

Breaking Barriers: Octavia E. Butler's "Speech Sounds"

Octavia Butler's "Speech Sounds" is set in a post-pandemic, Los Angeles dystopia. An undisclosed illness had left its survivors without the ability to speak, read, or write. The lonely protagonist, Rye, sits aboard a bus to visit her last remaining family members. A fight breaks out, forcing the bus to stop. A man intervenes in the fight, communicating through hand gestures with Rye. She eventually goes into his car, and they exchange personal totems that symbolize their names. Rye calls him Obsidian, and the pair end up having sex. She begins to feel less lonely, and hopeful even, as they continue on their journey; then another act of violence disrupts Rye's path. A woman is being chased by a man with a knife and the heroic Obsidian intervenes yet again. The fight unfolds leaving the woman, man, and Obsidian dead. Two children start grieving the dead woman and begin yelling coherent words at Rye. The story ends on a note of hope, as Rye utters her full name and vows to protect the children.

Butler's "Speech Sounds" consists of themes of isolation, violence, and fear; this is done to create discourse about a devolving society. This story, wrought with social commentary, launched Butler's science fiction career; both in her text and as a person, Butler broke the barriers of an arguably racist literary genre. Unlike many other science fiction (SF) stories, "Speech Sounds" creates a dystopia without the presence of science-bound tropes of robots or outer space, which makes for a more speculative, earth-bound narrative. Nonetheless, this story situated Octavia Butler into the sci-fi genre historically, but at the time Butler felt isolated in the sci-fi genre as a tall, black, dyslexic woman. In an article from *Book Forum*, Gabrielle Bellot writes, "If the world of science fiction seemed lonely for someone like Butler, real life seemed lonelier still. She was painfully shy, and as she grew older, she developed insecurities about her body that would linger." (Bellot, 2021). Like Rye, Butler also felt lonely in a world that she

believed was violent and unwelcoming. Bellot continues, “She was a large, Black woman in a society that demonized being large, Black, or a woman, and although she enjoyed being alone, her sense of rejection never left.” (Bellot, 2021). Even though she would earn many accolades in her life, Octavia Butler never felt truly accepted by the African American community or SF readership; even though she would be a seminal person in the Afro-Futurism subgenre of science fiction. This sense of isolation strengthened Butler’s love for literature and is a consistent theme in many of her stories. Unfortunately, she also felt rejected amongst the very authors that first published “Speech Sounds”.

Octavia Butler’s “Speech Sounds” was first published in Volume #73 of *Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine* in December of 1983, the magazine hereafter referred to as *ASFM*. *ASFM* was founded in 1977, publishing an average of three short stories per issue under the direction of Isaac Asimov, a pioneer of the SF genre. Asimov and his contemporaries crafted their own ‘canon’ of acceptable tropes and devices commonplace in the genre, and like other respected literary canons, white male authors dominated the field. Of the over two-hundred short stories published before Butler’s “Speech Sounds” an overwhelming, yet unsurprising majority of the authors were caucasian men. Octavia Butler was the twenty-first female author published in *ASFM*, many of whom wrote under shortened, more masculine names or pseudonyms to hide their gender. Only two other authors published before Butler were not white-passing: Thai-American author Somtow Sucharitkul, and African-American author Samuel R. Delaney, Butler’s teacher at the Clarion SF Writers’ Workshop in 1971 (Delaney, 1998). The first black woman published in *ASMF*, Octavia Butler’s “Speech Sounds” would be critically well-received; in 1984, Butler would also be the first black woman to win a Hugo Award for her enthralling, dystopian story.

In *The New York Review of Science Fiction* Samuel R. Delany, authored an article called “Racism and Science Fiction” where Delany disagrees with his label from the SF readership that he was the first African-American SF author. Delany states, “Among the ranks of what is often referred to as proto-science fiction, there are a number of black writers” (Delany, 1998), and exhibits ample evidence of the presence of black voices published before his debut novel *Babel-17* in 1966. Delany also recounts a direct interaction with Isaac Asimov in which Asimov told him, “No one here will ever look at you, read a word you write, or consider you in any situation, no matter whether the roof is falling in or the money is pouring in, without saying to him-or herself “Negro”.” (Delany, 1998). Delany’s article suggests that African-American authors were too subversive for the popular, white readership of magazines like *ASMF*. Under his tutelage, Butler was undoubtedly aware of this presence of racism in the SF genre and more equipped to navigate her career despite the apparent racism in the field.

The reception of “Speech Sounds” began Butler on a path where (like Delany) Butler would be labeled the “first” of her kind. Though (like Delany) they were titles that Butler never completely embraced. Instead, Butler felt very alone in a society that seemed desperate to label her. *Book Forum*’s article quotes Butler about her experience in a creative writing class, “The presence of blacks, my teacher felt, changed the focus of the story” (Bellot, 2021). This provides some insight into why Butler does not discuss race in “Speech Sounds”, as a means to break the barrier crafted by the white-male SF canon. Due to their popularity, and white palpability, Delany and Butler helped build the framework that would be later deemed Afro-Futurism; the representation of black history and culture through the use of science fiction themes and tropes; a genre that focuses on black narratives told by black artists.

Afro-Futurism is a subgenre of science-fiction literature that subverts the presence of race in the science fiction genre; both the lack of diversity in the collective science fiction cannon and the devices and stereotypes that exist in many of these white narratives (i.e., the use of alien races as symbols of otherness or evil, making all Asians martial arts masters, the typical white saviors, etc.). Octavia E. Butler does not mention race or inequality once in “Speech Sounds”, in this narrative everyone is equally stripped of their language. There is no allegorical ethnocentrism hidden in Butler’s story or any white saviors, instead, “Speech Sounds” is a character-driven story centered around the protagonist, Rye. Butler only alludes to their race through the totems they exchange with each other: the deep black conjured by the name Obsidian, and the golden wheat symbolized by the name, Rye.

Typically, in New Historical Criticism it is uncouth to equate the author with the narrator or character. The focus should remain on who Butler was and determine how that influences the creation of this story. However, it is also important to understand the conception of this story, and Butler’s insight on the science-fiction genre as a whole, which is easily determined by the ample amount of access to the late author’s insight on these topics. Butler was inspired to write this gripping, dystopian novel after witnessing a bloody fight on a bus bound for Los Angeles. In the ‘Afterword’ of her short twelve-page story, Butler writes, “I sat where I was, more depressed than ever, hating the whole hopeless, stupid business and wondering whether the human species would ever grow up enough to learn to communicate without using fists of one kind or another.” (Butler, 13, 1983) Sequentially, Butler infuses herself into “Speech Sounds” by utilizing a third-person limited perspective; only revealing the perspective and emotions of the protagonist, Rye.

This dual perspective begins to exist: the point of view of the dystopian society within the story, and Butler’s perspectives and fear about a society that doesn’t value language. The plot of

“Speech Sounds” centers on Rye’s choices, whose perspective begins at the very point the idea of the story was conceptualized, right where Butler herself was sitting; through Rye, we see Butler’s vision unfold: a story that asks if the ‘human species’ could ever evolve.

“The Hyphenated American” is a 2010 article from *Lesbian News* about the life and accomplishments of Butler. The article illuminates the uniqueness of Butler’s rise to popularity, “She did it during a time of civil disturbance, she did it in a male-dominated genre, she did it as a Negro, A black and Hyphenated American.” (Theory, 2010). Though “Speech Sounds” does not explicitly tackle race, at the root is a story that reflects Butler’s feeling of otherness; Rye is silenced, threatened, and alone. The lack of heavier racial topics helped her cross the threshold of the white SF author/ readership, yet she tells a story of fear and otherness situating her as a triple threat in the literary world, appealing to more audiences outside of the typical *ASMF* readership. Butler found larger audiences as a seminal figure in Afro-Futurism, an acclaimed science fiction author, and a female author.

Octavia E. Butler’s “Speech Sounds” is as socially pertinent today as it was in 1983. Butler feared “whether the human species would ever grow up enough to learn to communicate” (Butler, 1983) and now nearly forty years later, her speculative SF story has become hauntingly believable. Then, Butler became the first ‘hyphenated’ black-female author to be featured in *ASMF*. She was the first ‘hyphenated’ black-female author to win a Hugo Award, and eventually the only (hyphenated and non-hyphenated) SF author to win a MacArthur Genius Grant. Now, in a post-COVID American society, “Speech Sounds” echoes the paradigm of the modern, violent, and racist social discord that is at the forefront of social issues today. It mirrors a world where illness, isolation, and fear have become an episteme for people of all races, social, and economic classes. In an era where there are increasing instances of literature not ‘aging well’ to modern

readerships, “Speech Sounds” has only become more impactful, important, and realistic, transcending the science fiction genre as a whole into a historically important work of speculative fiction.

Works Cited

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