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# Cultural Identity, Deafness and Sign Language: A Postcolonial Approach

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## Abstract

*Franz Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks describes the experience of the recently de-colonized members of the Negro (as he refers to those of African descent) population living in Europe, particularly France, in the 1960s. A little over a decade later, Edward Said published Orientalism, thus adding to a growing discipline of scholarship in the fields of art, literature, and cultural studies called "Postcolonialism." My essay attempts to show that Deaf persons who communicate with each other using sign language can be viewed as a colonized group, and that applying postcolonial theory to the study of their culture is appropriate.*

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In his well-known work *Black Skins, White Masks*, first published in French in 1952, Frantz Fanon argues in the chapter "The Negro and Language" that "To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (Fanon 1966, 17). Fanon's work is meant to describe the person who is of African descent, but who lives in France, or in any of the former French colonies, and therefore speaks French, yet still may not feel completely embraced by the dominant culture as fully "French." What he argues in this chapter of his book is that people do tend to identify themselves, culturally, based on the language they speak as well as the geographic location in which they live, where they originally came from, or where their ancestors are from. Furthermore, he suggests that "colonized people [...] in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation: that is, with the culture of the mother country" (Fanon 1966, 18). Similarly, Deaf persons find themselves face to face with the language and culture of Hearing persons.

The Deaf, whose language is predominately made up of hand gestures, body language, and facial expressions, finds itself in a comparable cultural dilemma as colonized or recently decolonized people, though not exactly in the same predicament: that is, by finding themselves living in and amongst the dominant culture of the hearing, the Deaf may often, as Salmon Rushdie (1992) remarked, "feel that [they] straddle two cultures: at other times, that [they] fall between two stools" (15). This we can see by comparing works written about, and by, other scholars who have analyzed cultural identity through the postcolonial lens, along with works by scholars who have studied and written about those who make up the Deaf community.

It is worth mentioning that when researching this topic one discovers that those who study Deaf culture will often distinguish between (D)eaf and (d)eaf. According to Richard Senghas and Leila Monaghan (2002) "[b]y 1972, Woodward used this Deaf/deaf distinction to

highlight cultural identity as distinct from physiological deafness,” and they continue to remark that those in the field of deaf studies often distinguish between “[t]hose who lose their hearing late in life, for example, [and therefore] might be considered deaf but not Deaf” (72). In some of the literature on the topic, believing that issues being addressed might include both deaf people and the Deaf, authors will write d/Deaf in the text to refer to those who simply cannot hear as well as those who are considered part of the Deaf community and similarly will write h/Hearing to refer to the dominant population of hearing people. I found this somewhat confusing, clumsy, and unnecessary, so will not be doing this for this essay, but will distinguish between the two when appropriate.

As mentioned, Fanon’s ideas concerning the relationship between the language one speaks and one’s cultural identity were meant to analyze the phenomena of the decolonized Negro living in Western Europe of the early 1950s and early 1960s. In his view, during that time there existed what he refers to as a problem, saying that, “The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter—that is, he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language [...] A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language [...] Mastery of language affords remarkable power” (Fanon 1966, 18). He continues to say that language equals cultural identity throughout the first chapter by repeating in various formulations, “To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture” (Fanon 1966, 38). This idea becomes significant when applying it to the use of sign language.

When reading *Black Sin, White Masks*, it may not immediately occur to one how Fanon’s thoughts on language and cultural identity might apply (or not apply) to the sign languages used by deaf people. I think it is safe to assume that most hearing people simply take for granted that when writers and theorists such as Fanon and Rushdie, or linguists like Noam Chomsky and Donna Jo Napoli, use the word “language,” they refer to spoken speech. Furthermore, if one has no contact with the Deaf community, it makes sense one would not think about sign language while reading Fanon’s analyses. However, if one looks deeper into the issue, one finds very definite parallels between a colonized population coping with cultural identity through the means of communication and language, as Fanon suggests, and the Deaf person living in the dominant Hearing world.

As it turns out, and as is often the case in the world of academia, historically there has been debate surrounding the topic of deafness, and about whether being a deaf person situates one as a part of a separate culture, and whether or not sign languages are real languages. One example of this controversy appears on the opening page of Sengas and Monaghan’s (2002) article “Signs of Their Times: Deaf Communities and the Culture of Language,” where they state that “deaf people have been marked as different and treated problematically by their hearing societies. Until 25 years ago, academic literature addressing deafness typically described deafness as a pathology, focusing on cures or mitigation of the perceived handicap” (69). Not so coincidentally, Senghas and Monaghan’s article was published in 2002, and 25 years prior, more than one experiment was being conducted to find out if chimpanzees and gorillas could be taught to speak the language of the Deaf, adding yet more controversial elements to the discussion.

One of the things that makes the study of cultural identity amongst non-hearers by hearers difficult to approach is simply defining what establishes an actual culture and what separates one from another. In public discourse one often hears the term *multiculturalism* tossed around, and for the most part, has what is an intuitive understanding of this idea, and it is particularly easy to spot when talking about, say, Japanese culture verses American culture. Or,

when someone remarks that China is becoming more “Westernized,” there is an understanding, on some level, that what is meant by this statement is that China is beginning to embrace certain Western cultural elements. For our purposes, I am using the term *culture* in that difficult-to-articulate way most often used in the discipline of anthropology, which is meant to describe the sum total ways of living amongst social and ethnic groups, particularly, the way these groups communicate amongst members of their own kind. This is precisely why things become a little more nuanced and murky when discussing Hearing culture versus Deaf culture.

Although he does not use the term postcolonialism in his short work *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism*, Rushdie does articulate some elements of the concept when referring to himself as a writer of stories who was born in India, into a Muslim family of Kashmiri descent, during a time in which India was under British rule. British educated, at a certain point in his life Rushdie came to realize the strange duality of his own cultural identity. He was faced with the question of whether he was Indian or British or both, or for that matter; Kashmiri. At one point in *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie (1992) recalls commenting on this very issue at a conference on modern writing at Oxford, and in response to a question raised about Indian writers in England he writes:

[I]f I am to speak for Indian writers in England I would say this [...] we are not willing to be excluded from any part of our heritage; which heritage includes both a Bradford-born Indian kid’s right to be treated as a full member of British society, and also the right of any member of this post-diaspora community to draw on its roots for its art... (Rushdie 1992, 15)

In other words, as an artist and therefore a contributor to not only British literary culture but also literary culture worldwide, Rushdie felt he could embrace both his British-ness, and his Indian-ness, giving them equal importance. His attitude and perspective become helpful when looking at the dual nature that those whose cultural place in society has, as mentioned above, historically been placed in the category of “problematic” by the dominant culture and whose condition is considered by the dominant culture something that ought to be cured or mitigated.

When talking about a cultural identity in the way described above, being the sum total of ways of living amongst a group, this includes ways of living passed on from one generation to the next. This takes place in nearly every culture and ethnic group through the telling of stories, and in more advanced societies through an educational system. Again referring to Rushdie’s *Imaginary Homelands* (1992), when commenting on what he, as a British/Indian person of letters, uses for material and inspiration he says:

[...] those of us who have been forced by cultural displacement to accept the provisional nature of all truths, all certainties, have perhaps had modernism forced upon us. We can’t lay claim to Olympus, and are thus released to describe our worlds in the way in which all of us, whether writers or not, perceive it from day to day. (Rushdie 1992, 13)

In other words, these are the circumstance of one who straddles two cultures, but has grown up surrounded by and educated in one that is dominant over the other. Raised and educated as a British person, he inherits the British ways of living, not the Indian, yet still feels some connection, though perhaps somewhat distant, to Indian ways of living. For the sake of

comparison, I will analyze the of one who is Deaf, specifically a Deaf child, growing up in the Hearing world.

In his article “Pearls of Wisdom: What Stokoe Told Us about Teaching Deaf Children,” David Stewart discusses the work of a pioneering scholar in the field of deaf studies, William Stokoe. Stewart (2001) reminds us that when Stokoe first began teaching at Gallaudet University (a school for the deaf and hard of hearing established in the U.S. in 1864) in the 1950s, “[s]ign language, back then, was not considered a language, and for most people it had no visible logic in the way it was structured” (344). He also tells us that, as far as educating deaf students at that time, “education carried on much as it had since the turn of the twentieth century: Oral instruction in the classroom with signing left for the corridors and dormitories of [...] schools for deaf students [...]” (345). To an outsider this seems incredibly counterintuitive to suggest that a child who cannot hear could sit in a classroom and receive an education through oral instruction.

Stokoe eventually came to realize that sign language does in fact possess a certain type of structural logic and in 1960 published an essay entitled “Sign Language Structure.” Furthermore, Stokoe felt that embracing American Sign Language (ASL) as a legitimate language would allow “deaf people to be sharers in general American culture” (Stewart 2001, 348). This echoes Fanon’s comments when he suggests a person’s possession of a language also means “above all to assume a culture.”

However, I would argue that perhaps Stokoe missed the point, or maybe did not consider that his Deaf students already had a culture of their own, despite admitting, as Stewart quotes him, that “I soon discovered that sign language was my students’ first language, the language in which they understood things possibly obscure in English” (quoted in Stewart 2001, 345). Therefore, like a colonized group, who already have a language of their own but feel powerless to resist a way of living forced upon them, they attempt, often successfully, to assimilate with the dominant culture, yet maintain their original way of living when in groups or with other individuals of like kind. For the Deaf at Gallaudet, signing in the corridors and dormitories when they were together, away from the dominant Hearing population, can be compared to Fanon’s (1966) comment that “[t]he black man has two dimensions. One for his fellows, and the other with the white man” (17).

Senghas and Monaghan (2002) mention that it was during the early 1970s when those in the field of deaf studies in the U.S. began using the phrase “Deaf culture” by way of contrast to “Hearing culture,” and adapted the use of lowercase “d” to separate those from members of the uppercase “D” Deaf community. They also tell us that “[s]ince the time of Stokoe’s (1980) and Washabaugh’s (1981) review articles, sign languages have become accepted as genuine languages, and the notion of linguistic communities of (deaf) signers is no longer novel” (Senghas and Monaghan 2002, 70). However, this was not necessarily the case universally. Benjamin Fraser gives us insight into the situation surrounding the Deaf community in Spain through his work.

Fraser’s article “Deaf Culture Production in Twentieth Century Madrid” is focuses primarily on poetry and film that emerges from the Deaf community in Spain. Whereas the United States began regarding ASL as a real and separate language all its own in the early 1970s, Fraser (2007) tells us that it was not until as recently as the fall of 2005 that “the Council of Ministers in Spain approved a bill that would recognize sign language, as well as its acquisition, knowledge, and use by a predominately Deaf community [as legitimate]” (432). That the government of Spain found it necessary to pass a bill to officially recognize a minority group’s way of communicating, particularly the language used by the Deaf community, serves as another

example of how the Deaf community faces situations similar to those of a colonized or recently decolonized group. Fraser's article is helpful to illustrate further the idea that members of the Deaf population, like a colonized group, struggle to find a unique voice in their art and literature through the use of sign language, and therefore a postcolonial approach to the study of their world is appropriate. Fraser (2007) comments that:

The concept of a Deaf culture—or Deaf *cultures*—has proved of the utmost importance in wresting social power from an overwhelming hearing majority who have not only systematically privileged spoken language over visual language but who have also forced this spoken language on deaf people, both unsuccessfully and at the expense of a natural language equally capable of expressing abstract thought. (434)

In other words, the dominant hearing majority, for many years, behaved as if Deaf persons had no cultural identity of their own, believed their language was a less complex form of communicating, and were a group who simply needed to adjust their way of life to assimilate into the way of life of the majority. Another element to this discussion involves the idea of storytelling, as well as other forms of literature, as a way of perpetuating a particular cultural identity from one generation to the next, and this phenomenon exists within the Deaf community as it does in any other.

Rachel Sutton-Spence's article entitled "The Role of Sign Language Narratives in Developing Identity for Deaf Children," starts out by discussing the concept of storytelling in general but then also focuses on the process that uses British Sign Language (BSL)<sup>1</sup> to help young Deaf children grow and develop as non-Hearers in a Hearing world. What does not naturally occur to those who have no familiarity or contact with the Deaf community, as Sutton-Spence (2010) comments, is that "the vast majority of deaf children are born into hearing families who have no experience of deafness or sign language. Exposure to sign language rarely occurs before school age and often not until after the young adult has left school" (266). This statement contrasts Stokoe's remark that "sign language was his student's first language." Perhaps a way to interpret this remark alongside Sutton-Spence is to consider that what Stokoe may actually be saying is that sign language was his student's *primary* or *preferred* language, as opposed to the language they learned first. In any case, whether or not a Deaf child learns the sign language that her peers use before or after she learns to communicate with her hearing family does not particularly matter here. She will still find herself in a cultural position that is in some way separate from a dominant group similar to that of a colonized population based on language.

Sutton-Spence observes that, like Hearing culture, Deaf culture passes on their identity through the art of storytelling. Alongside stories that are specifically Deaf oriented there exists within the canon traditional stories that are adjusted in a way that speaks to a Deaf child's particular needs, both types of which are meant to strengthen the Deaf child's cultural identity. Sutton-Spence provides several examples of both, but I will only mention two types; one is a

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth mentioning that before I wrote this paper I was not aware of the fact that there is no one universal sign language for the Deaf based on English. Indeed, in his introduction to the article referenced above Benjamin Fraser mentions two that exist in Spain alone; Spanish Sign Language (LSE) and Catalan Sign Language (LSC).

story about a Deaf man who is humiliated for simply trying to hide his deafness from others, the other is a reworked “Cinderella.”

The first example, written and signed (language) by Paul Scott is entitled “The Deaf Man on the Plane.” It tells the story of a traveling Deaf man who does not want others on the plane, including flight attendants, to know that he is deaf. The plane eventually lands. Not wanting to wait in line, the man immediately stands up, grabs his bag from underneath his seat and moves quickly to the front exit, and waits for the door to open, while other passengers shout at him. A few minutes pass before he is tapped on the shoulder by a flight attendant, at which point the man turns to find everyone else in their seats, staring at him and the attendant. He says, “I’m deaf.” The attendant says, “I know,” and proceeds to write him a note explaining that the flight had been temporarily diverted and the passengers were to remain in their seats until they could take off again and go on to their final destination. The Deaf man, of course, did not hear the pilot make the announcement over the loudspeaker, and had he simply informed the attendant of his situation, she likely would have made the effort to let him know why they were landing and to remain seated. The story is meant to teach Deaf children that there are circumstances in which hiding your identity as a Deaf person among the Hearing can often result in the very humiliation one is trying to avoid.

The “Cinderella” reworking is one example among several well known folklore tales that are easily recognizable to most hearing children, but are tweaked and then re-told using sign language to appeal to Deaf children. Sutton-Spence lists several others including “Little Red Riding Hood,” “The Pied Piper,” and “Snow White” (in this last example, the only hearing character in the BSL version is the Wicked Witch). Sutton-Spence (2010) mentions that in one version of the ASL story, “the glass slipper is replaced by magical gloves, enabling the orally educated Cinderella to sign to her manually educated Prince Charming” (278). Furthermore, she tells us about a BSL version told to her by a woman she only refers to as Janet:

Me and a friend of mine changed “Cinderella”: the ugly sisters were two hearing sisters, the fairy godmother was Deaf, hearing dogs for the Deaf became the coachmen, Cinderella was Deaf, Prince Charming was Deaf and all the rest were hearing. Cinderella didn’t want to go home and marry a hearing person, so she lost her ear mould and she was found by having the hearing aid that matched it! (Sutton-Spence 2010, 278)

This serves as an example of employing the concept of storytelling, traditionally passed from one generation to the next orally, yet cleverly redesigning it to account for a different way of communicating. This brings us to the last point in this discussion of using a postcolonial approach to a study of Deaf culture.

In a collection of poetry and essays edited by James Proctor, *Writing Black Britain: 1948-1998*, we read poetry that is written in a way that uses what has been called creolized or pidgin English, meaning that the vernacular used is essentially a hybrid of two or more languages to produce something completely unique. This, admittedly, is an oversimplification, and one could even argue that my use of the terms creolized or pidgin is incorrect in that these terms are different from hybrid. However, use of these terms is helpful as a means of comparing what Deaf persons have done with their colonizer’s (the Hearing) language and stories, which is to create and claim their own identity, with what some poets and writers of African descent living in Britain have done with English.

One of the contributors to *Writing Black Britain*, Louise Bennett, wrote these lines in her poem “Colonization in Reverse” in 1966 (this is not the complete poem):

What a joyful news, Miss Mattie:  
Ah feel me heart gwine burs-  
Jamaica people colonizing  
Englan in reverse (Bennett [1966] 2010, 16)

This passage is not approved by Microsoft Word’s spell check feature, and this is the point. It is an example of a poet observing a population of people, specifically a recently decolonized people, and writing down words on paper in a way that is intended to recreate the phonetic speech being used. Though English speakers and readers recognize elements of British and American proper English in the poem, clearly something has been added and/or taken away that makes it its own language. Similarly, William Washabaugh (1981) in his article “Sign Language in its Social Context” comments that “[s]ubordinated people, in both Creole and Deaf communities, not only assimilate target languages, but they also transform them and adapt them so that they can serve as apt symbols of their marginal status” (244). In other words, a phenomena that emerges from colonized groups is the creative way in which a language gets adopted and reworked, and then it becomes a way of distinguishing one’s self from the dominant culture and binds one with those in the same circumstance.

The intention here is to show that the Deaf community can be looked at through the lens of postcolonial theory, with a main focus on the use of language, and in the case the Deaf, sign language. Regardless of a Deaf individual’s place of birth, or the geographic location in which she or he lives, that person’s cultural identity is dictated equally as much by the fact that she or he is deaf as well as any other cultural identifier. By using works by writers such as Franz Fanon, Salmon Rushdie, and Louise Bennet, and placing them alongside scholarly works by those who have studied Deaf culture in much greater depth and detail, one can without too much of a stretch see the parallels.

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