Imagining Possible Futures: Afrofuturism and Social Critique in Daniel José Older's

Shadowshaper

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Daniel José Older's *New York Times* bestseller *Shadowshaper* (2015) centers on teenager Sierra Santiago's entrance into the shadowshaping community and her confrontation of the dangers that the Afro-syncretic tradition faces.[1] Exploring an ancestral tradition or "spiritual magic"[2] that is passed down from one generation to the next, Older's pairing of a young Afro-Latina protagonist alongside Afrofuturist themes serves as a catalyst for the social critiques inherent in the novel. More than offering its readers an entrance into the elusive world of shadowshaping, *Shadowshaper* also delves into the challenges that multicultural adolescents face in the modern world. While the protagonist's inner battles—from themes of body image to self-identifying as a multicultural teen—emerge as constants in the young adult (YA) novel, societal and communal issues, including gentrification and policy brutality, also represent major preoccupations in the text.[3] The practice of shadowshaping—an Afro-Caribbean spiritual art form that connects "shadowshapers" to spirits through artistic expression that builds on multiple cosmologies including Santería and Candomblé—succeeds in reallocating power and advocacy to the Afro-Latinx Brooklyn community in the face of gentrification.[4] The present essay explores how the representation of Afrofuturism and other alternative futurisms in *Shadowshaper* supports the presence of complex social critiques in the novel, ranging from gentrification and police brutality to body image and the colonization of knowledge. Connecting the novel's social commentary and Afrofuturist pulse situates the text as a unique Latinx coming-of-age narrative that overtly addresses the "struggle for visibility in youth literature" (Jiménez García, "Lens" 5) by writing *in*

(instead of writing *out*) complex themes related to race, place, and identity development.

Shadowshaper's Afro-Latina protagonist, Sierra Santiago, reclaims the past in an effort to envision an alternative future and in doing so emphasizes a fusion between the primitive and the modern in the novel, a distinguishing feature of Afrofuturism. *Shadowshaper* illuminates an excavation of the past as a means to harness more desirable and inclusive futures by establishing ancestral connections and family history as key to saving and reviving the shadowshaping community. Older's utilization of Afrofuturist conventions as a means to address societal issues facing the diverse, urban Brooklyn community of Bed-Stuy in *Shadowshaper* renders a more complex and multiculturally minded model of young adult literature and offers readers an example of a coming-of-age novel for a racially diverse readership. In particular, Latina YA literature reveals "Latina teenage girl protagonists growing up within twenty-first-century US culture" and features Latina protagonists "working through questions of identity and belonging through the lens of both ethnicity and class, which is often absent in popular commercial YA fiction featuring white protagonists" (Salinas Moniz 87). Older inserts an Afro-Latina protagonist, Sierra, into contemporary US culture, while also overtly linking her path to identity formation to her past and thus directing the novel toward a YA readership eager to imagine an alternative—postcolonial, racially inclusive, socially just, and Afro-Latinx—future. The interest of the novel in envisioning a YA Latinx future serves to expand an understanding of the novel as Afrofuturist to one that is also representative of Latin@futurism and thus underscores the nascent but growing field of Latin@futurism that Cathryn Josefina Merla-Watson notes focuses on the "specific and unique histories and ontologies informing Latin@ speculative aesthetics." *Shadowshaper*, then, also relies on Latin@futurist principles to situate Sierra, the shadowshaping community, and the diverse community in which the novel is set within an alternative futurist

framework that prioritizes heterogeneity and hybridity.

The practice of shadowshaping and the channeling of spirits into art forms—most clearly defined in the novel as "work[ing] with spirits. . . . some of 'em are the ancestors of us shadowshapers, some are just other folks that passed on and then became spirits. But they're like our protectors, our friends even" (62-63)—at its most basic level looks backward, not forward; and the tradition unites the Afro-Puerto Rican Sierra with past generations of her family. The importance of ancestry in the shadowshaping realm highlights scholar Marilisa Jiménez García's understanding of Latinx YA literature as narratives in which "local knowledges and ancestral legacies" function as conduits to "awaken youth to radical activism" ("En(countering) YA," 232). Older fashions Afrofuturism in *Shadowshaper* as a means to bend the traditional genres of YA literature and uniquely mesh the primitive and a clear emphasis on the past with the modern and tech-savvy—a fusion at the heart of such futurisms.

Scholars define Afrofuturism, first originating within cultural studies from Mark Dery's article "Black to the Future," by highlighting an "outward"-looking or forward-looking perspective. Lysa M. Rivera denotes that some Afrofuturist predecessors returned to the past in an effort to (re)write African diasporic experiences, but "Afrofuturists use speculative fiction to bring 'black' to the future" (159). In this way, Afrofuturism takes cultural and historical recovery a step further to instead employ diverse characters in futuristic plotlines. Such characters, though, are often anchored to the past and, in this way, can offer a generational and ancestral pulse to novels such as *Shadowshaper*. In his delineation of Afrofuturism and in an effort to illustrate the connections between past and present, Dery maps how African American expressive culture concerns itself primarily with the past, as opposed to the future, due to centuries of racial oppression. He asks: "Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose

energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?" (Dery 736). The goal of "imagining possible futures" informs Afrofuturism, but this outward-looking characteristic of the genre simultaneously grounds itself in the past by seeking to locate histories void of individuals of African descent in order to revive or reimagine them.

Alondra Nelson, borrowing Dery's definition of Afrofuturism, denotes the genre as a crossroads in which "African American voices" have "other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come" (Nelson 9; Dery 738). Ytasha L. Womack affirms Nelson's allusion to the crossroads or intersections inherent in Afrofuturism, defining the genre as "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation" in which "Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future" (9). The notion of "redefinition" is key given that it denotes the genre's anchor to the past and suggests the importance of looking back in order to move forward. Afrofuturism manifests in *Shadowshaper* through the novel's youthful perspective on contemporary issues facing metropolitan communities. Moreover, the (inter)generational practice of shadowshaping forces Sierra and her friends to "look back" with the aim of liberating future generations and providing the multicultural generations of tomorrow with the tools to combat increasingly divisive and exclusive spaces. The art of shadowshaping may not provide readers with a technologically driven model of Afrofuturism like the Marvel blockbuster *Black Panther* does, for example, but the practice instead accentuates different characteristics of Afrofuturism such as the aforementioned interplay between past and future, themes of imagination and liberation, and the employment of diverse characters who challenge others' visions for the future. *Shadowshaper* proves to be an Afrofuturist novel that is a "total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about

the future rife with cultural critiques" (Womack 9). The ways in which Sierra and her Bed-Stuy friends address the issues facing their community provide a window into how multicultural adolescents harness their past in order to liberate their futures.

While early understandings of Afrofuturism emphasized the focus of the aesthetic and genre on the black experience in relation to science and technology, Latin@futurism more specifically targets the Latinx community.[5] In the literary realm, Latin@futurism focuses specifically on trans-American texts in which space coalesces as hybrid and borderless. The hemispheric approach of Latin@futurism pays homage to the traditions and practices native to the Americas and, like Afrofuturism, often falls within the realm of the umbrella category speculative fiction—as does fantasy, sf, magical realism, etc.—but as Merla-Watson cautions: Latin@futurism is "not derivative or mimetic of dominant speculative genres, but instead insists on its own terms and conditions." Like Merla-Watson, Catherine S. Ramírez also carefully differentiates another futurism—Chicanafuturism—from Afrofuturism. Ramírez cautions against conflation with other genres by articulating that Chicanafuturism moves beyond a reflection of the diasporic reality to also divulge "colonial and postcolonial histories" ("Deus ex Machina" 78). Pointing out the possible distinctions between Afro, Latin@, and/or Chicana speculative narratives serves to emphasize the importance of questioning the colonialist perspective with which science fiction texts traditionally identify and to problematize the genre's "writing out" of minorities.[6] Despite the importance of triangulating the differences between these alternative futuristic paradigms, Isabel Millán draws more broadly on Afro, Latin@, and Chicana speculative narratives to instead amalgamate a shared understanding of these genres and subgenres that she insists are "already entangled in productive ways" (168). Focusing on the ways in which respective futurisms are positively "entangled" better addresses how science

fiction can be reframed with not only (Afro-)Latinx literary production in mind but more specifically with an eye on Latinx coming-of-age narratives. *Shadowshaper*—while catering to an adolescent audience—draws on the conventions of both Afrofuturism and Latin@futurism to evade the perpetuation of traditionally white, male, Eurocentric genres and to instead "repurpose and blend genres of sci-fi and fantasy to defamiliarize the ways in which the past continues to haunt the present and future" (Merla-Watson and Olguín, "Introduction" 135).

Jeffrey Kaplan confirms that YA literature offers teenage readers a voice that is "honest, open, and real about what it means to be a 'kid in the modern world'" (54). Older's *Shadowshaper* expands Kaplan's explanation about what YA literature can afford its readers by instead answering to "what it means to be a '[multicultural] kid in the modern world'" vis-à-vis his fusion of a Latina coming-of-age novel with Afrofuturist themes. Older positions his representation of the "modern world" in Bed-Stuy, an urban Brooklyn neighborhood in the throes of gentrification, and this setting is key to the social critiques the novel addresses. It is the youth in this rapidly changing community—through the practice of shadowshaping—who actively engage in processes of "meaning-making," "crafting literacy narratives, and questioning their identities" (Kinloch 192). Valerie Kinloch's *Harlem on Our Minds* explores how youth navigate the "new Harlem" (4) and ongoing attempts to gentrify blackness by inserting their own narratives of community and understandings of literacy, often in "out-of-school spaces" (192). Not unlike the Harlem youth in Kinloch's study who challenge public attempts of gentrification in their community, Older's fictional protagonist makes meaning and reassesses history in an urban space, utilizing as her medium an ancestral art form rooted in Afro-Caribbean practices.

Similarly, Zetta Elliott, a professor and author of "African American speculative fiction for young readers" ("Trouble" 19), posits the relations between youth and public space in urban

areas like New York City as integral to creating "sites of discovery and recovery in speculative fiction for young readers" (18). While Elliott's essay "The Trouble with Magic" highlights the literary representation of New York City parks, the idea of public spaces (whether green space or architectural space) as "sites of historic preservation" (19) coincides with the cityscapes that Sierra Santiago and the shadowshaping community use as canvases for their art. In alignment with Elliott's envisioning of urban parks and protective magic as safe havens for racially diverse children, the practice of shadowshaping protects not just one individual or a group of individuals, but instead the spirituality and history of an entire community. As Jiménez García confirms, "The current trend in Latinx literature for youth contains a potent argument against colonial oppression, stolen histories, and territories" ("En(countering) YA" 233), and *Shadowshaper* follows suit by enlisting the youth of Bed-Stuy in a complicated battle to retain and recover their community.

Gentrification

While Sierra Santiago has a deep connection to her Bed-Stuy community that serves to highlight the intersections between race and place in the novel, a discussion of gentrification as it emerges in the text is crucial to an understanding of the interplay in *Shadowshaper* between social critiques and alternative futurisms. Older's Brooklyn, specifically the Bed-Stuy neighborhood, reads as a cultural crossroads. Sierra's network, both peer and familial, consists primarily of Puerto Ricans, but it also extends to Haitian, Dominican, and other minority groups. On the outskirts or periphery of Sierra's community, from the perspective of the protagonist, sits the Brooklyn hipster community, which appears to be encroaching on the physical map of the

neighborhood. The theme of gentrification is a constant in the novel and portraying this cultural, social, and communal dilemma for readers also forges a connection within discussions encircling Afrofuturism given that the prospect of reimagining a future is often convoluted with reimagining a (white) future. Catherine S. Ramírez notes: "people of color have been erased from the future, just as many of us were excised from narratives of the past and remain hidden from view in the barrios, ghettos, reservations, and prisons of the past" ("Fictive Kin" 188). *Shadowshaper* deals directly with refocusing and recentering the community of Bed-Stuy around people of color, not allowing the characters nor their artwork and creative, cultural mark on the neighborhood to become "narratives of the past" and thus relegated to the frays of society and shut out from the future. On the very first page of the novel, the reader learns that murals are being literally erased from walls in the Brooklyn neighborhood: "the portrait was fading; it seemed to disappear more and more every hour" (1). Before long, Sierra is at the forefront of a race to preserve the past and save the artistic, creative mark of her community. During her first experience with her shadowshaping abilities, Sierra is able to observe the murals' dissipation, as well as their ability to fluctuate, in her Brooklyn neighborhood: "She looked back at the mural of Papa Acevedo, barely visible now against the crumbling brick wall. It wasn't just that there was a new tear on his face; his whole expression had changed. The man—the painting, rather— looked downright afraid" (3). Through a conversation with Haitian shadowshaper Robbie, Sierra realizes *all* the murals are fading (39). Thus, the erasure of murals in Bed-Stuy—an artistic representation of the community's transcultural, transracial, and transnational roots—extends beyond the changes to the painting of Papa Acevedo (her Grandpa Lázaro's friend and a member of the shadowshaping community).

The perceived changes in Bed-Stuy, however, transcend the fading of murals;

Shadowshaper also addresses what fills the physical voids created by the forgotten or torn-down buildings and artwork. The novel's first nod to gentrification concerns what the narrator identifies as "the Tower":

> The Tower had shown up just over a year ago, totally unannounced: a five-story concrete monstrosity on a block otherwise full of brownstones. The developers built the outer structure quickly and then left it, abandoned and unfinished, its unpaned windows staring emptily out into the Brooklyn skies. (2)

It is along the side of this industrial edifice that Sierra paints her own "monstrosity," the green dragon that exceeds multiple floors in height. Other examples in the narrative point directly to recent changes in the neighborhood and, relatedly, signal a cultural divide. When Sierra runs from a "corpuscle," described in the novel as possessed dead bodies or spirits, she ends up in the "manicured suburbs" (108). The comments from the residents of this "new Brooklyn" are rife with racial generalizations and stereotypes. They see the injured Sierra, lying near the street, and remark: "It's a Spanish girl. Looks like she's bleeding" (105); and "She must be another OD from that damn Dominican club over on Flatbush!" (106). Such utterances not only position these peripheral "suburban" characters in the novel as non-Latinx but also serve to regurgitate established ethnic and racial generalizations. Stating Sierra appears "Spanish" connects to the common mistake of lumping all Latinx into a single category, based largely on language and a decentering of nationality.[7] The second comment positions Dominicans (and by extension, other Latinx groups) as drug addicts and speaks to the victimization of Latinx communities, often Latinx of Afro-Caribbean descent such as Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, in urban settings.

 Yet another footprint of gentrification in *Shadowshaper* is the onslaught of boutique-like, overpriced coffee shops that appear to have popped up all over Bed-Stuy. A discussion between

Sierra and her friends about a "tiny mug of flavored coffee" (159) prompts a debate about the difference between "yuppies" and "hipsters," and ends with the characters' observation of an "us vs. them" binary: "Everyone else in the little wood-paneled coffee shop was studying quietly or whispering into cell phones. Splotchy brown-and-gray paintings covered the walls, and a chalk-board behind the counter listed a whole slew of colorfully named overpriced beverages" (160). "Everyone else" here refers to those in the coffee shop not in Sierra's friend group—a friend group consisting of other Puerto Ricans, a Nigerian/French/Martiniquais, a Haitian, and others. The reader perceives the othering as referring not only to an adolescent group of "non-hipsters" but also as a racial, ethnic, and cultural divide.

In a recent interview, Older describes the city—a cultural and social phenomenon—as a "crossroads," and he highlights the constant exchanges of power that define urban spaces (Newkirk). In the same interview, the *Shadowshaper* author talks about adult urban fantasy, the subgenre in which his adult Bone Street Rumba series—including the novels *Half-Resurrection Blues* (2015), *Midnight Taxi Tango* (2016), and *Battle Hill Bolero* (2017)—often falls:

> Urban fantasy presents a tremendous opportunity to talk about what's going on in the world right now. Whether it's police brutality or gentrification or black lives mattering or cultural appropriation, all these things are alive in the city. You can't avoid them. For that not to be central to so much urban fantasy, for that to be basically sidelined by the larger genre of mostly white urban fantasy, is both a literary and a human failure. Why would you pass up an opportunity to talk about such a hugely important and literarily amazing and problematic conversation? (qtd. in Newkirk)

While *Shadowshaper* is not an example of adult urban fantasy, the thematic connections between Older's publications, spanning across genres, are clear. Older situates Bed-Stuy as the setting of

a Latinx YA novel and envisions diverse, multiethnic characters. The novel positions the neighborhood as an alternative to the "white urban" settings of other speculative fiction works, and it also facilitates an uncovering of the "real," diverse, and unadorned Brooklyn. What distinguishes *Shadowshaper* from Older's aforementioned publications in adult fantasy, though, is that the exchanges of power and the social, racial, and ethnic hierarchies addressed in Sierra's Bed-Stuy directly connect to the incisive social critiques directed toward teenage readers. The protagonists in *Shadowshaper* navigate an age-appropriate Bed-Stuy, traversing spaces such as schools, high-school parties, and coffee shops.

In *Shadowshaper*, Sierra's friends mention how "certain parts of Bed-Stuy" are difficult to reach (166). These unmapped areas are juxtaposed with the parts of town that are easily navigable via public transit because they are places that represent the neighborhood's expansion linked to gentrification. Sierra's friend Bennie notes: "Just wait till they get a couple more bakeries and boutiques stuffed in here . . . New train stations'll be poppin' up real quick" (166). In addition, intellectual spaces also emerge in the novel as "difficult to reach." Sierra's successful entrance into the Columbia University library to research shadowshaping only occurs because her Uncle Neville distracts the library security, thus allowing his niece to sneak inside unnoticed. Jiménez García clarifies that Uncle Neville's clever plot represents the vestiges of "the racist power structures that view him and Sierra, as AfroLatinxs, as outsiders on an Ivy League campus" ("En(countering) YA" 239). The fact Sierra and her Uncle Neville are barred entrance into the Ivy League's archives not only connects to discussions of gentrification but also to the colonization of knowledge and the prioritization of Western thought, explored further in the following pages. The multitiered discussion surrounding gentrification in *Shadowshaper* attempts to carve a space for the Puerto Rican community as well as other ethnic minorities and

seeks to prioritize these groups and their contributions to the community on both a literal *and* literary map.

<center>*Police Brutality*</center>

Much like the theme of gentrification present in *Shadowshaper*, police brutality emerges as yet another fierce criticism within the novel, a subject also connected to Older's critique of antiblack racism. Haitian American author Edwidge Danticat published a piece in *The New Yorker* about the sustained, often subtle history of police brutality in New York. She questions whether predominantly African American and Caribbean neighborhoods in Brooklyn in the 1970s and '80s ever belonged to the people: "The streets were never ours to begin with, because on these same streets our sons and brothers, fathers and uncles were, and still are, prey." In a similar vein, *Shadowshaper* critiques acts of police brutality, often brushed aside or deemed unworthy of public scrutiny by government officials. The most obvious mention of police brutality in Older's text relates to Bennie's brother Vincent, who the narrator notes "had been killed by the cops three years back" (33). The racial undertones of Vincent's premature death can be understood as parallel to the fading murals around the Brooklyn neighborhood:

> The portrait of Bennie's brother Vincent, which was painted along the side of a laundromat, has faded just like Papa Acevedo's. . . . His towering image stood tall against the cement wall, arms crossed over his chest, his name written in bubbly letters across the front of his favorite hoodie. The artist had painted him smiling that terrific Vincent cheeseball grin he'd flash after making a really stupid joke. Now, his eyebrow arched and his jaw jutted out with a sharp frown as he glared into the distance. (33)

Not only did the mural of Vincent fade, but his expression shifted—much like the mural of Papa Acevedo mentioned in the novel's first pages. The initial and intentional artistic depiction of Vincent memorialized him as a "carefree teen," which as Jiménez García notes is a characterization "perhaps denied to teens of color" ("En(countering) YA" 238). The distortion of this playful, perhaps hopeful, image pushes Sierra to take action. As the once smiling and gleeful expression on Vincent's face shifts to a "sharp frown," Sierra has an epiphany of sorts and she realizes that the changes in Papa Acevedo's and Vincent's murals are somehow connected; in this moment, she first asks herself, "What is going on?" (33) and at the same time commits herself to uncovering the answers to her own question. This realization marks Sierra's preoccupation for not just her own familial past (as related to her ailing Grandpa Lázaro, for example), but for her community's future. Overt linkages to Afrofuturism and Latin@futurism emerge in this moment given that Sierra begins to approach shadowshaping as an integral piece of "the template of the fantastic," or the futurist, that exists in an "imperfect, messy, postmodern, and postcolonial world" (Thomas 29). The narrative lens here becomes that of an Afro-Latina protagonist who is coming to terms with her community's social, cultural, and racial inequities; Sierra answers these injustices with shadowshaping—a spiritual practice that emerges as the key to her past while also inciting a more inclusive future. Although the novel does not offer additional information in regard to Vincent's death, the fading and altered state of the murals represents the negotiation of power in the Bed-Stuy community.

Older's open critique of police brutality in the novel not only represents an example of a modern-day power imbalance but also relates fictional social critiques to current events and movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM). Jesmyn Ward's 2016 edited volume, a contemporary discussion of race in America titled *The Fire This Time: A New Generation of*

Writers on Race in America, speaks to the importance of continuing race-based dialogues in the

United States and also points to the mobilization and activism of today's youth, exemplified by

the BLM movement and projects like #Blktwitterstorians. *Shadowshaper*, by not evading racial

dialogues and by offering a fictional portrayal of Afro-Latinx adolescent life in Brooklyn, also

forms part of "a new generation" of writers, poems, novels, etc. on race in America. Moreover,

the novel connects the shared experiences of African American communities to Afro-Caribbean

communities, narratively representing shared struggles and facilitating cross-cultural dialogue.

By portraying diverse communities in YA literature, Older directly addresses and does his part to

fill what Ebony Elizabeth Thomas refers to as the "imagination gap," a crisis of representation

(or lack thereof) in children's and young adult media (5).

Body Image

Clearly linked to themes of self-exploration and a "crisis of representation" on a personal level

for *Shadowshaper*'s protagonist, the discussion surrounding body image in *Shadowshaper*

connects to an underlying message in the YA novel about "seeing." Or rather, as opposed to

what is visible in a community, at its core *Shadowshaper* centers more on the things that people

elect not to see, such as people, buildings, and sections of a community that become eclipsed and

hidden from view like the unnavigable or "ungentrified" areas of Bed-Stuy, for example. When

Sierra is first introduced to the art of shadowshaping, Robbie—a fellow shadowshaper and, later,

Sierra's love interest—explains to her that she is not crazy for thinking the paintings and murals

around town move and come to life. He confirms: "It's just that people don't usually see it. Their

minds won't let them, so it just looks [like] a regular painting, not movin' or nothin'" (63).

Robbie reiterates the same idea later in the novel when Sierra again asks why others are unable to see the figures "dancing" on the walls: "They're not looking" (94). This idea of not seeing or pretending not to see out-of-the-ordinary things lends itself to speculative fiction, and more specifically Afrofuturism, given the unnatural events often dominating the plot, but it also connects to the adolescent spin of Latina coming-of-age novels given the emphasis on identify formation. Characters ask others and themselves: Who sees me? How do they see me? How do I see myself?

In *Shadowshaper*, most conversations related to body image involve Sierra's racist Tía Rosa. Sierra's aunt unapologetically "sees" or perceives both herself and her family as nonblack. Tía Rosa's "off-hand bigotry" (78) becomes blatantly evident from the comments she makes about Robbie (of Haitian descent). She calls him a "Negrito" (151) and warns Sierra against dating him by referencing the racist proverb: "If he's darker than the bottom of your foot, he's no good for you!" (77). Tía Rosa attempts to dilute the offensive saying by clarifying that the words were not her own and that, in reciting them, she was only recalling what her Tía Virginia used to say to her, thus implying that racism is passed down through generations. Despite these comments and the antiblack, racist discourse that pervades the novel, Sierra succeeds in deflecting her aunt's comments about her "*wild*, *nappy* hair" and darker skin tone (78), instead taking it upon herself to remind her aunt: "We ain't white" (150). Sierra calls out her Tía Rosa for being unable to look in the mirror and at the same time reaffirms her own self-confidence and the pride she takes in her Afro-Puerto Rican heritage: "I love my hair. I love my skin. I didn't ask your opinion about my life and I don't wanna hear it" (152). More evidence of Sierra's confidence and self-affirmation appears when she refuses the verbal advances of a neighborhood boy whom the narrator describes as "just another stoopgoon harassing every passing skirt" (24).

When the "stoopgoon" calls out to Sierra she retorts "I ain't in the mood, jackass," noting that

she knew "any sign of weakness would encourage them" (24). Both of these textual examples,

Tía Rosa and the "stoopgoon," relate to the emphasis on identify formation in YA literature and

center on how others perceive Sierra and how she perceives herself. *Shadowshaper* can also be

read as a critique not only of female objectification and sexualization but also of machismo and

sexism—the work of women in the spiritual realm, addressed in the following section, appears

discredited and discounted by certain characters in the novel. The shadowshaping community

finds itself in limbo primarily due to the questioning of the role of women within it, which is one

of the reasons why Sierra's grandmother Lucera—the matriarch of the shadowshaping

community and its strongest source of power—fled the shadowshaping realm.

Shared Futures and the (De)colonization of Knowledge

The practice and art form of shadowshaping begins to suffer in Bed-Stuy partly because the

community is female-led. At the same time, changes related to the spiritual practice take place as

a result of the colonization or Westernization of knowledge. *Shadowshaper*'s inclusion of

Jonathan Wick, a white anthropologist, inserts the novel into dialogues concerning the

colonization of knowledge. At its core, the practice of shadowshaping values non-Western ways

of seeing and sensing; shadowshapers establish a mind and body connection with the spirits they

shape or speak through in a unique art form. Wick, instead, attempts to devalue the sensorial in

search for a scientific explanation of the spiritual practice, and, in doing so, he discredits the

intergenerational knowledge of the shadowshaping community.

The Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano comments on Eurocentrism and the notion of

modernity in a globalized world by historically tracing the enforcement of Eurocentric

knowledge production systems, an idea of superiority that guides the anthropologist Wick's

approach to shadowshaping. Quijano writes: "Western Europeans will imagine themselves to be

the culmination of a civilizing trajectory from a state of nature," and this imperiousness "leads

them also to think of themselves as the moderns of humanity and its history, that is, as the new,

and, at the same time, most advanced of the species" (542). This vision of superiority blinds

Wick as he attempts to understand, from the Western-educated perspective of a cultural

anthropologist, the secrets of the shadowshaping realm. His failure to harness the power of

shadowshapers like Lucera and Sierra guides him to frustration and results in his desire to

destroy the shadowshaping community.

Grounding the family matriarch as the main source of power within the shadowshaping

realm serves as an example of the ways that the novel interweaves representations of race,

gender, and spirituality. The fact that the Afro-Puerto Rican Lucera channels the energy of the

shadowshaping world in *Shadowshaper* is not uncommon in Afro-Caribbean religious or

spiritual practices. As Joseph M. Murphy confirms: "Afro Caribbean spiritual practices can allow

for female practitioners to transcend being passive conformists to gender roles/norms," further

noting that such practices often open "the pathways to leadership" to women (87). Importantly,

Older identifies the practice of shadowshaping in the novel not as a religion, referencing

institutionalized religions in Western thought that serve as mechanisms for categorization and

social organization (Asad), but instead as a spirituality or cosmology. Shadowshaping, an Afro-

Latinx spiritual practice with strong roots in Yoruba religious beliefs, is at a crucial junction with

gender and race in the novel.

In direct reference to the intersections between spirituality, race, and gender, Theresa

Delgadillo builds on the groundbreaking work of Gloria Anzaldúa's borderlands theory in her 2011 book *Spiritual Mestizaje: Religion, Gender, Race and Nation in Contemporary Chicana Narrative*. Delgadillo analyzes the representation of the spiritual realm in eight Chicana texts to assess how the writers valorize spiritual development on both personal and societal levels. An interest in "non-Western spiritual traditions" guides the work (17), and she views spiritual mestizaje as a framework as opposed to a label that "designate[s] the subject 'naturally' produced by racial, material, or historical mestizajes" (13). While *Shadowshaper* does not define as a Chicana narrative, non-Western spirituality is indeed a focal point and is central to the novel's ethos. Although Older's text and reach expands beyond Chicana/o Studies, the novel's critique of communal and familial oppressions—police brutality, body image, gentrification— alongside a representation of Afro-Latinx spirituality vis-à-vis the practice of shadowshaping likens the text to those that Delgadillo recognizes as attesting to the need for spiritual development *and* addressing sociopolitical concerns facing the community (*Spiritual Mestizaje* 2). In a discussion of the term "spirituality" within Latino/a religious studies, Delgadillo asserts that an understanding of what is sacred insists in acknowledging the hybridity and diversity of Latino/a spirituality. She notes: "Among Latinas/os, conceptions of the sacred often flow from sources outside of traditional religions, such as Indigenous or diasporan worldviews, mythic knowledge systems, varies cultural traditions, popular or home-centered religiosities, or social, cultural, and arts formations" (Delgadillo, "Spirituality" 212). The spiritual practice of shadowshaping, a familial and community-based cosmology, models the broad and all-encompassing definition of Latino/a spirituality, and its identification as falling outside the box of traditional Western conceptions of religion proves key to the novel.

Wick serves as a signpost for the sometimes-tense negotiations between Western

religious practices and African diasporic spiritualties in *Shadowshaper*. As a traditional anthropologist who favors the scientific over the spiritual, he represents the colonial history to which shadowshaping provides a counterhistory by infusing traditions rooted in African and Caribbean spiritualties into Bed-Stuy's history and sense of community. While Wick, at first, desired to save the shadowshaping community by taking over Lucera's powers, he later converts into the outside force positioned to destroy the ancestral tradition. Wick's meddling in the shadowshaping community serves to imbalance the Afro-syncretic practice; he classifies as a spiritual and ancestral outlier. Wick himself admits: "Alas, I cannot create. I am a man of science. My only powers are those of observation and analysis" (117). Through observation and analysis, however, Wick proves successful in disturbing the longstanding Afro-Caribbean spiritual practice and he begins to drain the power from those immersed in the shadowshaping world such as Sierra. Notably, the tradition of white anthropologists studying and defining African American culture and/or Afro-syncretic practices links clearly to civic debates about cultural relativism and intellectual colonialism. A well-known example is Melville Herskovits, a Jewish American anthropologist recognized for his definition and analysis of African American culture and best known for his book *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941). Herskovits met wide critique for his research, considered by many to be exploitative of the African American community and black culture in America.

Wick, by attempting to uncover the secrets of the shadowshaping community, stands for the common portrayal within YA literature where "[s]cientists are seen as fallible" (Ostry 241). Moreover, often the "adult" ideologies represented by scientists or researchers, as opposed to solely parental figures, in YA literature explicitly reference the struggle for power and thus signal social, cultural, and racial hierarchies. YA literature, in this way, addresses how the

adolescents portrayed in the novels confront these imbalances of power and knowledge; the Afro-Puerto Rican teenager Sierra Santiago, for example, challenges Wick in her attempt to save the shadowshaping community and in doing so claims and exercises her own powers. Directly referencing the Foucauldian notion of power, critic Roberta Seelinger Trites confirms that in YA literature power is everywhere, unavoidable: "in the adolescent novel, protagonists must learn about the social forces that have made them what they are. They learn to negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions within which they must function" (3). For Brooklyn youth like Sierra and her best friend Bennie, this negotiation ranges from the shadowshaping community's confrontations with the anthropologist Wick to a personal understanding of the often-capricious power and authority of the urban police force.

The significance and valorization of non-Western cosmologies in the novel—of which the character Jonathan Wick stands in stark contrast—relates directly to the futurist undercurrent of *Shadowshaper.* Womack finds non-Western beliefs to be a defining characteristic of Afrofuturism, noting that the genre combines "elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with *non-Western beliefs*" (9; added emphasis). A blending of past and future elements and a visceral representation of the non-Western cosmology of shadowshaping intersect in Older's *Shadowshaper*, a negotiation further emphasized by the text's digital-positive writing style that, for example, inserts text messages into the body text.

The City as an (Afrofuturist) Crossroads

While Older has described the city as a "crossroads," a space that is "full of humans, and full of

power being taken and given and exchanged" (qtd. in Newkirk), the city or urban space itself is just *one* of the multiple crossroads illustrated in *Shadowshaper*. The "urban space" in Older's novel, Bed-Stuy, transforms into a space of cultural, racial, and spiritual confusion and collision. This uncertain or even uncanny geographic space is where Older envisions teenagers like Sierra Santiago coming of age, and in this way the novel bends and problematizes Afro-Caribbean identity by displaying it alongside and against not only other minority populations like Haitians and Dominicans but also "hipsters" and affluent suburbanites. The city is a crossroads also in a temporal sense, and *Shadowshaper* functions as a Latina coming-of-age narrative that blends the past and the future by imagining teenagers at the heart of this fusion. The lineage of shadowshapers to which Sierra is connected—a familial relationship that underscores the backward-looking perspective of the novel—intersects with the modern, networked world in which teenagers like Sierra and her friends inevitably form a part. In this way, the social issues facing the community of Bed-Stuy are not just challenged by the voices of tomorrow and the future leaders of the Brooklyn neighborhood, but they are ultimately combatted by the realization of Sierra and her friends that the power to liberate the future, at least partially, is located in the past.

Zetta Elliott's article "Decolonizing the Imagination" offers the term "way-finding" to discuss how "Africans in the Americas developed hybrid identities that retained aspects of their African roots yet still enabled them to adapt and survive in their new, and often hostile, environment." Shadowshaping allows for Sierra to find her "way"—reestablishing the art of shadowshaping and preserving the history of her community—by celebrating and uplifting "tradition *and* innovation" (Elliott). While the notion of tradition alludes to the ancestral pulse of shadowshaping, the marks of innovation inherent in *Shadowshaper* instead appear in the multiple

ways that the Bed-Stuy youth confront and challenge the underlying themes of gentrification,

police brutality, body image, and a colonization of knowledge. Womack reminds readers that

Afrofuturism is a form of social commentary (10), and *Shadowshaper*, representative of a

synthesis between past and future, addresses some of the issues facing today's diverse urban

communities and the teenagers that live in them. Older plays with the conventions and

methodologies of alternative futurisms vis-à-vis a diverse group of triumphant youth protagonists

who emphasize and underscore the possibilities inherent in an Afro-Latinx futuristic paradigm.

In doing so, the novel functions as a model of social critique within an Afro-Latinx reality,

challenging injustice and reflecting both Afro- and Latin@-futurisms. Sierra and her friends are

agents of change, but they do not just preserve history. Instead, by taking a leading role in their

community, they rewrite the future by "writing" (and, through shadowshaping, "drawing")

themselves back into a diverse community from which they found themselves pushed out.

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Notes

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[1] The sequel *Shadowhouse Fall* was released in September 2017 and centers on Sierra Santiago and her friends, now practiced shadowshapers, with a new battle to overcome.

[2] While the synopsis of the novel in its first release from Scholastic in 2015 describes this ancient art form as a "thrilling magic," the author instead opts for a subtle shift in his own classification of shadowshaping; Older instead defines the practice as "spiritual magic" ("Pub Deal Announcement").

[3] I use YA (Young Adult) literature and young adult literature interchangeably for variance.

[4] I use the umbrella-term "Afro-Latinx" here to parallel the references to Sierra as an Afro-Latina protagonist as well as the discussion surrounding Afrofuturism. It should be noted, however, similar to problems with the term(s) "Latina/o/x," that referencing the term "Afro-Latinx" groups varying communities into one conglomerate and does not acknowledge the differences between them or the complexities of diasporic communities of Afro-Latin American descent in the United States.

[5] See Ramírez, "Deus ex Machina," which first introduces Chicanafuturism. For more information on Latin@futurism, see the special issue of the journal *Aztlán*, vol. 40, no. 2 (Fall 2015) that endeavors to build on and move beyond Ramírez's initial distinction of Chicanafuturism and Afrofuturism.

[6] carrington's *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* and Lavender's *Race in American Science Fiction* are two recent works of scholarship that signal the whiteness inherent in sf and how the genre traditionally alienates black people.

[7] The "Spanish" tag appears again, used broadly and stereotypically, when a friend of Sierra's asks her if she is "Spanish." Sierra retorts, "C'mon, Jerome, you know it ain't as simple as Spanish." Jerome then responds, "Yeah, but we just *say* Spanish. Like Spanish food. Whatever, that's just what we say" (163).