

Jianna Collins

Dr. Jason Todd

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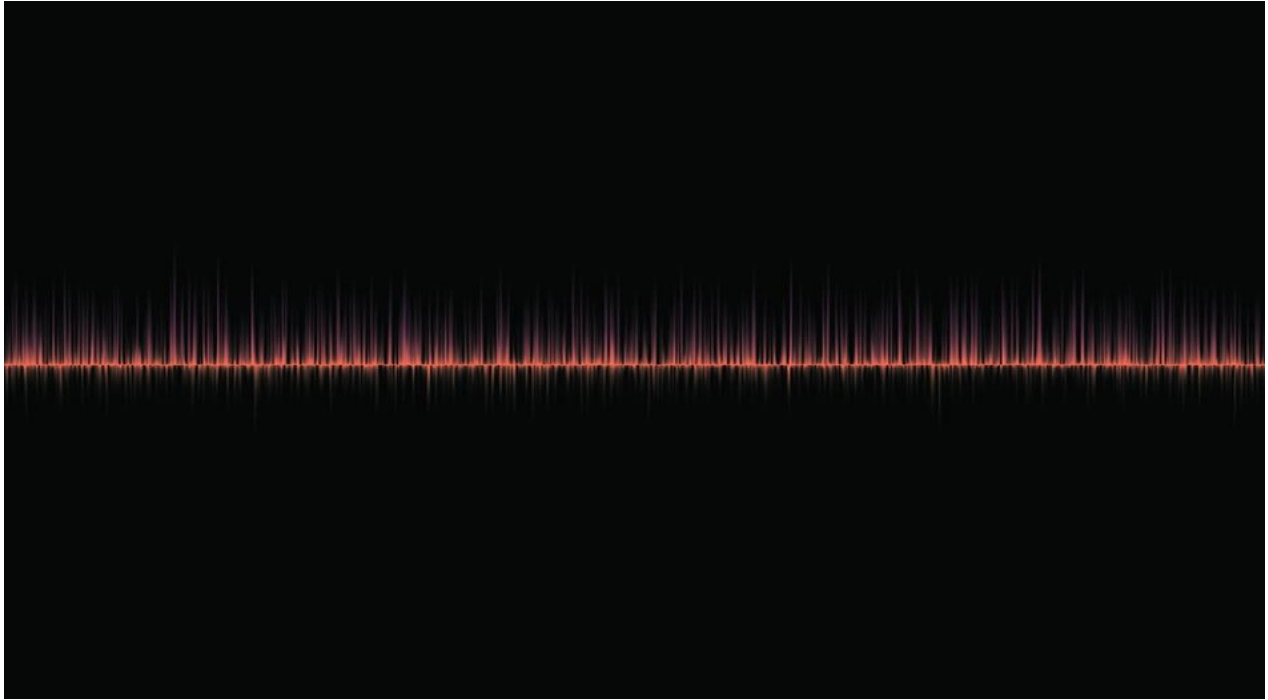
Conflict in Miscommunication

The short story “Speech Sounds” by Octavia butler is set in a disease-ridden world which has crumbled civilization. This pandemic has taken away people’s ability to use language and communicate which ultimately leads to violence. The reader follows Valerye Rye, the protagonist, on her journey through Los Angeles to Pasadena to find refuge with her brother and his family. Rye has lost most of her loved ones to the disease including her husband, parents, sister, and her children. What makes this more tragic is that there is the possibility that her brother is also dead, leaving her truly and utterly alone.

When a fight breaks out, most likely due to miscommunication, on a bus Rye is quick to step out and notice a man standing nearby wearing a police uniform. She is weary at first since government organizations have collapsed due to the pandemic. The “officer” throws a smoke grenade into the bus causing everyone else to rush out and ends the conflict. The man then tries to convince Rye to get in his car increasing her weariness. However, she reluctantly agrees to join him due to the rising hostility in the people watching. They ride for a bit and she sees the obsidian rock hanging around his neck implying that his name is Obsidian (or something to do with obsidian). Rye also possesses a necklace with a stalk of wheat to represent her name Rye. No communication or ability to read means that people have to get creative on introducing each other.

Rye notices that Obsidian is still able to read (he reads a map on his dashboard) and gets an intense feeling of envy. Obsidian notices and asks, through hand gestures, if she still has the ability to speak. She nods yes and Rye watches his envy come and go. Obsidian gestures that he is unable to speak or understand spoken language while he is unable to read and write. "The illness had played with them, taking away, she suspected, what each valued most" (Butler). Afterwards, they have sex in the back of the car and Rye asks if he would come home with her. Obsidian is hesitant at first but later agrees to go home with Rye, wherever that is.

While driving, the two see a woman run out into the middle of the street chased by a man. Obsidian, noticing the conflict, jumps in an attempt to help while Rye follows behind. However, they were too late and the woman dies. Obsidian and the man get into a struggle over Obsidian's gun and the man shoots Obsidian in the head. Rye pulls out her own gun and shoots the man. In the span of minutes, three people have died and Rye is alone once more. Two children, a young boy and girl, come rushing out a building and crowd them around the dead woman. Rye, feeling that Obsidian deserves a burial, drags Obsidian's corpse into the car. At first Rye planned on ignoring the children but has a change of heart and heads towards the woman to give her a burial. Unexpectedly, the girl shouts at Rye to leave and the boy tells her to be quiet. Rye then comes to the decision to adopt the two children and help them survive. She says to them, "I'm Valerie Rye...It's all right for you to talk to me" (Butler).

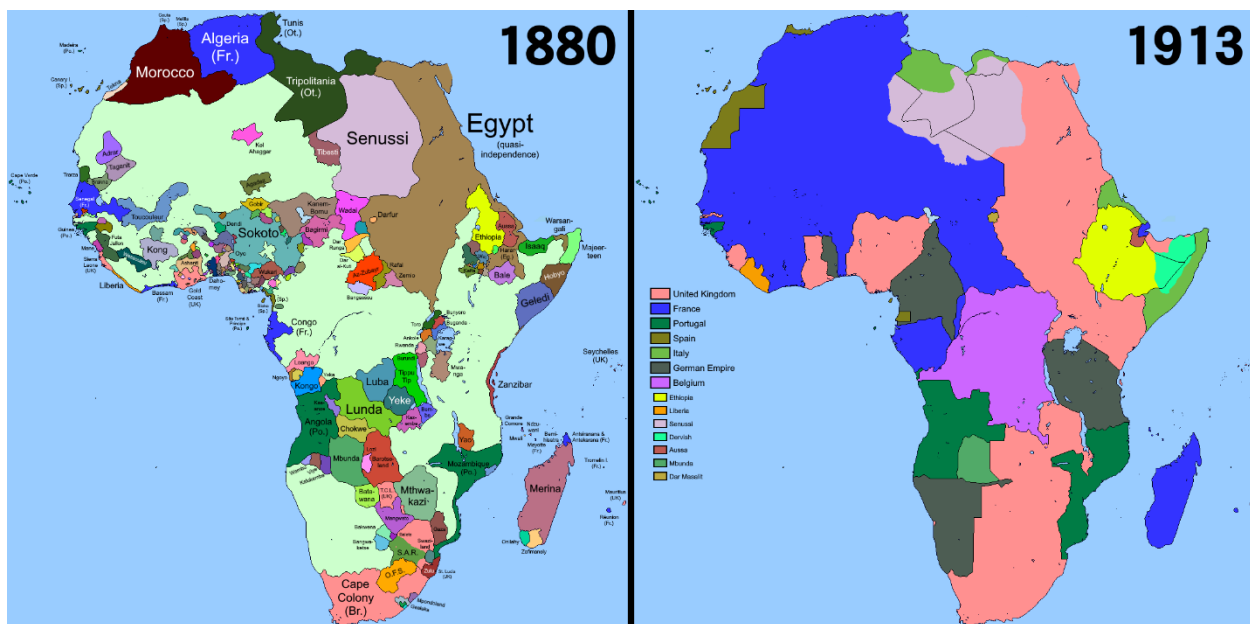


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Octavia Butler shows a direct link between loss of language and violence. The conflict between the two men on the bus is shown to be due to the inability to communicate. "She watched the two carefully, knowing the fight would begin when someone's nerve broke or someone's hand slipped or someone came to the end of his limited ability to communicate" (Butler). Due to Rye's reaction, it can be assumed that situations like this are common occurrences. In this new world, even the most mundane tasks could lead to dangerous conflict. Octavia Butler hints that loss of language could not only endanger others but oneself. Rye is travelling to Pasadena because if she were to stay home, she would kill herself. She has lost her family along with the ability to read and write. She used to be a history professor at UCLA and a freelance writer. In other words, she can no longer read her own writing or the countless books she possesses which significantly pains her. The last nail in the coffin is that people can no longer connect with each other. People grieving struggle to find solace with others due to the

inability to communicate. In Iris Young's *Five Faces of Oppression*, she describes violence as a practice that "everyone knows will happen and will happen again." There was the conflict on the bus and towards the end the conflict between the man and the woman.

This may be a stretch but one connection that was found between "Speech Sounds" and areal life event was the aftermath of the Scramble for Africa. The Scramble for Africa was when multiple European nations colonized and divided Africa among each other. This ultimately split and combined multiple different African civilizations which would lead to internal conflict in the future. "The partitioning of Africa by Europeans starts, roughly, in the 1860s and is completed by the early 1900s. The colonial powers signed hundreds of treaties, which involved drawing on maps the boundaries of colonies, protectorates, and 'free-trade' areas of a largely unexplored and mysterious continent (see Wesseling 1996 for a thorough discussion)..." (Papaioannou).



"[Scramble-for-Africa-1880-1913-v2](#)" by [Somebody500](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).

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