

# Women of Color in Speculative Fiction

## An Annotated Bibliography of Authors

### Project Introduction

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### Project Description & Components

This annotated bibliography focuses upon authors who are women of color (i.e., non-Caucasian or mixed identity), and who write speculative fiction. For some context, “speculative fiction” is an umbrella term for science fiction, fantasy, and some horror, all of which have literary and popular merit (Urbanski 2007). Historically, this field has been dominated by male authors of largely Caucasian descent; women and/or people of color have not been equitably represented in this genre. Examples of these authors include Octavia Butler, N. K. Jemisin, Daina Chaviano, Jewelle Gomez, and Malinda Lo. In its final iteration, this bibliography features fifty-five authors who have authored a total of 236 speculative fiction novels, novellas, and novelettes (an average of 4.29 titles per author).

Alongside a list of their works and any affiliated literary subgenres (i.e., Afrofuturism), the bibliography lists female authors within this genre with an author annotation about works and awards. The research necessary to gather this information comes from an array of speculative fiction publications (such as genre-specific magazines like *Asimov’s Science Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Analog*); publisher’s catalogs and websites (such as Tor Books, Del Rey, and Orbit); personal author websites and interviews; and reader’s advisory blogs and websites (such as Goodreads.com). Each entry provides a short analysis of common themes and motifs within each author’s work. This data was gathered between June 2015 and September 2016.

In summary, the entirety of this project consists of the following components:

- **Project Introduction:** This document, which contains an overview of the rationale and implementation of the project, also includes a brief discussion of emerging patterns.

- **Project Parameters:** This document outlines the scope (and subsequent limitations) of this project.
- **Annotated Bibliography:** The annotated bibliography, which lists fifty-five authors and a summary of their novels and novellas.
- **Appendix – Speculative Fiction Awards in North America:** This collection of awards given to speculative fiction authors in North America may be a useful resource for LIS professionals (for library programming or exhibit creation) and / or other researchers.

## Project Purpose

In her text *Plagues, Apocalypses, and Bug-Eyed Monsters*, scholar Heather Urbanski defines speculative fiction “...as any story that deliberately violates the bounds of reality as we currently understand it” (2007, pg. 8). Thus, writers of speculative fiction offer readers the opportunity to participate in literary transformations and reinventions of concepts such as race, power, gender, sexuality, and more. Within the genre of speculative fiction, women and people of color have historically had very little opportunity to publish and/or share their writing. In her chapter, “(E)raced Visions: Women of Color and Science Fiction in the United States,” scholar Elyce Rae Helford cites the several ways in which women of color who author speculative fiction are either grossly underrepresented in the publishing industry and/or are carefully selected in order to present specific viewpoints (2002, pg. 127). Ultimately, these practices result in a severe lack of representation of women of color in speculative fiction.

In recent years, Caucasian female authors have made some progress in the battle for representation within speculative fiction; indeed, the most recent “SF Count” from *Strange Horizons* – an annual statistical assessment of the genre – cited that Caucasian female authors made up approximately 43.7% of surveyed authors (Harrison 2014). However, SF authors who were also people of color only consisted of 2.4% of the total SF authors surveyed. This study also found that books written by women (both Caucasian and people of color) were disproportionately underrepresented in book reviews throughout genre magazines and websites – meaning that readers have less of a chance to discover these authors (Harrison 2014). These numbers clearly illustrate a need for increased awareness of female authors in speculative fiction, but particularly female authors of color within the genre.

Thus, the purpose of this annotated bibliography is to focus on women of color in speculative fiction. Designed to raise awareness about historically underrepresented voices in the genre, this bibliography can provide personnel in North American libraries a tool for creating library exhibits or programs. An annotated bibliography on this topic can raise an awareness of literary multiculturalism. Many scholars have commented on the efficacy of using collection development as a means of representation and inclusion (i.e., the practice of purchasing library content that reflects the needs of constituents). Williams and Deyoe’s 2014 article, “Diverse Populations, Diverse Collections?” commented on the problems inherent in the revelation that a significant number of public libraries had purchased materials that did not meet minimal levels of representation for their respective community populations. And in her analysis of the

South Carolina's Picture Book Nominees, Kurz maintains that full and authentic depictions of people of color within literature are necessary because they reflect the growing reality of North American society and provide counter-narratives to the historically dominant White Culture (2012, pg. 142).

Other scholars have demonstrated the effectiveness of strategic collection development as a means of enhancing community and patron partnerships. In a case study where an academic library partnered with a Multicultural Affairs organization, Maloney revealed that intentional and thoughtful use of library materials in an exhibit enhanced awareness of underrepresented voices on campus and promoted use of those materials (2012, pg. 289). In reviewing the literature, it is clear that libraries are uniquely suited to highlight historically underrepresented voices through the use of collections, exhibits, and programs.

Fans, scholars, and library professionals are welcome to use this bibliography for personal and professional reasons. I anticipate that the immediate impact of this proposed bibliography will simply result in fostering the conversation about female authors of color in speculative fiction. It is my hope that this project can also continue to raise awareness about the need to discuss representation and inclusionary practices in collection development at libraries everywhere.

## Project Findings

The primary purpose of this annotated bibliography is to serve as an educational tool for researchers and / or LIS professionals to use in a variety of ways: event programming, exhibits, and as a launch point for further inquiry. However, in the process of gathering the data on the authors, the works, and the affiliated themes, there emerged several striking patterns that warrant (at the very least) a brief discussion.

**Authors & High Levels of Education:** Many of the authors within this bibliography have some form of collegiate education. Out of the fifty-five authors listed, thirty-seven authors – which amounts to 67% of the authors – have a baccalaureate degree from a college or university; furthermore, twenty-five of these authors have one, or multiple, Master's degrees (45% of the authors). Eleven of these authors have a doctoral degree of some kind (20%).

It may be helpful to contrast these numbers to the general population of the United States citizenry. In a recent population census of the United States, authors Ryan and Bauman show that only thirty-three percent of the population have a bachelor's degree or higher (2016, pg. 1). Furthermore, this same report demonstrated that educational attainment varied by race: Asian-Americans have the highest education attainment rates (at 54%), followed by Caucasian-Americans (36%), then African-Americans (22%), and Hispanic Americans (15%). The report concluded that there are still significant gaps in (2016, pg. 5). A fascinating future research opportunity could investigate whether the pattern of highly educated female speculative fiction authors of color is simply a product of inclination (i.e., writers have a natural attraction to studious pursuits), or if the pattern indicates something more.

**Young Adult Literature:** Sixteen of the authors (29% of the fifty-five) listed in this bibliography either write exclusively, or have written some, speculative literature intended for young adults. For some background, young adult and juvenile literature has exploded in the last fifteen years. Indeed, the 2015 Nielsen Summit demonstrated that juvenile literature has grown 40% in the last decade; furthermore, the Summit also demonstrated that 80% of young adult is purchased by adult readers (i.e., those over the age of 18) (Gilmore, 2015). And in an article titled, “How Young Adult Fiction Came of Age,” journalist David Brown cited the startling statistics associated with rapid growth of YA literature:

“...To wit: 3,000 young adult novels were published in 1997. Twelve years later, that figure hit 30,000 titles--an increase of a full order of magnitude. In 2009, total sales exceeded \$3 billion, which is roughly all the money” (Brown, 2011).

It is worthwhile to note that young adult literature is dominated by female authors in general (Lewit, 2012; Brinkley, 2016). Thus, given the history of the genre, it's not terribly surprising that women of color who write speculative fiction may also write for, or trend towards, young adult audiences. Combined with the general publishing trends in young adult literature in North America, it begs the question of opportunity vs. inclination (i.e., are there simply more opportunities in a rapidly growing industry, or are these authors simply writing what they want to write). Since the data presented is quantitative, and cannot suggest motivation, a future research opportunity is available through conducting qualitative interviews with these same authors to discover more about author motivation.

**Immigration:** Several of these authors, if not actual immigrants themselves, are the descendants of immigrants to the United States. Eleven authors (20% of the authors) cited a first-hand experience with immigration, and went on to share that it impacted their worldview. Many of these same authors have spoken on how these experiences lend themselves to writing about space travel and fantastical worlds. Again, it would be interesting to contrast these statistics with all authors of speculative fiction, and indeed, with authors who write in other genres.

**Activism:** At least six of these authors stated that they are activists of some kind, or that they serve in a volunteer capacity on literary or social movement organizations. While this number (a mere 10% of the authors) is not as significant a pattern as the high levels of education or the experiences with immigration, this number may highlight a future research opportunity. It would be fascinating to survey trends of activism across all genres, and across genders.

## Conclusions

To reiterate, this project is primarily intended to be a resource for LIS professionals and other researchers. However, the data presented in this bibliography – like all research – raises further questions to pursue and to investigate. The data discussed is largely quantitative, which means

that future researchers have significant opportunities to adopt methodologies designed to gather qualitative data – such as interviews and oral histories about writing speculative fiction as a woman of color. While this project can continue to raise awareness about the need to discuss representation and inclusionary practices in collection development at libraries everywhere, I hope it may also prompt further inquiry and research into this important topic.

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