"Speech Sounds": How Octavia Butler Found Her Voice and Shook Up Science Fiction

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Octavia Butler is one of the most recognizable authors associated with science fiction. Having produced over two dozen works in her lifetime, several earned her critical acclaim in the form of genre-coveted Hugo and Nebula awards. In addition, Butler was also chosen as a recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship in 1995, making her the first--and so far only--science fiction author to win the prestigious award. Despite the recognition and praise Butler and countless other science fiction authors have received in response to their work, the literary academy--comprised of "trained critics"--remain of the opinion that in relation to other genres, science fiction at best classifies as "second-rate literature" (Westfahl and Slusser 2). When one encounters the acumen exemplified within Octavia Butler's writing, however, it becomes clear just how misguided the academy truly is.

While most critical analyses conducted in relation to Butler's work fixate on her more well-known novels, such as *Kindred* (1979), *Dawn* (1987), and the *Parable* series (1993-1998), her less recognized short story, "Speech Sounds", establishes itself as an extraordinary example of her writing talents. The story, set in a dilapidated California, follows its protagonist Valerie Rye as she navigates her way through life in a society wherein effective communication is almost a thing of the past. Struck illiterate due to an unknown "illness", she also chooses to not speak for fear of the negative and violent reactions she may suffer at the hands of other characters (Butler, "Speech Sounds" 99). Near the end of the short story, however, Rye experiences a crucial moment during which she actively "unlearn[s] to not speak" in order to regain some of her lost autonomy (Gilbert and Gubar 1539). In the critical introduction to *Science Fiction, Canonization, Marginalization, and the Academy*, Gary Westfahl and George Slusser assert that regardless of the disdain held for the genre, science fiction "offers unusually fertile grounds for an examination of the continuing... literary... marginalization [of] feminism, racialism, gay and lesbian studies, and popular culture" (2-3). "Speech Sounds" supports their claim by providing a worthy format through which to study feminism and racialism while simultaneously confronting several of the real-world prejudices held within the literary community.

Due to the ignorance surrounding the genre, many critics have disregarded the possibility of science fiction producing literature worth studying and in doing so have overlooked the richness a feminist reading of "Speech Sounds" provides. In their essay "Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship", Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, well known for their collaborative work in the field of women's literary tradition, utilize Harold Bloom's theory of "swerving" for their own feminist purposes. This theory, as Bloom describes it, is the idea "that literary influence is similar to paternity... [at which point] a "son" needs metaphorically to kill or castrate the "father" to make room for [himself]" (Richter 111). The two feminist critics differ in their application of "swerving" through both their attribution of the term in reference to women writers as well as their less violent illustration, wherein female authors merely "revise male genres... to record... their own stories in disguise", and in doing so displace the "central sequences of male literary history" (Gilbert and Gubar 1533). As a female author writing a story that employs narrative voice in order to explore the "dailiness" women endure (Haraway 1983) rather than the more common "boys own... adventure[-driven]" (Lefanu 2) perspective, Octavia Butler actively challenges science fiction's existence as "male territory" (Roberts 99).

Although a feminist reading of "Speech Sounds" reveals some of the intriguing undertones the short story contains, in order to fully grasp the significance embedded within Butler's prose, an analysis rooted in critical race theory must also take place. Following the civil rights era, critical race theory "emerged and began uncovering the ongoing dynamics of racialized power and its [fixed place] in [American] practices and values" (Schur 1). In her essay "Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination", Toni Morrison explores one feature of "racialized power" as detected in the form of "knowledge" (1791). According to Morrison, literary "knowledge" is the belief held by some that "traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed by, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of [black individuals] in the United States" (1791). It also "assumes that the characteristics of [said literature] emanate from a particular "Americanness" that is separate and unaccountable to this presence" (1791). One of the most commonly observed manifestations of this sentiment presents itself as the assumption that within a literary work, the "absence of a racial marker default[s] a character as white" (Mura). In spite of this, several passages within the short story allude to Rye's existence as a black woman through descriptions of her interactions with other characters and her own heightened reaction to her illiteracy. In less than six thousand words, Butler undermines generations of literary prejudice which had previously marked literature as a white sphere.

While the hegemonic academy marginalizes science fiction, "Speech Sounds" assists in the efforts to redeem the genre from the harsh judgment it receives. The short story necessitates a dual analysis through the lenses of feminist and critical race theory in order to reveal the hidden complexities within. Although an examination of the text through a single one of the aforementioned theories would provide readers with a satisfactory--if not cursory--understanding, both theories are necessary to fully appreciate the significance of what Butler has accomplished. Several of the short story's key passages demonstrate a rejection of prejudiced gender and racial normativity standards present not only within science fiction but the entirety of the literary community and, in doing so, makes a lasting impression on both.

The significance of Butler's rejection is better understood by gaining insight into the definition of science fiction--what qualifies as such--its history, and how it operates as a genre. In and of itself, science fiction has always been difficult to define. Even with the academy's disapproval of the validity of the genre, scholars have debated for decades regarding the best fitting definition. Darko Suvin, author of *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, provides one of the most widely accepted interpretations: "[Science fiction is] a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (8-9). Essentially, Suvin claims that for a literary work to qualify as science fiction three things must exist simultaneously: First, an equal balance between estrangement--the alienation of a reader from the text--and cognition--the "aspect which prompts readers to understand"--must be at the fore. Second, continuous respect for the constraints of science is critical. Finally, science fiction needs to place an emphasis on the rational over the "emotional or instinctual" (Roberts 8, 9).

However, based solely on Suvin's definition, "Speech Sounds" only partially qualifies as science fiction since it aligns with the critic's first two requirements yet diverges from the third. Butler's decision to aim readers attention towards Rye's grief and rage-filled reaction to her illiteracy and away from more "rational" elements of the story, such as details concerning the illness, showcase the author's efforts to "release the play of writing" in order that she might better represent the inherent value of an exploration into the "dailiness" of women (Haraway 1985). Butler's refusal to eschew the inclusion of emotion within "Speech Sounds" further validates Gilbert and Gubar's theory. The author revises the male-dominated genre's expectations to better fit her needs so that she may tell the story she wishes to tell. Without the emphasis placed on Rye's attitude concerning her inability to read and write, her "most serious impairment and most painful", the story would lose a great deal of its impact (Butler, "Speech Sounds" 98).

In contrast to Suvin's strict interpretation of science fiction's definition, Damien Broderick, science fiction author and critic, establishes his own, more inclusive opinion. Broderick is astutely aware of science fiction's existence as a "popular genre that… de-emphasizes fine writing" (Broderick 155), thus "allow[ing] content and concept to come more obviously to the fore" (Jones 5). This perception does not disqualify Suvin's conditions of "estrangement", "cognition", and "constraint"--it merely favors Butler's dismissal of outdated and faulty genre expectations. The accessible vernacular Butler employs--while not as accepted by the academy as the language seen in "classical" texts--supports readers in their endeavor to discern the nuances of "Speech Sounds" (Westfahl and Slusser 2). While the content of the short story obviously delineates Rye's experiences in a world she no longer feels a part of without her literacy, a concept is less readily available and for good reason. "Concepts are universal, timeless, abstract, and move [readers] towards higher levels of thinking" (Erickson, et al.), not simple things to write into a fiction work. Butler manages to embed two concepts within "Speech Sounds", feminism and racial equality, without utilizing "fine writing", lending her prose an accessibility traditional texts lack (Broderick 155).

Furthermore, an exploration into the restrictive history of the genre lends readers a greater appreciation for Butler's rejection of several of the discriminatory biases practiced in science fiction. Although an in-depth analysis is indeed possible, for the sake of relevancy, one must begin with the "Golden Age". In his critical text *Science Fiction*, Adam Roberts asserts that "science fiction first emerge[d] as the underside of [a] set of cultural dominants: as, in a sense, the dark subconscious to the thinking mind of Imperialism" (Roberts 66). Following World War II, this idea unfolds itself in the way of American-produced science fiction showing an infusion of the very "bullishness" and "ebullience" which permeated its "national outlook" (75). The "Golden Age", which began during the mid-to-late 1930s and extended through the 1940s, features "a striking wealth and diversity of writing talents" (75). Those "talents", however, reference authors such as Isaac Asimov, Thomas Sturgeon, and Clifford Simak to name a few, and completely disregard authors of color and women writers. Viewed as "pioneers of modern science fiction" (Roberts 76), white male authors ruled the genre so thoroughly--championing an "Americanness… removed from and without the presence of black people" (Morrison 1791)--that even a half-century later, while in attendance at a writing convention, Butler shocked other attendees with her African American heritage (Butler, *Conversations with Octavia Butler* 96). Considering the explicit characterization of several of her work's protagonists as black women, it seems logical that one would grant the possibility of the author existing as a black woman herself. However, the surprise shown at Butler's blackness illustrates the imperial mentality of the "Golden Age" maintaining its power over time--preserving the arrogance of white authors and their assumed ownership of everything, including ethnic narratives--and further emphasizes the importance of subverting genre-typical prejudices whenever possible. In writing "Speech Sounds", Butler engages in and disrupts an exclusive genre that would just as soon label her irrelevant all while technically adhering to its guidelines.

Following the "Golden Age", the 1950s and 1960s saw an increase in social and civil reformation which the literature produced then reflected, including science fiction. This era in the genre's history is referred to as the "New Wave" (Roberts 79). John Huntington, author of *Rationalizing Genius: Ideological Strategies in the Classic American Science Fiction Short Story*, describes the shift: "New Wave [science fiction]… can be seen as a rendering of attitudes implicit in [the zeitgeist of] the middle and late fifties. It is not accidental that the flourishing of the New Wave coincides with a decade of political activism and… solutions to social [problems]" (2). Gone were the totalizing "Golden Age" days where white, male authors dominated the field. Instead, in answer to second-wave feminism and civil rights movements, the science fiction produced under the "New Wave" reflected a mentality of inclusivity previously unseen within the literary community, recognizing the efforts of authors of color and women writers. Due to this recognition, a more accurately termed "wealth and diversity" of writing talents emerged, subsequently upgrading the genre's status from a "minority interest" to a "mass phenomenon" (Roberts 75, 80).

While the "New Wave" was far more receptive to equal representation than its predecessor, it was far from perfect. Science fiction, like any other genre, participates in and perpetuates what critics have identified as the "Age of Empires" through its latent "ideology… that difference needs to be flattened, or even eradicated" (Roberts 65). A cursory examination of history reveals the tendency of Empires to favor their own citizens and cultural practices over that of the people groups they have dominated, praising the "Same" while demonizing the "Other" (66). American literature exists as its own Empire through which white authors have established their own "knowledge", awarding them the ability to separate themselves and elevate the worth of their works above those which are produced by "Others"; blacks, Jews, women, disabled, the list goes on (Morrison 1791). Despite its faults, the "New Wave" granted Butler a platform to address several of the sexist and racist tendencies still running rampant through the genre. In taking advantage of that platform, "Speech Sounds" actively fights back against the American literary Empire's exploitation of authority which had previously allowed them absolute control.

During an interview with Randall Kenan in 1990, Octavia Butler revealed her personal belief that she did not "[hold] any particular literary talent" (Butler, *Conversations with Octavia Butler* 37). However, the opposite could not be more true. Although several of her early writings mimic some of the same tendencies exhibited within works written predominately by white, male science fiction authors, Butler's own intersectionality plays a major role in the respect and success she garnered for herself. After having had time to mature as an author, Butler recognized the value that her unique perspective offered to a genre dominated almost completely by white men. She "felt it important to acknowledge that her black, female existence produced different experiences than those typically found in science fiction and tried to write stories rooted in these experiences" (Francis X). An analysis of her short story "Speech Sounds" conducted through a feminist lens reveals her success in her endeavor to disrupt the genre by including more diverse perspectives. As a woman, Butler maintains an incontrovertible authority to call attention to and reject science fiction's existence as "male territory".

When examining "Speech Sounds" readers are promptly exposed to Butler's revision of the "central sequences of male literary history" in order to better fit her own story (Gilbert and Gubar 1533). While science fiction is consistently perceived as an analytical, impartial genre with a disinclination towards emotionality, by the third sentence of "Speech Sounds", the narrative voice affirms the author's abandonment of that idea through the announcement of Rye's "loneliness and unhappiness" acting as the catalyst for her coming journey (Butler, "Speech Sounds" 89). Although the story does contain other elements of science fiction which Suvin claimed as necessary--estrangement between the reader and the text, cognition, and a respect for the constraints of science (Suvin)--the single element the critic railed against the most is the one that is presented first, showcasing Butler's simultaneous conformation and subversion of "patriarchal literary standards" (Gilbert and Gubar 1533). The almost instantaneous declaration of the protagonist's emotional state reveals the importance the narrative voice places on emotion, and rightly so--seeing as how from that point on, Rye's emotions act as the driving force of the plot. In revising the standards of science fiction so that they fit the story she feels needs telling, Butler ascribes herself a "female literary authority" the genre did not see fit to allow her (Gilbert and Gubar 1533).

In choosing to explore the "dailiness" Rye endures as a woman, Butler further disrupts the male-oriented nature of science fiction. (Haraway 1983). As a female living in a post-apocalyptic world whose communicatory abilities are substantially limited, Rye encounters a great deal of harassment as a result of her gender. A confrontation between Rye and a male stranger exemplifies this:

She had no idea what he intended but she stood her ground. The man was half a foot taller than she was and perhaps ten years younger. She did not imagine she could outrun him. Nor did she expect anyone to help her if she needed help… She gestured once--a clear indication to the man to stop… He gestured obscenely and several other men laughed. Loss of language had spawned a whole new set of obscene gestures. The man, with stark simplicity, had accused her of sex with the bearded man and had suggested she accommodate the other men present--beginning with him. (Butler, "Speech Sounds" 95)

It is not unreasonable to assume that if Rye were a male character, she would not receive the same treatment. Butler's inclusion of the sexual harassment Rye experiences serves as a way to disrupt science fiction's existence as "almost exclusively male" (Roberts 93). By explicitly focusing readers' attention on an instance where a woman is forced to navigate a situation wherein her physical safety is threatened by a group of men, Butler "swerves" (Gilbert and Gubar 1563) from the patriarchal standard where women, if they are mentioned at all, are "there in no sense that matters" (Morrison 1792).

Furthermore, the most identifiable theme within "Speech Sounds"--communication-- operates in direct opposition to the traditional themes of the genre, thereby facilitating Butler's rejection of science fiction's existence as "male territory" (Roberts 99). Within his critical text, *Science Fiction*, Adam Roberts discusses the genre: "[Science fiction's] conventions are shaped by the passions and interests of adolescent males, that is to say, its focus is on technology as embodied particularly by big, gleaming machines with lots of moving parts, physical prowess, war, two-dimensional male heroes, adventure, and excitement" (93)."Speech Sounds", which contains only very limited elements of adventure, focuses instead on the less exciting but more meaningful concept of communication and how the loss of language and literacy impacts society. Such a significant modification to the patriarchal standards of the genre invites readers to recognize that as male-dominated as science fiction is, the possibility of change still exists and disenfranchised authors--just like Butler herself--are the ideal candidates to usher in a new, more inclusive era of science fiction.

Communication continues to operate within the short story by highlighting the relationship between Butler and Rye as they both undergo the process of "unlearning not to speak" in order to free themselves from the oppressive expectations of their respective societies (Gilbert and Gubar 1533). Although Rye admits to another character that she has the ability to speak, she chooses not to do so because "such superiority was frequently punished by beatings, even death" (Butler, "Speech Sounds" 93). However, when presented with a choice to either speak up and possibly change the course of her reality or stay silent and leave two children to fend for themselves, Rye bravely decides that "it's all right for [her] to talk" (107). This exchange also serves as a reflection of Butler's choice to engage with the literary world. Despite science fiction's reputation as a "male genre" and the misogynist hostility that comes with it, Butler reclaims her voice by "dancing out from the debilitating looking glass of the male text into the health of female authority" and in doing so manages to "articulate the private lives of one half of humanity" (Gilbert and Gubar 1539).

Even though Butler claimed to write without "a particular feminist or racial agenda", almost all of her works have provided countless scholars with a wealth of material to analyze through either lens. "Speech Sounds" is no different (Francis X). During an interview Butler gave for *Equal Opportunity Magazine*, she asserted that when it comes to "minorities and their place, or lack of place in science fiction… to be black is to be abnormal" (Butler, *Conversations with Octavia Butler* 6). Butler's statement supports Toni Morrison's theory of "knowledge", wherein black individuals hold no influence or claim over American literature (1791). Although "Speech Sounds" avoids explicitly revealing the race of its protagonist, several key passages within the short story allude to her existence as a black woman, revealing Butler's objection to the collective assumption that when a character's race is unspecified they default as white and her hope for a less segregated literary community.

Rye's intense emotions regarding her loss of literacy help to inform the reader's appreciation of her existence as a black woman despite science fiction's tendency to white-wash its characters when their race goes unnamed. In her essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century", Donna Haraway asserts that for "all colonized groups… [literacy] has a special significance" (1983). The "widespread suppression of reading and writing" (Morse) of first African slaves then African Americans led to a generations-long struggle for literacy in order that black people might "become something other than [white people's] economic tools" (Green 177-178). Seeing as how identities are often the "result of encounters with boundaries of exclusion", it makes sense then that African American's tended to intimately link their literacy with their identities--one could not exist without the other (Yon 2).

Rye perfectly represents this idea; her literacy does not merely inform her identity, it is her identity. Although she maintains her ability to verbally communicate, she has lost "reading and writing" and to her, "that [is] her most serious impairment and most painful" (Butler, "Speech Sounds" 98). With the loss of her literacy--an ability which drove her passions as a "freelance writer" and provided her with a career as a history professor at the University of California Los Angeles--Rye feels she has no "reason to live" (98). Although white people, of course, suffer from illiteracy too, their inability to read or write does not stem from systematic racial oppression but most commonly a lack of schooling or poor circumstances and because of that, they do not place the same importance on literacy as African Americans (Collins and Margo). Rye's heightened despondency when faced with her illiteracy firmly suggests her existence as a black woman which in turn weakens the American literary Empire's claim on science fiction as solely white territory.

Although Rye's riding of the bus seems like a mundane task, in reality, it serves as one of the ways through which Butler undermines and rejects the "knowledge" held by countless literary historians and critics that black people have no place in American literature (Morrison 1791). Elijah Anderson, professor of Sociology at Yale University, offers illumination on how different races operate in shared spaces:

Black people typically approach the white space with care. When present there, blacks reflexively note the proportion of whites to blacks, or may look around for other blacks with whom to commune if not bond, and then may adjust their comfort level accordingly; when judging a setting as too white, they can feel uneasy, expecting to be reprimanded at any moment. For whites, however, the same settings are generally regarded as unremarkable, or as normal taken-for-granted reflections of civil society. ("Black in White Space" 2018).

Within the first scene of "Speech Sounds", several characters engage in a violent fight while aboard the same bus Rye is on (Butler, "Speech Sounds" 89-90). Based on Anderson's comments, their actions suggest their whiteness because of their willingness to engage in such disruptive behavior without heed to their surroundings. Rye's actions equally reveal her blackness. While the fighting happens, she "watches... carefully" in a bid to protect herself as Anderson claims any black person in a similar situation surrounded by white people would do (90). Although Rye does not identify with anyone on the bus, verifying to readers that there is no one on board with whom she feels comfortable doing so, once she disembarks, that all changes. Through the employment of a deceptively straightforward introduction, Butler manages to effortlessly highlight a unique struggle of black individuals which calls attention to the protagonists' blackness despite the white normativity standards of the genre.

The immediate identification that occurs between Rye and another character, Obsidian, supports Elijah Anderson's theory of black individuals seeking one another out when confronted with "white spaces" and further challenges the default whiteness of literary characters ("Black in White Space" 2018). From the moment Rye sees Obsidian and Obsidian sees her, there exists a likeness between the two. Although she is hesitant--after all, they are strangers--Rye comes to the conclusion that Obsidian, perhaps because he is the only person with whom she is able to identify with, is her safest option in comparison to the men on the bus. Their meeting happens in very short order:

"She was near the curb when a battered blue Ford on the other side of the street made a U-turn and pulled up in front of the bus... When the driver of the Ford beckoned to Rye, she moved away warily. [He] got out--a big man, young, neatly bearded with dark, thick hair. He wore... a look of wariness that matched Rye's. She stood several feet away from him, waiting to see what he would do. He looked at the bus, now rocking with the combat inside, then at the small cluster of passengers who had gotten off. Finally he looked at Rye again. She returned his gaze" (Butler, "Speech Sounds" 91).

Anderson asserts that "when judging a setting as too white, [black people] can feel uneasy", because there's no way to tell how a situation will turn out for them; they are constantly at a disadvantage. Rye's "wariness" reflected back at her through Obsidian reveals their likeness--their black existence--to readers. In addition, by "returning his gaze"--something she refused to do with the other patrons aboard the bus--Rye has found someone to "commune" with and "adjusts [her] comfort level accordingly" (Anderson), allowing the man to take her away from the hostile situation (Butler 96). As Butler herself once said, she "does not feel obligated to [include any elements] which do not help the story" (Butler, *Conversations with Octavia Butler* 221). Therefore, the implications of Rye's existence as a black woman are entirely intentional. The inclusion of which serves as Butler's attempt to rectify the inaccurate "knowledge" preserved by the American literary Empire wherein science fiction is "removed from and without relationship to the presence of black people in the United States" (Morrison 1791).

In writing "Speech Sounds" Butler actively "seize[s] the tools to mark the world that mark [her and people like her] as other" (Haraway 1983). The majority of the American literary Empire conducts itself under the impression that the stories of women are less interesting or unworthy of attention in comparison to male-oriented narratives, and that white is an acceptable default for characters when the race goes unspecified. Butler actively rejects both of these suppositions in her short story by virtue of her exploration into a day in the life of her female protagonist as well as the rather obvious implication of her protagonist's blackness. The author's simultaneous adherence to and subversion of genre expectations highlight her talent as an author; playing by the rules just enough to establish her own voice but not so much that her rejection is lost.

The ramifications of Butler's rejection are not limited to science fiction--all genres are the target of her challenge for every single one suffers from the same shortcomings. There is a certain irony in the fact that Butler, through the employment of a genre the traditional literary academy dismisses as insignificant, manages to call out the entirety of the literary community for their prejudiced practices. However, in her own process of "unlearning to not speak"--overcoming the stigma and hostility she faced as a black, female author in a white, male-dominated field--Butler remains somewhat "hidden and confined", subject to the mercy of an audience (Gilbert and Gubar 1539). If readers were to listen to the academy and decide that they were correct in the claim that science fiction produces insignificant, "second-rate literature", Butler's rejection would largely go unnoticed no good would come of it (Westfahl and Slusser 2). Although Butler's work in "Speech Sounds" does not undo any damage already done, it calls attention to the issue of prejudiced gender and racial normativity standards within the literary community and that is the first step to change.

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