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Orientalising Deafness: race and disability in imperial Britain

This article explores the connotations and connections that postcolonial and disability scholars have drawn between 'race', 'colonialism' and 'disability' from an historical perspective. As Mark Sherry (2007) has discussed, such slippages are potentially problematic, insulting to both disabled populations and peoples of colour as well as obscuring the specificities experienced by both. By looking at the connections drawn between 'race' and 'disability' in the context of nineteenth-century imperial Britain, I hope to probe beyond them to examine the origins and implications of their interplay. I do so by focussing on ideas about deafness, an impairment radically reconfigured in the colonial period, and inflected with concerns about degeneration, belonging, heredity and difference. Disability, I argue, not only operated as an additional 'category of difference' alongside 'race' as a way of categorising and subjugating the various 'others' of Empire, but intersected with it. The 'colonization' of disabled people in Britain and the 'racial other' by the British were not simply simultaneous processes or even analogous ones, but were part and parcel of the same cultural and discursive system. The colonising context of the nineteenth century, a period when British political, economic and cultural expansion over areas of South Asia, Australasia, and Africa increased markedly, structured the way in which all forms of difference were recognised and expressed including the difference of deafness. So too did the shifts in the raced and gendered thinking that accompanied it, as new forms of knowledge were developed to justify, explain and contest Britain's global position and new languages were developed through which to articulate otherness. Such developments reconfigured the meaning of disability. Disability was, in effect, 'orientalised'. 'Race' I argue was formative in shaping what we have come to understand as 'disability' and vice versa; they were related fantasies of difference.

Keywords: d/Deaf; disability; race; colonial; postcolonialism; imperial Britain

The influential American novelist Edward Bellamy's short story 'To Whom it May Come' (1898) tells the tale of the sole survivor of a ship-wreck washed up on the shores of a remote island in the Indian Ocean. The narrator awakes to find himself surrounded by the 'inhabitants of the country' who he recognises to be a 'white and handsome people, evidently of a high order of civilization', but not possessing any 'traits of race' with which he was familiar (390). The narrator's successive addresses to them in English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Dutch and Portuguese, were met with looks of pity, but no verbal affirmation of comprehension. Before long the disturbing silence between the strangers caused 'a most extraordinary conjecture' to occur to the narrator: 'could it be that these strange people were dumb?' 'Such a freak of nature as an entire race thus afflicted had never indeed been heard of', he mused, 'but who could say what wonders the unexplored vast of the great Southern Ocean might thus far of hidden from human ken?' (391). The protagonist was also familiar with the 'deaf-and-dumb alphabet' and began 'to spell out with [his] fingers' the introductory remarks he had already uttered to no avail (391). The 'natives' found his resort to sign-language

hilarious. 'It was as if they were very sorry for me, and ready to put themselves wholly at my service, if I would only refrain from reducing them to a state of disability by being so exquisitely absurd' (391). Fortunately, an interpreter arrived and begged the narrator excuse his countrymen for 'the wholly involuntary and uncontrollable mirth' provoked by his attempts to communicate with them explaining that 'they understood you perfectly well, but could not answer you' (392-3). The protagonist was horrified that his conjecture may thus be confirmed: the whole group had been 'afflicted' by 'dumbness.' His pitying assumption of their disability was soon, however, corrected (393). They were in fact a race of 'mind-readers', descended from a group of magicians expelled from Persia 2000 years before, who had themselves been ship-wrecked on their way to Ceylon. They had embarked on a 'rigid system of stirpiculture' (selective-breeding) and 'within a few generations there had evolved 'a new and advanced order of humanity' (395). As mind-reading became the 'natural' form of communication, so spoken language had fallen out of use. Only a single interpreter retained the dubious 'power' of speech and even that was 'the most pitiable abortion of a voice' which, 'having all the defects in articulation of a child's who was only just beginning to talk, it was not even a child's in strength of tone, being in fact a mere alteration of squeaks and whispers inaudible a rod away' (392).

In 'To Whom it May Come', Bellamy strikingly evokes the entangled fears and fantasies of race and disability in late nineteenth-century thinking across the Anglo-American world. Degeneration, evolution, disability and colonialism play off each other in the anxieties of difference expressed in the encounter. Otherness is racialised; whiteness is disrupted by the presence of apparent disability; the 'dumbness' of the 'natives' is evidence of both of piteous incapacity, and yet is queered, apparently proving evidence of a more 'advanced' stage of a 'civilisation' than the narrator's (and by extension the reader's) own; and yet the infantilised voice of the translator smacks of 'degeneration'. Throughout, the human condition appears disconcertingly malleable and concepts of 'race' and 'disability' are difficult to disentangle.

Postcolonial and disability theorists from many disciplinary perspectives have identified intersections between racism, colonialism and disability. Some have highlighted causal links from the production of impairment through the economic and physical violence of colonialism to the disabling postcolonial legacies of warfare and poverty in the Global South (Meekosha 2011). Scholars of disability have used the language of 'colonisation', 'slavery' and 'apartheid' to discuss the political, social and economic marginalisation of disabled people in Global North (Hirsch 2000; Szasz 1977; Goggin & Newell 2004). Such formulations have long roots, stretching from the historical naming of leper asylums and psychiatric institutions as 'colonies' to recent literary discussions of 'the cripple as Negro' (Kreigal 1969). In this vein, Harlan Lane and other Deaf activists have deployed the language of colonial resistance to claim members of Deaf cultures as a linguistic and cultural minority suffering the 'physical subjugation of a disempowered people, the imposition of alien language and mores, and the regulation of education on behalf of the colonizer's goals' (Lane 1993). From the opposite perspective, the rhetoric of disability has also been used by postcolonial critics to discuss 'disabling the colonized' through economic and social exploitation and the process of colonisation as one of 'national disablement' (Quayson 2002; Choi 2001). However, as the sociologist Mark Sherry (2007) argues, metaphorical transfers between disability, race, and postcolonialism, are potentially problematic. Straightforward conflation is offensive and conceptually confusing, blurring very different experiences and marginalising the distinctive cultural constructions and patterns of stigmatisation specific to each. The marginalisation of and discrimination against people with

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disabilities in Britain was quite a different process from overseas territorial colonialism, which also involved mass physical violence, expropriation of land, and economic exploitation (Meekosha 2011). Nonetheless, the enduring and evocative connections between disability, race and colonialism suggest that understanding them historically, if only to pick them apart, is important.

This article explores these confluences and connections in nineteenth-century Britain, a time and space where Benjamin Disraeli argued 'all is race' and Britain ruled a global empire. By examining the slippages between 'race' and 'disability' historically I hope to probe the origins and implications of their interplay. 'Disability', I argue, not only operated as an additional 'category of difference' alongside 'race' but intersected with it. The 'colonisation' of disabled people in Britain and the 'racial other' by the British were not simply simultaneous or analogous processes, they were part of the same cultural and discursive system. The colonising context of the nineteenth century, a period when British political, economic and cultural expansion in South Asia, Australasia, and Africa increased markedly, structured the way in which all forms of difference were recognised and expressed, emphasising heredity and aligning bodily difference with political subjugation. New forms of knowledge were developed to justify, explain and contest Britain's global position and new languages were developed through which to articulate otherness. Such developments reconfigured the meaning of disability. Disability was, in effect, 'orientalised'. 'Race' I argue was formative in shaping what we have come to understand as 'disability' and vice versa; they were related fantasies of difference.

Deafness seems to be particularly fruitful ground through which to explore these connections and will form the focus of my analysis.ⁱ Branson and Miller (2002) have convincingly argued that deafⁱⁱ people have long been treated as an 'other' that was stereotyped, discriminated against and differentiated from 'mainstream' national culture. Paddy Ladd (2003) has argued that the social and cultural 'colonisation' of the deaf replicated that of the ethnic 'others' of empire: both groups were subject to ethnocentric and paternalistic endeavours to 'civilise' them, both experienced the deliberate suppression of their vernaculars, and both were disenfranchised politically. Douglas Baynton's work (1992 and 2006) similarly suggests that, in the US context, concerns about race, language and nationhood impacted the development of oralism (the practice of teaching deaf people to articulate the vernacular rather than in sign-language), as well as the exclusion of new migrants on the basis of impairment. And, of course, the eugenicist fantasy expressed by Bellamy in the opening paragraph is, not insignificantly, one of deaf-muteness. The deaf appeared to evoke particularly acute concerns about degeneration, as expressed in Alexander Graham Bell's warning that inter-marriage between deaf people would create 'A Deaf Variety of the Human Race' (Bell 1883). But these links have generally been discussed as analogous processes, not, as I argue here, connected.

Discovering deafness

As the historian of disability, Jacques-Henri Stiker (1999) has argued, disability and disabled populations always represent what is 'unlike', what 'should not exist' or what must be assimilated. The social malleability of disability, allows it to be imbued with whatever any given society considers particularly frightening, disturbing or disruptive to an imagined 'norm' and inflected with ever-shifting fantasies of the 'extraordinary', 'monstrous', 'leaky' or 'incomplete' body (Thomson 1997, Shildrick 2012). This has resulted in different forms of embodiment being understood as 'disabled' in

different periods and specific impairments, such as deafness, being inflected by fantasies of difference of ever-shifting shapes. During the eighteenth century, the racial difference of the colonial other became an important measure of what the literary critic Felicity Nussbaum has discussed as 'the limits of the human' (Nussbaum 2003). Racial thinking too, is highly contingent not least in its various articulation through what Stuart Hall has discussed as 'biological' and 'cultural' registers or 'logics' of race that are 'always present, though in different combinations, and grounded in different contexts and in relation to different subject populations' (Hall 2000, 224). In the nineteenth century, perceived racial difference was used to justify the transatlantic slave trade, the expropriation of indigenous land across Australasia, South Africa and the Americas, and violence of genocidal proportion in Tasmania. The colonial other became a subject of ethnographic examination, pseudo-scientific investigation, literary curiosity, political subjugation, economic exploitation, Christianising mission and philanthropic crusade. Imperialism infiltrated British culture in complex and manifold ways from high politics, to education, to literature and brought with it increased sensitivity to questions of race, nationhood and belonging (Hall & Rose 2006). As Nussbaum argues, the difference of race, 'anomaly' and gender were intricately enmeshed (Nussbaum 2003). In a context when issues of race and empire gained increasing levels of cultural dominance, attitudes towards disability (including deafness) absorbed some of the associations of colonial difference. One way in which this can be seen is in the increased identification of deaf people both as a cultural group ('deaf heathens') and as a biological category ('a deaf race'), markers which held colonial resonances. The framing of deaf people in the language of 'discovery' also suggests that the 'problem' of deafness was reconfigured alongside the increased 'exploration' of empire overseas.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw many shifts in the way in which both deaf people in Britain and the colonial other overseas were conceptualised. The increased confidence of doctors to identify and cure various conditions led to the medicalisation of deafness (Carpenter 2009). The period saw a growing identification drawn between deaf people and charity, when following the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, deaf people increasingly became objectified as members of the 'deserving poor' (Atherton 2011, 25). At the same time, the rapid expansion of the British Empire; debates over the abolition of slavery; the development of pseudo-scientific racism; the increased circulation of imperial and missionary travel writing; and later in the century the 'hardening' effect of indigenous rebellions on attitudes towards the others of empire propelled images of the colonial other into the British public sphere. A colonial context in which difference was inscribed on the body made the presence of 'other' bodies within the imperial race yet more problematic). The sensational discovery of the 'savage of Aveyron', a 'wild' boy, aphasic and possibly deaf, who lived 'naked' in the woods until he was eventually captured, examined and displayed raised fears about 'primitive' Europeans at a time when 'savagery' was being increasingly located overseas (Simpson 2007).

Religious difference was a key part of this. The 'heathenism' of the colonial other preoccupied missionaries, humanitarians and their networks of supporters in Britain who worried over the 'godless' states of the Indians and Africans they encountered and associated lack of 'civilisation' (Cleall 2013). They raised money, trained missionaries, built schools and Churches, and translated the Bible into local languages to introduce the Word of God to those who, it was feared, were otherwise consigned to hell. Similarly the fear that deaf Britons were 'pagans' at worst and 'heathens' at best, motivated the rise of missions to deaf children at home. The deaf child is 'thrown at once to an almost immeasurable distance from all other men', Charles Orpen the Secretary to the Deaf and Dumb Institution at Clarendon in Dublin wrote, 'inferior immensely to those who should be

his equals, dependent entirely upon those about him', 'wholly ignorant of HIM' and living 'without the hopes and prospects and consolation of religion' (Orpen 1828). Deafness not only carried the figurative association with 'heathenism', but the 'deaf and dumb' were literally feared to be un-Christian: the 'Deaf, who on that account do not attend Church' were an identifiable community unable to hear the Word of God (SCPK 1864).

Analogy and comparison with the 'others' of empire was also useful in the attempt to make 'known' the 'unknowable' condition of deaf people. It is 'difficult to find a point of comparison for such a state of being', one observer wrote of deafness:

It was not the condition of the uneducated savage, who, if he had the use of all his senses, however neglected by others, might, in some degree, educate himself. It was not like a state of prolonged infancy: for the faculties of the child were in a continual process of development. It might be most fittingly termed a chaotic state of mind – dark, confused, barren, and dreary... (*Report of the Cambrian Institution*, 29-30).

Images of colonial otherness are redolent here. The deaf person is positioned *below* both 'the uneducated savage' and the (European) child. The language used to discuss their 'dark', 'confused', 'barren' and 'dreary' existence evoke further images of empire, of the 'dark, benighted, fearfully savage people', to use the words of a contemporary missionary, of those located in 'Africa' and other far reaches of Empire (Sykes 1870, 255).

Degraded people in need of Christian benevolence were common tropes in humanitarian thinking, influential in the early nineteenth century. During the campaigns for the abolition of the slave trade, the emancipation of the enslaved, the protection of Aborigine rights, and the ending of indentured labour, humanitarians powerfully evoked the 'suffering body' of colonial others overseas. As Thomas Laqueur (1989) has argued, the lacerated backs of enslaved Africans, amongst other images, narrated the suffering body so as to 'engender compassion' and compel ameliorative action. New ways of writing about disability 'at home' can be added to this, including about deafness (an 'invisible disability') which was often read onto the body. One hearing man reflected on the 'faces of deaf-mutes' he had encountered in the Margate deaf asylum remarking that he could 'imagine nothing more pathetic than the anxious look of a deaf-and-dumb child, the utter lost expression of it, the sense of being cut off from you, of being outside your world, a creature of an inferior order' (Hatton 1896, 9). Deaf people were depicted as suffering beings whose bodies and minds demanded rescue. Mr Gordon (1831), an educationalist, wrote of deaf children struggling with 'a rude language of gesture' 'ill-adapted' for communicating with 'friends and neighbours' and deaf people as 'ignorant of the author of his existence', lacking 'all the great truths of natural and revealed religion', harbouring a 'propensity to evil' and being 'a burdensome', 'troublesome' and 'mischievous member of society' (iv). In other publications, deaf people, like the 'degraded' Indians and Africans of Empire, or the slum-dwellers of London's East End, were explicitly labelled 'heathens' needing rescue (*The Sheffield & Rotherham Independent* 1862, 6). Societies were established to 'save', 'civilise' and Christianise deaf children, particularly those from the working classes. Like the others of empire, deaf people were deemed incapable of helping themselves and dependent on white able-bodied people. As such they were subject to unprecedented attention from philanthropists, census officials, missionaries, educational and medical 'experts' and the lay public.

'Deaf and Dumb Lands'

One of the consequences of the increased 'discovery' of deaf people was institutionalisation. The nineteenth century saw the increased tendency to 'treat' and 'educate' disabled people within asylums and residential schools (Stiker 1999, 6). Following the opening of the Braidwood Institution, the first school in Britain for deaf children, in 1760, and the first *public* institution in 1792, similar institutions sprang up all over the country. These schools, institutions and asylums signified various kinds of segregation and have been read by some scholars of deafness as an early form of 'social welfare colonization' (Woll and Ladd 2011, 165). Deaf children were educated separately and differently from hearing children, in lessons that focussed on the mechanics of communication. Religious socialisation was also emphasised and many of these schools were missions, operating as part of the wider 'civilising mission' at home (Pemberton 2004). The West End Mission in London, for example, whose work extended to various internal others from 'destitute women' to the growing Jewish community in London, also managed an institution tellingly named 'Guild of the Small Brave Things', that aimed to teach 'deformed' children to be "'laetus sorte mea" (happy in my lot)' (West London Mission 1901).

The missions to the 'others' of empire and the deaf at home were part of the same project and seen through the same lens. The schools, asylums and other institutions for the deaf were founded on the same lines as the 'civilising mission' overseas which aimed, not only to introduce 'heathen' people to Christianity, but to overhaul their domestic arrangements; regulate their sexuality; dress them 'decently'; teach reading, writing and often English; 'morally' reform them; and to dislocate them from indigenous cultures, beliefs and practices (Cleall, 2012). Deaf missions back in Britain similarly aimed not simply to educate deaf children but to moralise and normalise them. Deaf people needed to be 'rescued' from families where they were physically and morally neglected. Deaf girls needed to be taught that sex outside of marriage was sinful and thus saved from 'the peculiar dangers to which female mutes are exposed when unguarded by education and religion' (Orpen 1836, 313-9). Metaphorical overlaps consolidated connections; hearing 'heathens' overseas were described as 'deaf to the Word' and Jewish people accused of 'playing deaf' when approached by Christian missionaries in London (Cleall 2012 and Ross 2011). Material overlaps of funding and support were personal and institutional. William Wilberforce, Zachary Macaulay, Thomas Buxton, Thomas Clarkson, and the Gurney family, names foremost connected with anti-slavery, also supported institutions for deaf children in Britain (*List* 1831). The Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge wrote stories about the deaf in Britain and hearing children overseas (SPCK 1847).

Institutions for deaf children could also be seen as instructive for the mission to 'racial' others. When Samuel Johnston (quoted in Réé 1999, 140) visited the aforementioned Braidwood Institution he was much impressed by the pupils' articulation of 'LONG words' and their understanding of arithmetic. 'It was pleasing', he said, 'to see one of the most desperate of human calamities capable of so much help'. The prospect gave him hope 'after having seen the deaf taught arithmetic,' he mused, 'who would be afraid to cultivate the *Hebridies*?' Johnston's comparison to the Gaelic-speaking Highlanders, associated throughout his tour to the Western Isles with uncivilised savagery, points to further connections between the 'civilisation' of the 'disabled' body and that that was ethnically 'different'.

Elsewhere, however, the 'heathen' deaf at home and the 'heathen' 'other' overseas were rival causes. Writing of the Cambrian Institution in 1848, a contributor to *The Welshman*, having extolled the virtues of this 'benevolent and truly Christian establishment', and writing in a context where overseas missions were becoming increasingly vocal fundraisers, posed that 'there is quite enough of real destitution and practical heathenism in Wales to absorb every penny of surplus money... without being called upon to send over the seas from Wales, (as is annually the case) hundreds and thousands of pounds for the conversion of the Caribbean, New Zealanders, &c' (quoted in *Report of the Cambrian Institution 1848*, 25). To supply 'the physical and moral wants of distant and uncivilised tribes', the author argued, should only be considered after the people of Wales had provided 'for the education of those who are surrounded with a double wall of ignorance – THE DEAF AND DUMB OF THE PRINCIPALITY' (25). Such a framing both drew attention to the differences between the two groups and held them together in the same imaginative framework. The language of 'degraded heathenism' was used to justify cultural and physical colonisation in both colony and metropole. Such comparisons were not exclusive to the deaf. As Susan Thorne (1999) has demonstrated the plight of the working-class 'heathen at home' was in constant struggle with the 'heathen overseas' for attention, prayers and money. Naming a domestic group a 'racial' other carried more and more weight as race 'hardened' and 'consolidated' in colonial discourse.

Physically grouping deaf people together changed the experience and representation of deafness. Within the newly founded schools, churches, and institutions, deaf people developed distinct social identities (Pemberton 2004). The use of manual sign-languages spread rapidly between children. Teachers of the deaf also spread sign-language and the issue of whether to use sign-languages ('manualism'), or spoken and written English ('oralism') to educate deaf children became highly contentious.

Language signified difference in both the racial and the deaf other and the displacement of native vernaculars is a staple of cultural imperialism. In his famous Minute of 1834 Thomas Babington Macaulay argued that 'native' Indian languages 'contain[ed] neither literary nor scientific information' and were 'so poor and rude' that they were incapable of expressing scientific thought (Macaulay 1835). Macaulay's conclusion that Indian advancement could only be effected through the English language was echoed throughout the nineteenth century in claims that English was essential to the progress of deaf children and that signing was 'animalistic', unable to express abstract thought, and a 'primitive' form of communication. In 1880 a congress of deaf educationalists from across Europe and America (all of whom were hearing), produced the infamous Treaty of Milan declaring that sign-language restricted deaf children and should be replaced by oral training (Branson and Miller 2002). Today, the Milan Treaty is remembered by Deaf activists as an aggressive act of 'oralist colonization'. The nineteenth century also saw the active discouragement of Welsh, Scots and Gaelic within the British Isles.

Sign language and the physical separation between deaf and hearing, evoked in visitors to deaf asylums and schools the sense that they were entering another world. Hearing visitors often described these institutions in ways reminiscent of Bellamy's evocation of the mute islanders and as the embodied fantasy of deaf people as a race apart. Joseph Hatton wrote on his 'exploration' of the Margate Deaf and Dumb Asylum as the 'reminiscences of a sojourner in Deaf-and-Dumb Land', a place he described as 'A strange, sad, interesting country' (Hatton 1896, 6). The deaf were safely

contained 'in there' and the allusion of physical distance seemed to relieve Hatton, and other interlopers into 'deaf-and-dumb lands', of the possibility of contagion. Hatton's description of 'Deaf-and-Dumb Land' evokes contemporary imperial travel writing which represented non-European places as spaces of adventure to be 'discovered', and 'conquered' by intrepid Europeans, and indigenous peoples as exotic curiosities. 'Deaf-and-Dumb Land is a new country to me', he wrote, 'For a time it affected me as might have done the discovery of a new country.... I experienced some of the sensations of a discoverer' (Hatton 1896, 41). This imagery is not only about geographical distance but also about otherness, a link that was increasingly mapped onto imperial frameworks in this period. In medical and colonial discourses the empire was often associated with disease: the 'hot' spaces of the colonies were constructed as a climate that Europeans could not survive; Africa was a 'sick continent' both epidemiologically and morally, and the peoples of empire were imagined as crying out for western biomedicine (Vaughan 1891; Anderson 2002). In doing so, the empire offered a means through which to imaginarily exile the ills from the metropole out to the colonies. It was as though sickness and disability were themselves being conceptually exported to the colonies, as climatic understandings of disease increasingly identified Africa and India as 'places of sickness' and Britain as a place of relative 'health'. Asylums, institutions and residential schools helped to relieve the disruption posed to these neat separations in the metropole.

The comparison could also operate in reverse. When Harriet Martineau, herself hard of hearing but writing in this context as an imperial traveller in the Middle East, recorded visiting Egyptian harems she described leaving them with a 'heaviness of heart greater than I have ever brought from Deaf and Dumb Schools, Lunatic Asylums or even Prisons' (Martineau 1848, 259). Like many European travel writers, Martineau had been appalled by the 'atrocious' harems and their 'ignorant', 'wretched' and 'gross' inhabitants. By introducing the harems with this metaphor, Martineau frames cultural difference through the imagery of disability. Her later discussion of 'attempts to have conversations by signs' similarly evoked the deaf institutions that she, like Hatton, had visited as a quasi-colonial curiosity (Martineau 259-70). The origins and consequences of depictions of educational institutions and of harems are clearly different, not least in the 'colonisers' attempts to erect the former and dismantle the latter. But some of the power dynamics of the hearing or colonial 'gaze' are shared nonetheless, and the metaphorical slippage between 'overseas territories' and 'deaf-and-dumb lands', indicates how diverse forms of bodily difference occupied the same imaginative space.

Whilst deaf institutions primarily operated to exclude and seclude the deaf, this was accompanied by the selective 'exhibition' of choice pupils. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson has demonstrated elsewhere, 'freak shows' performed the cultural work of focussing, containing and 'discharging' anxieties about the differences of both race and disability onto the 'spectacle of the extraordinary body' (Thomson 1997, 55-80). So too was the invisible difference of deafness rendered visual for this kind of display. Whilst signing always provoked fascination, as oralism gained precedence over manualism (either in the form of signed languages or the manual translation of spoken languages), it was the 'speaking deaf' who were considered most remarkable. An observer at the demonstrations by the pupils at the Glasgow Institution in the 1870s recalled the 'interesting' and 'astonishing' demonstration of 'articulation and lip-reading' as several 'deaf mutes' read aloud portions of the Bible. 'In some cases the sounds emitted were not easily distinguishable', the observer recorded, 'but a number of the pupils pronounced the words as distinctly as if they had all their lifetime been gifted with the power of speech. One little fellow recited the Lord's Prayer in a very clear and

creditable manner' (*Fifty-Seventh Annual Report 1878*, 19). These performances were about objectifying and visualising otherness as much as demonstrating achievement and, as such, there is an uncanny resemblance between the 'display' of the 'speaking' deaf and the 'civilised or Christianised African'. As the literary scholar Eitan Bar-Yosef notes in another context, in much Victorian discourse the disabled person was encouraged to 'overcome' their impairment, by making it "invisible", but, paradoxically it must also be maintained because 'unless the impairment is somehow kept in mind, made visible, the accomplishment cannot be fully appreciated' (Bar-Yosef 2009, 135). For the postcolonial scholar such paradoxical demands are reminiscent of Bhabha's 'colonial mimicry': the demand to be 'almost the same, *but not quite*' (Bhabha 1984, 127). In this way, the trend towards oralism, carried colonialist resonances, as did the element of ethnographic human display proliferating in Britain in this period, which as Sadiya Qureshi (2011) has recently argued generated as well as reflected new, 'hard-edged' ideas about race.

A deaf race?

The codification of 'biological' difference also drew on evidence drawn from types of body defined by 'race', 'disability' the intersections perceived enjoining them. The bodies of those most famously associated with 'otherness' – Sara Bartman the 'Hottentot Venus', for example, were defined both through ethnicity and through ideas about medical or physiological 'deformity'. Those puzzling over what they termed 'Mongolianism' struggled with whether Down's syndrome was 'racial'; following the fame of Eng and Chang Bunker conjoined twins were labelled 'Saemese'; and Victorian 'freak shows' exhibited both 'Pigmies' and those with restrictive growth as 'midgets'. Eugenicists latched onto both race and disability as signs of 'degeneracy', often reading 'racial' degeneration as physically disabling.

Deaf people, particularly those conveniently grouped together in the new asylums and schools, were a source of investigation and interest to anthropologists, ethnographers and phrenologists, who were otherwise engaged in measuring, examining and categorising the 'race' of 'colonial others' in pseudo-scientific ways. George Combe, perhaps the most prolific British phrenologist of the nineteenth century, and his colleague and mentor Dr Spurzheim, visited many deaf institutions to record the apparent peculiarities of deaf children (Capen 1881). Alexander Atkinson, a former pupil at the Edinburgh Deaf and Dumb Institution, recalled Combe visiting their school as he pursued 'his researches on skulls from Institution to Institution in the city'. Atkinson was dismissive of his findings wondering 'if he was disappointed in not finding any peculiarity in our cerebral system, which he might have anticipated from the peculiarity of our physical lot' (Atkinson 1865, 134), but others took more seriously the implication that the physical differences of 'the deaf and dumb' extended far beyond the ear. The Scottish doctor James Kerr Love (1896), aural surgeon to the Glasgow Royal Infirmary, was also interested in establishing whether '[a]part from his deafness, has the deaf-mute any special physical characters? (sic)' a question he sought to answer by recording the height, weight, head-circumference and chest-circumference; incidence of left-handedness; reaction to painful impressions; mental qualities and longevity, as well as many more categories of measurement that also appeared in attempts to codify 'race' (10-28).

In reconfiguring understandings of the biological body, discourses of race and disability constantly intersected. The findings of Paul Broca, the French surgeon and anthropologist best known for his racial taxonomies, were also used by those writing about deafness, who read his location of the

faculty of speech in a specific part of the brain, as evidence that deaf inter-breeding could produce an alternative 'race' of humanity (Hubbard 1894, 7). From a different perspective, those writing about cultural difference often reflected on deaf people as a point of comparison. Max Muller, the orientalist and philologist, for example, speculated that "The uninstructed Deaf and Dumb... have never given any signs of reasoning in the true sense of the word", a statement which was taken up by those condemning deaf reproduction later in the nineteenth century (Muller quoted by Hubbard 1894, 8).

Edward B. Tyler, the so-called father of Anthropology, was also deeply interested in the 'deaf-and-dumb' not least in his investigations into 'primitive cultures'. Deaf people were not only another example of 'primitive cultures' but central to his thinking about them, an example of mankind in its 'natural state' that could be returned to repeatedly. The 'gesture-language', he wrote, gives 'insight into the workings of the human mind'. This in turn could be used to understand the concept of race itself. 'As, then, the gesture-language appears not to be specifically affected by differences in the race or climate of those who use it, the same of their skulls and the colour of their skins, its evidence, so far as it goes, bears against the supposition that specific differences are traceable among the various races of man, at least in the more elementary processes of the mind' (Tyler 1878, 47). Tyler's observation that 'The Indian pantomime and the gesture-language of the deaf-and-dumb are but different dialects of the same language of nature' (28) is similarly racialising. He places all deaf people the world over in the same 'class', making disability a master-category through which to define them and as such displacing national or ethnic belonging. He then aligns this 'class' with 'races' widely discussed as 'inferior'. Tyler was convinced of 'the ease and certainty with which any savage from any country can understand and be understood in a deaf-and-dumb school' reporting how the conversations of 'a native of Hawaii', a 'Chinese, who had fallen into a state of melancholy from the long want of society' and 'some Laplanders, who were carried about to be exhibited' were immediately revived and refreshed by being able to communicate to residents of deaf institutions with ease (47). Elsewhere, both racial others and disabled people were looked to as the 'missing link' between humanity and animals, particularly following the beginnings of evolutionary understandings of human development.

As a 'racial' group the deaf were increasingly felt to need containing not only in where they lived but in the numbers of their population in total. In his work on restrictions of deaf immigrants entering the US, Douglas Baynton demonstrates how ideas about the 'alien' in late nineteenth-century US culture, drew together ideas of both 'foreignness' and disability in eugenistic fears about degeneracy, that also carried racial connotations. Whilst less focussed around issues of immigration, similar processes were at work in Britain and its position at the heart of a global empire, ensured such discussions had a distinctly colonial dynamic.

Both in Britain and the US, issues of heredity and reproduction propel these issues into the public sphere as deaf people were overtly constructed alongside racial others as undesirable elements in the racialised nation. The Royal Commission into the Condition of the Deaf Dumb and Blind was perhaps the most influential organisation to demand that: 'intermarriage of congenitally deaf persons... should be strongly discouraged' (*Report of the Royal Commission*, Recommendation 26). But their views were widely maintained. Alexander Graham Bell (1883), whose interests in deafness and eugenics came together over this point, argued that deaf schools and sign-language should be abolished as generative of the deaf communities and identifications that led to inter-deaf marriage.

Others went further, to argue that marriage between deaf people should be legislatively forbidden (Baynton 1992, 231). Whilst in some ways such writings represents an *inversion* of fears of 'miscegenation' (fear of 'inter-breeding' instead of racial 'mixing'), many of the same concerns about degeneration, eugenics, public health and human 'types' underpinned both debates: what was at stake was the degeneration of the imperial race.

A reoccurring and unsettling theme in these discussions was how difficult it was to separate two categories that gained their discursive power from dichotomous positioning (in this case 'deaf' and 'hearing' and by extension 'disabled' and 'able-bodied') from, in practice bleeding into one another. Many critical colonial scholars have argued that policing racial boundaries often proved impossible, with mixed-race children, master-servant relationships, and indigenous converts to Christianity, forming just some examples of 'transitions' between 'colonisers' and 'colonised', or 'white' and 'black' (Stoler 2002). The same was true of understandings of deafness, not least in deaf children born to hearing parents and vice versa. Disability could always strike within the heart of the 'imperial race' and disrupt ideas about racial hierarchy. When these slippages could not be prevented, they were often disavowed. But in some fantasies of difference we see the fear generated by these instabilities seep through: part of what was so baffling for Bellamy's narrator was the whiteness and apparent 'normalcy' of the 'race' he encountered, they did not look 'black' and they did not look 'disabled'. Nonetheless, the discursive power of 'race' made it crucial to the explanation of the difference of disability whether to consolidate or to complicate it.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that the colonial context and the language of race entangled with it profoundly influenced the ways in which the difference of disability was framed and, in many ways, 'orientalised' disability in nineteenth-century Britain. I have suggested several different processes through which these confluences occurred. The religious otherness of deaf people was inflected by the rise of missionary work overseas, which identified 'heathens' to be pitied and converted as part of a civilising project. Discourses of 'civilisation,' 'progress' and the replacement of a native vernacular with English language, widely discussed in the context of overseas empires, could also play out at home. Biological registers of racial difference increasingly framed conceptions of 'others' both abroad and at home. Disability and ethnicity were explicitly brought together in fears about the 'health' of the 'imperial race'. Because ideas about race and disability were, in the nineteenth century, mutually informing, the 'colonising' treatment of the d/Deaf community and the colonisation of ethnic 'others' of Empire intersected. Disability, like race and gender, was important in expressing issues of 'difference' and contributing to their making.

The implications of these connections are important. The early histories of disability have focussed on disabled people in Britain who have experienced and resisted various forms of disempowerment, recovering the lives of deaf and disabled residents in the schools and institutions that proved so formative in their nineteenth-century constitution. But reframing this work in a colonial context, reminds us that such processes of disenfranchisement and exclusion were part of a wider shift in the constitution of a normative subject. It also opens some potentially uneasy questions about the ways in which peoples with disabilities, including deaf people, could occupy the position of an oppressor group as well as a group that has been repressed. The partially deaf Francis Baring, for example, earned huge amounts of money from the Transatlantic Slave Trade and for some years directed the

East India Company as it sought to exploit the Indian Subcontinent. Francis Humberstone Mackenzie was also deaf and was involved in slavery as well as being Governor of Barbados from 1800-1806. Jane Groom, a Deaf Missionary, suggested an emigration scheme whereby deaf people could colonise a part of Ontario (presumably at the expense of the dispossessed First Nations). Deaf British children may well have been subjected to discrimination, prejudice and ill-treatment, but they were also able to adopt the language of the coloniser when talking about overseas 'others' and to articulate imperialist and racial thought. The deaf pupils funded by the Glasgow Society for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb, for example, demonstrated their mastery of written English with accounts of the 'many heathen people in India' to whom 'we send missionaries to teach them the Gospel', of 'the Natives of New Zealand who are called Maoris', and of the 'inhabitants' of Ceylon who could 'pluck cocoa-nuts' [sic] and drink their juice (*Fifty-Seventh Annual Report 1878*). When deaf people travelled to the overseas of Empire, the complex interactions between disability and race were yet further contorted.

From a postcolonial perspective, examining the disruptions posed by disability reminds us to explore the embodied position of the coloniser as well as the colonised. Colonial observers from missionaries, to educational reformers, to colonial doctors, to government officials argued that the 'native' practices (such as confining women to harems and zenanas; foot-binding and female circumcision) were physically disabling. One implication of such activities was to represent the European as able-bodied and the indigenous population as sick, a dynamic compounded by the growth of colonial medicine which purported to use western science to 'cure' the 'sick continents' of Africa and Asia (Vaughan 1991). Disability amongst the European population and back in Britain complicated such constructions. Incorporating disability into postcolonial analysis reminds us that colonisation was not simply about a 'white' body or a 'male' body, it was one that was able-bodied. That embodied identities could be disrupted by disability both inter-generationally and within the individual life-cycle, engendering forms of fragility and bodily chaos that many were anxious to disavow. That disability has effectively been forgotten from much postcolonial analysis, demonstrates the power of this reluctance to confront bodily fragility and its continued power to subvert.

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ⁱ Many politically Deaf groups now argue that sign-language users are not a 'disabled' but an 'ethnic' or 'cultural' group. Here, however, I discuss deafness and disability together because, in the nineteenth century, the labelling of deafness as 'infirmity' was an important element of its construction.

ⁱⁱ Deaf activists have used 'Deaf' to indicate identity and 'deaf' adjectively, a distinction which usefully illuminates the gap between 'impairment' and identity. I have not, however, used it in this paper as the grammatical distinction did not exist in the nineteenth century and applying them retrospectively requires a problematic assumption of identity, particularly as in this period many people identified with both or neither of the categories with which they may now be associated.