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Curing the Cultural Disease of Toxic Masculinity in Octavia Butler's "Speech Sounds"*

LI Qing-yang
School of English Education, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China
QI Jia-min
School of English Education, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China

This paper delves into African America writer Octavia Butler's Hugo-Award winning "Speech Sounds" to explore how the author uses a fictional pandemic as a metaphor to critique toxic masculinity in 1980s American culture. By analyzing the story, it reveals how the unnamed illness functions as a social pathogen, intensifying the negative aspects of hegemonic masculinity, leading to the breakdown of communication and the prevalence of violence. Through the character of Rye, the paper also examines how black feminist resilience offers a counter-narrative to the destructive forces of toxic masculinity. The study concludes that Butler's work not only exposes the cultural disease of toxic masculinity but also provides a vision of healing and regeneration through communal care and the cultivation of hope, highlighting the power of speculative fiction as a tool for social critique and imagining alternative futures.

Keywords: "Speech Sounds", masculinity, pandemic, Octavia Butler

Throughout literary history, disease narratives have served as powerful vehicles for social critique, enabling authors to examine cultural pathologies through the lens of physical illness. This metaphorical relationship between biological and social disease gained particular resonance during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing how health crises expose and amplify existing social fractures. Speculative fiction, with its capacity to envision alternative worlds, has long disease as a metaphor for societal dysfunction, from Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) to contemporary pandemic narratives. As Sontag argues, "it is diseases thought to be multi-determined (that is, mysterious) that have the widest possibilities as metaphors for what is felt to be socially or morally wrong" (Sontag, 1990, p. 61). Octavia Butler's "Speech Sounds" (1983) exemplifies this tradition by transforming a mysterious pandemic into a searing critique of 1980s American culture, revealing how toxic masculinity operates as a cultural pathology with devastating consequences. Written during the Reagan era—a time defined by hypermasculine political rhetoric and militaristic spectacle—Butler's story literalizes toxic

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LI Qing-yang, Undergrade Student, School of English Education, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. Research field: English education and cultural studies.
QI Jia-min, Ph.D., Lecturer, School of English Education, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. Research field: African American speculative fiction.

masculinity as a "viral" force, eroding communication and fostering violence. "Speech Sounds" ultimately demonstrates how speculative fiction functions not only as a diagnostic tool for cultural disease but also as a space for imagining alternative modes of survival and healing.

Toxic Masculinity: Butler's Pandemic as Social Pathogen in Reagan's America

In "Speech Sounds," Butler employs a fictional pandemic as an allegorical critique of hegemonic masculinity and its toxic manifestations in 1980s American society. The story presents a world where people's ability to communicate has been severely compromised by an unnamed illness that "swept over the country" with "strokelike" effects, leaving the entire population unable to communicate effectively (Butler, 2005, p. 95). This speculative premise serves as more than mere fantasy; rather, it functions as an intensification of existing social realities. Speculative fiction could operate as "a mimetic discourse whose objects of representation are nonimaginary yet cognitively estranging" (Chu, 2010, pp. 44-45), suggesting that the genre's power lies in its ability to concretize and examine real-world phenomena through defamiliarizing frameworks. Butler's estrangement here is deeply gendered by stripping away language, she exposes how toxic masculinity depends on performative dominance to mask its fragility. This mimetic function invites us to decode the metaphorical relationships between Butler's imagined pandemic and contemporary social conditions. Indeed, "[t]he essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 2011, p. 5). Butler's narrative leverages this cognitive process to illuminate the metaphorical function of speculative fiction by transforming the pandemic into a metaphorical revelation of the destructive patterns of hegemonic masculinity in American society. The "strokelike" pandemic becomes a neurological metaphor for cultural pathology just as a stroke disrupts brain function, toxic masculinity disables societal capacity for empathetic communication. The story thus demonstrates how speculative fiction's task extends beyond mere world-building to offer critical reflection on our present reality and suggest possibilities for social transformation. By harnessing the transformative potential of metaphor, Butler not only defamiliarizes established social hierarchies but also creates a space where speculative fiction becomes a critical laboratory for rethinking the norms of power and identity. In this laboratory, Butler subjects masculinity to a radical stress test: when language asphyxiates, how would humans survive? Within this carefully constructed speculative framework, Butler crafts a powerful criticism of how masculine aggression supplants meaningful discourse when language—the foundation of human civilization—breaks down. In doing so, her narrative reveals how the cognitive process of mapping one realm onto another enables speculative fiction to expose and reconfigure the underlying assumptions of our social reality.

Butler employs a pivotal bus confrontation to illustrate how the nameless pandemic intensifies toxic masculinity, turning the loss of communication into displays of violence and dominance. Although the illness robs humanity of language, its most detrimental effect is how it amplifies male aggression, reducing all social interactions to raw power struggles. Gender dynamics play out starkly on the bus, where men resort to "mock punches, hand games of intimidation to replace lost curses" (Butler, 2005, p. 89), using physical threats instead of words. This breakdown mirrors a wider social collapse in which the "[l]oss of verbal language had spawned a whole new set of obscene gestures" (Butler, 2005, p. 95). Men use these gestures to assert sexual power over women or express "wordless anger" toward other men, reinforcing a system of hegemonic masculine dominance

that gives men "material, physical, and symbolic benefits" by keeping women subordinate while protecting men from showing weakness" (Levy, 2007, p. 254). The concept of "toxic masculinity" refers to the detrimental aspects of traditional male dominance, encapsulating traits such as "misogyny, homophobia, greed, and violent domination" inherent to hegemonic masculinity" (Kupers, 2005, p. 716). This performative behavior is often amplified among men in marginalized circumstances, such as incarceration, where societal power structures are starkly unequal. In Butler's dystopian imagination, these destructive tendencies manifest with visceral intensity, exacerbated by a silent pandemic that traps men in a resource-scarce environment rife with interpersonal conflict. The scarcity of resources and pervasive social antagonism within this setting render toxic masculinity not merely a cultural construct but a survival mechanism with brutal, real-world consequences. When a female passenger complains, the bus driver responds with a grunt and "bared teeth," a threatening display that leaves her "[f]rightened" and backing away (Butler, 2005, p. 90). By showing violence as masculinity's default expression, Butler reveals how the pandemic makes visible an existing cultural sickness: the acceptance of aggression as a way to maintain control. The bus scene captures American society consumed by its gender-based diseases—a world where patriarchal power, stripped of language's civilizing mask, devolves into pure animal instinct.

The story exposes how toxic masculinity thrives in societal collapse, not as an aberration but as an amplification of patriarchal norms embedded in 1980s America. The bus scene—where men erupt into violence over a trivial "misunderstanding" (Butler, 2005, p. 89)—mirrors an incident Butler witnessed where hostility stemmed from a perceived slight ("didn't like the way another man was looking at him" [Butler, 2005, p. 110). These clashes reveal a dangerous truth: the pandemic doesn't create toxic masculinity but weaponizes latent pathologies. Butler's choice of a bus—a democratic space meant for communal coexistence—as the battleground is deliberate. Its collapse into violence critiques Reagan-era ideologies that valorized hypermasculine performance over dialogue. As Jeffords notes, Reagan himself became a "premiere masculine archetype" (Jeffords, 1994, p. 11), merging cowboy individualism with Cold War aggression. His administration's policies, like the Strategic Defense Initiative (dubbed "Star Wars" for its sci-fi grandiosity), prioritized spectacle over substance, reducing geopolitics to a contest of dominance. Similarly, Butler's men default to Reagan's "peace through strength" logic—here stripped of ideology, reduced to brute physicality. The 1980s cultural obsession with hypermasculine icons like Rambo, whose on-screen violence supplanted diplomacy (Jeffords, 1994, pp. 34-38), parallels Butler's dystopia, where language's failure leaves only performative aggression. Men stage bus brawls as grotesque pantomimes of Cold War brinkmanship, their violence a warped reflection of Reagan-era America's retreat into binaries of strength/weakness. By setting her pandemic narrative during Reagan's first term, Butler critiques not just toxic masculinity but its normalization as national identity—a world where communication collapses into the same confrontational posturing that defined 1980s militarism.

In addition, Butler's speculative dystopia illustrates how the "toxicity" of masculinity functions as a self-replicating system that demands conformity to hypermasculine norms. When Rye allies with Obsidian, a stranger impersonating police authority, the men pause their infighting to mock them with a "two-thirds of a Boy Scout salute" (Butler, 2005, p. 94), signaling Rye's coerced sexual partnership with Obsidian. This truncated salute—a distorted symbol of honor—encapsulates how institutions propagate predation. Butler's choice of gesture is highly suggestive, implying a culture of toxic masculinity that is deeply rooted in 20th-century American history and the Boy Scout organization. The Boy Scouts of America emerged in 1910 during

widespread concerns about evolving masculine ideals in the late 19th century, and since then, it has remained central to ongoing discussions about how society defines manhood. Camp life within the Boy Scouts aims to cultivate boys into heterosexual men through a culture that systematically rejects anything perceived as feminine. Through jokes, rituals, and group behaviors, bus men form a temporary hypersexual "boys' club," distancing themselves from feminine qualities through anti-female attitudes (Mechling, 2001, p. 232). Later, these men even collectively sexualize Rye through obscene gestures, suggesting that she should "accommodate the other men present" (Butler, 2005, p. 95). They appear to believe that gang-raping a random woman plays a misguided opportunity to prove their masculinity. This escalation from symbolic gestures (such as salutes) to physical threats (like rape) mirrors how toxic institutions nurture violence: first as a play, then as a ritual, and ultimately as trauma. Society's expectations of masculinity create a constant pressure for males to repeatedly demonstrate their manhood, as it is not a permanent achievement but rather an ongoing challenge that must be continually reaffirmed. There are concerning real-world implications to Butler's speculations. The work of "being a man" is never truly complete. This "viral" spread of toxic behavior reflects Cold War-era pressures to conform, where, as scholars note, "cultural collectivism" stifled individual autonomy to enforce rigid gender norms (Cuordileone, 2009, p. 117). The chaotic bus in Butler's story becomes a pressure cooker for this collectivism isolated from linguistic nuance, the men enact hypermasculinity as a survival strategy, breeding exponential violence through their conformity. In this dystopian world, men cling to hypermasculine bondage—whether through sexual dominance or performative violence—to mask their vulnerability in a society stripped of language. Their refusal to acknowledge fragility exacerbates aggression, mirroring the "Cold War cult of toughness" (Cuordileone, 2009, p. 238).

Butler's speculation reveals a morbid connection between the spreading illness and hegemonic masculinity. Notably, the illness disproportionately hurt men much more than women. "The illness had been harder on men than on women—had killed more men, had left male survivors more severely impaired" (Butler, 2005, pp. 101-102). This gendered toll functions as poetic justice: a system built on male dominance implodes under the weight of its own pathologies. Butler's narrative employs Darwinian irony to unveil patriarchy's inherent self-destruction: the admired masculine traits of aggression and dominance hasten men's demise, thereby exposing hegemonic masculinity as an ideology that ultimately undermines its own proponents. Deducing from the opening bus-fight scene, men in the pandemic, after losing their verbal abilities, easily get into physical conflicts with one another, resulting in an increase in violence and a diminishing male population. The pandemic's "strokelike" effects reinforce the metaphor just as a stroke damages the brain's capacity to regulate bodily functions, toxic masculinity disables society's ability to sustain itself. Ultimately, Butler's men become casualties of their own performative scripts, with their aggression acting as a viral load that devastates the host.

From Survival to Nurture: Black Feminist Resilience

In "Speech Sounds," Butler portrays toxic masculinity as a cultural pathology, with its symptoms most vividly manifested through Rye's neighbor. His compulsion for women to tend to his gardens, coupled with his overtly territorial behavior, represents more than mere individual regression; it exemplifies the systemic exploitation as fundamental to the oppression of Black women. The neighbor's gardens become a potent symbol of patriarchal control, where cultivation degenerates into coercion, reducing women to resources rather than

recognizing them as human beings. Butler's pandemic—stripping humanity of language—serves to amplify these existing power structures by removing the veneer of civility from patriarchal authority. The resulting social order presents women with what the text identifies as an impossible choice: to "settle for less or stay alone" (Butler, 2005, p. 102). This binary between exploitation and isolation reaches its tragic apex when a man murders his wife out of jealousy, illustrating how systems of domination perpetuate themselves through the elimination of resistance.

In Butler's dystopia, Rye embodies Patricia Hill Collin's black feminist ethic of "self-valuation and resistance" (Collins, 2000, p. 113), transforming individual survival into a radical act of preserving collective humanity. While she remains vigilant in her self-protection, "never go[ing] unarmed" (Butler, 2005, p. 93) in a world where vulnerability proves fatal, her self-reliance exists in dynamic tension with an unwavering commitment to human connection. Her dangerous journey to Pasadena, spurred by the loss of her family, transcends mere survival—it represents a quest to reclaim the essential "context of family and community" through which "African-American women develop more fully human, less objectified selves" (Collins, 2000, p. 113). Through these choices, Rye actively resists the dystopia's drive toward isolation, demonstrating that individual and collective preservation are inextricably linked. This interplay between self-protection and communal care reaches its apex during the bus crisis. When two little children are threatened to be "knocked down and trampled" (Butler, 2005, p. 93), Rye's intervention shows her care and concern for others. Her resistance represents not mere individual defiance but a powerful affirmation of human interconnectedness—she protects others not from naive idealism, but from a profound understanding that, as Collins argues, Black women's self-valuation inherently involves resisting dehumanization through community bonds (Collins, 2000, p. 113). Through Rye's journey, Butler redefines strength not as rugged individualism or martyred self-sacrifice, but as the revolutionary choice to nurture human connection in a world bent on its destruction.

Within this dystopian landscape, Rye emerges as an embodiment of the Black feminist consciousness of "self-valuation and resistance" (Collins, 2000, p. 113). Rye's strategic self-reliance exemplifies her strong sense of independence, constantly maintaining self-protection in the midst of peril as "she never [goes] unarmed" (Butler, 2005, p. 93). But her strong sense of self is not of social isolation or selfishness. After losing all of her closest kins, she started a hazardous intercity journey to Pasadena, driven by the hope of finding a group of relatives left alive. This quest transcends mere survival, embodying the Black feminist principle of asserting a strong sense of self through communal bonds. For a Black woman, the "self is found in the context of family and community," because "African-American women develop more fully human, less objectified selves" in immersing herself into the larger self of community (Collins, 2000, p. 113). Rye's intervention during the bus crisis, where she protects vulnerable passengers from being "knocked down and trampled" (Butler, 2005, p. 93), demonstrates how individual resistance can foster collective preservation.

This interplay of individual defiance and collective care—rooted in Black feminist traditions of relational survival—finds its fullest expression not only in Rye's actions but also in Butler's strategic use of agricultural symbolism. The agricultural imagery that permeates Butler's narrative takes on particular significance through Rye's character development, framing her communal resistance as an act of cultivating futurity. Her golden wheat-stalk pin, described as a "name symbol" (Butler, 2005, p. 100), operates on multiple symbolic levels. Beyond its surface function as an identity marker in a world where written names have lost meaning, the pin

encodes Rye's dual role as both a preserver of past knowledge and a cultivator of future possibilities. This symbolism gains deeper resonance through her eventual guardianship of children who retain speech—a development that transforms her from a mere survivor to a nurturer. Like the wheat stalk, Rye's protection of these children represents a harvest of hope: they embody a Black feminist vision of intergenerational resistance, bearing the potential to dismantle systemic oppression through sustained communal labor.

This delicate harvest of communal futurity—embodied in Rye's cultivation of hope—stands in stark contrast to Butler's dismantling of patriarchal protection myths, epitomized by Obsidian's fatal performance of masculinity. His name, evoking volcanic glass's brittle strength, ironically underscores the fragility of patriarchal ideals: Obsidian initially appears as a rare reliable man, his protective role mirroring traditional gender scripts. Yet his death, triggered by a heroic attempt to save a fleeing woman, shows how Obsidian clings to rigid patriarchal roles. His death catalyzes Rye's evolution from a momentary dependence on male guardianship to Collins' model of the "othermother" (Collins, 2000, p. 179), a figure who transcends biological kinship to sustain the role of communal nurture. Rye's vow to "keep [the children] alive" (Butler, 2005, p. 107) channels the legacy of enslaved Black women who forged improvised kinship networks; as Collins notes, these "othermothers" sustained children orphaned by systemic violence, children stripped of biological ties through "sale or death" (Collins, 2000, p. 180). Like those historical orphans, the two children—newly parentless yet magically immune to the plague—embody both vulnerability and possibility. Their retained speech, a "linguistic seed" in a silent world, renders them "something worth protecting" (Butler, 2005, p.107). Rye decisively transforms herself from a mournful woman who loses her latest male partner to a firm protector for the two orphans, taking up her new role as "othermother" for them. This transformation speculatively reworks survival strategies forged under slavery: Rye's stewardship of the children's speech does not merely resist dehumanization—it cultivates liberation through language's regenerative power.

Butler constructs this contrast between patriarchal domination and feminist regeneration through agrarian symbolism—a duality where cultivation becomes either extraction or stewardship. Where the neighbor's coercive gardens and the bus driver's territorial control literalize patriarchy as resource hoarding (women reduced to reproductive labor, passengers treated as cargo), Rye's journey from "uprooted survivor" to nurturer redefines cultivation as preservation. Unlike Lauren Olamina's structured doctrine in the Parable series (*Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*), Rye's resistance operates through improvisational care: shielding children, aiding the elderly, and safeguarding the "seeds" of healing speech itself as fertile ground for renewal. Yet both characters share Butler's conviction that resilience lies not in dominance, but in nurturing the fragile seeds of community. Rye's name—a grain historically cultivated for sustenance and resilience—embodies her role as both seed and sower in this silent dystopia. She is not merely a guardian of life but a cultivator of resistant futurity, with her stewardship embodying Collins' Black feminist ethos: survival rooted in care is revolutionary. Just as ryegrass thrives in harsh conditions, Rye's nurturing of the children's "linguistic seeds" transforms barren soil into a landscape of possibility. Through her name, Butler offers a defiant metaphor: even in collapse, regeneration begins when the seeds of love and strength are sown.

Conclusion

Octavia Butler's "Speech Sounds" harnesses speculative fiction's unique capacity to refract cultural pathologies through the prism of crisis. By rendering toxic masculinity as a literalized plague—a "viral" force that erodes language and replaces discourse with violence—Butler crystallizes the Reagan era's sociopolitical anxieties into a devastating metaphor. The story reveals how 1980s America's hypermasculine posturing corroded empathy and civic connection, reducing society to a battleground of territorial bus brawls and tyrannical gardeners. Butler's world mirrors the social disease festering beneath Reagan's America: a culture equating masculinity with domination, where performative aggression supplants dialogue. However, Butler's grim diagnosis coexists with a radical prescription for healing. Rye's evolution from guarded survivor to nurturing othermother embodies a Black feminist antidote to patriarchy's pathologies. While toxic masculinity self-destructs—claiming men like Obsidian, whose volcanic namesake belies its brittleness—Rye's stewardship of the speech-retaining children replants the seeds of communal regeneration. This agrarian duality, central to Butler's narrative, reframes cultivation as resistance: where patriarchal systems extract (coercive gardens, territorial buses), Rye cultivates (linguistic seeds, improvised kinship). Her golden wheat-stalk pin, symbolizing both lost identity and futurity, becomes a manifesto for survival rooted in care—a practice that Collins identifies as revolutionary.

Like the COVID-19 pandemic, which revealed social fractures through a biological crisis, Butler's speculative plague strips society to its ideological bones, laying bare the rot of unchecked patriarchal power. Nevertheless, Rye's choice to nurture, "Speech Sounds" transcends mere diagnosis to fulfill speculative fiction's deepest promise: to model recovery. Butler's story reminds us that regeneration begins not with grand gestures of dominance, but in the quiet labor of tending to fragile seeds—whether linguistic, communal, or the resilient rye grain itself, thriving defiantly in barren soil.

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