

# ‘Silence perpetuates the problem’

Sign language interpreters of colour reflect on their experiences



**Olivia Whitter: ‘Their facial expressions and body language say it all’**

I would like to start by saying these are my personal experiences and views as an interpreter.

As a mixed-race interpreter, I am regularly asked: ‘Where are you from?’ and ‘What are you?’. Rather than sarcastically answering ‘I’m from earth and I’m a human’, I say I was born in England and that I’m British. I would love this to satisfy most people but it rarely does. I am usually hit with, ‘I mean, where are your parents from?’ I respond, ‘They were born in England and they are British’. They are asking about my ethnicity, although that is not the question they ask. After explaining my heritage, most people are satisfied.

This conversation starter is my daily experience and although 85 per cent of the people I meet are genuinely intrigued by my appearance and can’t work out my ethnic background, it can be tiresome. I wonder how many other SLIs are asked about their heritage and whether they are all interpreters of colour? I know these people are not being mean by asking these questions, although I could argue for better semantics.

The other 15 per cent of people are present at the bookings where I feel

unwelcome, mistrusted and uneasy. This could be due to the conversation starter above and the client repeatedly asking if I was born in England (in case I’m confused as to where I was born) or it could be the client finding out I am the SLI and their facial expressions and body language say it all. Most of these interactions I would not claim to be blatant racism or discrimination but still, there is an underlying yet tangible tension and discomfort. Like most people, I struggle to forget negative experiences and ponder on why this happened to me.

I could not write a piece on my experiences as an interpreter of colour without mentioning Black Lives Matter and the impact it has had on me when some colleagues have opted to stay silent on the issue. I understand this could be for many reasons and am also aware it makes some people uncomfortable, but I feel silence perpetuates the problem.

I feel it is important to highlight this because as SLIs we have many issues that we individually and collectively endure. If we will not stand together against discrimination, many will feel unsupported, undervalued and isolated.

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**Olivia Whitter lives in the West Midlands and works in a range of domains including medical, education and theatre**



**Azaria Francis: ‘Invisibility and hypervisibility can coexist’**

Is there racism in interpreting? Yes – racism is everywhere – systemic, structural and institutional. SLIs of colour are underrepresented in interpreter education, research, training and practice. As a person with lived experiences of being a Black British female SLI, I have seen that invisibility and hypervisibility can coexist. In my 12 years working with deaf people, I have seen very few, if any, BAME tutors, assessors, IVs, EVs, mentors or supervisors. It is also rare to see a black or brown face at the top levels of our SLI organisations. This lack of representation can be isolating and negatively impacts those in the profession.

Conversely, there is nowhere to hide when you are the only black person in the room! The community we work with is very diverse, so why is our profession predominantly made up of middle-class white women?

BLM has put racism in the spotlight. It prompted me to try to make some changes. I started having open conversations at the VR company I work for, directly addressing the lack of diversity. The response was positive. As the only black member of staff, it was difficult but necessary. A new role as Equality and Diversity Champion has meant facilitating training sessions that focus on the nine protected characteristics within the Equality Act 2010. The sessions create a safe space where people can become more aware of their prejudices and have open discussions. This will hopefully create an environment where differences are valued.

One session included the following task: hold up five fingers. Put one down for each statement that has happened to you.

- ‘Can I touch your hair – is it real?’
- You are often asked ‘Where are you from, like really from?’
- ‘You’re an interpreter – oh wow I didn’t know people of your race could be SLIs!’
- A deaf person often asks you (before you’ve signed) ‘What level are you? Are you fully qualified?’ ‘Let me see your badge.’
- You arrive at a job and the hearing professional assumes you are the patient and not the SLI, because of your skin colour.

Any fingers left? That’s privilege! The more fingers you have left, the more privilege you have. (I had no fingers left by the way!)

White privilege doesn’t mean your life hasn’t been hard; it just means skin tone doesn’t make it harder. There are lots of other privileges such as socio-economic, male, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied etc. But white privilege is perhaps the most enduring throughout history.

**How to be an effective ally**

- **Be aware of your privilege** and use it to address inequalities.
- **Educate and challenge** yourself and others. The minority cannot make a difference. We need the majority, in the privileged group, to use their influence to change the current situation.
- **Talk to people of colour.** If you make a mistake, listen, reflect, apologise and do better.

I have seen more jobs recently asking for an SLI of colour, either from an interpreter who has realised they are not culturally appropriate, or the organisation itself wanting to source a non-white interpreter directly.

This is a step in the right direction.  
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**Azaria Francis works in various domains such as medical, education and community**



**Nikki Champagnie Harris: 'I am not deaf but I know what it's like to be on the end of other people's unconscious bias'**

Storytelling is powerful isn't it?

I did some research for this piece, and here's what I found online:

- 'Stories stimulate our senses and involve us emotionally and intellectually'
- 'Story structure consists of character, goal and challenge'
- 'Storytelling is as much an art as it is a science'
- 'Stories work well if the audience objective and channels are carefully considered in advance'
- 'Stories should feel real and relatable'

I am a Bristol-based interpreter, born into a mixed-heritage family in the 1970s, with half my family Irish and the other side Jamaican. For 16 years, I was the only person who tied both sides together, acting as an ambassador for two sides that at times really didn't understand each other. Years later I became a SLI and, when people ask me how I chose this profession, my answer is that I've always been in this space. To me, cultural brokerage and language brokerage are two sides of the same coin and I believe my experiences moving between two cultures inform my practice.

What is cultural brokerage? Jezewski (1990) says that cultural brokering is 'the act of bridging, linking, or mediating between groups or persons of different cultural backgrounds for the purpose of reducing conflict or producing change'.

I have been doing this since I was a little girl. I was a fascination to some in the seventies – one moment patting my hair, parading me around at school music competitions in a rah-rah skirt, holding

maracas and singing cute Jamaican folk songs, parents cooing; the next, parents not letting me play with their children.

I grew up in white-majority Britain. Stones were hurled my way and thank God for the afro protecting my head back then; that's dark humour – it's nigger-ola's childhood adaptive strategy. I am 'other', I am 'non-white', to some I am 'not totally black', but here is where I exist.

The academic word to describe part of my experience is that I am a multicultural as opposed to a monocultural person. 'Multiculturals not only possess culture-specific knowledge, but also have various culture-general skills, such as high levels of integrative complexity, or the ability to accept different perspectives and combine them into a coherent whole (Tadmor and Tetlock, 2006), and cultural metacognition, or the ability to think about one's cultural assumptions (Chua et al, 2012, Thomas et al, 2010). These skills allow multiculturalists to identify and synthesize relevant information and ideas across different cultures in creative ways. Moreover, having experience in multiple cultures increases one's willingness to learn from and work with people from other cultures, as well as one's appreciation for the value of cultural diversity (Orr and Scott, 2008).' (Jang, 2017).

My early experience of growing up in an environment where I was constantly code switching has made me hypersensitive and I use this as an SLI. I am very adaptive to different types of deaf people and hearing people and their environments that I move through. I am also very intuitive. My experiences of being different and the feedback I get from others around me dictate how big or small I have to be in order to get on with everyone. Something many black and

brown people are always aware of is making yourself small, or in my case big, so others feel comfortable, checking their fragility is still intact while you try to connect with them, and this is all before starting to interpret. Using a collaborative model of interpreting, both my deaf client and I will strategise before meetings. I might not be the best interpreter in their team but I am good at meta-cognition and passing this to my client to get the best outcome. That's my USP.

I am not deaf but I am a protected characteristic and I know what it's like to be on the end of other people's unconscious bias most days. There are many parallels in the experiences of people of colour and deaf people. When you see two deaf people together, no matter how bilingual you are, there is something about them that you can't quite enter, you can't completely share. You may understand the language, but you are not totally in their universe with them. This, I believe, is similar with people of colour.

The deaf community is quite diverse, with 20 per cent of it made up of deaf people of colour (Oxford Policy Management, 2016). This is above the 13 per cent of the UK population coming from an ethnic minority (2011 Census – ONS). IOCs meanwhile represent only between 7 and 9 per cent of the profession, according to Sikder (2020).

How can deaf people of colour access their own culture and really connect with their own narrative at events if often a white interpreter, who doesn't share their cultural capital, covers these events? How can they have real access to their stories and who can really tell them?

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**Nikki Champagnie Harris runs a webinar: 'Casting interpreters appropriately for public events and theatre'**



**Selina Jacques: 'Can the interpreting profession say that it accurately reflects the communities which we serve?'**

I graduated from the University of Wolverhampton in 2012 and began to work part-time as a freelance CSW, while continuing my part-time student job for a housing association. My manager passed away suddenly, increasing the workload, and I took on less freelance work until I was no longer working as an SLI or CSW.

In 2016, I decided to do my NVQ Level 6 and Part A of interpreter training as a refresher and, in September 2017, I enrolled on a course to do a PDP with Interpreting Pathways based in Bristol, enabling me to re-join NRCPD as a regulated trainee. I also re-joined ASLI and was welcomed by Danielle Hansbury and the rest of the West Midlands group, who have always been so supportive.

A regulated trainee again, I began to undertake freelance work. My confidence grew and I really began to love my job, wondering why I left the profession in the first place. The University of Wolverhampton launched a Master's degree in Interpreting. I applied and have not looked back!

Everything was going well until Covid happened. It felt like yet another setback on the road to the job I love. Towards the end of the semester, teaching moved online, as did our live assessments. To my delight, and despite the strains of lockdown, home-schooling and Black Lives Matter, I passed my assessments in July and could register with NRCPD to obtain my RSLI status. I had got my yellow badge.

Yet during that time I had to deal with the uneasy feelings brought about by Covid, as

did my peers, and also with the global issue of BLM. The killing of George Floyd and the mass grief and anger that followed was not only justified; for many black people it stirred up feelings we had tried to suppress.

Racism is much more than slurs, name-calling or acts of violence. I have been on the receiving end of prejudice, name-calling and stereotyping since childhood. When a white colleague or friend disbelieves you about racism in the UK, it hurts, as if they are trying to downplay your life experiences. The impact of microaggressions is difficult to grasp unless you have experienced them yourself.

People often feel that it would be different in professional settings, yet there the prejudice can be subtle. Such examples as colleagues being shocked when they meet you face to face after conversing by email as 'you are so eloquent by email – I didn't realise you were young and black' and 'Oh I didn't realise you managed that team. Did you get the job because they are trying to fill a diversity quota?'

Being a person of colour in the UK can be just the feeling of being 'othered'. Although I have always felt welcome at ASLI meetings, an ASLI survey in 2011 found that 9 per cent of 297 respondents identified as non-White British and I am often the only person of colour at such events. This is not just a reflection of ASLI, as this has also been the case in other professional spaces.

A fellow SLI reached out to me via Twitter and advised of a WhatsApp group for interpreters of colour and I jumped at the chance to be involved. We have SLIs and deaf interpreters/translators from the UK, Germany and France. The inaugural zoom meeting for the IOCN (Interpreters of Colour Network) made me feel quite emotional, to

see so many interpreters of colour on the screen. I do know other interpreters of colour, but seeing so many on a screen at once was a revelation. For me the IOCN came at such an important time and made me feel less alone; I do not have to explain certain concepts or experiences as the other members 'just get it'.

I am hoping that the IOCN continues to grow and provide support for interpreters of colour all over the UK and Europe – a few of our members are the only person of colour in their region and they have said that the IOCN made them feel supported.

I am fortunate to have a great support network from my undergraduate, NVQ, training courses and postgraduate studies. I have also felt welcomed whenever I have attended ASLI meetings or training sessions. However, the fact that I am an interpreter of colour is important to me and it is something I possess that makes me different. I feel that I have lots of cultural information that is of benefit to the interpreting profession – I live in the West Midlands, which is a vibrant multicultural area. However, can the interpreting profession say that it accurately reflects the communities which we serve?

I do not profess to have the answer on how we can make the profession more diverse, but I believe that further academic research will be useful.

It is also important to note that representation matters and that Black people and people of colour need to see themselves in professional spaces, for example on company websites such as ASLI and NRCPD and in their publications.

**Selina Jacques is a freelance interpreter, based in the West Midlands and working mostly in education and community**



**Sandra Pratt: 'Learners do not only need knowledge, they need representation'**

Is there a 'Blackademic' in the house? My name, according to Boakye (2019), could be considered 'white-sounding'. I am inclined to agree, as I have had some interesting looks or smiles when I have first met people. One bold interviewee said (in relation to my name and accent), 'I thought you would be white'.

Other experiences include being mistaken for a cleaner or waitress or a foreign student, despite efforts to explain my role as a senior lecturer (of 17 years standing). These examples may appear shocking at first but, considering current demographics of Black lecturers in higher education, furthermore Black interpreter trainers/lecturers, perhaps such assumptions are understandable (but not acceptable). 'HESA figures for 2018/19 report that, of the 137,720 academics on fixed or permanent contracts, 123,335 (89.5%) are white, whereas only 2,210 (1.6%) are Black British (African/Caribbean or other) and 4,445 (3.2%) are Asian British. In this light, such attitudes are not surprising. However, for me, I accept this as an opportunity to educate and hopefully eliminate those stereotypical views.

In this article I wish to address a couple of points from my perspective as a Black lecturer and interpreter trainer: firstly, how can we incorporate race discussions into interpreter training pedagogy and secondly, how can I include my lived experience in interpreter training discussions.

It is evident that 'globalisation has altered the face of social, cultural and linguistic diversity in societies all over the world' (Blommaert and Rampton, 2011:1). We notice that 'the spectrum of communities living [in the UK] is rich and diverse, adding value and texture to UK society' (Boakye, 2019:56). As interpreters, we work in these communities and it is essential that we understand this diversity. Indeed, we need to appreciate the richness and value communities have and what they contribute to our society. So how do we incorporate these much-needed aspects into the training and development of interpreters?

At the University of Wolverhampton, we have a diverse team as well as (as the years go on) more diversity within our student group on the BA (Hons) Interpreting British Sign Language (BSL)/English course. It is therefore essential that students feel they can relate to the curriculum and to those who are instructing them. As one of the very few Black BSL/English interpreter trainers in the UK, I am in the advantageous position of being able to bring my own lived experience into my teaching, having the opportunity to address issues of race and ethnicity within a teaching and learning context.

The training of SLIs and our own CPD, as we know, goes far beyond linguistic competence (see Dean and Pollard, 2001); it also needs to explore real-life situations faced by real people. This can be done in several ways – guest speakers, materials that reflect people of diverse backgrounds, in situ observations, etc. We can make our

**<sup>1</sup> HESA is the Higher Education Statistics Agency who 'collect, assure and disseminate data about higher education (HE) in the UK' (www.hesa.ac.uk ). (89.5%) 123,335 are white, whereas only (1.6%) 2,210 are Black British [African/Caribbean or other] and (3.2%) 4,445 Asian British. (1.8%) 2,585 are of mixed ethnicity, with (1.4%) 1,995 Chinese, and (1.2%) 1,745 listing their ethnicity as 'other'.**

## INTERPRETERS OF COLOUR

curriculum and our CPD opportunities more inclusive by identifying the materials we have available and using them to reflect the diversity of the communities we work with – both deaf and hearing. We can incorporate changes to names used in situated learning roleplays to reflect experiences and names we may encounter in the community: Ahmed, Dipisha, Owusu, Ranjit, Kojo etc. Names like Prayer, Patience and Precious are names of people within our communities; knowing the various spellings and pronunciations is essential to building rapport. In (BSL and English) language development, we should incorporate a range of videos from different communities, for example – using the BSL corpus, TED talks, 1,000 Black Voices, and other online materials available. Students' own and individuals' experiences of

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language and culture make for fascinating discussions. In some sessions I have introduced students to Anansi stories as part of language practice. I remember a student being quite excited because these were stories they had grown up with and related to. TV programmes and the reading of books that give insights to other cultures is a great addition to our professional development.

Diversity and race are not topics we tend to talk about openly, as shown in the Channel 4 programmes 'The School that tried to End Racism' and 'The Talk'. Race and racism should be addressed (Obasi, 2013; Holland, 2015), both incidentally and explicitly. Housee (2008), in her research on teaching about racism, found that students felt that the 'affective' side of learning is as essential as the 'knowing'. This is where my experience as a Black person becomes an advantage. This is not to say that only Black lecturers can teach about racism (nor should they be the only ones), but Housee recognises that 'the presence of Black lecturers is important for [both] Black and white students as it [helps] to dispel the idea that universities are "white places"' (Housee 2008: 427).

Incorporating my lived experience brings up opportunities for discussions and assists students to reflect on their own experience and relate to the experiences shared. Learners do not only need knowledge, they need representation. It is important to ensure diversity in the curriculum and in our CPD opportunities. For less diverse teaching teams, it is essential to make a 'space' to explicitly address issues of diversity, race and culture, and for students to 'tell their own stories' (Housee, 2008:418).

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