

JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY & HISTORY OF EDUCATION



2019

The Journal of the Society of Philosophy & History of Education

Black ASL: Sign Language and Racism in the Education of Deaf Students

Taylor Woodall-Greene, Oklahoma State University

Multiple varieties of American Sign Language developed as a result of the segregation of state schools for the Deaf during the pre- and post-*Brown* eras causing widespread change in both the Deaf community's social and cultural norms and in the teaching of American Sign Language. Deaf education is a significantly understudied area in the field of Social Foundations of Education, so the phenomenon offers much for scholars to tease out and investigate in terms of how power and race intersect with the Deaf community. In this paper, I introduce and document Black ASL as a form of American Sign Language (ASL)—a language of which few Deaf educators and dominant users of ASL are aware—and investigate the real-life consequences of Deaf educators' lack of awareness for the Black Deaf community. Framed theoretically by the socio-historical influence of racism and Critical Race Theory (CRT), I then analyze the systematic suppression of Black ASL in Deaf education to reveal how language varieties born of racial segregation continue to affect sign language, Deaf culture, Deaf history, and, more broadly, the education of Deaf students. I do so in order to expose white dominance in Deaf education and the consequences of the resulting discrimination against Deaf people of color.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a branch of social theory whose authors theorize race, racism, and power structures within society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT theorists roughly align along five tenets, including counter-storytelling; the permanence of racism; whiteness as property; interest conversion; and the critique of liberalism (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Hiraldo, 2010). Although CRT can be applied as a frame to analyze many fields of study, some researchers call for further development and utilization of CRT in educational contexts (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). As a theoretical frame, CRT can be used starkly to illuminate race issues in education and provide insight into those educational settings which operate under supple racist ideologies.

The CRT tenet of counter-storytelling opens space for active seeking of stories and histories left out of the mainstream education

curriculum. Exploring the stories and experiences of Black Deaf people, the history of Black Deaf involvement in education, and the language varieties of the Deaf community show potential in re-creating a more equitable representation as well as inclusion of Deaf citizens of color. Calling upon the activist mission of CRT and the determination to bring about social change, in this paper I present and analyze counter-stories that emerge from Black Deaf history.

Varieties of ASL

I am a white, hearing person and sign language interpreter who works within the Deaf community at a southern U.S. university. I have long asked myself and thought about how and when I have contributed to either the processes of building bridges or of creating barriers between the hearing and the Deaf. Throughout my experience in this role, now totaling more than six years, I work daily with many types of Deaf and hearing-impaired people who employ language modes based on race and culture. In my experience, hearing people are rarely aware there are multiple forms of sign language. Many factors can create difference in a Deaf person's language; for instance, the cultural and familial background from which a Deaf person comes plays a significant role in their ability to use sign language. Whether a Deaf person is born into a hearing family or a Deaf family influences the type of education received during their youth, and culture influences language acquisition. Additionally, a Deaf person's heritage and other cultural groups to which they belong may influence their language preference. Just as there are a multitude of regional accents in any one country, different countries develop unique sign languages. While white U.S. students generally sign similarly despite their different backgrounds, when Black students sign, they might use a style that many people of color and others argue functions as an entirely different language from ASL. Because Deaf students of color encounter majority-white university interpreters who use the dominant form of ASL, Deaf students of color are made to adjust to the signs of university interpreters.

Capitalization of the letter "D" in Deaf is intentional, connecting the diverse Deaf community as a linguistic minority with a separate cultural identity (Baynton, Gannon, & Bergey, 2007). Lower-case "deaf" functions as a medical term used to describe a person's hearing loss and the medical perception of deafness (Baynton, Gannon, & Bergey, 2007). This leads to a general assumption all d/Deaf people accept the label and political meaning inherent in the capitalization of Deaf, however, use of this label requires caution as many hearing-impaired people may not feel aligned with the Deaf community. Making sweeping generalizations about a group of people cancels out within-group

diversity. The cultural identity of deafness/Deafhood raises questions about the connections people who are deaf feel with others who share the same experience. The history of specific minority groups (Burch & Joyner, 2007; Christensen & Delgado, 2000; McCaskill, Lucas, Bayley, Hill, King, Baldwin, & Hogue, 2011; McKee & Davis, 2010; Williamson, 2007) within the overarching Deaf community is worthy of consideration by Social Foundations scholars since most literature written on these communities labels specific groups with an identity-based prefix to Deaf, such as Black Deaf or Hispanic Deaf. In this paper I uncover examples of racism within specific varieties of sign language.

Historical Context of Deaf Education

My institution's classes on Deaf history and culture generally follow a pattern of retelling the Deaf community's history and experiences, but from a white perspective. One common starting point for the teaching of ASL and Deaf culture and history is the year 1817, important because it marked the creation of American Sign Language at the opening of the first school for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut, where manual sign language was first used to educate students (McCaskill et al., 2011). The school's founding fathers were Thomas Gallaudet, a hearing white U.S. man, and Laurent Clerc, a Deaf Frenchman. The school's founding marks a significant change from previous attempts to educate Deaf people because the school taught multiple means of communication. Gallaudet, Clerc, and some of the school's first students created the system of communication now referred to as American Sign Language (ASL). Sign language is comprised of hand movements, body language, and facial expressions used for visual communication (Lane, 1989). ASL arose from a mixture of French Sign Language, Native American Sign Language, and local signs from communities with a high population of Deaf residents, like Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts.

After 1817 Deaf schools were established across the U.S., using ASL to teach students. However, other modes of communication, such as oralism, arose in U.S. schools to challenge the teaching of sign. Oral education is a method of communication that combines reading lips with Deaf people voicing; oralism is steeped in the belief "spoken language is inherently superior to sign language" (McCaskill et al., 2011, p. 26). Following the 1880s the practice of oralism came on the rise, creating a tremendous shift in Deaf education, replacing ASL with oral methods. Consequently, Deaf teachers and administrators were fired and replaced by hearing people as oralism rose in popularity and practice. In the late 1980s Deaf advocacy steeply increased, and the *Americans with Disabilities Act* passed in 1990. Soon thereafter visibility of and advocacy for the Deaf community advanced significantly and ASL was re-established as the primary educational approach in most U.S. schools.

The history of Deaf education reads, troublingly, as a colorblind enterprise since it assumes, despite all that is known about the intricacies of culture and language creation and acquisition, all Deaf people's history can be painted using the same brush—the same story presented time and again. Few studies explore the experiences of Black Deaf students at segregated schools, the different languages used, or the effects on the Black Deaf community and their language following *Brown v. Board of Education* (Burch & Joyner, 2007; Hairston & Smith, 1983; McCaskill et al., 2011; Runnels, 2017; Williamson, 2007). The power historically exercised in order to make policy, create curricula, and control access to education unsurprisingly fell to white hearing people; white Deaf people would become more central over time, opaquely whitewashing “standard” ASL.

A History of Black Deaf Education

While Black Deaf people historically lacked the power to make many educational or social decisions, nevertheless Black Deaf people persisted and their unique sign language variety prevails. The preservation of underrepresented varieties in the larger Deaf language is significant because Black Deaf people, like other Deaf people of color, were assimilated, segregated, and denied equal opportunity. This purposeful omission matters because past atrocities of dominant white society inspire activism and such activism restructures an inequitable history into a different, more equitable future form.

Deaf Black people's history of language acquisition has purposefully been shaped by dominant, white, racist ideologies and policies. One reason is owed to the first Deaf school's exclusion of Deaf Black people. This racially based educational exclusion is significant because it explains the present-day lack of acceptance and the suppression of alternative forms of sign language made by people of color. Since African Americans and other Deaf people of color were not permitted to attend Deaf schools for many years after these schools were established, Deaf Black students were completely uninvolved in development of ASL's foundational language composition.

Many northern Deaf schools began integrating as early as the 1850s; the American School for the Deaf accepted Deaf Black students beginning in 1852, making it the first integrated school in Connecticut (McCaskill et al., 2011). Integration of students of color into Deaf schools was prohibited in the South, where thirteen states established segregated Deaf educational facilities (Hairston & Smith, 1983). From the end of the Civil War in 1865 until forced desegregation in the 1970s, Black and white students, including Deaf students, attended separate schools (Black and white Deaf students most often attended special boarding schools) (Gannon, 1981). Which year each state Deaf school

was desegregated varies, but all occur after the *Brown* decision, with some states desegregating as early as 1954, while other states did not comply with *Brown* until the 1970s. Louisiana, for example, remained segregated until 1978 (McCaskill et al., 2011). Separate schools for deaf and hearing students created a natural environment for varieties of manual sign language to develop. This long period of segregation, while in most ways harmful, makes possible the crucial preservation and longevity of Black ASL and its effect on the Black Deaf community who used it (McCaskill et al., 2011).

An unintended effect of racially segregated Black Deaf schools preserved Black ASL; oralism was not enforced with Black students because white educators believed Black students could not learn or perform oral methods of reading lips and speaking (McCaskill et al., 2011). The consequence of white educators' Eugenics-fueled discrimination is Black Deaf children continued sign language use unimpeded by oralism, and therefore Black Deaf children's language acquisition "was more comprehensible than their white [D]eaf counterparts" (McCaskill et al., 2011, p. 107). The exclusive use of sign language and the presence of Black Deaf teachers in the classroom meant Black Deaf students were exposed to Deaf adult role models and had access to education in their native language, something stripped from white Deaf students by the rising tide of oralism.

Hairston and Smith (1983), in *Black and Deaf in America: Are We that Different?*, explain the field's persistent focus on underemployment and under-education of Black Deaf people in the post-*Brown* era as an "oversimplification of the problem" (p. 1). They argue, rather, the problem stems from the inferiority complex Black Deaf people develop when they are first labeled as disabled, and then further stigmatized based on race, doubling their minority status and isolation from society. The limited, limiting educational opportunities available to Black Deaf students reflect the same brand of vocational tracking Native Americans experienced in Indian boarding schools. For example, a Black Deaf man reveals his mistrust in Gallaudet University, a university founded to educate the Deaf- and hearing-impaired because:

...prior to 1949, educational programs were segregated in Washington, D.C. ... I was informed in my sophomore year at the Indiana School for the Deaf that Blacks were not allowed to go to Gallaudet. Naturally, I lost interest in studying with no goals for which to aim. Going to Gallaudet used to be my number one goal.... (Hairston & Smith, p. 16)

For this Black Deaf man his compound minority status earned by being both Black and Deaf equates to educational second-class citizenry. The practice of barring Black Deaf students from applying and attending a

Deaf college reflects society's attitude of the time toward the Deaf and hearing-impaired, but also shows the exclusion of the Black Deaf community from Deaf colleges as perpetrated *from within* the Deaf community. Despite this knowledge of exclusion, little to no mention of racism appears in current research and history on Deaf culture, likely because Special Education as a discipline is notoriously whitewashed, its scholars speak of "difference" in terms of physical or mental ability, and rarely, if ever, explore the discriminatory effects of race or social class.

Chronicling racial tension in the Deaf community, the authors of *The Hidden Treasures of Black ASL* (McCaskill et al., 2011) encountered resistance from the Black Deaf community. Some Black Deaf participants refused to participate in research conducted by Gallaudet, the Deaf college that once routinely excluded Blacks, yet that now ostensibly seeks Black Deaf students' contributions (McCaskill et al., 2011). Mistrust of Gallaudet stems from more than its exclusionary practices toward Black Deaf students, but also from how educational policy stipulated by states only allowed for vocational education through the 10th grade, which automatically disqualified Black Deaf students from attending Gallaudet (McCaskill et al., 2011).

The story of Junius Wilson provides an example of the lived experience of those who reside at an intersection of race, sex, class, and disability. Wilson attended a segregated school for the Deaf called the North Carolina School for the Colored Blind and Deaf in Raleigh, NC from 1916 until 1924 where he learned Black ASL (Burch & Joyner, 2007). The North Carolina school and its students experienced a unique effect of Jim Crow laws: the laws altered Black Deaf students' interactions with the white Deaf community while also excluding Black Deaf students from the hearing Black community (Burch & Joyner, 2007). Paradoxically, the isolation of Black Deaf people resulting from social and political barriers to their education created an environment where Black ASL flourished among generations of students.

In 1925 the state accused Junius Wilson of attempted rape, and because he could not communicate with anyone due to his Deafness, he was "found insane," "surgically castrated," and committed to the Cherry Hill Hospital which housed North Carolina's "Asylum for the Colored Insane" (North Carolina's sole mental institution for African Americans until the *Civil Rights Act* was passed) (Barth, 2017), where he remained for the next 65 years (Burch & Joyner, 2007). In the 1970s, the state dropped charges against Wilson, but he remained incarcerated for another 20 years (Burch & Joyner, 2007). Wilson's inability to communicate, his Blackness, and his family's powerlessness to provide appropriate legal counsel contributed to his wretched institutional

abandonment. Junius Wilson's story recounts one way racism can affect dramatically Black Deaf education, the Black Deaf's access to resources and legal counsel, and language development for Black Deaf people.

According to sign language interpreters in the Southern U.S., even if one is considered fluent in American Sign Language, it is "virtually impossible [for outsiders] to understand" Black ASL created by students within segregated school systems. In the case of Junius Wilson, a complete lack of interpreters and professionals understanding Black ASL left him imprisoned and unable to communicate with others. Language barriers also likely contributed to Wilson's assumed intellectually damaged state, for in Wilson's case, white ASL interpreters and Deaf communities held the power to say what constituted Deaf language.

In the end, Wilson's ruined life comes down to a consequence of delegitimizing certain forms of sign language considered outside the scope of white American Sign Language. Means of suppressing people of color take on many forms, for, as Alexander (2012) argues in *The New Jim Crow*, there has never been an end to racial caste systems in the U.S.; we as a society "have merely redesigned it" (p. 2).

After schools for the Deaf integrated, Black students using Black ASL were forced to conform to the language of the white Deaf schools they entered (Burch & Joyner, 2007). The exclusion of Black ASL from "official," white American Sign Language supports Alexander's (2012) and Anderson's (2016) assertions on how deep-seated, systematic racism from the past still dramatically shapes lives today. Still today, whitewashed notions of racial difference, like the concept "colorblindness," sway perspectives (Alexander, 2012; Anderson, 2016) on how racism shapes the history of Deaf people in the U.S.

Colorblindness, or the fictional claim white people "don't see color," partially steeped in a "belief that race no longer matters" (Alexander, 2012, p. 11), prevails across U.S. society, and this view is taught in colleges of education and shared among educators. The mythical colorblindness also shapes Deaf education, members of the Deaf community, and members of the hearing community who serve the Deaf community since white ASL is passed throughout the Deaf community by majority-white sign language interpreters working in the U.S. (Cokely, 1981; Jones, Clark, & Soltz, 1997; Williams, 2016). The assumption of colorblind homogeneity and assumption of a monolingual, monolithic Deaf community erases the many vibrant, authentic, culturally appropriate forms of ASL, substituting wholesale white ASL which then becomes the basis for educational theory and practice.

Conclusion

The white Deaf community's control of language is a modern phenomenon. For instance, Nyle DiMarco—a well-known white Deaf male actor, model, and advocate for the Deaf community—posted a video meant to teach others the sign for the recent superhero movie, *Black Panther*. Thousands viewed DiMarco's video; both the hearing community and the majority of the Deaf community embraced the sign he created. However, the sign for a Black superhero from Africa already exists in Black ASL. The Black Deaf community posted the correct sign for the character and made requests for the removal of DiMarco's video. Although highly criticized, the video remained on social media.

This small, modern example of white dominance in ASL language selection is only a fraction of numerous cases in which white people determine appropriate signs. If Deaf educators fail to recognize white dominance in the teachings of Deaf culture and its pernicious effects, and if Deaf educators fail to include those stories of discrimination against Black Deaf people often forgotten, then the systemic power of racism will continue to dominate ASL and will remain normalized within the broader U.S. Deaf culture. Recognizing and rethinking politics, power, and privilege *within* the Deaf and Sign Language communities can inspire and illuminate recognition of white dominance and supremacy in the teaching, using, and interpretation of ASL, paving the way for Black ASL to be recognized and appreciated for its unique contribution to Deaf culture and its stitching together and holding tightly over time the Black Deaf community.

One way to combat white dominance within the field is to initiate active recruitment of people of color as sign language interpreters. This can only be accomplished if educators look to Deaf people of color to teach Black ASL to interpreters. Also potentially helpful would be adding workshops for the Deaf and hearing communities led by Black Deaf leaders on dismantling barriers and building cross-cultural bridges within and between communities. Recognizing historical and present-day segregation, integration, and a profound lack of educational opportunity for Deaf people of color is a first step in looking at the past so we can understand present discrimination and inequities. Given how racism shapes the very foundation of Deaf education and other sign languages across the world, by reevaluating teaching methods, inclusion efforts, and practicing reflexivity when encountering ASL's inherent power, such initial steps have the potential to steer the field in a much more equitable, inclusive direction. Finally, those of us who operate within the system and have privilege must recognize the racist systems embedded within educational institutions and do our part to build a bridge linking all communities when interacting with the Deaf community.

References

- Alexander, M. (2012). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. New York, NY: New Press.
- Anderson, C. (2016). *White rage: The unspoken truth of our racial divide*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.
- Barth, B. (2017, December 11). The strange, horrifying history of Cherry research farm in North Carolina. *Modern Farmer*.
<https://modernfarmer.com/2017/12/strange-horrifying-history-cherry-research-farm-north-carolina/>
- Baynton, D. C., Gannon, J. R., & Bergey, J. L. (2007). *Through Deaf eyes: A photographic history of an American community*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Burch, S., & Joyner, H. (2007). *Unspeakable: The story of Junius Wilson*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Christensen, K. M., & Delgado, G. L. (Eds.). (2000). *Deaf plus: A multicultural perspective*. San Diego, CA: DawnSign.
- Cokely, D. (1981). Sign language interpreters: A demographic survey. *Sign Language Studies*, 32(1), 261–286.
- DeCuir, J. T., & Dixon, A. D. (2004). “So when it comes out, they aren’t that surprised that it is there”: Using critical race theory as a tool of analysis of race and racism in education. *Educational Researcher*, 33(5), 26–31.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Hairston, E., & Smith, L. (1983). *Black and Deaf in America: Are we that different?* Silver Spring, MD: T. J. Publishing, Inc.
- Hirald, P. (2010). The role of critical race theory in higher education. *The Vermont Connection*, 31(1), 53–59.
- Jones, B. E., Clark, G. M., & Soltz, D. F. (1997). Characteristics and practices of sign language interpreters in inclusive education programs. *Exceptional Children*, 63(2), 257–268.
- Lane, H. (1989). *When the mind hears: A history of the Deaf*. New York, NY: Vintage.
- McKee, R. L., & Davis, J. E. (Eds.). (2010). *Interpreting in multilingual, multicultural contexts*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- McCaskill, C., Lucas, C., Bayley, R., Hill, J., King, R., Baldwin, P., & Hogue, R. (2011). *The hidden treasure of Black ASL: Its history and structure*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.