




(Nothing But) Futures

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(Chattasa, 2018)

ABSTRACT

The year after the journal *ACCESS* originally launched, Octavia Butler (1983) published a short story titled “Speech Sounds” in the science fiction monthly *Asimov’s Science Fiction*. The story takes place in the aftermath of a pandemic that seemingly has one of multiple effects: one either loses the ability to speak coherently, or one loses the ability to read and write (but not both). In this paper, I will discuss how this story has utility as an example of future studies. Futures studies is an attempt to game out multiple futures by using our present-day anxieties, institutions, and value systems to consider what is probable, what is possible, and what is preferable. Through future studies, I am looking for a new way for thinking about theory so that we can engage in imagining any number of educational futures, one that takes the scaffolding of futures studies and both looks to science fiction as its object of inquiry and reads educational research and policy as science fiction writing.

KEYWORDS

Educational futures; science fiction; futures studies; theory; Octavia Butler

“And as things fell apart

Nobody paid much attention.”

Talking Heads (1988), *(Nothing But) Flowers*

The year after the journal *ACCESS* originally launched, Octavia Butler (1983) published a short story titled “Speech Sounds” in the science fiction monthly *Asimov’s Science Fiction*. The story takes place in the aftermath of a pandemic that seemingly has one of multiple effects: one either loses the ability to speak coherently, or one loses the ability to read and write (but not both). Another effect of the pandemic is death. As a result, society has largely collapsed into an anarchic equilibrium, where there is a mutual desire to survive, but little ability to communicate that desire intelligibly.

The protagonist is a former professor of history at UCLA named Valerie Rye. She has lost the ability to read and write, and as a result she has lost part of who she was, what made her human. She has also lost her husband, children, parents, and sister to the pandemic. The plot of the story is driven by her decision to attempt to find her brother and his family, if they are still alive, in Pasadena. After an ill-fated attempt to venture the twenty miles by bus, she encounters a man with a gun, dressed in an LAPD uniform, who cannot speak, but who saves her from a fight that breaks out on the bus. People in this moment wear symbols around their necks to indicate their names, and Valerie decides to call him Obsidian for the smooth black rock he wears on a necklace. Valerie herself wears a stalk of Rye, although she is sure people refer to her as Wheat.

As Rye and Obsidian depart the chaotic aftermath of the bus, riding in his car, she discovers that Obsidian can still read (and likely write) as he pulls out a map gesturing a question as to where she wants to go. His literacy infuriates her, as she can only vaguely point in the direction of what she thinks is Pasadena, but after a sort of back-and-forth communication between the two, they find themselves making love in the car. Their journey together ends shortly thereafter, however, when they witness a woman being chased by a man wielding a knife running in front of the car. The woman is stabbed to death, and while Obsidian tries to wrestle the knife from the man, he is shot in the head and dies instantly. Rye then kills the man, and is confronted with two children who emerge upon the scene. Rye discerns that they are the couple's children, and that they have just witnessed the murder of both their parents. To Rye's surprise, the children begin speaking to each other in perfect English, and the story ends with Valerie Rye introducing herself and hearing her name aloud in what seems a very long time.

There are a number of reasons why I think this story is important. The first is that I am writing this essay in the midst of a pandemic, one which has seen the failure of public institutions and the abdication of civic leadership accelerate at speeds that were unimaginable a year ago. In the United States, where I write, there is a feeling of uncertainty, anxiety, and the steady movement towards a cliff that comes as a result of a rather impressive breakdown in multiple systems, including health, civil society, and education. There is a sense of anarchy as school districts around the country are left to their own devices in terms of their reopenings, as an example. And while society has not broken down completely (yet), we have moved in that direction and at a clip that is much too close for comfort. Butler's story is, if nothing else, a warning of what is now *more* possible.

A second lesson from "Speech Sounds" is one of communication. Here I want to shift my focus from the news of the day to the state of academia and its role in the broader social imaginary and discourse. Academia, it seems to me, is in a bit of a rut, specifically the way educational theory is used to both explain everything under the sun and at the same time exclude all but the most specialized readers. As a result, much educational scholarship functions largely as autopsies of the past, and more fashionably of the present, as a set of diagnoses with little to no prognosis. Part of the reason for this is that we have lost the ability to communicate with theory. There is a laundry list of signifiers to those in the know (Bourdieu, Derrida, Foucault, Žižek - the list goes on and on), and a formula that runs generally as: Insert Theory A into Context B, lather, rinse, repeat. As much as we might hope, the work of Gilles Deleuze does not constitute a grand unified theory of social phenomena and cannot be used to interpret every habit and practice of systems of education. Yet so many of us keep trying to prove the opposite. As such, as D. N. Rodowick (2014) opines, theory has lost "its powers of explanation and conceptual innovation" (p. 4). Theory has become merely a set of speech sounds.

And like in Butler's story we have lost either the ability to speak or to read and write, and so we, like her dystopian future society, are left gesturing and gesticulating at each other. We are unable to communicate, academics to academics, to say nothing of academia with the wider populace. We have lost the utility of good theory. I am as guilty of this as anyone else. But good theory wants to be used. So I am looking for a new perspective, a perspective that looks elsewhere and takes inspiration from frameworks available in non-academic, yet still theoretical, sources. To

that end, I am looking to recapture the use of theory in science fiction by marrying it to futures studies, and have some fun in the process.

Here, then, is a third take away from Butler: the story's utility as both science fiction as well as an example of futures studies. To summarize the latter, futures studies is an attempt to game out multiple futures by using our present-day anxieties, institutions, and value systems to consider what is probable, what is possible, and what is preferable. (There are other goals to futures studies, but this distillation seems to work the best for my purposes. See Kupferman, 2020.) It does so through a variety of perspectives, the two most helpful of which are counterfactual and prefactual thinking - more on this in a moment. The thing to remember about futures studies is that its role is not prediction, but like Isaac Asimov says of science fiction in the same issue that "Speech Sounds" appeared, it "is committed neither to marvels nor to disasters. It deals with *possible situations*" (original emphasis).

And in science fiction we have no better example in the social imaginary of futures studies and futures thinking - not to predict, but to anticipate. But science fiction, too, tends to suffer from an attempt to theorize the joy out of it, even as it has occasionally hovered around the margins of academia and academic writing. This is too bad, because, like Rodowick's good theory, science fiction is able both to explain as well as conceptually innovate. What we need is to treat science fiction as its own important well of theory, without turning to others to interpret it for us. We need to use it as a guide to imagine, wonder, and create. Butler has given us but one window into a possible (probable?) future here, the future after a pandemic. And it is one thing to analyze how we got here, to the age of coronavirus, and undoubtedly a profusion of diagnostic studies will be published offering no end of hindsight about how things fell apart so quickly. But what about where we are going next? Why are we not imagining that? "Speech Sounds" isn't about how a pandemic got started, or why, or who was to blame. It is about what comes after, and how people and society respond (or don't respond) in the aftermath. And so Butler is actually taking an ethical position in this story, to wonder about what comes next.

What I am looking for is a new way for thinking about theory so that we can engage in imagining any number of educational futures, one that takes the scaffolding of futures studies and both looks to science fiction as its object of inquiry and reads educational research and policy as science fiction writing. Perhaps a good place to start, then, is by writing "This approach is different from other approaches." But that is not really my line. "This book is different from other books" is the start to every *Choose Your Own Adventure* book (Montgomery, 1982), the popular children's series that came of age in the 1980s, offering a multitude of different storylines within a given set of circumstances and offering kids (like me) the chance to try out different paths. Or different futures, if you will. Similarly, Marvel Comics released a title in 1977 called *What If...?* that posed a series of questions related to the Marvel universe. The first issue asks "What if Spider-Man joined the Fantastic Four?", and in so doing introduces readers to a new superhero group, the Fantastic Five (Thomas, 1977). The series is grounded in a convergence of ideas of multiple/possible worlds. Each issue begins in the same way, with Uatu, the Watcher, saying something to the effect of "I know all that is -- most that has been -- and much of what will be. I have also many windows into the strange parallel worlds of what might have been." He then introduces the scenario with the words *What if...?*

Granted, both of these series are excellent examples of counterfactual thinking, a concept that asks one to consider different outcomes had some decision or event in the past been different. Another type of analysis, one that is better suited to futures studies, is prefactual thinking. This type of analysis asks questions entirely in the future tense, so that if this *will be* the case, then some other sort of outcome *might* result. If counterfactuals ask us to imagine a world or worlds counter to our current facts, prefactuals ask us to imagine the world before we even know what those facts will be. Which brings us back to *Choose Your Own Adventure*. While the books offered a lesson in counterfactuals, typically with 20 different 'endings' depending on what decision you make (or made, as you continued reading), they also work as an example of prefactual analysis. As an

elementary school student, one of the earliest lessons I learned from reading *Choose Your Own Adventure* was that you could try to ‘game’ the story (that is, flip through the alternate endings and wend your way back to the start in order to get the ending you wanted). When I did this, I wasn’t concerned with altering events in the past or present but rather trying to figure out how to get the ending I wanted before certain twists and turns in the book even happened. This completely changed how I would read the book. But there was no escaping the fact that you still had to choose. It was a form of anticipation - a ‘what if...?’ scenario that wasn’t concerned with the past or the present, but with the future. It became about altering what I was about to do (not what I did or was doing) in order to see what would happen after that.

In order to think about educational futures, then, I propose a combination of *Choose Your Own Adventure* alternate endings, asking The Watcher’s question *What If...?*, prefactual thinking, and some futures studies. There is good theory in *Choose Your Own Adventure* and *What If...?* There is good theory in science fiction. Let’s use it, by asking: What if the pandemic forces schools to go online again, and stay there? What if the disparities in access to online schooling widen the gap inexorably and unalterably among students of different socio-economic backgrounds? What if teacher education programs shift entirely online, training teachers only to teach online? What if in-person teaching never returns - *on purpose*? We need to ask these questions so that we can anticipate the futures they portend, be they probable, possible, or preferable. We weren’t asking similar questions before the pandemic, which is why our response in terms of education policy for much of 2020 has been at best a gamble and at worst a failure. But these seem like pretty good questions now, and it is time to start considering what educational futures might look like. Let’s start to explore these futures by making them whole, real, fleshed out, the way Butler does Valerie Rye’s world. Let’s play in the future by writing it.

A final thought about Octavia Butler’s story. It is as much a gateway to theory as anything one might find in conventional educational research. But it is much more fun to read. This is a story about finding one’s voice in a future with little hope. It is also permission to use good theory differently. It gives license to help us find our voices, so that we too can begin to anticipate, imagine, and create nothing but infinite futures.

Notes on contributor

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