Signs of Change: Navigating the Conflicts Between Deaf and African American Identities[1]

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1. Introduction

For some Deaf[2] African Americans[3], navigating multiple cultural identities has been an exercise in negotiation. Both the mainstream white Deaf community and the hearing African American community have overlooked these individuals. The research conducted in the mainstream white Deaf community, along with the literature, tacitly imply a color-blind framework within public discourse concerning issues of race/ethnicity. According to Ruth Frankenberg (1993), color-blindness is one of the two prevalent modes of race talk in the United States, the other being race cognizance. She defines color-blindness as, "a mode of thinking about race organized around an effort to not "see," or at any rate not to acknowledge, race differences" (142). One who is described as race cognizant insists, "on the importance of recognizing *difference*—but with difference understood in historical, political, social, or cultural terms rather than essentialist ones" (157, italics in original). Color-blindness in the mainstream Deaf community supports the pervasive notion that the only

[2] I acknowledge the contested spellings of "d" deaf for the physical condition of not being able to hear, and "D" Deaf for an individual who culturally identifies with the Deaf community and uses American Sign Language (ASL). Since I will primarily be talking about Deafness as a cultural identity and referring to the Deaf community, I am using the capital "D" Deaf. For further discussion see Padden & Humphries (1998) and Senghas & Monaghan (2002).
[3] I define African American/Black as individuals who were born in the United States, have African ancestry, and self identify as African American or Black. The two terms will be used interchangeably.

unifying factor is a person's deafness and the use of American Sign Language (ASL). Other aspects of identity, such as racial/ethnic background are ignored or viewed as unimportant, subordinate to a Deaf cultural identity. While this may be acceptable for many Deaf people, consideration must be given to a person's racial/ethnic background and its influences on their perspective and the construction of their cultural identity. In the mainstream African American community one unmarked characteristic of its members is the act of hearing; there is often little or no acceptance or acknowledgement of deafness, and especially a Deaf linguistic and cultural identity.

To study these issues further, I interviewed six individuals who were both African American and Deaf. I found that age is a significant factor in how they prioritized their cultural identity. Here I take a closer look at two individuals' life stories that exemplify the generational difference. While I found similarities in how they were raised and treated in their immediate families, nonetheless had markedly different experiences with the mainstream Deaf community and acceptance by some Deaf members.

2. Language and Identity

One method used to create cohesiveness within communities and construct boundaries is language; most racial/ethnic and cultural groups have a distinct language or dialect that sets them apart from others. From this viewpoint one's language can be more indicative of membership than one's racial/ethnic characteristics because while one is born with racial/ethnic attributes, learning and using the language of one's community is symbolic of a commitment to the community (Turner and Giles, 1981). The use of a specific language by in-group members creates unity and cohesion, especially when the community and/or language is marginalized. This is certainly true in the Deaf community where one's membership in the community depends on one's knowledge and use of ASL (Padden and Humphries, 1988; Kannapell, 1989, Wilcox, 1989; Lane et al, 1996). "ASL is a powerful tool for identity in the Deaf Community, along with the cultural beliefs and values that are expressed through ASL. This suggests that ASL is the cultural language of the Deaf Community" (Kannapell, 1989:25). At the same time, being audiologically deaf does not guarantee one's membership in the Deaf community, as it is the use of ASL that determines whether a person will be labeled capital 'D' Deaf as opposed to lower case 'd' deaf.

A similar dilemma exists in the hearing African American community in regard to language use. Verbal language has been used to maintain African American community identity (Smitherman, 1977). Marcyliena Morgan (2002) argues that African Americans use a markedly African American English as a key method to identify with and connect other African Americans, and when African Americans use mainstream English it can cause divisions within the community. Morgan states, "Monolingual GE [General English] in intragroup interaction symbolizes self-hate regarding an African American identity and an exaltation of European values that marginalize those of African descent" (66). African American English is recognized as a distinct language that unifies African American people, it is one of the attributes that makes the African American community unique. As Rickford and Rickford (2000) explain, "the reasons for the persistence and vitality of Spoken Soul are manifold: it marks black identity; it is the symbol of a culture and life style" (10).

Similarly, ASL is seen as the cultural language of the Deaf community (Kannapell, 1989), but there is little understanding of the intersections of these identities. Where does an African American Deaf person fit in? On the one hand she is not able to fully participate in the mainstream hearing African American community because ASL is not widely learned by her friends and family. On the other hand she does not feel connected to the mainstream white Deaf community because her style of ASL is not accepted. This paper will examine how two individuals who are both African American and Deaf navigate between these two modes of cultural communication. Is one language and identity prioritized over the other and, if so, for what reason, and in what contexts? This case study illustrates the factors that have shaped how some African American Deaf people culturally identify, and is not meant as a generalization of either community, but rather as a foundation for further research.

3. Two Perspectives on being Deaf and African American

To explore these questions further I conducted interviews with two individuals who are both African American and Deaf, whom I will refer to as "Phyllis" and "Robin". At the time of the interviews Phyllis was fifty and Robin was thirty-two. Each interview was videotaped and lasted approximately one hour with subsequent follow up over e-mail. While both have several things in common, their life experiences have also created differences in how communication has impacted their lives and how they identify culturally.

Both of the interviewees were born and raised in the Northwest (Richmond, CA and Seattle, WA, respectively) and now live in the Seattle area. They were both raised in hearing African American families where for sociopolitical and strategic reasons their parents chose not to use ASL as a mode of communication. They were both raised orally, meaning they learned to read lips and voice for themselves. This was the expected mode of communication in their childhood homes, and still remains prevalent. As a result, both of the interviewees have felt isolated and disconnected from their immediate family members. This situation is not uncommon for many members of the Deaf community, regardless of race/ethnicity. What complicates the situation for Phyllis and Robin is the traditional use of verbal language to construct and enact cultural identity in the African American community. For hearing African Americans these interactions foster a sense of unity and identity among members of the in-group. This was not the case for Phyllis and Robin: not only did they feel disconnected from their families, they also felt disconnected from their cultural identity.

Both Phyllis and Robin were introduced to ASL and the mainstream white Deaf community in their teens. Currently, both use ASL as their primary mode of communication and are active in the Deaf community. Most interesting was how they each reacted differently as members of the Deaf community. This is where their stories and life experiences differ. Upon her introduction to ASL and the Deaf community, Phyllis felt immediate comfort; it was as if she had finally found a place where she could truly be herself. On the other hand, while Robin was excited to find a community that shared her language some of her experiences in the mainstream white Deaf community have left her with the sense that she is not accepted as a full member.

Phyllis is an example of someone who prioritizes her Deaf cultural identity over that of her racial/ethnic African American one; she has taken on a more color-blind perspective similar to that of the mainstream Deaf community. Phyllis attended a predominately white public school with an oral program. She was first introduced to a mainstream educational setting in community college where she had her first contact with ASL, the Deaf community and utilizing an interpreter to facilitate communication. In her previous oral program, she was expected to read the lips of her teachers and classmates and voice for herself. She had little to no linguistic communication with her family and did not feel accepted by other children in her neighborhood because of her deafness. It is my opinion that these experiences had a huge impact on how she decided to culturally identify.

Phyllis recalled many frustrating stories of her early education before learning ASL and the reluctance on the part of many teachers to accommodate her special circumstance. For instance, her teachers would move around when they lectured, lecture from the back of the class or talk while the lights were off when showing a film (which was not closed captioned). All of these incidents made it impossible for Phyllis to read their lips. Even when Phyllis confronted her teachers, they refused to accommodate her. She had nothing but positive memories of both the hearing and deaf students, however. Even though Phyllis went to a mostly white mainstream school she did not feel ostracized at all: "I saw other kids wearing hearing aids and I knew I wasn't alone. It felt good being with them. My elementary school was mostly white people…it never bothered me, I felt connected with them, I knew them and they treated me the same." For Phyllis, being Deaf was more salient than her African American background: "I always identified as a Deaf person first. Being deaf was the biggest part of my childhood." She made it clear that identifying as African American was not as important because it was her deafness that she felt set her apart. Regarding the African American children in her neighborhood, Phyllis did not feel connected to them. She was constantly bullied and picked on by them because she was deaf: "I remember growing up in my home environment, the friends I had in that area were Black and it was odd because they always gave me a hard time because I was deaf. They'd take my hearing aids from me and throw them on the ground. They would always fight me."

For Phyllis, being Deaf meant belonging to a white community in which she was content and comfortable. She had no reason to question the alliance until she decided to attend Gallaudet University, the only Deaf liberal arts university located in Washington D.C. It was there that Phyllis had to make a choice regarding with which community she would align herself. At first, she was excited to find others who shared both her racial/ethnic and cultural identities. However, it did not take long for her to realize there were still other facets to their identities that kept them separated.

When she first arrived at Gallaudet Phyllis found the signing style of members of the African American Deaf community to be different than the style she was used to. At one point some members of the African American Deaf community told her she was signing too "white." This sentiment is also held concerning hearing African Americans who use the mainstream style of English. This concept, that Deaf African Americans

receive similar feedback as some hearing African Americans regarding their use of a mainstream speaking style, is novel demonstrates that regardless of the mode of communication there exists a prevalent language ideology that the use of the mainstream style of signing/talking marks you as "white." When I questioned Phyllis further about the difference between signing styles she said: "The Black Deaf use more body language, they move their arms in the air like this [demonstrates an exaggerated movement with her arms over her head], it is embarrassing. It looks kinda wild, you know." Since Phyllis learned ASL in the white Deaf community, in her mind, this style was the only way to sign. Phyllis never received any feedback from others back home that her signing style was different from theirs; she had no idea she signed in a culturally "white" style. When I questioned her more about her reaction to the different style she went on to say: "I am not like that, I can understand if you are at home by yourself and want to have fun, be silly that's fine but in public I don't like that. I don't feel comfortable." Implicit in this statement is a judgment about the appropriateness of language, when and where one should use this style of language and the type of people who use the style. Lippi-Green (1997) argues that marginalized language communities are constantly being asked to suppress their cultural identity through a standard language ideology that is perpetuated through education, the court system, and media… She goes on to say: "Thus, accent becomes a litmus test for exclusion, an excuse to turn away, to refuse to recognize the other" (64). While Lippi-Green is referring to spoken language one can easily make the connection between the spoken accent and the different language variation in ASL that Phyllis is referring to in the above statement.

The African American Deaf people Phyllis met at Gallaudet who called attention to her different signing style prescribe to a more race cognizant approach and were raised in the South or on the East Coast where the histories of African American and white Deaf communities are extremely different. First the African American Deaf population in those areas is much larger, making it possible for a solid African American Deaf community could thrive. The Deaf schools in those areas were also historically segregated by race/ethnicity (Gannon, 1981; Hairston and Smith, 1983; Maxwell and Smith-Todd, 1986), unlike schools in the Northwest, so African American Deaf students created and maintained their own style of sign language in their community. As Deaf schools became desegregated, African American Deaf students began to change their signing style to fit in with the white students. While some adopted a more white signing style because it was seen by African American Deaf people as a way to succeed in the new school environment, some adopted

the same style only because some white teachers explicitly told African American Deaf students they could no longer use their "black signs" at the integrated school (Woodward, 1976; Maxwell and Smith-Todd, 1986). However, amongst themselves, they often retained their own language variation (Hairston and Smith, 1983). In Aramburo's (1989) study he noticed, "standard ASL signs are used when conversing with white deaf individuals" (119). In essence they would "code switch" between the mainstream ASL and their unique signing style. Code switching is most commonly referred to a bilingual person changing languages but code switching can also refer to changes in register or variation (Heller, 1988), which is the case for the African American Deaf community being referred to.

As a result of feeling disconnected from her family and the children in her neighborhood, Phyllis never learned African American slang[4] or needed to understand the notion of code switching between a mainstream white style and a style used only with other in-group members. Since Phyllis never experienced the history of racially/ethnically segregated schools and could not belong to a large African American Deaf community, one can understand why she would be baffled by her experience with other African American Deaf people at Gallaudet. On the other hand, one can also understand the perspective of the African American Deaf people at Gallaudet who regularly practiced code switching between the white mainstream ASL and the African American style of ASL and their response to meeting Phyllis, an African American Deaf person, who could not similarly code switch. Phyllis never had to switch her signing style where she was raised, whereas the others most likely did and accepted the arrangement. Given Phyllis' experiences with her family and the children in her neighborhood, and how they contrast to the experiences she had at school and in the mainstream white Deaf community, it is understandable that she has chosen to prioritize her Deaf identity over her racial/ethnic one.

This contrasts with Robin, who is a generation younger. Even though Phyllis and Robin were both raised orally and introduced to ASL by

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[4] Linguistically, the term "slang" only refers to a colorful word choice that has a temporal meaning (Trask, 1999). However, when I asked Robin about her perspective on the term slang, she was clear that the way she signed was also a part of what she calls 'slang' not merely the word choice.

the white Deaf community their cultural identity and language use differs significantly. Since Robin's perspective is more race cognizant, she is an example of someone who prioritizes her racial/ethnic identity over her Deaf one. She was raised orally and educated in an oral program for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children until being mainstreamed with hearing children in the sixth grade. Like Phyllis, Robin also had little to no linguistic communication with her family. However, unlike Phyllis, Robin was educated in a more racially/ethnically diverse school. She had African American friends who taught her spoken and signed slang and therefore was able to create a sense of community separate from that of the white mainstream Deaf community. Robin believes that her experiences in the Deaf community and her connection with other African American people contributed to her prioritizing her African American racial/ethnic identity over her Deaf identity.

Also in contrast to Phyllis, Robin had early experiences in the white Deaf community where she was made aware of her racial/ethnic difference. The first experience she was able to recall was in middle school during recess, when she was playing kick ball with her class and she kicked a foul for her team. A white Deaf boy signed to her "You stupid dark fudge nigger." At first, she laughed along with all of the other kids because she had not seen nor understood the meaning of the sign for "nigger." Another one of her classmates, an African American boy, approached her and explained the negative connotation of the word and that she should not be laughing. It was only after being told the meaning that she became upset: "That was the first time I really realized I was different from other Deaf [people]," she told me. When asked if Robin felt as an adult that there are still divisions in the Deaf community, she told me that she does not feel as supported as other subgroups of the Deaf community: "I feel like they support the others in the community like gay/lesbian, Deaf Blind, Asian, but not African Americans. Strange huh."

Robin also attributed divisions in the Deaf community to different signing styles. She uses an African American style of signing that she sees as setting her apart from the white Deaf community. While there is no longer a distinct African American southern style of signing, there continues to be an African American variation used among African American Deaf people (Hairston and Smith, 1983; Padden and Humphries, 1988; Aramburo, 1989; Valli et al., 1989; Bruce, 1993; Guggenheim, 1993; Lewis et al., 1995). Hairston and Smith (1983) state very clearly: "we maintain that there is no Black sign language. There is, however, a Black way of signing used by Black deaf people in their own cultural

milieu—among families and friends" (55). Since African American Deaf people are no longer using different signs to distinguish their language it is the manner in which they execute the signs that distinguishes their style from the mainstream white style of signing. Initially, when asked about her sign choices and if she changed her signing style, Robin was adamant that there was a distinct style but that she did not change: "people will have to accept my signing if they want to accept me, it is who I am." However, I had seen Robin shifting styles. Her denial of code switching is a fairly common sentiment among members of a marked language community. Often, the change happens so frequently and effortlessly that members of the marked category do not notice they are changing (Heller, 1988). However, the more Robin and I talked, she became aware that she did have a style of signing that was reserved for African American Deaf people only. Robin told me: "I thought I sign the same with everyone, that is true to an extent. I open myself up more with other Black Deaf. I don't really have a real explanation why, there's just a shared and unspoken 'I know where you are coming from' with each other." She went on to say that using slang among African American Deaf people was a way to create solidarity, "I think it adds a uniqueness and a bond to our culture and our people." Robin sees using an African American style of signing as more than simply communicating, it is a way to set her apart from the mainstream white Deaf community while simultaneously creating unity among in-group members.

Because Robin was clear that there was a distinct difference in her signing style with African American Deaf people compared to others, I asked if she could describe the signing style. She explained with African American Deaf people she could use more body language: "I can be more loose and laid back in my signing with a fellow Black Deaf." I specifically asked her to show me how she would sign the same sentence to a white Deaf person and an African American Deaf person. Robin gave me an example of a story about going to church. The English translation of her "mainstream ASL" version is: "Yesterday, I went to church, and enjoyed myself. It was good. I felt the spirit moving. It was beautiful". When she signed the sentence the second time demonstrating how she would sign with an African American Deaf person, what she said was more intense and emotive. The closest English translation might be: "Girl, yesterday I went to church, it was so good. I could really feel the spirit moving. I was really moved, it was fantastic." The two sentences share the same concepts, however; she did add the African American vernacular sign for 'Girl' at the beginning when demonstrating the African American style. Many of her expressions are more emphatic, translated here in English with the added words "so" and "really." In the first example she does not give a

commentary on how the church service affected her but the second time she demonstrates the same sentence she finishes it off with, "I was really moved." This demonstrates that for Robin the African American style can imply more personal and emotional communication.

In ASL, the two sentences look noticeably different, the signing space is larger, there are more pronounced facial and body expressions in the second sentence than the first. In Lewis' (1995) study he observed when an African American Deaf participant was asked to describe the different ways of American and African clothing his signing style changed dramatically. When he described the American style of clothing he had virtually no body movement or facial expressions. He stood straight and in place, faced forward, kept his body straight and did not mouth any signs. In contrast, when describing the African clothing he employed different African American signing style elements. He mouthed different signs, his body movements included his torso and shoulders moving forward, he made exaggerated gestures, and bobbed his head back and forth. These are the elements others have mentioned when describing an African American Deaf signing style: not only are facial expressions and body movements exaggerated but the actual signing space is used to its fullest (Hairston and Smith, 1983; Aramburo, 1989; Guggenheim, 1993).

Similar to Lewis' observation in Robin's example her facial and body expressions were more intense in the African American signing style as well. When comparing the word "good" that appears in both versions, one can also see a phonological difference. In her first demonstration she signs it similar to how one would find it in an ASL dictionary. Both palms are open, face up, the right hand touches chin and in a downward straight motion the back of the hand gently touches the other palm which is at mid chest level. In Robin's demonstration of an African American style the same sign is given more emphasis and intensity. She uses the same palm orientation; however, the right palm slides across her chin from left to right, and instead of taking it in a straight downward motion she makes a large downward arc before audibly slapping the second palm. One can take away from her different signing of the word good that the white Deaf style works for saying church was simply good, and the African American Deaf style is appropriate to say it was extremely good or fantastic.

Watching the two examples was reminiscent of how my other interviewee described the different signing styles. One could understand why Phyllis would see the large demonstrative and emotive signing style as 'wild' or embarrassing if she was accustomed to signing in a more

conservative manner. Robin emphasized that it is not the signs that are different, but their execution. This is different from the findings of Aramburo's (1989) study in which he videotaped several conversations with a mixture of hearing and Deaf as well as white and African American people. What he noticed was that in one instance when the African American Deaf people were signing amongst themselves they used "Black Signs" for certain words, as opposed to the mainstream signs they used with the white people. The participants in his study had access to the Black Southern signs whereas I hypothesize that because Deaf schools were not racially/ethnically segregated in the Northwest there was no need or environment to create different signs. However, for Robin and the younger generation to create community and call attention to African American Deaf culture, they use a different style of signing. The hand shape and palm orientation are similar but the use of space and the added intensity of body and facial expressions are different. The use of facial expressions in itself is not unique to an African American signing style in ASL as it is an essential part of ASL grammar. What I noticed while Robin was demonstrating the difference was how intense her facial expressions were. If one is to furrow their brow while signing, she furrowed hers even tighter. Each facial expression was more emotive than usually seen. When Phyllis first met and signed with African American Deaf people at Gallaudet, the facial expressions were what she noticed as being so different. In Robin's case she knows when and with whom she feels comfortable using the African American style. While it is apparent there is a unique African American style in sign language, (Woodward, 1976; Maxwell and Smith, 1986; Aramburo, 1989; Valli et al, 1989; Bruce, 1993; Guggenheim, 1993; Lewis et al., 1995; Lewis, 1998) there has not been research on code switching among African American Deaf people in the white mainstream Deaf community. Robin's example of how she changes her signing style highlights the need for more research on code switching among African American Deaf people.

4. Conclusion

Individuals who are both African American and Deaf struggle with finding a community where their unique history and language style are accepted. Even though both Phyllis and Robin were raised orally in hearing African American families with no linguistic communication at home, their rapport with the African American community and identity choices are different.

Phyllis grew up feeling disconnected from the hearing African American community, and as an adult still feels more accepted in the white Deaf community. As a result, she prioritizes her Deaf identity over her African American one. This differs from the findings of other studies on African American Deaf people, which conclude that participants overwhelmingly identify more with their racial/ethnic background, if they do identify as Deaf first it is because they were raised in Deaf families (Aramburo, 1989; Foster and Kinuthia, 2003). It is my belief that Phyllis' experiences of being educated in a predominately white Deaf environment, and having her deafness as the primary marker of difference has given her a color-blind perspective which led her to choose to culturally identify as Deaf first.

Robin, on the other hand, had negative experiences early on in the white Deaf community. She was made to realize, similar to the African American Deaf community in other regions of the United States, that deafness is not the only unifying factor and that race/ethnicity plays a vital role in how the mainstream Deaf community is maintained regardless of the pervasive color-blind perspective that is expressed in the Deaf community. Along with Robin being educated in a racially/ethnically diverse school environment I believe her being race cognizant had a huge impact on how she would eventually culturally identity. Consequently, Robin prioritizes her African American identity over her cultural Deaf one.

Language use was another difference between the two interviewees. When asked about the different signing style of some African American Deaf people it was interesting how divergent the two responses were. Phyllis learned mainstream ASL and has felt comfortable using it ever since. Phyllis found the African American style not desirable, she went as far as to place judgments on the style as 'wild' and 'embarrassing'. If one looks at this reaction from a standard language ideology perspective one can interpret Phyllis' reaction as one who prescribes to the belief that the standard mainstream ASL is superior to the African American style and there is an implicit judgment about those who choose not to use the standard language. Robin on the other hand recognizes the importance of using the mainstream ASL but cherishes being able to use the African American style as a way to create cohesiveness among other African Americans. She too, learned ASL from the mainstream white Deaf community but also grew up interacting with other African American students (hearing and Deaf) who taught her the unique style she refers to as "slang." Because of this, Robin acknowledges the importance of having a different signing style, which she strategically and exclusively uses with

other African American Deaf people as a way to create unity, which is consistent with the literature on African American language.

There is more to learn about how African American individuals in the Deaf community negotiate their multiple identities. The few studies that have been conducted in the Deaf community with African American people have not taken into consideration historical and regional differences, which can have an effect on a person's identity formation. Likewise, research in the hearing African American community has not explored the impact of how not signing with a deaf child may influence how they culturally identify. These are just a few of the issues which need to be explored further in order to continue to bridge the gap between the mainstream white Deaf community and the hearing African American one.

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