

Bicultural/Bilingual/Bimodal: Deaf Identity in Nina Raine's *Tribes*

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The controversy between oralism versus manualism in the education and development of deaf children has raged for the past fifty years or more. Oralism proponents on the one hand claim that the aim of education is to prepare the deaf child to function as seamlessly as possible in hearing society and value the ideal of mainstreaming as a means of ensuring that the deaf child fits into a culture where spoken language is the primary mode of communication. Manualists, on the other hand, point to the fact that the deaf child will always remain outside of and isolated from the hearing world, can “make do” in terms of passing as a “hearing” person but never fully participates in the give and take of spoken conversation. The manualists claim that Sign Language is the natural medium of communication for deaf persons, that literacy in Sign Language frees the individual to receive and express ideas and enter into intimate language exchange. Bilingual or bimodal approaches attempt to synthesize oralism and manualism by envisioning a deaf individual who can utilize both oral and manual communication when the occasion calls for it. However, a deeper question surfaces about how the deaf individual gains entry into a culture, into a community of individuals who share a set of life circumstances, who share values, attitudes, meanings, social mores, a way of thinking, and common experiences. In other words, the issues double back on how the deaf individual transcends the separation that prevents the creation of community and full participation in the foundational social units that give meaning and direction to life.

What binds the individual to other people? Tribes, clans, and families are bound by blood, by bloodlines, by genetic markers. Because these smaller social units cannot function with self-sustaining autonomy, they typically organize themselves into larger societies where families work together to satisfy mutual needs and pursue mutual interests. However, the family, the tribe, the clan remains the core unit in any society and provides the locus where new generations are born, nurtured, and acculturated to become contributing members of society. In an interview for the Royal Court Theatre, Nina Raine, the author of the award-winning play, *Tribes*, described how such reflections on the cohesiveness of family as a tribe served as the impetus for her writing of the play:

I first had the idea of writing *Tribes* when I watched a documentary about a deaf couple. The woman was pregnant. They wanted their baby to be deaf.

I was struck by the thought that this was actually what many people feel, deaf or otherwise. Parents take great pleasure in witnessing the qualities they have managed to pass on to their children. Not only a set of genes. A set of values, beliefs. Even a particular language.

The family is a tribe: an infighting tribe but intensely loyal.

Once I started looking around, tribes were everywhere. I went to New York and was fascinated by the orthodox Jews in Williamsburg, who all wear a sort of uniform. They were like an enormous extended family.

And just like some religions can seem completely mad to non-believers, so the rituals and hierarchies of a family can seem nonsensical to an outsider. . .

Finally, I thought of my own family. Full of its own eccentricities, rules, in-jokes and punishments. What if someone in my (hearing, garrulous) family had been born deaf?
All these things went into the play, which took a very long time to write.

(“Why I Wrote Tribes”)

In an interview for Columbia University’s *Daily Spectrum*, Raine referred to the family as “the smallest niche you can get . . . a tiny little kingdom with its internal rules and hierarchies and weirdnesses that are unquestioned” (<http://spectrum.columbiaspectator.com/the-eye/layers-of-language-an-interview-with-tribes-playwright-nina-raine>). Families can function, however, only when the members are able to communicate with one another, and a common language is the vehicle for this communication. Raine’s play examines how language succeeds and fails in its primary function of sharing meaning between and among the members of the family and the ramifications of these failures of language when the family members encounter the world outside their closed system.

This discussion of language takes place in an erudite, almost rarified context in this household. Christopher, the *pater familias*, says that he used to teach but now writes books. His son Daniel describes these books as “the argumentative sort” (40) and Christopher corrects him to with the descriptor, “critical” (40). We see Christopher’s critical, if not argumentative nature in his derision of the man his daughter Ruth is interested in. Ruth’s current love interest, also a writer, approaches the nature of language from a post-modern, semiotic perspective. Christopher quotes from Ruth’s boyfriend’s book as follows:

“Narrative is phallic.” “The thetic, or mirror stage of development is Lacanian, where the semiotic self becomes coherent and acquires language.” . . . “Without language our thought will die.” (7)

Christopher obviously thinks that the book is rubbish and dismisses Ruth’s boyfriend for being too old for her and for writing books filled with gibberish. Daniel’s girlfriend Hayley is another target of criticism; Christopher observes, “Look, Daniel, as regards Hayley, you’re well off out of it. Even if it does mean you have to live here again. After spending time with her, your IQ *visibly* halved” (20). Hayley is rejected because she is from the north of England, is uneducated, and has, according to Christopher, the libido of “a bonobo” (). Christopher’s no-holds-barred approach to interpersonal interaction among the family members is reflected in his characterization of his children’s love interests as “parasites” (8), and he defends his confrontational and argumentative style by saying, “I’m having a conversation. That’s what we do in this house” (54). His children, however, characterize Christopher’s criticism as abusive; Daniel says, “Well, abusive love’s all that’s on offer here” (30). The mother Beth, who is writing what she describes as a “marriage-breakdown detective novel” (39), cries out at one point, “Christ. Why can’t you move a *step* without an argument starting in this house?” (19), and Christopher responds, “Because we love each other!” (19). For Christopher, the strength and resiliency of his love for his family is reflected in the open, honest, even hurtful language that he uses with them.

Language is also an obsession of Daniel, who is working on a thesis that is following its own post-modern argument, which he sums up as follows:

Ultimately, language is worthless . . . Language is radically indeterminate. Language doesn’t determine meaning. We have words but they are token, they are a pale photocopy of life.
(11-12)

Although Daniel appears to be *au courant* in terms of the theories he has borrowed from post-modernists like Jacques Derrida, the utility of his ideas is not borne out by the ways that language functions in his household. The family members struggle to understand and be understood by each other. Raine said in an interview that the play explores “How many ways there are of communicating and not communicating” (“Layers of language”). Language is so important according to Christopher that he even says, “. . . we don’t know what feelings *are* until we put them into words! . . . *That’s* the whole point of art. Putting feelings into words so that we know how to feel them” (16). And the children recognize the primacy of language in the household as the audience sees when opera singer Ruth says at one point, “. . . Dad’s bored with me, because what I do has nothing to do with writing” (30).

The central conflict in the play involves the youngest child Billy, who has recently returned home after college and realizes that, because of his deafness, he cannot fully participate in the repartee that characterizes his family’s conversations. In the first act dinner scene, Billy repeatedly asks, “What are you talking about?” (8), “What are you *all* talking about?” (9), and “What happened?” (10), but the other family members dismiss the conversation as nothing important and don’t fill him in on what has just transpired. At the end of the scene, the stage direction tells us that Billy sits isolated on the stage with the lights dim except the ones directly on him. In the background Ruth and Beth are heard talking in the kitchen, Daniel continues talking on the phone, Christopher is off in another part of the house listening to his Chinese language lessons, and the overture from Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* plays in the background—all aural experiences that Billy cannot register.

When Billy brings his new girlfriend Sylvia home to meet the family later in Act 1, the audience begins to understand the reasons behind the family’s callousness toward Billy’s deafness. At one point Christopher announces, “Billy’s not deaf” (36), which for him means that Billy has “been brought up in a hearing family, he’s been protected from all that shit! I’m talking about the hardliners, capital-D deaf, not racists but *Audists*—” (36). For Christopher Billy’s learning Sign language is tantamount to making “your flaw . . . part of your personality” (36). For him, “Defining your personality around the fact that you are deaf” (35) means that you become swallowed up by identity politics; he says, “your identity becomes *ideological*” (35). After Sylvia arrives and the conversation turns to her work arranging fundraising events for a deaf charity, Christopher probes her for information about the deaf community, which he has earlier characterized as a “sect” and “cult” (35-36). He then puts Sylvia on the spot by asking, “. . . which language [spoken English or Sign language] is better?” (52). Sylvia finally admits, “You can’t say ‘would’ in sign. Or ‘if’” (55), and the following dialogue ensues:

CHRISTOPHER: Aha, I see.

SYLVIA: But—

CHRISTOPHER: Right. So no word for “if” or “would.” Because this is where it gets interesting. I do words, Sylvia, that’s what I do.

RUTH: He’s a slag for words.

CHRISTOPHER: And I would say that if your language is a bit black and white then it makes you a bit black and white. Because how can you feel a feeling unless you have the word for it.

SYLVIA: Deaf people can be more honest.

CHRISTOPHER: More honest? Or more tactless? (55)

The scene ends with Sylvia going to the piano and playing Debussy’s *Clare de Lune*—at first haltingly and then with confidence. The family is charmed by the specter of a young woman who is going deaf engaged

in an activity that as a hearing person she might have taken for granted. But Billy cannot participate in this moment and stares, as we are told in the stage direction, “out and away” (57) at the end of the scene.

The crisis of the play is precipitated by the fact that, as Billy slowly becomes to identify himself in terms of his deafness and begins carving out a career as a lip-reader for the Crown Prosecution Service, he is led to reject the hearing world, represented by his family. But this is the very moment when Sylvia struggles against being defined by her advancing deafness and decides that she needs to take a break from the deaf community, including a furlough from her deaf boyfriend. Billy, however, is experiencing the first real success in his life, and the family hears that the influential Manchester Guardian plans to do a feature story about how he is helping the prosecution of criminals by lip-reading surveillance camera videos. But the audience learns more about Billy’s approach to his job, and it becomes apparent that his method is less than empirical, as illustrated early in Act 2 when Billy talks to Daniel about his work:

BILLY: I’m looking at another tape for them next week. Prison visit conversation. They said their regular lip-reader couldn’t work it out so they’re passing it on to me. It’s a big one this one. Apparently.

DANIEL: A big one. Woo.

BILLY: Yeah.
Beat.
A lot of it isn’t really lip-reading . . . it’s just joining the dot dot dots . . . putting together what you expect.

DANIEL: What, guessing?
BILLY stares at DANIEL. (59)

Later, as Sylvia watches a videotape with Billy, he notices that Billy cannot see the criminal’s face and asks him, “How much of this do you make up?”(85). Finally, in the last scene, Billy admits to Daniel that he fictionalized some of the dialogue on the tapes:

DANIEL: You . . .made stuff up . . . when you looked at those tapes.

BILLY: Sometimes.

DANIEL: You *invented*.

BILLY: I *guessed*. Sometimes. Sometimes not.
It was what they wanted to hear.
Pause.
It’s easy. You just imagine what it’s like to be the people. You know what the story might be. You put yourself in their place. Like Mum does, really.
It was fun thinking what they might be saying.
The weird thing is, I think I was usually right even when I was just guessing.

DANIEL: How come?

BILLY: Because I’m good at guessing . . .

DANIEL: Did they convict people on that evidence?

BILLY: Yes. Sometimes . . .
They might not prosecute.

DANIEL: How come?

BILLY: Cos . . . on that one . . . even though I was guessing . . . the gist was actually right. (94-95)

The audience comes to realize that what it witnessed in the first dinner scene and throughout the rest of the drama was Billy trying to understand what people are saying and what is transpiring through guesswork and invention.

Billy's process of building confidence in himself as a deaf person parallels his need to confront his family about how they neglected to bring him into the core of their family life, into the conversation that characterized and sustained their familial relationships. After Billy announces, through Sylvia as his interpreter, that he will no longer use spoken English to communicate with his family but only Sign language, she explains, "He says . . . he's spent his life trying to understand you and now he thinks you should try to understand him" (73). Billy goes on to describe his experience: "You never explain your arguments. You're all laughing about something and I have to say 'What?' 'What?' 'What?' 'Oh nothing. It was about a book.' I'm tired of saying 'what what what' all the time" (74). When Billy remonstrates that the family never learned Sign even though Beth had promised they would, Christopher tries to justify their actions: "Look, the reason we didn't learn sign wasn't because we couldn't be bothered, it was out of principle. Out of principle, we didn't want to make you part of a minority world" (78). Billy counters that his family is its own "minority world":

If anywhere's a closed bloody ghetto it's this bloody house. Conventionally . . . unconventional . . . You think we're not part of any community, that's because we're our own . . . totally bonkers . . . hermetically sealed . . . community. "No hawkers, no traders, and no one who doesn't know who (*Hesitantly, as she watches the name be finger-spelled.*) Dv . . . o . . . řák is." And no one's allowed to leave. I'm fed up with it. (79)

Billy concludes his confrontation by saying, "I'm leaving you . . . I don't want you anymore. I don't need you anymore" (82).

At the end of the play, after Sylvia has asked for some breathing time from Billy and he is being investigated because of giving false evidence in several criminal trials, Billy returns home, hopeful that he and Sylvia will get back together and ready to reconcile with his family. The play seems to be saying that, within the messy entanglements of familial relationships, an eccentric and dysfunctional family will survive due to the quality of the love that underlies the recriminations and individual human failure of its members. The final tableau consists of the family and Sylvia onstage surrounding Daniel and Billy. Daniel asks Billy to show him the sign for "love," and Daniel uses the sign to embrace Billy. This image lingers for a moment and impresses the audience with the depth and durability of the family bond.

For the Los Angeles production of *Tribes*, the Center Theatre Group worked with David Kurs, Artistic Director of North Hollywood-based Deaf West Theatre, and Benjamin Lewis, who teaches American Sign Language for the Department of Linguistics at UCLA, to ensure the authenticity of the play's treatment of the deaf experience. Many of the issues they advised on are reflected in program notes for the Center Theatre Group's production in an article by journalist Lynne Heffley. One of the points the article makes is that "The debate over whether deaf children are better off learning oralism — speaking and reading lips — or American Sign Language is one of many threads woven into the evocative tapestry" (1) of *Tribes*. Benjamin Lewis, who is deaf, is quoted in the article as follows, "'Enforced normalcy' overlooks the fact that there is a real Deaf community and that 'many of us are very successful sign language users'" (2). Lewis points out that the Deaf community (with an upper-case "D" to denote those who share acultural identity with ASL as their common language) represents wide diversity:

The Deaf community, Lewis explained, encompasses those deaf from birth or early childhood, “late-deafened adults” and supportive hearing parents and relatives, friends, families and spouses, advocates, teachers, administrators and professionals. It “ideally” includes the “culturally or native Deaf and longtime ASL users,” Lewis said, “as well as those who are deaf but are oriented towards oral means of communications . . . There are radical differences between the needs of the culturally Deaf and the needs of the late-deafened, the progressively deaf, and the hard-of-hearing. . . Yet all, Lewis said, share the same concerns, the need for support services, fair treatment and accessible communication.(2)

The joy of Nina Raine’s play is that it introduces its audience to a world that only a minority of people have access to and provides us with a sensitive and nuanced discussion of the human experience of that world. John Lahr in his list of best plays for 2012 made the following comment: “The British playwright Nina Raine is one of her generation’s most promising talents” (“The Year in Theatre”). We see Raine’s talent in rare form in *Tribes* and look forward to her enjoying a long and productive career.

Works Cited

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