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Deafness, Disability, and Cultural Resistance: Reimagining Identity and Language in Ann Clare LeZotte's Show Me a Sign

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Abstract : Ann Clare LeZotte's Show Me a Sign (2020) offers a historically grounded representation of Deaf life on nineteenth-century Martha's Vineyard, a unique community where signed communication formed an integral part of everyday social interaction. Unlike conventional literary portrayals that position deafness as a disability requiring correction, LeZotte presents Deafness as a cultural identity rooted in language, community, and shared history. This paper examines the novel through the interdisciplinary frameworks of Disability Studies and Deaf Studies, exploring the intersections of language, identity, colonial power, and scientific exploitation. It argues that Mary Lambert's experiences challenge the medical model of disability while exposing the ethical violence of nineteenth-century scientific curiosity directed toward marginalized bodies. Furthermore, the paper investigates how sign language functions not merely as an alternative means of communication but as a symbol of cultural resilience and collective belonging. By situating the novel within the historical context of Martha's Vineyard and engaging with contemporary scholarship on Deaf representation in literature, the study demonstrates how LeZotte redefines silence as agency rather than absence. Ultimately, the novel contributes to expanding disability narratives within children's historical fiction by foregrounding Deaf epistemologies and resisting ableist constructions of normalcy.

Keywords: Deaf Studies; Disability Studies; Sign Language; Deaf Identity; Children's Historical Fiction; Martha's Vineyard

Introduction

Literary representations of deaf characters have historically been shaped by hearing perspectives that privilege spoken language while portraying deafness as a deficiency or personal tragedy. Throughout nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, Deaf characters frequently appeared either as inspirational figures who overcame adversity or as isolated individuals whose silence symbolized social exclusion. Such representations reinforced what

Disability Studies scholars identify as the medical model of disability, wherein bodily difference is interpreted as pathology requiring treatment or normalization rather than as a legitimate form of human diversity (Batson; Sayers). Contemporary Deaf literature, however, increasingly challenges these assumptions by foregrounding Deaf culture, sign language, and community as positive identities rather than compensatory conditions.

Ann Clare LeZotte's Show Me a Sign occupies a significant place within this emerging literary tradition. As a Deaf author, LeZotte writes from an Own Voices perspective, presenting Deaf experience through cultural authenticity rather than external observation. Set in early nineteenth-century Martha's Vineyard, the novel draws upon the remarkable historical reality that a substantial portion of the island's population was Deaf and that both Deaf and hearing residents communicated fluently through a shared sign language. Consequently, Mary Lambert, the novel's young protagonist, grows up without perceiving herself as disabled. Her identity is shaped not by exclusion but by participation in a linguistic community where signed communication represents social normalcy rather than difference (LeZotte).

The novel's central conflict emerges not from Mary's deafness but from the intrusion of outside institutions that attempt to redefine her identity according to medical and scientific frameworks. The arrival of a hearing scientist seeking to identify the origins of hereditary deafness transforms Mary's body into an object of investigation. His attempts to classify and examine Deaf individuals reflect broader nineteenth-century scientific practices that frequently reduced marginalized populations to specimens for observation. Through this conflict, LeZotte exposes the relationship between scientific authority, colonial knowledge production, and the regulation of bodily difference. This paper argues that Show Me a Sign fundamentally challenges deficit-based understandings of deafness by presenting Deaf identity as a linguistic, cultural, and political category. Drawing upon Disability Studies and Deaf Studies, the study demonstrates how LeZotte repositions sign language as an expression of cultural belonging while simultaneously critiquing scientific exploitation and ableist assumptions. In doing so, the novel transforms silence from a symbol of absence into a site of resistance, identity, and collective empowerment.

Literature Review

The representation of Deaf characters has received increasing scholarly attention over the past several decades, reflecting broader developments within Disability Studies and Deaf Studies. Early literary criticism frequently examined Deaf characters through symbolic or metaphorical frameworks, often emphasizing silence, isolation, or communication failure. Such interpretations generally privileged hearing norms while overlooking the cultural and linguistic dimensions of Deaf communities.

Trenton W. Batson's Angels and Outcasts remains one of the foundational works documenting the historical representation of Deaf characters across literary traditions. Batson demonstrates that Deaf individuals have repeatedly been positioned within binary frameworks: either idealized as inspirational figures whose perseverance compensates for physical difference or marginalized as social outcasts whose deafness signifies personal limitation. Both models ultimately reinforce hearing-centered assumptions because they define Deaf identity primarily through comparison with hearing experience (Batson). Building upon this earlier work, Edna Edith Sayers' Outcasts and Angels expands the literary archive by examining more recent portrayals of Deaf characters across multiple genres. Sayers argues that contemporary literature increasingly shifts toward culturally authentic representations, emphasizing Deaf communities, bilingualism, and sign language rather than narratives of cure or rehabilitation. This transition reflects the growing influence of Deaf Studies, which conceptualizes Deafness as cultural identity rather than medical impairment (Sayers).

Scholars have similarly investigated Deaf representation within visual media. Miriam Nathan Lerner's study of Deaf characters in film argues that cinematic narratives often assign deafness symbolic functions unrelated to actual Deaf experience. Deafness becomes a metaphor for emotional distance, communication breakdown, innocence, or vulnerability rather than an authentic cultural identity. Such symbolic appropriation frequently erases Deaf agency by reducing characters to narrative devices that facilitate hearing protagonists' emotional development (Lerner, "Narrative Function of Deafness"). Lerner and Sayers further demonstrate that visual media have historically relied upon stereotypes including the "miracle cure," the isolated Deaf child, or the exceptionally gifted Deaf individual. Although more recent productions have begun incorporating Deaf actors and sign language, many representations continue to privilege hearing perspectives, reinforcing ableist assumptions about communication and normality (Lerner and Sayers).

Children's literature presents particularly significant challenges because literary representations often shape young readers' earliest understandings of disability. Sharon Pajka-West observes that adolescent literature has frequently portrayed Deaf characters through sentimental narratives emphasizing pity, dependence, or heroic perseverance. Such portrayals encourage hearing readers to sympathize with Deaf individuals without necessarily recognizing Deaf culture as a legitimate social identity. Pajka-West therefore calls for narratives that foreground Deaf perspectives and normalize signed communication rather than framing deafness exclusively as individual hardship (Pajka-West). Research examining children's book illustrations likewise demonstrates persistent visual stereotypes. Debbie Golos, Annie Moses, and Kimberly Wolbers argue that illustrations frequently depict Deaf children primarily

through hearing aids or other medical technologies, visually reinforcing disability rather than cultural belonging. The authors distinguish between disability-centered representations and culturally informed portrayals that emphasize language, community, and interpersonal relationships. Their findings highlight the importance of visual narratives capable of presenting Deaf identity beyond biomedical frameworks (Golos, Moses, and Wolbers).

LeZotte's Show Me a Sign directly contributes to this evolving body of literature by centering Deaf culture within historical fiction. Rather than constructing Mary's deafness as an obstacle to overcome, the novel portrays the hearing outsider as the disruptive force. Mary's community already possesses sophisticated linguistic practices through sign language; it is the hearing scientist who misunderstands Deaf life by imposing external medical categories. Consequently, the novel participates in broader literary efforts to reposition Deafness as cultural identity while simultaneously interrogating scientific and colonial systems of classification.

Theoretical Framework: Disability Studies and Deaf Studies

The present study adopts an interdisciplinary framework combining Disability Studies and Deaf Studies. Although both fields critique medical understandings of bodily difference, Deaf Studies introduces an additional emphasis on language, community, and cultural identity that is particularly relevant to LeZotte's novel.

Disability Studies distinguishes between impairment and disability by arguing that disability emerges not solely from bodily variation but from social structures that privilege certain bodies while excluding others. Rather than locating disadvantage within individual physiology, scholars emphasize the role of institutions, architecture, education, and cultural assumptions in producing disability. Under this perspective, Mary's deafness is not inherently disabling; instead, disability arises when external authorities deny the legitimacy of signed communication and impose hearing norms upon Deaf individuals. Deaf Studies extends this critique by emphasizing that Deaf communities possess distinctive linguistic traditions centered upon sign languages. William Stokoe's pioneering linguistic research fundamentally transformed understandings of sign language by demonstrating that signed languages possess grammatical complexity equal to spoken languages. His work challenged earlier assumptions that signs merely represented simplified gestures or visual translations of speech. Instead, sign languages constitute fully developed linguistic systems capable of expressing abstract thought, narrative, and cultural identity (Stokoe).

Margalit Fox further explores the cognitive significance of sign language, demonstrating that signed communication reveals important insights into human language itself. Rather than representing an adaptation to sensory loss, sign language illustrates the

flexibility of the human brain in organizing linguistic meaning across multiple sensory modalities. Fox thereby rejects assumptions that spoken language occupies a superior evolutionary or cognitive position (Fox). Within Show Me a Sign, these theoretical perspectives illuminate why Mary's identity remains stable until confronted by hearing institutions. Martha's Vineyard functions as an unusually inclusive linguistic environment where Deafness does not determine social participation. Because hearing residents also communicate through sign language, the social barriers commonly experienced by Deaf individuals are largely absent. Disability therefore emerges only when outside authorities introduce medical classification and hearing-centered assumptions. LeZotte's narrative consequently illustrates one of the central arguments of contemporary Disability Studies: exclusion is socially produced rather than biologically inevitable.

Furthermore, the novel critiques scientific authority by exposing its dependence upon visual surveillance and bodily classification. Mary's forced participation in scientific experimentation demonstrates how institutional knowledge often transforms marginalized individuals into objects of observation rather than recognizing them as autonomous subjects. This critique aligns with Disability Studies' broader examination of medicine as a mechanism of social regulation rather than purely therapeutic intervention.

Deaf Community as Cultural Identity: Martha's Vineyard

One of the most remarkable features of Show Me a Sign is its historical reconstruction of Martha's Vineyard, where hereditary deafness became sufficiently common that signed communication evolved into an ordinary aspect of community life. Unlike mainland America, where Deaf individuals frequently encountered educational exclusion and linguistic isolation, Martha's Vineyard fostered a bilingual society in which hearing and Deaf residents shared everyday communication.

This setting fundamentally reshapes conventional literary narratives surrounding disability. Mary Lambert does not initially perceive herself as different because difference itself has little social significance within her community. Her family history, local traditions, and neighborhood interactions collectively affirm Deaf identity rather than marginalize it. Consequently, LeZotte rejects the familiar literary trope in which disabled protagonists seek acceptance within hearing society. Mary already belongs. The crisis begins only when outsiders attempt to redefine that belonging according to external standards. The historical setting therefore serves as more than background; it functions as evidence that disability is socially contingent. When an entire community embraces sign language, communication barriers largely disappear. Mary's experiences reveal that exclusion originates not from deafness itself but from societies unwilling to accommodate linguistic diversity. In this sense, Martha's

Vineyard becomes a powerful counterexample to dominant assumptions about disability, illustrating the transformative possibilities of inclusive social structures.

Scientific Exploitation and the Medicalization of Deaf Bodies

The arrival of the hearing scientist marks the novel's decisive shift from a narrative of communal belonging to one of institutional oppression. Mary's deafness, which has never diminished her social identity within Martha's Vineyard, is suddenly transformed into an object of scientific curiosity. Rather than recognizing her as an individual embedded within a vibrant linguistic and cultural community, the scientist perceives her as biological evidence capable of revealing the hereditary origins of deafness. This transition reflects the nineteenth-century rise of scientific positivism, in which marginalized bodies were frequently subjected to observation, classification, and experimentation in the name of empirical knowledge. LeZotte demonstrates that the violence inflicted upon Mary does not originate from her deafness itself but from the desire of external authorities to define and regulate bodily difference according to hearing norms (LeZotte).

The scientist's methods reveal the dehumanizing consequences of the medical model of disability. Instead of engaging with Mary through her language or attempting to understand Deaf culture, he approaches her as a specimen whose value lies in her biological difference. His investigations deny her agency by reducing her identity to hereditary data, illustrating how scientific discourse often objectifies disabled bodies. Disability Studies scholars have long argued that medicine frequently establishes hierarchical distinctions between "normal" and "abnormal" bodies, legitimizing interventions intended to correct or explain difference rather than respecting diversity. LeZotte exposes this dynamic through Mary's repeated resistance to becoming merely an object of knowledge (Batson).

Importantly, the novel distinguishes between scientific inquiry and scientific exploitation. Knowledge itself is not portrayed as inherently oppressive; rather, oppression emerges when knowledge is pursued without ethical responsibility or informed consent. The scientist's obsession with discovering the "cause" of deafness reflects a broader ideological commitment to eliminating difference instead of understanding it. By portraying Mary's fear and humiliation, LeZotte critiques scientific practices that privilege observation over empathy and classification over human dignity. Such episodes remind readers that disabled individuals have historically been denied authority over their own narratives, while experts claimed the right to define their identities through institutional discourse (Fox). Furthermore, the novel demonstrates how medical authority becomes intertwined with social power. The scientist's hearing status grants him immediate credibility among mainland institutions, whereas Mary's experiences are frequently dismissed because they are communicated through sign language

rather than speech. Language thus becomes a site of political inequality. The inability—or refusal—of hearing authorities to recognize signed communication reinforces structures of exclusion that transform cultural difference into perceived disability. In this way, LeZotte illustrates that oppression is sustained not by deafness but by institutional refusal to acknowledge linguistic plurality (Stokoe).

Mary Lambert as a Figure of Resistance

Although Show Me a Sign depicts considerable suffering, it is not ultimately a narrative of victimhood. Mary consistently resists the identities imposed upon her, refusing to internalize hearing assumptions regarding her supposed inferiority. Her resistance is not expressed primarily through physical confrontation but through persistence, cultural memory, and unwavering confidence in the legitimacy of Deaf communication. Consequently, she emerges as a protagonist whose strength derives from community rather than individual exceptionalism. Mary's resistance begins with her refusal to accept the scientist's definitions of deafness. Throughout the novel, she never regards herself as broken or incomplete. Instead, she repeatedly contrasts the mutual respect and linguistic accessibility of Martha's Vineyard with the ignorance of outsiders who interpret silence as deficiency. Her confidence reflects the cultural security provided by a community in which Deafness constitutes ordinary social experience rather than marginal identity. This distinction separates LeZotte's novel from earlier literary works in which disabled protagonists sought assimilation into dominant society. Mary seeks no such assimilation because her community has already demonstrated the possibility of genuine inclusion (LeZotte).Equally significant is Mary's commitment to preserving the dignity of others. Her resistance extends beyond personal survival to encompass the protection of fellow Deaf islanders whose experiences mirror her own. By refusing to become complicit in scientific exploitation, she transforms personal suffering into collective responsibility. Such solidarity reflects central principles within Deaf Studies, which emphasizes community identity rather than individualized conceptions of disability. Mary recognizes that attacks upon one Deaf individual ultimately threaten the entire linguistic community. LeZotte also portrays resilience through everyday acts of communication. Conversations conducted in sign language become powerful affirmations of cultural continuity. Rather than depicting sign language merely as functional communication, the novel presents it as a repository of memory, affection, humor, and intergenerational knowledge. In doing so, Mary embodies cultural perseverance rather than passive endurance (Stokoe).

Language, Community, and the Politics of Sign Language

Perhaps the novel's most profound achievement lies in its representation of sign language as a complete linguistic and cultural system. Rather than treating signing as an auxiliary substitute

for speech, LeZotte presents it as the foundation of community life on Martha's Vineyard. Hearing and Deaf residents alike participate in signed communication, thereby eliminating many of the barriers commonly associated with deafness. This depiction challenges long-standing misconceptions that sign language represents a simplified or inferior form of expression.

William Stokoe's linguistic research revolutionized understandings of signed languages by demonstrating their grammatical sophistication and structural independence from spoken English. His work established that sign languages possess their own syntax, morphology, and expressive capacities equivalent to spoken languages. LeZotte's historical setting vividly illustrates these theoretical insights. Communication on the island flows naturally through signs, revealing language as fundamentally visual rather than exclusively auditory (Stokoe).
Margalit Fox similarly argues that sign language expands contemporary understandings of human cognition by demonstrating that language is not inseparably linked to sound. Human thought can be organized visually with equal complexity and nuance. Within the novel, this insight becomes culturally significant because language shapes social relationships rather than merely transmitting information. Families express affection through signs; neighbors resolve conflicts visually; traditions are transmitted across generations without dependence upon speech. Language therefore becomes the foundation of communal belonging rather than an indicator of disability (Fox).

LeZotte further reveals how linguistic exclusion functions as political exclusion. Outside Martha's Vineyard, hearing authorities frequently refuse to engage with sign language, thereby denying Deaf individuals equal participation within legal, educational, and scientific institutions. The resulting inequalities emerge not from sensory difference but from institutional unwillingness to recognize multiple linguistic modalities. Consequently, the novel aligns with contemporary Deaf Studies by arguing that language rights constitute fundamental human rights.

Colonial Conflict and Intersecting Marginalities

Although Show Me a Sign primarily explores Deaf identity, the novel simultaneously situates this experience within broader histories of colonialism and Indigenous dispossession. The tensions between English settlers and the Wampanoag people complicate the narrative by demonstrating that systems of domination rarely operate along a single axis. Deafness, colonialism, race, and land ownership intersect throughout the novel, revealing multiple forms of exclusion produced by unequal distributions of power.

Mary's observations of the Wampanoag community encourage readers to recognize parallels between cultural oppression and linguistic marginalization. Just as hearing institutions

seek to regulate Deaf bodies, colonial authorities attempt to regulate Indigenous land, traditions, and sovereignty. Both groups encounter external forces determined to redefine their identities according to dominant ideological frameworks. LeZotte thereby constructs an intersectional critique of power that extends beyond disability alone. Importantly, the novel avoids suggesting that Deaf and Indigenous experiences are identical. Instead, it highlights shared mechanisms of exclusion while respecting historical specificity. Colonial expansion threatens Indigenous autonomy through territorial displacement, whereas scientific authority threatens Deaf identity through medical objectification. Nevertheless, both processes depend upon denying marginalized communities the authority to define themselves. This thematic convergence deepens the novel's political significance by situating Deaf history within broader struggles against cultural erasure.

Mary's growing awareness of these overlapping injustices contributes to her moral development. She increasingly understands that resistance requires empathy across different forms of oppression. Her expanding ethical consciousness reflects the novel's broader argument that justice depends upon recognizing the legitimacy of diverse languages, histories, and cultural identities rather than enforcing uniformity.

Reimagining Deaf Representation in Children's Historical Fiction

LeZotte's novel represents a significant departure from earlier traditions of Deaf representation in children's literature. Previous narratives frequently portrayed deaf protagonists as isolated individuals striving to overcome communication barriers through extraordinary determination or medical intervention. Such stories often centered hearing audiences by emphasizing inspiration rather than authentic Deaf experience. In contrast, Show Me a Sign rejects sentimental frameworks and instead foregrounds cultural belonging, historical specificity, and linguistic diversity.

Sharon Pajka-West argues that adolescent literature has too often encouraged pity rather than understanding in its depiction of Deaf characters. LeZotte responds to this concern by constructing a protagonist whose identity is shaped by confidence rather than deficiency. Mary's struggles originate from external prejudice rather than internal inadequacy, thereby redirecting readers' attention toward social structures rather than bodily difference (Pajka-West).

Similarly, Golos, Moses, and Wolbers emphasize the importance of representing Deaf culture instead of merely illustrating disability. Show Me a Sign fulfills this objective by depicting signed communication as ordinary, joyful, and socially embedded. Deaf identity is presented not as exceptional but as integral to everyday life. Such representation encourages readers to appreciate linguistic diversity while questioning assumptions regarding normal

communication (Golos, Moses, and Wolbers). LeZotte's status as a Deaf author further strengthens the novel's authenticity. Rather than appropriating Deaf experience from an external perspective, she writes from lived cultural knowledge, allowing readers access to forms of perception frequently marginalized within mainstream literature. The novel therefore contributes to the broader Own Voices movement by demonstrating the importance of authorship in shaping ethical representation.

Conclusion

Show Me a Sign fundamentally transforms literary understandings of deafness by relocating disability from the individual body to the social and institutional structures that deny linguistic diversity. Through Mary's experiences on Martha's Vineyard, Ann Clare LeZotte reconstructs a historical moment in which signed communication flourished as a shared community practice, demonstrating that deafness becomes disabling only when societies privilege hearing norms over inclusive communication. The novel therefore rejects deficit-oriented narratives in favor of a culturally grounded understanding of Deaf identity.

Equally significant is LeZotte's critique of scientific authority. By portraying Mary's forced objectification under the gaze of a hearing scientist, the novel exposes the ethical dangers of reducing marginalized individuals to biological specimens. Scientific knowledge divorced from empathy becomes an instrument of domination rather than understanding. Mary's resistance ultimately reclaims authority over her own identity, affirming the dignity of Deaf culture against institutional attempts at classification and control.

The novel also broadens the scope of children's historical fiction by integrating disability history with colonial conflict, linguistic rights, and cultural resilience. Mary's story demonstrates that language constitutes far more than a means of communication; it is the foundation of memory, belonging, and collective identity. Through sign language, LeZotte reimagines silence not as absence but as presence, agency, and resistance. Ultimately, Show Me a Sign stands as an important contribution to contemporary Deaf literature because it challenges readers to reconsider dominant assumptions regarding disability, communication, and normalcy. By centering Deaf epistemologies and historical realities, LeZotte offers a narrative in which difference is neither cured nor overcome but recognized as an essential dimension of human diversity. The novel thus expands both literary representation and scholarly understandings of Deaf identity, affirming that genuine inclusion begins not by changing Deaf individuals but by transforming the societies that seek to define them.

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