

After Words: On Octavia Butler's "Speech Sounds"

ABSTRACT In this essay, artist Nikita Gale presents a reading of Octavia Butler's short story *Speech Sounds* through the work of Edouard Glissant, Kate Lacey, Homi Bhabha, and Elaine Scarry. Gale considers the trauma of silence and the loss of language as events that might serve as starting points for emergent forms of social relations. **KEYWORDS** Linguistics, science fiction, sound studies

Statement confirming the paper is not under review elsewhere.

Words work as release—well-oiled doors opening and closing between intention, gesture. A pulse in the neck, the shiftiness of the hands, an unconscious blink, the conversations you have with your eyes translate everything and nothing. What will be needed, what goes unfelt, unsaid—what has been duplicated, redacted here, redacted there, altered to hide or disguise—words encoding the bodies they cover. And despite everything the body remains.

Occasionally it is interesting to think about the outburst if you would just cry out—

To know what you'll sound like is worth noting—

– Claudia Rankine, *Citizen*¹

The woes of the landscape have invaded speech . . .

– Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*²

I was born in 1983, the same year that Octavia Butler published her science fiction short story "Speech Sounds" in *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*.³ The story earned Butler her first Hugo Award for Best Short Story in 1984. As an artist, I often rely on the affinities between my work and speculative fiction. These relationships help me develop the ideas in my practice that are concerned with the social and political properties of sound, so I was excited to encounter "Speech Sounds" because it presented a poetics of displacement, sound, and language.

My work is concerned with the material conditions of social infrastructures—specifically, environments designed for listening and other forms of spectatorship. I'm interested in the ways these environments shape social relationships: how the scale of a stage might interpolate the speaker's relationship to their audience; how the distance between rows and seats sets out the potential an audience has to easily move through or crowd a space to be in relation to one another; how the placement of partitions and pathways reveals how much literal or figurative access one has to the object of their attention.

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“Speech Sounds” takes place in the aftermath of a deadly illness referred to only as “the silence.” It is not surprising that the same author who in *Parable of the Talents* in 1998 created a presidential character who pledged to “Make America Great Again” would also have speculated, in 1983, that an unknown illness would strike the United States of America and set into motion a sequence of events that would profoundly alter its political, social, and economic infrastructure. In Butler’s work, readers always have the uncanny sense that they are witnessing something that has already happened and is happening now and will happen again.

The illness, if it was an illness, had cut even the living off from one another. As it swept over the country, people hardly had time to lay blame on the Soviets (though they were falling silent along with the rest of the world), on a new virus, a new pollutant, radiation, divine retribution. . . . The illness was stroke-swift in the way it cut people down and stroke-like in some of its effects. But it was highly specific. Language was always lost or severely impaired. It was never regained. Often there was also paralysis, intellectual impairment, death.

– “Speech Sounds”

Like many of Butler’s stories, “Speech Sounds” takes place in Southern-California-of-the-not-too-distant future—downtown Los Angeles to be specific—and chronicles a few hours in a day of misadventures for a female protagonist named Valerie Rye. In this future, a fatal and unnamed illness has wiped out a significant swath of the world’s population. Those who are exposed to the disease are left with significant impairments, the symptoms of which vaguely resemble aphasia—loss of the ability to speak, read, or understand language, or some combination of the three. It’s a disease that has bifurcated the public sphere’s acoustic realm and has rendered the activities of speech and listening mutually exclusive. This loss of communicative force has splintered society into small clusters of isolated individuals. All major institutions, including the explicitly named LAPD, have dissolved, and misunderstandings occur so frequently in this world that the story begins in the middle of one.

The least impaired people tended to . . . stand back unless they were physically threatened and let those with less control scream and jump around. It was as though they felt it beneath them to be as touchy as the less comprehending. This was an attitude of superiority and that was the way people . . . perceived it. Such “superiority” was frequently punished by beatings, even by death. . . . And in this world . . . the only likely common language was body language . . .

– “Speech Sounds”

“Speech Sounds” places us in a world of bodies. The bodies in this world whistle and applaud. They scream and squawk and roar and whimper. They all seem to carry guns. Facial expressions “disintegrate” as bodies throw punches, fuck, spit, cry, and bleed out in the wake of mundane eruptions of the violence of misunderstanding. Emotions are harbored and silent—disappointment, jealousy, anger, fear.

Communication has retreated to the visible body. That space between bodies formerly designated for speech and listening has been removed entirely. Language has been

replaced by paroxysm and elaborate physical gestures that stop “just short of contact.” In this world, the body is the word and text by which meaning is produced and received. People find themselves in a valley of semiotic strangeness, where bodies no longer dispatch language and symbols but have become the symbols themselves. It is fascinating to observe how Butler chooses to describe the characters in this world. While vague references to height and age and facial hair are sometimes provided, the attribute of color is only applied to inanimate materials, some of which become devices by which characters are identified.

The two named characters are the protagonist—the woman named Valerie Rye—and a “bearded man” named Obsidian who wears an obsolete LAPD uniform. They each have objects that allude to these names: Rye wears a pin with an image of a stalk of wheat on it (which is the closest she could get to an image of “rye”), while Obsidian wears a gold chain that holds an obsidian rock pendant. It is striking to make these associative leaps between minerals and grains and people. The colors of the objects—golden brown rye, glassy black obsidian—become associative qualities of these two characters.

When I read Butler’s stories, Blackness is not a named condition or attribute, it’s a foundational reality of the future. For me, the message is clear: We are in this world and we have survived *again*. She lands the reader on the other side of a world-destroying disaster. And in this space, we find characters who are trying to find new formulas to recognize one another and to survive in the wake of accepting their sudden and violent new reality.

... pain ... destroys a person’s self and world, a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe. Intense pain is also language destroying: as the content of one’s world disintegrates, so the content of one’s language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject.

– Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*⁴

For the slave within the project of colonization, capture by European colonizers and subsequent captivity in the “New World” was accompanied by a loss of communicative force,⁵ a psychological violence that compounded the physical violence of kidnapping and torture. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry elaborates in a multitude of ways how through torture, administrators of violence evacuate the interior worlds of their captives.

These kinds of psychic and linguistic violations are familiar in scenes of oppression, where names are taken away or replaced with those assigned by the oppressors. In this arrangement, authority locates itself through a campaign of displacement of language and *re-naming* that includes the forced learning of the colonizer’s language.⁶ In these deployments, language is a channel by which the state legitimizes itself through the wetware of bodies.

The illness in “Speech Sounds” is formless; it’s environmental. Its violence operates as a function of what it seizes from bodies—language, intellect, life itself; it turns bodies in on themselves and shrouds them in ambiguity. Bodies betray themselves and others.

It's a violence without an imperialist objective or discrete source; bodies are not evacuated to operate as subjects of authority but rather are left to be in relation to one another as clumsily signifying objects. This displacement of language and loss of efficient standardized communication has resulted in extreme isolation and promotes suspicion, competition, and the presumption of threat among what remains of civilization.

Listening . . . constitutes a kind of attention to others (and otherness) and, importantly, being attended to that is the prerequisite both of citizenship (as distinct from community) and of communicative action . . . [t]he speaker must . . . attend to those listening, just as the listeners attend to those speaking. Without such attention . . . democratic communication withers away . . . and yet what really goes unsaid is that speech requires a listener.

– Kate Lacey, *Listening Publics*⁷

The disease has rendered the act of listening obsolete in a world in which language can no longer be employed as a technology of intersubjectivity. This is a world without discourse; a world in which subjects—as a condition of an unnameable, invisible violence—are unable to recognize one another.

I felt a tinge of disappointment in the ending of “Speech Sounds” because it suggested some vague return to normalcy when Rye encounters two young children who have retained their ability to communicate; this, in turn helps her realize that she, too, still has the ability to speak and understand language. The story suddenly becomes an exercise in perception. Rye can listen and speak but thought she had lost her communicative capacity because she had no one to listen to. The insinuation seems to be that in the absence of coherent communication a person is unsure if they, too, have lost their intellectual capacity—a deeply relatable predicament for a citizen of a government led by a figure who vilifies intellectuals and disdains science-based evidence.

The relief that Rye seems to feel upon this retrieval of a familiar communicative mode is a return to “normal” that I find troubling, particularly as it appears in narratives around a desire for “returning to normal” in the face of the present crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic and its relationship to anti-Black racism. As many thinkers and commentators have already stated: Normal wasn’t working for many of us.

But this story opens up a way of thinking about the new networks of understanding that might be possible when accepting what has been lost and by recognizing what new frameworks and poetics can be gained by cooperating with differences, or what philosopher Édouard Glissant refers to as “opacity.”

[T]he opacities . . . are propelled by every divergence, and live through becoming involved not with projects but with the reflected density of existences.

What we call the world today is not only the convergence of the histories of peoples that has swept away the claims of philosophies of History but also the encounters (in consciousness) among these histories and materialities of the planet. Catastrophic fires reactivate the work of genocides; famines and droughts take root in suicidal political regimes; warring parties defoliate on a staggering scale; floods and hurricanes call forth

international solidarity, yet no one can prevent them or really combat their effects; humanitarian movements that have sprung up in wealthy nations strive to bandage the open sores in poor countries, inflicted more often than not by the merciless economies of these same rich countries; jungles and tribes are simultaneously torn up by the roots; and so it goes on endlessly. . . . No specific history (joy or tragedy, extortion of liberation) is shut up solely in its own territory nor solely in the logic of its collective thought. The woes of the landscape have invaded speech, rekindling the woes of humanities, in order to conceive of it.

– Édouard Glissant⁸

The ideas that Octavia Butler activates in “Speech Sounds” present an opportunity to ask questions: What other forms of violence—biological, institutional, or otherwise—render us speechless or unable to recognize one another? What does a loss of discursive space do and what does a space of relation look like beyond or before language? It is an invitation to think about what happens to society when it loses a tool that not only locates a subject in relation to others but is also such a naturalized marker of identity. We get to imagine what happens in the wake of an abrupt and traumatic biological event and contemplate new modes of relation that determine how we are understood and how we understand one another. We are prompted to ask ourselves who we are without language.

In this way, the metaphor of language essentially becomes a project of decolonization. The death of language is painful only in the loss of the familiar, but it’s also an opening for new forms of relation to emerge. It prompts the idea that some brief and painful event might make possible the destruction of the more prolonged violence of language and of other dominant systems as they now exist.

The story ends with Valerie Rye reassuring two frightened children, telling them, “It’s alright for you to talk to me,” but I’d like to imagine there’s so much more that we could do.

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NOTES

1. Claudia Rankine, *Citizen* (Minneapolis: Gray Wolf Press, 2014), 69.
2. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997 [1990]), 196.
3. Octavia Butler, “Speech Sounds,” *Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine*, Mid-December 1983.
4. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 35.
5. Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 64–81.
6. Homi Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817,” *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (Autumn 1985).
7. Kate Lacey, *Listening Publics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 165.
8. Glissant, 195–96.