. Second of all, it doesn't work. Third of all, no writer ever just throws up their hands about something. We are always claiming rightfully the good thoughtful work that we did to make a book work. It doesn't just happen. We work at it with the foreshadowing or with the structure. We make it work and we figure it out, but sometimes with politics and race, people want to pretend like they're just letting it flow naturally. That's not a thing. Very rarely, I don't want to say not ever, but it was very rare for that to just work out. Why? Because we live in a white supremacist society. This isn't hard, and if you just hope it works out, it's going to end up veering in that direction, in general. There are obviously exceptions, but it comes back to strategy and being strategic with it. If you're not strategic with it, you will usually end up being clumsy with it. And it'll just either not be there at all and you'll end up toeing the line and they're not as

white supremacist, or it'll be extra clumsy and kind of throw it in there and feel like it dropped out of nowhere.

Taylor: Thinking about this idea that we are living under this culture of white supremacy and how overwhelmingly white publishing still is, one of the things that struck me is that in a lot of YA and middle grade fiction too, is there's always this trend of rebellion and especially teenage rebelliousness. And what I liked about what you did, is that everything that was happening in terms of rebelliousness, for the most part the *Shadowshaper* series is about making good trouble, in the service of fighting oppression. When you did that, were you trying to impart to the audience this idea that teenagers of color have more at stake when they're rebelling? And if so, who was your intended audience?

Older: I think there's definitely more at stake. It's having that conversation. It's also just having the conversation that a lot of kids of color, especially, have been talking about this the whole time. This generation, not always, but really in a lot of ways, just comes up by necessity being more radical out of survival. For us it's about survival; it's not a fad. It's not just cause it's cool. People need to know how not to die. And that is, unfortunately in this country, a radical point of view. It's a necessity; it's also that the stakes are higher. Kids who read it, young people who read it, who just already, are there; there's a lot of kids that are just already there. They don't need to realize that there's white supremacy.

They know. They've known for most of their lives. I wanted them to see themselves in a book. I wanted them to be like, Oh cool, it's not weird. I'm not just the radical one, which I think was more of a thing in the past and in our generations, where there was the radical one in a lot of the kids' groups. There's a lot of different ways to be radical and today to fight and to survive. It's similar to the diversity conversation; it's so flattened by having such a lack, a deep dearth of representation that it's very hard to get into the true depths of it and the really complex and wonderful parts of it.

That's also true with conversations about activism, because activism has been such a cartoon thing of itself in literature and in movies and popular representation for so long. Strategically, I think it's flattened it, and it's made it into just something that's just a one note song, really. But it's not that; anyone who's an activist knows that it's extremely complex and multilayered and difficult and there's infighting and challenges within and all this other stuff. It also, not for nothing, makes for really good stories because it's more complex and more complex is good for storytelling. I wanted to represent that—the struggle of the struggle. It's something that I think kids in particular and young people need to be able to see in literature so that they can realize they're not alone. A lot of these recent movements have been led by young people, like the Black Lives Matter rallies. And most of the ones that I was at in New York were really youth led in a way that nonprofit organizations can only dream of. They put it on their brochures, but the reality of youth led movements is that they're not funded by nonprofits. And that's why they're successful, by and large.

Taylor: And that leads me thinking about one of the ways that you were showing activism, a path to activism in the series by showing how you can use the arts to be an activist, such as how Culebra would play during different moments as a form of activism, even when Juan wasn't necessarily shadowshaping. I thought that that was really powerful, but also the idea of the power of story and history. I was wondering especially about the *Shadowhouse Legacy*, if you were thinking about

the work of Gloria Anzaldúa. Or, if not that specifically, when thinking about La Contessa and the whole House of Light with the Sorrows side of the family, I was wondering if you're thinking about the way that Sierra's mom has a little bit of that internal colonization (similar Sierra's racist Tía Rosa)? It seemed to me in that moment where they meet María Cantara and also when Sierra's mom really starts to embrace that legacy of shadowshaping that she had a transformation toward seeing things more the way Sierra's generation sees things. Were you thinking there that the young generation could perhaps teach the old generation to see things differently?

Older: Yeah, that's definitely a part of it. With Maria, we see someone who is in the gray area where she's skeptical and hesitant and just not a real believer. She's bought into a lot of the mythologies of dominant white American culture without fully going full Tía Rosa. She doesn't hate her people; she's not full of self-hate, but she is kind of, eh, this is just some weird magic stuff, which honestly is how a lot of people treat Santería and a lot of other things. It's not necessarily full-blown anti-blackness or full-on racism, but it does have tones of that and there's elements of it. That's a part of it.

There's also what's been shoved down our throats for so long. That this is just that thing over there. This is just that weird magic or whatever which is rooted in anti-blackness. But I think also there's that phenomenon realizing that and opening your eyes. Sometimes it is through that younger generation that that'll happen, and being like, Holy shit, you know, I've actually been really messed up for my whole life over this for whatever reason. And here I am, and now I need to swing hard the other way. You see that with Maria. She's just like, wow, I was really, really messed up and it almost cost me my daughter. The answer to that is to just be, you know what, I'm going to be the best shadowshaper; I'm going to be on it on every level. I'm going to be there for her.

That is part of her arc and that's how she ends up. They take that family trip at the end together; that's them finding each other through, in a way, looking forward and looking backward. They find the previous generations and that really does stand up to bolster and unify them and save their lives. The whole thing is art and spirit joining together to save our lives and to get us to where we need to get, to get us to the next place. Art and spirit thriving because of that. It's an interchange. Not in the capitalistic sense, but in the sense of a trade, in that I give, and you give, and we give to each other as mutuality today.

Sierra and the other living participants grow and are saved and they thrive because of the spirit world interfering and joining with them and helping them. Then, also the spirits themselves grow and thrive differently because of the living people who are working with them, and that's symbiosis. That's something that I wanted to get in there, the idea of power with versus power over. It is very Anzaldúa. She's a big influence on me for sure. I don't know if she was on the forefront of my mind when I was coming up with that, but certainly she's in everything because she was a very foundational read for me in college.

Taylor: Yeah, me too. Especially in *Shadowshaper Legacy*, I thought, Oh, I could see Sierra being the priestess of the crossroads and she is fully embracing her mestiza identity, particularly her Blackness, in a way that it seems her mother and Tía Rosa haven't. At least her mother's complicit in the beginning of not really enabling that. I thought it was great the way spirit in that moment allows them to recover this history that was kind of intentionally erased by the European side of the family. That was like trying to be that white supremacist society, you know?

Older: Right. Yeah, totally. That's all there. I don't know how to expand on that point. Mestiza is such a complicated word.

Taylor: Yeah. The history behind it?

Older: The history behind it is so deeply entrenched to anti-Blackness. I don't know if I would say she was embracing her mestiza identity because of it, because of all the weight that that word has with it. So much of the work that she ends up having to do because of the anti-Blackness is just embracing her Blackness period. It's also true that she has multiple identities in her and multiple ethnicities. It's so complex. There are levels to it.

Taylor: Yeah. I thought, especially learning when Sierra's mother was still upset to discover Septima in the attic, it seemed she was aware of some family history, of the fact that La Contessa was probably a slave owner, probably tried to squash rebellion. That she comes from that fourth daughter that they literally tried to kill and then just erase from the family history.

Older: Right, exactly. Then, also, the constant theme throughout was really the idea that your stories are being told to you by the people that tried to kill you and what that means and how complex that is and how that changes the story. So much of what happens in *Shadowhouse Fall* is also about the images, your own image being drawn by someone else. And then the way that turns into demonization and sexualizations. *Shadowhouse Fall* is really about representation in publishing, in mass media and everything. Sierra's moment is really just being, okay, I'm not just going to cast this out entirely. Instead, I'm going to find the truth within the lie and run with that and embrace it, find a way to embrace it. And that's when she really takes on the mantle of this image that was terrifying to her because it was supposed to be. And so, she thinks, I will be that terror and use it to my benefit.

Taylor: Whoa, cool! I hadn't thought about it that way. I really like that. In *Shadowhouse Fall*, to me, we started to see a transition between the first book and the second book where more of the family history that we're getting from the Sorrows is incorporated. And then you have the past vignettes in *Shadowshaper Legacy* that we later realize is the real story that had been hidden from Sierra for so long. It felt to me that the tone of those stories had this sense of being sacred in a way that the Sorrows versions of the stories were not. I wonder what is the connection that you are making there between this storytelling built on lies and these kinds of sacred stories that she's getting later?

Older: It's exactly that. There are different kinds of mythologies of a place even, you know, America; the United States has written its own mythology—that is in a large part lies to make ourselves feel more noble and better about all the atrocities that were committed in our name and lies taste a particular way in your mouth. Even when you don't necessarily know the facts of why they're not true, they still have that stench of falsehood. The truth feels different. And sometimes the truth is fantastical. Sometimes it's in the pages of a book that has magic in it, but it still feels true. That's fantasy. At the end of the day, whether it's about diversity or power imbalances or what have you, you know it still comes back to the writer's job being one to where our job is to tell the truth. You have one job; it is to tell the truth.

Sometimes we do it with angel wings and dragons. Sometimes you do it with cold, hard facts. Those are sometimes the hardest truths to tell because you have to really do that research work, but this is about the way that our stories are sometimes true, even when they seem impossible. And I think the biggest nod to that, really, in the whole series, is that at the very, very, very last moment it switches to first person plural. There's a very tiny shift in the narrative where you realize that it's really the spirits that have been telling the story the whole time. And that each step along the way has been a part of a huge fabric that goes all the way back to that weird castle in Puerto Rico and certainly beyond that too. They're all really interconnected in ways that we can't just separate as much as we are told we're supposed to. The past didn't really go anywhere and it's just part of this very beautiful and very painful fabric that we're a part of.

Taylor: Yeah. I love that shift at the end because I didn't realize who was telling these stories until we got to that moment. And then I was like, wow, okay, this makes perfect sense. And it even made me think of all of the times that Sierra's crew tried to speak truth to power, whether it was Wick or whether it was or wasn't Ms. Rollins that teacher who was perhaps well-meaning but a total disaster. Here we see how the characters finally are able to come into their own power over the series, and it's exemplified by the way the spirits are able to finally reveal these truths to us that Sierra has been looking for this whole time.

Older: And if you think about it, it's woven a little bit throughout. Remember the end of *Shadowhouse Fall*? It's Nydia, I think, who gifts Sierra the typewriter, which she then uses to basically write the first two books to Anthony while he's in prison. That's what she writes in his letters. In the letters that she writes to him, she's telling the whole story again; she's re-capsulating it, which becomes part of that fabric. That then we realize is attached to the larger fabric of all the vignettes and the pieces throughout history. And it is really about the coming together of the past and the present and that there is no difference between them. They're not different things. They're part of the same cloth. I'm glad you like that because I actually got pushback on that from an editor. I think it was a copy editor. They said something like, "Oh, do you know that you switched into first person here?" And I was like, yes.

Taylor: I would think so. It was the reveal!

Older: Of course. It's like, how would I not know that? What do you mean? Do you know?

Taylor: That's weird because, to me, it was a very obvious reveal moment.

Older: I appreciate it. I had to say, am I crazy? I thought I did this right.

Taylor: I would've been really put out by that. Did you read the book I was writing or what?

Older: For me, it was a really big moment. It really mattered to me that it landed. I actually sent it to Tracy Deonn, who wrote *Legendborn*. Have you read *Legendborn*? Tracy had read the first and second *Shadowshaper* books. I was at the end of three and copying edit, and I was like, "I need your eyes on this," and I sent it to her. She re-read the whole series to get to that point. And then I was like, "Okay, I'm not crazy, right?" And she said it's great. It makes total sense. And I

was like, I knew that, but I...yeah, sometimes you've got to get other sets of eyes on it, but you know, publishing will make you feel you have lost your damn mind sometimes.

Taylor: Yeah, no, I thought it worked perfectly. I'm surprised that that was the case, which actually brings me to another question I had about publishing. I read in an interview that *Shadowshaper* was your first book and was actually in the slush pile. I remember being really shocked by it because I always thought that *Bone Street Rumba* was what started your career since it came out before *Shadowshaper*. Why do you think that happened that way?

Older: Some of it is just the mechanics of publishing. It took me about four years to sell *Shadowshaper*. So, I wrote *Bone Street*; I wrote the stories for *Salsa Nocturna*, which is my first book that came out from an independent press in 2012. That was all happening when I was still trying to sell *Shadowshaper*. I didn't have an agent. I couldn't get an agent because every agent had rejected me. That was the period of being rejected 40 times. *Shadowshaper* was in a different state; it did change in the course of that, but it was still good. I posted the original draft on a Wattpad, which is a writing forum type thing. I think it's really strong. It's different, it's much younger-skewed, and a little more weird and there's more monsters and stuff, but there's a couple of the moments that are still in there.

Some of the scenes are the same, like the dancing in the Haitian club is the same and a couple of other things, but I ended up extracting *Shadowshaper* from a subplot in that story. It's been through a long process. I still think that first book, you know, in a different publishing climate, would have done what it needed to do. But regardless it was a process I was submitting to Scholastic without an agent. That's part of what makes everything take a lot longer because the agent is really the person that pushes things for you on your behalf. I didn't have any idea how to push. I don't even think it would have mattered if I had. Things take a long time and especially in children's publishing.

Older: In the meantime, I wrote *Flood City*, actually, which just came out two weeks ago, because, again, publishing was like that. That was 10 years ago that I wrote it. And then I wrote *Half Resurrection Blues*, and somewhere in there got an agent, fired that agent, got another agent and then we sold *Half Resurrection Blues*. I guess it was probably in better shape, so there were fewer edits to do. I did a lot of editing on *Shadowshaper* because it was my first book. I was learning how to write a novel, so there was more editing in the process. *Half Resurrection Blues* was very minimal edits, but also there just was just a faster publishing schedule. It was a three-book deal right off the bat, which *Shadowshaper* wasn't. They just funded it as one. And then later they were like, "Ooh, this book did pretty well. We'll take some more." I was like, cool.

Taylor: Interesting. I never realized that the books might be written out of the sequence in which we get them. So, I assumed *Flood City*, since it just came out with something you would have written more recently, like 10 years ago. Wow. That's so fascinating. I don't understand much about publishing, I guess!

Older: I don't understand either, and I've been at it for 10 years!

Taylor: I have to ask about uncle Neville; this is more of a personal question that I just need to know, but I love Uncle Neville and I love the taxi crew, especially Ms. R. I found the way that

Uncle Neville was written in particular really refreshing because we know he's in this gray area of the law and...but it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter at all. It doesn't affect how Sierra sees him; it makes him more of an asset and it doesn't affect him being able to have this relationship with Nydia. It just seems very realistic for a novel taking place in an urban space; anybody who lives in a city knows people who are on the other side of the law. What were you doing with Uncle Neville? He's such a strong presence throughout. And I wondered why.

Older: Thank you. I really love it. You say you haven't read the *Bone Street Rumba* books? Reza is in this one—*Midnight Taxi Tango*. That's all those guys, that whole taxi crew that in *Shadowshaper Legacy*. It's all from that book.

Taylor: Oh cool. I have them; I bought them all!

Older: They're actually hard to find now. We're going to republish them, but they're kind of in between, so they're harder to find.

Taylor: I was wondering about that because when I was doing research in advance of this, I noticed not a lot of people have written about the *Bone Street Rumba* books, at least on the academic side of things. I thought that seemed strange because I remember reading a really compelling blog post by, I can't remember who, it might've even been on Tor.com, but bought them all right after that. And I remember whatever the person was analyzing made me think that someone needs to write a long scholarly piece about the *Bone Street* series.

Older: I agree, thank you. There's a lot in there. Maybe it's to your point about the difference between YA and adult speculative fiction, because they literally take place in the same world. There are multiple crossover moments where the series meet in different ways. The shadowshapers pop up in that series in a small way. In fact, one of the characters is obsessed with Izzy as a musician. She listens to her music all the time. Doesn't know her personally, but she's her favorite rapper. So, she walks around, spittin' lines from Izzy, who she just knows as King Impervious. There's a ton of Easter eggs, but especially those taxi guys. They all show up in *Midnight Taxi Tango*, particularly they're some of the main crew. The events in *Bone Street* series happen after that *Shadowshaper Legacy*, but I wrote *Bone Street* first.

With Uncle Neville, I'm glad you liked him. He is the number one, favorite character of people in the world that I hear about. People have their favorites, but I think Neville more than anyone else is the one that was like, Oh, just love *Uncle Neville*. And I think that's great. I think it's because we all have that. So many of us have that element in our families or in our friend circles or in our friend circles' families. Somewhere in there, there's someone who's on the other side of the law. Usually, they're the bad guy in books and we have to make a translation in our head to be like, well, they're probably nice to their niece, but they're trying to take over the world and destroy humanity or whatever; they're evil. I just thought it was unrealistic because so many people have to, for various reasons, survive on the other side of the law. We should get to love them too. If you think about it, the initial kind of impulse of *Shadowshaper* had so much to do with memorial murals, which are one very real way of honoring exactly those people. People who either won't show up in the *New York Times* at all when they die or will show up as criminal elements only, and not nothing more. Everybody is so much more complex than that, but certain people get the benefit of the doubt much more. For Uncle Neville to be a living version of that, it was important to have someone that, you know, that shows up. Also, much of the conversation about hardcore

Catholics who hate Santería, but as soon as shit goes down for real, that they're the first one at the Babalawo's house dropping shells, being like, "Tell me what I need to do."

That's the same thing. Like the shit goes down and you need someone on your side who knows how to get around the law. You've got to call that uncle that you were trash to and hope that they are in a forgiving mood. Or just don't be trash to your criminal uncle. He's her godfather and he's not technically her uncle, but he's the one that looks out for a lot of folks in the community. I was really happy to be able to give him more of a backstory in *Ghost Girl in the Corner* and really get into him because he's also a character who is in danger of becoming a cartoon character in some ways, because he was just that cool dude that everybody loves. He's the man, but it was important that he had things in his past that he cared about and he was still hurt about, and he needed to make moves to try to do better and everything else. That's what that was.

Taylor: I thought that was great. Especially when he cried and you can feel his emotion because you tend to see people writing those characters so stereotypically, as if they never have moments of feeling.

Older: Right, exactly. And then he gets to fall in love. Him and Nydia are perfect for each other, and they get to run off and get their weird little found family and that's how it should be.