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The Experiences of Black Deaf Americans

Having a community in which a sense of belonging exists is an important part of the human experience. Everyone wants to have people around them who can accept and even relate to the things that make you different. Therefore, societies are created around a central similarity that unite them together. The Black community in America connects through the injustices brought upon them that set them apart from white people, and they have their own broad, unique culture. The Deaf community in the United States partakes in their own world called “Eyeth”, in which hearing is not necessary like it is in the audible world. They also have their own culture and language. However, there are Black Deaf Americans who can relate to both communities. While they can relate to both commonalities, neither one is a perfect fit for both experiences. Consequently, Black Deaf Americans created their own society. The Black Deaf American community is fit with its own history, language, and associations that make it a truly unique culture.

Slavery is a tough topic to discuss in America, yet due to this difficulty, the experiences of Deaf slaves and other slaves with impairments are not discussed like they should be. A common belief in the United States is that slavery ended right after the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, however, this was not the reality for impaired slaves. During this era, Southern white people believed Black people were

slaves because they had no work ethic and needed supervision by white people to get tasks done. The anti-slavery Northerners advocated for the freedom of Black people by promoting that they could work on their own and sustain themselves. But because Deaf, blind, etc. slaves were not able to work without aid due to their impairments, they were not considered “able-bodied”. Since only “able-bodied” freedpeople were given government assistance after the war, impaired Black people had no other option than to remain as slaves. Eventually, the impaired freedpeople were removed from the plantations and placed in federal asylums. This was because impaired Black people were not allowed to work for the government for wages, and therefore were not able to own property. Due to the lack of money that was funded into these asylums, the impaired freedpeople were forced to work to keep the home operating. Again, slavery continued for the Black Deaf, blind, and other impaired people while most “able-bodied” Black people began their lives of freedom (Downs). While these asylums later came to an end and the impaired Black were finally freed, these unique hardships that Black Deaf people endured are a part of their distinctive culture.

To evaluate the truly special Black Deaf culture in America, one should first understand why and how this culture was created. The Black Deaf culture began not only because choosing either the Black community or the Deaf community would not be a perfect fit for a Black Deaf person, but also because Black Deaf people were not welcomed in those communities throughout the 17th to mid-20th centuries. Black Deaf people wanted to be a part of Black organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the National Urban League. However, Black leaders did not

focus on the main concerns of the Black Deaf, and due to the communication barrier, those concerns could not be expressed easily. As for Deaf organizations, Black people were prohibited from participating in them for a long time. Gallaudet University did not have their first Black student until 1950, and the National Association of the Deaf did not allow Black Deaf people until 1965, a year after the Civil Rights Act was passed. Because of the inability of Black Deaf people to participate in Black or Deaf activities, they created their own Black Deaf communities (Ogunyipe).

The Black Deaf culture began to thrive independently during the 1950s and 60s. Like hearing schools during that period, deaf schools were also segregated until the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision. Since Black Deaf schools did not have white teachers or white resources, they created their own version of ASL, called Black ASL. This language is now an important part of the Black Deaf culture. Communities where Black Deaf people could use their language and relate to each other's experiences were naturally created in big cities. However, a nationwide community for Black Deaf people was not formed until 1982. That year, the first national Black Deaf conference was held in Cleveland, Ohio, and the National Black Deaf Advocates non-profit organization (NBDA) was established. Now, NBDA has 30 chapters across the United States where they hold skillful workshops, leadership programs for young adults, and a Miss Black Deaf America pageant. Their mission statement is to "promote the leadership development, economic and educational opportunities, social equality, and to safeguard the general health and welfare of Black deaf and hard of hearing people" (Ogunyipe). Members not only include Black Deaf and Hard of Hearing people, but also parents of those who are Black Deaf, professionals in the Black Deaf world, sign language

interpreters, and anyone else who may want to advocate. Now, the Black Deaf community has expanded even more with the help of the internet. In 2020, a documentary called *Signing Black in America* aired on PBS, in which Black ASL and its development is expressed. Online, the Black Deaf Center website provides many resources, such as vlogs from Black Deaf people and their lives, educational books, online workshops and presentations, and Black Deaf owned businesses and connections. The Black Deaf community is gaining recognition through social media as well. Nakia Smith went viral on Tik Tok by demonstrating her Black ASL (Ogunyipe). The Black Deaf community has grown exponentially since its creation in the mid-20th century, and it continues to flourish every day.

While most Americans may not be aware, the Black Deaf culture is a large society with their own relations, language, activities, and history. They suffered a much longer period of slavery than the “able-bodied” Black person and were forced out of the Black and Deaf communities that they should have belonged to. Yet, Black Deaf people band together despite the troubles they have faced and have found a belonging within each other. The perseverance and determination that Black Deaf people acquire is truly inspirational.

Works Cited

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