

Audrey Muscato
Professor Saiber
World Science Fiction: Multiplexing
April 3, 2020

The Power of Names in “Speech Sounds” and “Out of All Them Bright Stars”

The 1980s in the United States were a great time for science fiction literature and film; *Star Wars* and *Blade Runner* come to mind for many and— for those more invested in science fiction literature— cyberpunk and William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*. However, two short stories that do not fit into the cyberpunk craze of the decade are Octavia Butler’s “Speech Sounds” (1983) and Nancy Kress’s “Out of All Them Bright Stars” (1985). In “Speech Sounds,” Butler writes of a Los Angeles (and world) taken over by a virus that obliterates verbal and written communication skills. Kress’s “Out of All Them Bright Stars” imagines an encounter in a quiet diner between an ordinary waitress and a blue alien. These stories both deal with human (and alien) relationships, hate, and fear, but they have one more topic in common: names. Both Octavia Butler’s “Speech Sounds” and Nancy Kress’s “Out of All Them Bright Stars” showcase the significance of the exchange of names in diffusing the tension and instilling a sense of safety with a stranger. However, the importance of what the names actually are differs: for Butler, it does not matter what name one has, while for Kress, it does.

Butler and Kress both feature a scene in their respective short stories in which the protagonist exchanges names with someone who was previously a stranger. These scenes are pivotal moments; the very act of telling a stranger one’s name and learning theirs in return brings about a sense of safety and diffuses tensions between the two characters involved. In

“Speech Sounds,” the protagonist, Rye, learns the name of the bearded man just after he asks her which direction she wants to drive and as she is beginning to allow herself to relax. Rye and Obsidian exchange name symbols and when Obsidian hands Rye’s pin back to her, “he caught her hand as she reached for it and rubbed his thumb over her calluses” (Butler, p. 572). This is the first intimate physical moment that Rye and Obsidian share and it is made possible by the sense of comfort and safety they now feel in knowing the other person’s name. Over the course of the rest of the story, Rye and Obsidian strengthen their connection through physical intimacy and non-verbal communication, but the act that allows them to first start building their relationship is the exchange of names. In that moment, Obsidian begins to change in Rye’s eyes from a bearded man who could potentially harm her to a trusted friend whom she wants by her side.

In Kress’s “Out of All Them Bright Stars,” the protagonist, Sally, experiences a similar interaction with an alien, John, as Rye does with Obsidian. Once Sally has shown John to a booth and taken his order, she begins to feel more comfortable around him and even attempts to make further conversation about the quality of the salad he ordered. Just as Sally is feeling less wary of John, he asks her name in a way that is “so polite I know he’s curious and not starting anything” (Kress, p. 582). John is attempting to make a connection with Sally and the nature of how he asks her name makes her feel safe and at ease. Like Rye and Obsidian, Sally and John are brought closer together by the act of exchanging names. Furthermore, when John tells Sally his name, she laughs, diffusing much of the tension in this human-alien interaction. In fact, the mundaneness of the name John is important. Sally actually begins to see John as more human following this revelation. When he takes off his hat immediately after she learns his

name, she realizes that “all there is underneath is a bald blue head. Nothing weird like with the hands” (Kress, p. 582). In this case, she has just learned his name is John and she is noticing a human-like feature of his. This gives her the courage and sense of comfort to ask what his name is in his own language. When John tells her, Sally is in awe, but she also finds it extremely foreign describing it as, “that beautiful sound right here in Charlie’s diner” (Kress, p. 582). While the name John made her see the alien as more human, his actual name makes her realize the juxtaposition of a blue alien sitting in an ordinary diner. She is not offended or scared by the name, but she is taken aback. Before she can attempt to understand John, she is immediately interrupted by Charlie “charging out of the kitchen” and further reminded that, while she did see him as having human qualities, he is still an alien (Kress, p. 582). In this way, not only does exchanging names allow Sally and John to feel more comfortable with each other, but also the names themselves are important in how the two characters view each other.

In contrast with the significance Kress places on names themselves, Butler emphasizes that the names we choose to call ourselves and other people do not matter nearly as much as the fact that we have names at all. When Obsidian shows Rye his name symbol— “a smooth, glassy, black rock”— she thinks “his name might be Rock or Peter or Black, but she decided to think of him as Obsidian. Even her sometimes useless memory would retain a name like Obsidian” (Butler, p. 572). Furthermore, when she hands him her own name symbol— “a pin in the shape of a large golden stalk of wheat”— she muses, “people like Obsidian who had not known her before probably thought of her as Wheat. Not that it mattered. She would never hear her name spoken again” (Butler, p. 572). In these exchanges, Rye cannot be sure that Obsidian is the bearded man’s actual name or that he correctly interpreted her name, but that

does not matter. The act of exchanging names is important regardless of the names themselves. Obsidian's name is a way for Rye to identify him in her own head. It is a way for her to bond with him and to remember him. It does not matter if his name is not actually Obsidian. Butler's message here is distinctly different from Kress's. For both authors, names carry a certain meaning. They are a way to connect with people and a basis for relationships, but for Butler, the actual words that we choose as names do not matter, while for Kress, those words carry a lot of meaning themselves.

Regardless of Butler and Kress's different views on the importance of the names that we choose for ourselves and for others, both of their stories carry strong and clear messages on the power of names in human (and alien) connection. The practice of exchanging names and introducing oneself allows for connections to be formed even when it seems impossible. In the case of "Speech Sounds," the seemingly insurmountable obstacle is the complete loss of verbal and written communication. In "Out of All Them Bright Stars," it is the fact that two different species are trying to communicate. Nevertheless, names allow for hope in overcoming those obstacles. The hope for the future that names instill is perhaps most obvious at the end of "Speech Sounds." Upon finding two young children who are able to speak, Rye decides to take them in as her own. Her first words are to calm the children down and reassure them that everything is alright. Her next words are to introduce herself: "'I'm Valerie Rye,' she said, savoring the words" (Butler, p. 579). That sentence leaves the reader feeling hopeful that the characters in the story will overcome the virus. In Kress's story, the exchange of names allows hope for connection between humans and those we see as different. Both stories tell us that

this seemingly insignificant practice of introducing ourselves to others by stating our names carries a lot more weight than we believe.

Works Cited

Butler, Octavia. "Speech Sounds." *The Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction*, edited by Arthur B. Evans, et al, Wesleyan University Press, 2010, pp. 566-579.

Kress, Nancy. "Out of All Them Bright Stars." *The Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction*, edited by Arthur B. Evans, et al, Wesleyan University Press, 2010, pp.580-586.